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1. The Road to Adoption

Following a lengthy period without an updated strategic framework for tourism development, Greece is moving towards the adoption of a new Special Spatial Framework for Tourism (SSFT).

The process towards its adoption has progressed significantly over the past two years. Following the completion of the Strategic Environmental Assessment and the public consultation process in 2024, the draft Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) approving the framework was published for public consultation in May 2026.

The framework is currently under final review by the competent authorities prior to its formal approval and publication, which will mark the completion of a key reform in Greece's tourism spatial planning system.

2. The regulatory gap

The need for the new framework arose following the annulment of the previous SSFT, adopted in 2009, by the Council of State on procedural grounds. As a result, Greece lacked for many years a modern and updated strategic planning tool for tourism development, despite the sector's rapid growth and the emergence of new challenges such as climate change, overtourism, and increasing pressure on natural resources and local communities.

The SSFT aims to fill this regulatory gap by providing a coherent national framework that balances tourism growth with environmental sustainability, destination resilience, and quality of life for local communities.

3. Key Priorities of the Special Spatial Framework for Tourism

The SSFT is Greece's national strategic planning instrument that defines the framework and guidelines for tourism development across the country. Its primary objective is to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social cohesion, ensuring that tourism expansion is managed in a sustainable and well-organized manner.

The framework is built around the following key strategic priorities:

- Respecting the carrying capacity and unique characteristics of each destination.
- Promoting a broader range of tourism products and experiences.
- Extending the tourism season through high-quality, modern tourism infrastructure.
- Encouraging a more balanced distribution of tourism activity across different regions of the country.
- Supporting special-interest and thematic forms of tourism.
- Strengthening the connection between tourism, Greece's natural and cultural heritage, and other sectors of the economy.

4. Classification and Key Provisions

The new SSFT classifies areas across Greece based on the intensity of tourism activity, primarily taking into account the number of tourist beds in relation to land area and permanent population. Areas are divided into five categories:

(A) Controlled Development Areas: Highly developed tourism destinations, where priority is given to the upgrading and modernization of existing accommodation facilities. The development of new hotel units in areas lacking an approved urban plan requires a minimum land area of 16 stremmata. On islands, tourist accommodation capacity for new establishments is generally limited to 100 beds.

(B) Developed Areas: Areas with established tourism activity, where the focus remains on quality enhancement, special-interest tourism, and modern tourism infrastructure. New hotels outside planning zones require a minimum plot size of 12 stremmata, while island developments may reach up to 350 beds.

(C) Developing Areas: Areas offering greater opportunities for new tourism investments and accommodation developments aimed at strengthening their tourism profile and competitiveness.

(D) Early-Stage Development Areas: Emerging destinations where tourism growth is encouraged in a sustainable manner, taking into account local environmental and landscape characteristics.

(E) Areas for Special Development Enhancement: Areas intended primarily for special forms of tourism, including mountain, wellness and thermal, marine, and diving tourism.

In parallel, islands (excluding Crete and Evia) are classified into three groups according to their size. Group I includes islands larger than 250 sq. km and allows for greater tourism development, subject to enhanced carrying-capacity assessments. Groups II and III comprise smaller islands, where stricter environmental protection measures, building restrictions, and capacity limits apply in order to preserve landscape quality and local identity.

5. Special Provisions of the SSFT

5.1. Minimum Plot Size Requirements for New Hotels in Areas Outside Urban Plans

For the development of new hotels in areas that are not covered by an urban plan, the minimum plot size requirements are set according to the category of the area:

- Category A: 16 stremmata
- Category B: 12 stremmata
- Categories C, D and E: 8 stremmata

In addition, the framework specifies the categories of tourist accommodation that may be developed in each area, placing particular emphasis on higher-standard establishments. In Categories A, B and C, for example, only 3, 4 and 5-star hotel units are permitted.

5.2. Coastal Zone Protection

The SSFT introduces strict protection measures for the coastal zone, aimed at preserving natural landscapes and safeguarding coastal environments. In particular, all new constructions and land alterations are prohibited within the first 25 metres from the coastline.

5.3. Regulatory Framework for Short-Term Rentals

The SSFT establishes the framework and rules under which tourism-related activities, including short-term rentals, may be regulated. Indicatively, it promotes measures aimed at the organization and control of the short-term rental market, including:

- The establishment of conditions and requirements for the use of properties as

short-term rentals, particularly in relation to their use as primary residences.

- The regulation of the duration of short-term rental activity on an annual basis.
- The designation of geographical zones where such activity may be restricted or prohibited.
- The introduction of restrictions on the development of new short-term rental supply, particularly in areas facing increased pressure or possessing specific geographical characteristics, including newly built residential properties.

5.4. Special Interest Tourism

The SSFT places particular emphasis on the development of special interest and alternative forms of tourism, recognizing their growing contribution to the diversification and resilience of Greece's tourism product. Indicatively, the framework supports rural tourism, geotourism, fishing tourism, sports tourism, cruise tourism, diving tourism, cultural tourism, city breaks, religious tourism, conference tourism, health and wellness tourism, as well as other thematic tourism activities.

Among these, cruise tourism is identified as a strategic priority, reflecting its significant contribution to visitor flows, regional economies and the international visibility of Greek destinations.

At the same time, the framework promotes the expansion and modernization of tourist ports and marina infrastructure, strengthening Greece's position as a leading destination for yachting and recreational boating in the Mediterranean.

5.5. Other Activities Affecting Tourism

The SSFT also provides guidance on the coexistence of tourism with other key economic activities, including industry, mining, renewable energy projects, aquaculture and other productive sectors.

The objective is to ensure the effective spatial organization of different land uses, minimize potential conflicts, protect the environment and landscape, and support the sustainable development of tourism destinations.

5.6. Existing Permits and Approved Plans

Existing permits, approved plans, and projects will not be affected by the new SSFT.

The SSFT serves as both a strategic and binding framework for lower-level spatial planning instruments, including Local and Special Urban Plans and Regional Spatial Frameworks. These plans will be progressively aligned with the framework's directions through future revisions and updates.

6. The Way Forward

The new SSFT establishes the strategic framework that will guide tourism-related spatial planning in Greece in the coming years. While preserving existing rights and approved developments, it introduces a comprehensive set of directions aimed at ensuring that future tourism growth is aligned with environmental protection, spatial cohesion and the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

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