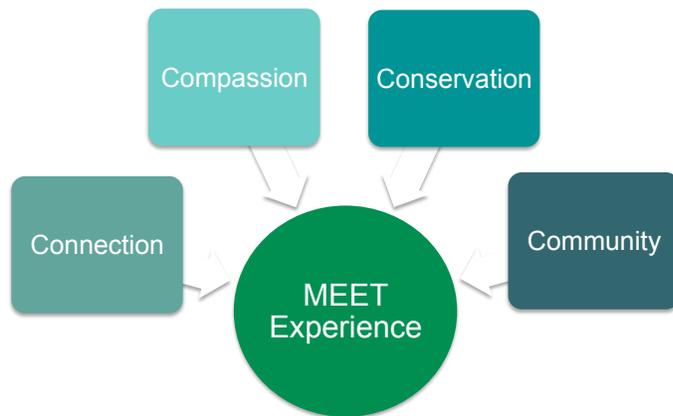




## **MEET Rome Training Report**

The objective of the MEET Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) Training in Rome was to cultivate a greater understanding amongst participants of the MEET Brand Values and plan to commercialize and promote MEET. The training was designed to inspire participants about how they will actualize the MEET Brand and Vision in their packages. Participants were also encouraged to work on their unique selling proposition in order to attract outbound tour operators (OTOs), and fulfil the expectations of tourists from target markets.

**Diagram 1: MEET Brand Values**



**Connection:** We help to inspire meaningful connections with the people, places and culture of the region

**Compassion:** We engage with and strive to understand visitors, each other, and the region's biodiversity and heritage

**Conservation:** Conservation is at the heart of what we do: the long-term sustainability of people and places is fundamental to the brand experience.

**Community:** We embrace the concept of collective impact and the cooperative relationship between Protected Areas and their local communities

The training commenced with a presentation on the MEET Brand Values and the important role they play in establishing market differentiation. Richard Edwards- an OTO from Greenspot.Travel-emphasized the immense value MEET has in creating a strong network of partners to support the development of new ecotourism products, which are in high demand in the Mediterranean region. This network not only benefits ITOs in the creation of a strong collective voice for marketing and promotion, but it also will be highly attractive to small and medium OTOs who do not have the time or funding required to develop new quality product and adopt sustainability best practices.

The participants were separated into groups to practice describing their tour in alignment with the MEET Brand Values, and they each presented a 60-second tour Elevator Pitch. The key Elevator Pitch tips which emerged from the presentations were as follows:

- Don't list the whole itinerary! Choose an aspect of your tour which you are passionate about – tell a quick and captivating story that is both compelling and meaningful

- Include the MEET values: how you're protecting and engaging with local communities and supporting conservation in Protected Areas. Ensure you refer to the park/Protected Area, and communicate how travellers will feel like part of the local community
- Make sure to answer people's WHY questions: *Why should I go there?* Tell people what their experience will be, why it will be special, what special and unique memories they will take home with them. For example, *did you know that you can find/experience...? Through this tour you will discover a different Malta...*
- Don't focus on numbers on species, but perhaps a token species that is charismatic.. For example, *our PA is so special because...*
- Information is good but it doesn't sell travel – don't underestimate the power of a story

The second day of training began with a presentation on the future of MEET, and the commercialization and marketing strategy going forward. The proposed transformation of the MEET Network into a Destination Management Organization (managing the development aspect of lobbying, fundraising and partnership development, training and capacity building, sustainability and quality assurance etc.) supported by an expert Destination Management Company (handling the business side of catalogue marketing, promotion and sales, bringing OTOs onboard, organizing FAM trips, representing MEET at travel trade shows etc.) was shared with attendees.

The group then engaged in discussion surrounding the commercialization strategy, working with OTOs, and package pricing and commission structures, Key takeaways were as follows:

- OTOs are not looking to please the general market, only a niche group with their packages
- OTOs will want to change some aspects of the packages, but these changes will have to be made in keeping with the MEET Brand and Values
- Package must include a financial contribution to a conservation activity. Because each situation is unique, ITOs will need to work with their Protected Areas Managers to develop the right strategy
- The DMC will have a contractual obligation to market all packages equally and not to favor one over another
- The ITOs will have collective bargaining power with the DMC, which they would not have if they were approaching a DMC as individual operations
- Each package will have a min of 5 people and a max of 15 people, but the DMC will negotiate this

- Pricing of packages needs to be based on what will be attractive and competitive in each ITO's specific market
- At least 30 – 33% commission should be factored into the net package price

The training continued with a presentation of the MEET Sustainability Criteria and introduced the concept of sustainability storytelling and action planning. The objective of this exercise was to communicate how sustainability is a journey, and illustrate how MEET will provide ITOs with training and capacity building to help them improve their sustainability performance over time. The criteria have not been established as 'qualifying criteria,' but rather as aspirations to inspire improvements in the short, medium, and long term.

Discussion also centred on the idea that it will be crucial to set visitor expectations before the tour, and to communicate effectively in an honest transparent way (for example, *what is being done well, what they are trying to do, what they are battling with and why*). This is especially important because there are large variations in sustainability achievements across MEET products. MEET ITOs were encouraged to think about how to communicate their sustainability achievements using sustainability storytelling and to find solutions for sustainability challenges that are easily solvable, e.g. to reduce plastic waste.

Participants discussed plans to share MEET with their service providers in order to encourage consistent communications with participants in the upcoming FAM trips and package tests. As one attendee noted, *"It is important for us to be engaged, and we want to make the travellers realise why MEET is important."* Key avenues of engagement with supply chains were identified as follows:

- Organize a meeting to discuss and communicate the MEET values and brand promise, including how this could be implemented in the package activities and communicated to MEET guests
- Meet with each service provider separately to explain and discuss MEET
- Make sure service providers know that MEET tourists are not just 'any tourists' and help them understand that they are part of a larger network

The training feedback forms indicate that 100% of the training participants felt satisfied with the training, and are excited about the future of MEET. 43% of participants felt confident that they have a better idea of what to expect from the OTOs and how to work with them. It has been recognized that more clarity is needed but that this discussion will need to be conducted with the DMC that will be brought on-board in the near future.

93% of participants left the training with a better understanding of MEET Brand Values, and 79% felt highly confident that they are able to align their tour with these Brand Values. One attendee summed up his aspiration as follows, *"My only goal is to make the guests feel like I feel about*

*sustainability and my protected area. They are not paying for anything, they are just investing in an educational trip, and they go home richer. It's a smart and clever way to travel."*

In addition, 77% of participants came away from the training with a strong idea of how to talk about MEET with OTOs and tourists, while 64% felt highly confident that they would be able to share what they have learned with their service providers. 85% of participants felt that the training was highly valuable because they were able to learn from other ITOs and to exchange experiences, while feeling as if they are *"part of a network around the Mediterranean Sea."* 86% of participants felt highly inspired by the training, with one participant summing up the overall feeling of the group, and the achievement of the training, as follows: *"To hear the ITOs speaking about their experiences made me excited about the MEET project and have a clearer idea about this wonderful experience to share with tourists and locals."*