



## Cultural tourism: the “minor” art center in Italy

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### Abstract

At a time of increasing globalization, the protection, conservation, interpretation and presentation of the heritage and cultural diversity of any particular place or region is an important challenge for people everywhere (Icomos, 1999). Therefore, culture and cultural tourism are taking on a new meaning in the context of economic globalization. From an economic standpoint, cultural heritage consists of heritage assets that also incorporate a cultural value that goes beyond the intrinsic economic value (Savarese, 2005). The public must also preserve this cultural value through a set of economic activities that promote protection, conservation and consumption. Cultural tourism can play a propulsive action in countries characterized by a great number of relevant sites that can attract international tourists. For these reasons, promoting management and business models to increase the effectiveness of cultural heritage as an economic production factor is one of the most pressing issues currently faced by the public and private sector at the international level for its contribution to economic growth and sustainable development. In particular, smaller centers are gathering particular interest. They are heterogeneous for dimension, historical and cultural traditions and life style, but they also have characteristics and precise identities that remarkably influence the new settlement and location dynamics. These dynamics often answer to logical searches of culturally attractive cities and high quality comfortable atmospheres. During the last years, the debate on this topic has had a growth interest. It however, slowly evolves towards three different meanings: i) as observable evidence, because of the curved nature of mobility of goods and people, and the fast spread of the technologies of information and communication; ii) as a theoretical model, to exceed the traditional interpretation of tourism introducing the analysis of the variety and diversity of the present functions in the cultural sites, and of their distribution and their relations (Costa and Manente, 2000); iii) as objective of policy-makers, because this kind of tourism can be promote a fair and sustainable territorial development agenda (Martelloni, 2004).

**Keywords:** Cultural tourism, cultural heritage, cultural tourism in Italy, Borghi d'Italia

### Introduction

One can define cultural tourism in several ways (McKercher & Du Cros, 2012). We say it is “that activity which enables people to experience different ways of life of other people, thereby gaining a first-hand understanding of their customs, traditions, the physical environment, the intellectual ideas and those places of architectural, historic, archaeological or other cultural significance which remain from earlier times. Cultural tourism differs from recreational tourism in that it seeks to gain understanding or appreciation of nature of the place being visited” (Icomos, 1999). However, we would like to mention another definition: “Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new cultural and deep experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, or psychological” (Stebbins, 1996).



Cultural tourism may play a propulsive action in countries which have a great number of relevant sites that can be exploited to attract tourists from outside. Revenues for tourism activities have a significant weight on total exports and contribute to driving the entire economic-productive system, also involving activities that are not strictly tourist-related. Tourism-related consumption, in fact, allows the creation of jobs both directly in the same tourism sector, and also indirectly in the traditional sectors of agriculture, industry, commerce and services. In addition, in less economic developed areas, tourism can serve to help mitigate the traditional phenomenon of economic impoverishment linked to emigration, especially of young people which is generally caused by the lack of productive activities. However, these repercussions could be temporary and the effects on the labour market could be precarious, due to the low specialization and to the highly seasonal nature of tourism activities. In this sense, heritage and cultural tourism could make up for this inconvenience by giving the tourist inflow greater regularity including off-peak periods.

At a European level, cultural tourism has the highest growth rate of the all tourist sectors, linked to artistic and landscape value, to cities of art and areas characterized by a particular concentration of historical values and local traditions (European Commission, 2015). Moreover, Europe is the most visited tourist area in the world, being located where there are a substantial part of the cultural and natural sites surveyed by UNESCO as part of the “World Heritage Site” notion. Among these areas Italy features highly, and is rated the first country in the world for the number of cultural sites registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List (54 out of 845).

In this paper, the researcher tentatively explores new avenues of cultural tourism as the small centers of Italian “*borghi*”. The goal is to analyze the role of this kind of tourism to promote the economic growth of areas that risk becoming peripheral or marginal.

## **Methodology**

The paper is organized as follows: in part 1, the researcher describes the general characteristics of cultural tourism; in part 2, she introduces the analysis of cultural tourism in Italy; part 3 considers the role of the Italian “minor” historical and artistic heritage; finally, she illustrates it with some concluding considerations.

## **Cultural tourism: general aspects of supply and demand**

On the economic level, cultural tourism is essentially characterized by the modest influence of the market segment on price changes (with the same quality of the cultural product) and the awareness of tourists to contribute to the maintenance and protection of cultural resources.

In recent decades, cultural tourism, especially visits to art cities, has had a strong growth in Europe and especially in Italy<sup>1</sup>. Among all the destinations, the art cities can offer to the tourist a wide range of attractions to satisfy needs and curiosity (Morelli, 2003). More recently, so-called “minor” cities of art have become particularly important. There, tourism is intertwined with the structure and life of the place without unbalancing. Many factors have determined growth of the

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<sup>1</sup> See specialized institutes reports as Federculture (2005; 2028); Istat (2017; 2018).



interest about cultural tourism (Lanza and Pigliaru, 2000). They can be summarized in three variables: 1) a growth of the general interest for culture; 2) short breaks and city trips; 3) multi-purpose holidays. Above all, the development of cultural tourism is linked to a widespread increase in the level of education and to a general increase in income, which has pushed some segments of demand to spend more time and money on journeys that offer the possibility of living an educational and cultural experience, as well as entertainment. Added to this, some specific trends characterize tourism demand and favor the development of cultural tourism such as:

- the tendency towards the search for the authenticity of the tourist experience, that can offer a realistic experience of the identity of places and, at the same time, know their history, traditions and art;
- the fragmentation of the holidays, with a tourist demand oriented to many short breaks and weekends lasting (no more than three days), throughout the year, regardless of the season. It is considered to be the second or third holiday, after the summer one, which is still today experienced as the main and longest one. For this type of holiday, tourists chose the art cities above all.
- the increase in multi-purpose holidays, intended as a moment of satisfaction of multiple needs; in the past, the holidays responded to a single element of interest; the general increase in interest for cultural events.

The historical and artistic heritage of cities and of small urban centers is an excellent requisite to successfully address this motivation. For this reason, the historical and cultural attractions are the first factor of the international tourist flow.

What attracts the cultural tourist is not only the specific interest for visiting monuments, churches, museums and historical and archeological sites but also a wider motivation that pushes them to experience the charm of the city and the places of art. Most of cultural tourists are not looking for art, but for the atmosphere of the city and the places of art. In this sense, the interests of this kind of tourist is in all the forms in which the life of a people is expressed: certainly art and architecture, but also the traditions, gastronomy, craftsmanship and that set of characteristics relating to the socio-cultural aspects of an area. Therefore, the different forms of cultural tourism are defined as “visits, outside of one's own area of residence, wholly or partially motivated by an interest in aspects related to history, art, science or traditions/styles of life of a place, region, group or institution” (Silbergberg, 1995). It follows a very large and varied universe of visitors, which has been so segmented (McKercher, 2002; McKercher & Du Cros, 2012). They are:

- highly motivated: this is a first and small group of visitors. They undertake the journey with the primary purpose of seeing a monument, a museum, or attending a cultural event. Most of them have a high level of education and good availability to travel and good travel habits;
- partly motivated: they are the people who combine a vacation to a city of art with the opportunity to take a journey, to go shopping, to see friends or relatives;
- additional motivation: these are tourists for whom culture is not the main objective of the journey;
- random cultural tourists: who do not plan the journey to a location as an art city but visit it accidentally.



There are different behaviors according to the group and the category to which they belong, both about the stay's duration and also about the motivation for the visit to the site. According to one of the most recent researches in the area, cultural tourists' analyze the choice of visiting a particular destination and consider the level of experience and search about the people and the importance of cultural tourism is high for them (Hughes, 2002).

On the supply side, the studies on cultural tourism make it possible to define some behavioral aspects that differentiate it and make it particularly interesting when compared to other segments of demand, and are also useful in solving some problems of seasonality: i) higher income and greater spending capacity; ii) higher level of education; iii) interest in events and initiatives related to local issues; iv) seasonal adjustment of flows; v) particular propensity to shopping.

However, the decision of addressing the cultural tourism segment requires precise choices. First, it is not sufficient to have a significant cultural heritage in order to attract cultural demand, but it is necessary to enhance artistic and cultural assets, considering the expectations of the demand and the logic of the market. Currently, we can say that tourism in art cities is still a poorly developed market. Despite the cities having a concentration of cultural values, attractions and traditions, only a few of them have managed to make urban tourism one of the major economic activities. For this reason, this kind of tourism is taking on an increasingly significant role among the key elements of urban policy in the cities of art. With regard to the most recent trends, the smaller art cities are able to offer rich cultural resources, often undiscovered in terms of tourism.

### **Cultural tourism in Italy**

The image of Italy is strongly linked to cultural tourism as an artistic and cultural heritage. The supply is considerably diversified, from large cities to small villages, from large cultural events to festivals in smaller towns (Macchiavelli & Garibaldi, 2001). The cultural motivation is a very strong motivation that pushes foreign tourists to travel to Italy. In 2015, foreign travelers spent over 35,5 billion euros in Italy. Of these, about 37% are holidays in our cities of art. Looking at the increase in spending over the last few years, we can see how the cultural holiday maintains its supremacy over other types of tourism (Banca d'Italia, 2018). The year 2017 was another year of noticeable growth in the touristic movement in Italy: the hotels registered a new all-time high, after 2016, with over 420 million presences (+ 4.4% compared to 2016) and 123 million arrivals (+ 5.3%). The growth was higher than the European average.

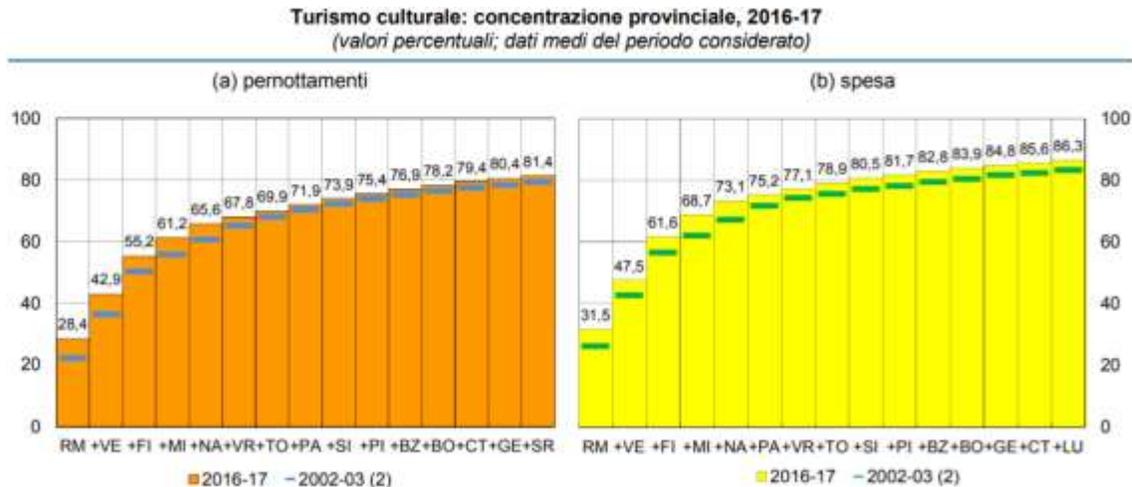
Sicily (+ 7.3% compared to 2016), Basilicata (+ 6.5%), Piemonte (+ 6.3%) and Emilia-Romagna (+ 6.0%) registered the most consistent increases of attendance. In 2017, both resident and non-resident customer numbers increased in most regions, but the tourist attraction capacity of the territories is different in relation to the origin of the tourists. The largest increases in the presence of resident customers is in Sicily (+ 9.5%) and Basilicata (+ 6.8%), while the foreign component in Sardegna (+ 10.4%), Puglia and Calabria (both + 9.3%). Umbria, Marche and Molise show the most reductions for both types of customers (Istat, 2018).

The territorial distribution of expenditure for cultural tourism is crucially influenced by the location of the major cities of art. In the years 2016-2017, Rome, Florence and Venice were the first three provinces in which more than half of overnight stays and over 60 % of spending were concentrated. The other kinds of holidays have a lower degree of concentration: in terms of



expenditure, the first three provinces account for just over 20 % of the national total (Bank of Italy, 2018).

**Graph 1:** Cultural tourism: provincial concentration, 2016-17



**Source:** Bank of Italy 2018, p. 51

Other features distinguish cultural tourism from other types of flows. The tourists to art cities are younger than average: in the period 2016-2017, 38% of them were in the 15-34 age group, compared to 29.4 % of the total vacation journeys. As for the type of stay, the cultural tourists preferred hotels (63.5 % compared to 55 % of all holiday trips). Foreign tourists for cultural holidays have a high propensity to spend: in the average of the 2002-2017 period, tourists in the cities of art spent an average of € 118 per day per person. This value is significantly higher than that which is shown in other types of holidays (83 euros), but also for other kind of travelers (89 euros). These differences have had modest relative changes over time, with the exception - of cultural tourism - of the transitory decline in 2009, linked to the international economic and financial crisis (see also: Symbola, 2009).

### The "minor" historical and artistic heritage

An Italian peculiarity is the considerable extension of the architectural and urban heritage in the configuration of the villages. They are usually located in disadvantaged locations, far from economic centers and characterized by an essentially rural past. Because of these characteristics and of the consequent very strong migratory phenomenon, they risk becoming 'phantom-countries'. Cultural tourism could remove these villages from such a nefarious destiny and reactivate their activity through a new utilization of the existing. It can promote cultural and artistic activities consistent with local traditions and history and typical products.

The tourist experience in the Italian smaller centers began spontaneously in the early 2000s (Severini, 2012). In those years, some initiatives were promoted and activated in the area. A remarkable growth regarded the "minor historical heritage" too: at least once, during the year,



about 50% of the adult population visited medieval villages, castles, monasteries, etc.; a part of the interviewees (from 6% to 15%) declared having a continuous relationship with these unique type of special assets.

The question concerning the centrality of the territory and the promotion of its resources intended as a benefit and as an element of differentiation, takes on stronger relevance in the motivation underlying the formation of new tourism businesses in the field of accommodation. The reference is to the Italian particular experience of the "diffused hotel", a formula of hospitality adapted to guarantee authenticity to the offer of hospitality and to support the economy of small villages (Dall'Ara and Morandi, 2006). Therefore, the villages are the protagonists par excellence of these new types of tourism. These are small towns with a population of less than 5,000 inhabitants. At the national level, there are 5,536 municipalities with this size requirement and in the South of Italy (Barucci and Becheri, 2006); Campania holds the record with 338 municipalities out of 550.

In these centers, tourism has recent origins and it is in constant growth both as demand and as supply. It finds its strong point in the immense material and intangible heritage that the villages have often been able to conserve unchanged over time, also thanks to their state of isolation in front of the main touristic roads and routes. Even if these touristic villages have serious problems such as unemployment and depopulation, they are able to be appreciated as guardians of tangible and intangible assets that stand as defensive bulwarks of cultural identities which have remained unchanged over time. Therefore, they could become an indispensable tool to sustain the economic growth of these areas and to give vitality to an otherwise negligible or even non-existent tourist supply.

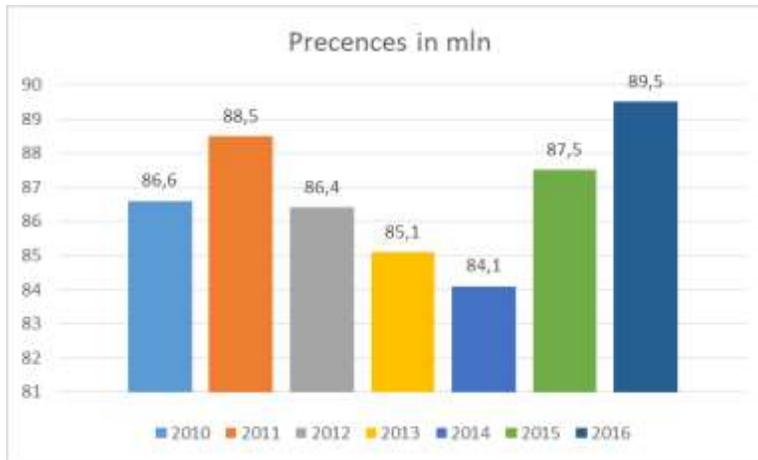
According to the most recent data, tourism demand in the more than 5500 Italian villages is estimated to be about 22 million arrivals and 95 million presences (+24 million compared to the last year), equally distributed between Italian tourists (49.8%) and foreign tourists (50.2%). In the Italian villages, the total tourism expenditure is estimated in about 8.2 billion euro: 54.8% from foreign tourists and 45.2% from Italian tourists. From the accommodation capacity standpoint, in small municipalities there are about 1.4 million beds distributed in just over 51,000 structures.

Furthermore, in the villages, tourism does not have the characteristic of "hit and run": the average stay is of 3.8 days of stay. In terms of seasonality, national presences in Italian villages are concentrated above all in August (30% of the total), while foreign flows are more evenly distributed throughout the summer season (Istat, 2018). In terms of trends, tourism movements in Italian villages have returned to growth in 2015 and even more in 2016, after three years of decline. In the 2010-2016 period, there were a 3.3% increase in attendance and 14.4% in arrivals. The increase is considerable if you think that the foreigners' flow increased by 22.6% compared to 6 years before when the percentage share of total attendance was 41.8%.

However, we notice a reverse trend of the Italian's presence in the villages, which fell by 10.4% in 2016 compared to 2010. Then, 2017 was an exceptional year for tourism in the villages, probably also because it was the "Year of the Villages of Italy", proclaimed by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MiBACT). Its aim was to enhance the heritage in all forms such as artistic, cultural, natural and human of the places that represent a fundamental component of the tourist supply of the Country. This initiative is in line with the actions and projects recommended by the "2017-2022 Strategic Tourism Plan".



**Graph 2:** Tourist presences in Italian villages (in millions; years 2010-2016)



**Source:** elaboration on ISTAT data

Among the initiatives to promote tourism in the villages, we note "*Borghi Italiani*" in 2017. It is an Airbnb' project with the MiBACT and the ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities) which provides for the enhancement of over forty villages throughout Italy. The plan intends to introduce travelers all over the world to the small Italian centers, so as to turn the spotlight on landscapes, traditions and unique knowledge, and to expand local economies and promote sustainable tourism (Grossi and Debbia, 1998). Also, the project foresees that the visitors share a house with the local inhabitants who give availability and it spurs the collaboration between communities, artists and architects, to recover public spaces and historic buildings in respect of specificities and environmental needs of the area. In short, tourism in the villages is increasingly an essential component of the Italian touristic sector. In the same way, we can look at the protection of historic rural landscapes and traditional agricultural practices, which not only preserve the cultural identity of the places, but also serve to become a strategic resource for local economies, through the benefit of typicality of the agricultural production and through rural tourism, especially in the inland areas. The protection of historic rural landscapes can also represent the most effective form of soil protection against its erosion and instability.

The National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historical Interest, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge has this aim. Over the last two years, five sites have been registered (Colline Vineyard di Soave and Colline di Conegliano Valdobbiadene in Veneto, Paesaggi Silvopastorali di Moscheta in Toscana, Oliveti terrazzati di Vallecorsa in Lazio and Piana dei monumentali oliveti pugliesi) and the agricultural practice of Transhumance (Molise and Puglia), while other candidacies are awaiting approval. A form of valorisation of the rural landscape particularly widespread in Italy is agritourism. A specific legislation promotes it as a factor of rural development. It is very important because it is endogenous to the rural world and because it contributes to the continuity and economic sustainability of agriculture and its traditional productive vocations (Istat, 2018).



**Table.1.** Perspectives and development opportunities connected to the use of diffused historical assets

|  |  |
|--|--|
| From economic standpoint, cultural tourism can <sup>2</sup> :  |  |
|  | • create employment and local development  |
|  | • generate territorial regeneration  |
|  | • promote sustainable development  |
|  | • support companies' research, turnover, repositioning and star up   |
|  | • product, service and process innovation  |
|  | • create new tourism products and services   |
|  | • favour changes in local tax schemes  |
|  | • attract other capitals or funds (philanthropy)   |
|  | • reduce abandon, disuse and replacement costs   |
| Availability of a heritage of historical assets spread in part "submerged"<br>(unknown, abandoned, underused) in Italy |  |
|  | - 900 main historical centers  |
|  | - 6.850 minor historical centers   |
|  | - 15.000 villages or historical urban landscapes   |
|  | - 40.000 historical buildings  |
|  | - 20.000 castles   |
|  | - 1.500 convents   |
|  | - 1.300.000 underused historical building (81.000 rural)   |
| The enhancement of this heritage can have beneficial effects on the country's economy <sup>3</sup>                     |  |
|  | - 2.1 the multiplier of the added value of cultural tourism (against 1.8 of beach tourism)                                       |
|  | - Every 100 jobs in tourism create 60 in other sectors   |
|  | - 85% of Italians thinks that historical heritage represents a national wealth on which to focus in order to restart development |

## Conclusion and implications

Cultural tourism is a very complex part of the tourism industry because demand and supply are different and versatile. Moreover, this complexity will probably tend to strengthen in the future in relation to the change in the recreational needs of tourists. Presumably, the demand for cultural travel will grow rapidly. Even if the traditional mass tourism will never lose its market positions, the new types of tourists will increasingly manifest the need to know the different cultures and habits of remote places. However, it is also true that when we analyze these recent trends, we must emphasize that not only the needs of local communities have changed, but also the motivations of cultural tourists. It is especially about the desire to empathize with the spirit of the place and with its cultural, social and human elements that best denote a territory and its community. Indeed, one of the most important international researches on the subject (ATLAS 2009) has highlighted how the experiences most appreciated by cultural tourists are in those little and less visited places that offer a taste of 'local' and/or 'authentic' culture. Tourists say they want to experience the local culture, to live like the locals and to discover the identity of the places

<sup>2</sup> Bortolotti and Segre (2016), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Our elaborations of Censis data (2003).



(Richards, 2009). Then, a special position takes part in cultural tourism, the tourism of the villages, to combine the pleasure of the trip with the need for culture, in at least one of the various forms in which it can be enjoyed (see also Throsby, 1999).

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