

**GSTC 2019 Conference - Opening session by Marta Guerreiro,
Regional Secretary of Energy, Environment and Tourism**

December 5th, 2019 – Angra do Heroísmo

Being in front of this audience, within this important congress and in the island of Terceira, to speak to you about Tourism in the Azores, representing the Regional Government, it is a great honor!

It is impossible to hide the enthusiasm, especially after this amazing new.

The Azores are to be congratulated! We are all to be congratulated!

Mainly because it is on a date in which we receive the Annual Congress for Global Sustainable Tourism Council, to whom I thank in advance, in the name of its president Luigi Cabrini, for believing with us that it was possible to hold on one of the biggest events dedicated to the sustainability, in here, in the island of Terceira.

Firstly, because it is a unique opportunity to promote our region internationally, within the sustainability of our destination.

In addition, because it is another specific action of the Azorean Government in up taking events outside the high season, allowing the fight against seasonality and deliver flows to all the islands.

In this case, benefiting Terceira, an island with an enormous richness and with a strong cultural nature, that I hope everyone here, especially the ones that are here for the first time, can feel and live.

However, allow me to share with you some notes about the road of Tourism in the Azores.

Nowadays talking about Tourism is, at first glance, to turn a place global, making its tendencies more wide-ranging, and at the same time, specializing in market segments and products that highlight the local features, in a more internationally context .

For this reason, every nation, every country, every region must follow a construction path for a positioning that is differentiator, which adds value que consolidates its visibility over their competitors, promoting the growth of their potential markets.

In fact, each destination must always maintain a double look: from inside out and outside in.

Only with this duplicity of acting and behaving that, it is possible for each region to have a real perception of its positioning and the path it must take.

Quoting the Azorean writer Daniel de Sá:

“Happiness came late, almost half a century, but had arrived. And the village never looked so inhabited as today (...) because the village is not only the houses, but mostly the people”.

It is certain that it is a fictional village in the author’s mind but the truth is that Tourism, in any part of the world, has this same role: to agitate places and at the same time, must focus in the quality of people’s life.

Based with this context, the XII Government of the Azores creates, in 2016, the Regional Secretary for Energy, Environment and Tourism, which I have the honor to head since its existence.

In addition, this was – and still is – a clear indication that the Azores strategy for tourist growth it is to be done on a sustainable way and in total respect for the preservation of nature and environment – our main and differentiator asset.

According to this tourist potential of the archipelago, we have designed our entity “Azores – certified by Nature”.

With great pride, we are one of the two single regions of the world that has all the ratings given by UNESCO: 4 Biosphere Reserves, 13 Ramsar sites, 1 Geopark that includes 121 geosites spread all over the islands and 2 nominations of world heritage, one of them is where we are today – the historical center of Angra do Heroísmo.

With a mild climate throughout the year, a prime location in relation to North America and the European Continent, good conditions to provide tranquility, relaxation, safety but above all, unique nature and environmental conditions, the Azores are in the perfect place concerning tourist segment that has been recording one of the most increasing growths worldwide; the tourism for adventure and active nature, with high environmental and social responsibility and that seeks high levels of well-being and tranquility.

The dazzling natural beauties associated to the authenticity of the history and traditions of its population, allows the Azores to claim their place at a national and international level, as a European Destination in the middle of the Atlantic, known internationally as 9 volcanic islands, preserved and with exuberant nature, exclusive, of mystical beauty where the visitor is welcomed as a special guest that, in safety, as at his disposal a wide variety of activities and products, whether in land or sea.

Examples of this, we have the walking trails, BTT, paragliding, birdwatching, whale watching, diving, wave sports and spa, among others.

Essentially, this is the strategy of the Azorean Government. A strategy that presents itself consolidated and integrated where, every day, we feel the positive effects of this sector in all the islands.

We are making an extraordinary road. Proof of this are also the several awards, highlights and nominations we have been receiving within the positioning of the Destination Azores – that we all must be proud of – and that testify the quality and the strong identity root of sustainable nature, allowing levels of growth that we have never seen before.

Bear in mind that the Azores have been leading some tourist markers nationally since 2015.

Just on the first 9 months of 2019, the tourist activity in the Azores recorded a new important growth of 17%.

We have exceeded, in 9 months, the number of overnights from last year – the 2 million and half in all types, wherefore we estimate to finish the year very close to 3 million.

For the Azores Government, this data is more than simple numbers; they represent the quality of life by virtue of new available business opportunities, operating tourism as a gathering and driving element for the different economic sectors and employing a substantial number of workers on a direct and indirect way.

In addition, these results do not come by chance. They are due to continuous work from the last executives and from all the private sector from this area, with certainty that, via Tourism, it would be – and it is – possible the economic development of the nine islands of the Azores.

Regarding the Government, which path was this? Was a strategic option.

- Firstly, safe keep the heritage, allowing a sustainable growth, positioning the Destination as environment ally
- Boosting the demand as a new model of accessibilities
- Promoting the region near the segments regarded as priority and duly aligned with our signature
- In addition, of course, certifying the offer!

These results are proof of this: progress!

They show the optimism of the sector about make them be aware of the nowadays new challenges. The main one: environmental sustainability economic, social and cultural.

Acknowledging the importance of the tourism sector, in 2017 – proclaimed year by the United Nations as the International Year for Sustainable Tourism – the Azorean Government joined these celebrations promoting the conference “Azores 2017: on track for sustainable tourism”, moment that signed the begin of the process of certification of the Azores as sustainable tourism.

What did we do it?

- Because we believed having the unique conditions to claim ourselves as a world reference in tourist sustainability
- We believed in our uniqueness and tranquility, due to an unspoiled and pure nature
- We believed that we are not and we do not want to be a mass destination and that our visitors seek us for our magnitude that we already have concerning sustainable tourism and environmental friendly practices
- We have been developing good public policies crosscutting to several sectors that show us that we are aligned with the international positions concerning these matters.
- Because we believed that, with the engagement of everyone, it would be possible

And it was!

It is with great proud that today we can say that the Azores are certified as a sustainable tourist destination.

We are the first and only archipelago in the world to have this certification.

We are the only region in Portugal with this certification.

We are on the front line!

And when I say us, I mean all of us. The commitment was from the Government of the Azores but the Azoreans, from start, took as their own. The people and the entities were with us. They fulfilled with us.

To us, this is the way to make politics: to be, to integrate, to listen, to produce and to fulfil.

It was 2 years of hard work, not always visible, and dedication to fulfill a commitment to certify the Azores as a sustainable tourist destination.

Since the beginning, starting with the choice of Earthcheck, certified by the requirements of GSTC, for being world leader in benchmarking, certification and consulting regarding travel and tourism, with a strong academic, scientific and technologic base.

Within this framework, the Structure for Management of Sustainability of Destination was formed, responsible for following the process of certification, depending upon this Regional Secretary, involving two stages: Benchmarking and Certification.

In the first case, we proceed to the exhausting survey for quantitative and qualitative data in several key areas (greenhouse gas emissions, residues, water management, ecosystems preservation, cultural management, etc) in order to show compliance according to the demanding requirements of sustainability of the Region.

The peak of this stage, with success, result in the grant of the Bronze Status, that more than an award, symbolized a small giant step towards the path that was been covered in the strategic positioning of the Azores.

Among many other settings, we were considered the destination of reference with the highest percentage of preservation area of habitats and destination of reference with the highest percentage of green area.

On the other hand, the second stage of the certification process engaged an enormous commitment of the several local partners, in the definition of a set of sustainable agreements through their governmental structures, and the private agents that proposed to work in order to achieve levels of excellence regarding destination's sustainability.

Adding the audit on the set, guaranteeing total transparency and demanding in all the process and that involved the review of all the documentation and the collected data in the Benchmarking stage, as well as the visit to three islands of the archipelago, chosen by Earthcheck: São Miguel (eastern group), Terceira (central group) and Flores (western group), visiting several infrastructures in each of these islands – such as power plants, waste processing centers or water treatment stations – so that it could be verified its compliance with all the requirements.

Furthermore, I have to mention the several projects that we have been carrying away towards “On track to sustainability”, namely education for the environment, for the energy efficiency, waste reduction, recycling but also for the importance of tourism in the economic development of the Region.

Another very special mention for the project of Sustainability Booklet of the Azores – dynamic forum of debate and sharing of sustainability practices, with annual public subscriptions and commitments within the Goals of Sustainable Development of ONU, on the part of enterprises, associations and even the public sector.

At this moment, we have around 100 subscribers, spread in all the islands, with over 300 public goals, which well reflects the echo of this collective strategy of sustainability, raising awareness of the several entities of different activity sectors.

At the end of this process, I emphasize: it was 2 years of hard work, which allowed us to be part of an ensemble of 13 Regions of the World and only eight countries have this certification.

However, endings bring new beginnings. And today, we leave our promise to continue to work to always make Azores what it is today: a sustainable tourist destination.

A challenge that spreads to all sector agents that have already shown to be engaged towards sustainability, working with great commitment and dedication but above all, with great enthusiasm and positive attitude – feeling that must prevail and shared for the future.

In the end, the certification that we received today is not an end in itself, it is the opposite: a destination certified in terms of sustainability can never consider its work done.

A sustainable destination is continuously aware of its development and performance, engaging an even more range of parties and local and international players.

We have said, several times, that we would do everything so that sustainability would chance from utopia into reality, in a very real and meaningful action for the life of us all.

We believed that we would achieved it if we all be together in this plan and, in fact, there was a collective modesty accepting this constant work of self-examination and improvement.

We made it!

More than ever, today, this destination sustainability certification requires a commitment from all of us: population, private agents and public sector, in a joint reflection between real necessities and present and future demanding.

We speak of responsibility. And ours is to elevate – always – the name of the Azores.

Today we made a difference, once more, between who stays in the past and who has a role of leadership in the building of the future.

Proudly, I state hat the Azores are leading this path worldwide.

Special thanks to all that have contributed for the success of this project. We will need that each of you keep doing the best you can in order to make a difference.

I finish wishing that these two days be full of sharing around tourism sustainability, thanking once more GSCT for choosing Terceira Island and the Azores for this important event!

Thank you very much!