

IL CIOCCO IN TUSCANY: A SIGNIFICANT CASE STUDY FOR THE LITERATURE DEBATE ON RURAL TOURISM

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Abstract

This short paper aims to highlight the case of ‘Il Ciocco’ in Tuscany in order to contribute with a case study to the debate on rural tourism local development. In particular, this paper describing the peculiarities of Il Ciocco aims to highlight the existing link and in part already covered in literature between rural tourism and new and alternative models of hospitality.

Keywords: Il Ciocco, Rural Tourism, Sustainability, Hospitality, Tuscany

1. Background

In a recent paper Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) describe the evolution of practice and research in the rural tourism field. More in detail they described the three phases of modern rural tourism and the important contamination between tourism and rural environment. This link during the past decades assumed a higher importance in term of economic development and sustainable development. In this framework an emergent issue concerning the evolution of innovative and alternative hospitality models such as Agritourism and Albergo Diffuso (Giampiccoli et al., 2016; Fissi et al., 2019; Vallone et al., 2013; Romolini et al., 2017; De Montis et al., 2015; Romolini, Fissi & Gori, 2017; Cucari et al., 2019).

More in particular in the last few decades, the economic structure of rural areas has changed. In Western Countries with advanced economies, the reorganization of spaces, demography and production have played an important role in reducing the borders between countryside and city centres. While the population has moved from rural areas to the main urban centres, new activities and services have come about, which are linked to the local natural characteristics of rural areas. Urban pace and behavioural patterns added to the traditional landscape of the countryside causing different relations and balances to emerge. In this scenario the relation between tourism and rural areas has started to become important in term of reinvention of the economic development: tourism seems to be a driver for the rural areas economic development (Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005).

In the literature there are several definitions of tourism as Pearce illustrated in his studies (Pearce, 1989). Following Tinsley and Lynch tourism could be defined in various ways (Tinsley R. and Lynch P., 2001: 372). In the literature there is a growing

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recognition that tourism constitutes one end of a broad leisure spectrum. Usually tourism as a phenomena it takes place within a tourist destination (Garrod et al., 2006). There have been many studies and models of development based around what is referred to as the tourist destination (Butler, 1980; Gunn, 1993; Laws, 1995; Pearce, 1989).

Moving from these studies in this paper an analysis of the 'rural' definitions has been carried out. From a tourist's point of view, travel to areas that have not been extensively developed for tourism can be considered rural. Conversely, areas that have been heavily transformed for tourism development but have low levels of year-round residents can also be considered rural (Gartner, 2004).

Long (1998) proposes a definition of rural that reflects lifestyles one is likely to encounter in a visit to a 'rural' community (Randelli et al., 2014; Long and Lane, 2000; Wilson et al., 2001). In a functional sense, rural can be considered a place where small-scale enterprises dominate the economic scene, open space is abundant, contact with nature or 'traditional societies' is offered, development is slow growing using local capital and the types of touristic activity offered varies but reflects local resource capabilities (Lane, 1994). Getz and Page (1997) argue that even local enterprises are capable of growing quickly and rural tourism is still a possibility even with rapid transformation of the physical plant. Long's (1998) definition of rural, once accepted, changes the focus from a statistical, easy to measure, parameter to one that is more ambiguous and benefit based. Gartner describe that there is a number of market trends that indicate positive signs for rural tourism development. In particular following Long and Lane (2000) it is possible to take into consideration i) the growing interest in heritage, tradition, authenticity and rural life, ii) taking multiple holidays per year with a desire to take a second short break in a rural area, iii) increasing health consciousness giving a positive appeal to rural lifestyles, iv) market interest in high performance outdoor equipment from clothing to all terrain bikes and high-tech climbing equipment, v) search for solitude and relaxation and vi) an ageing but active population retiring earlier but living and travelling far into old age (Long et Lane, 2000).

Gartner argue that as a result of these trends there have been numerous attempts to create additional tourism products with a heavy emphasis on heritage and culture and with an orientation to the development of niche markets.

2. Method

This paper analyzed the experience of a family business company - Il Ciocco International Centre - situated in a rural area in Tuscany as good practice of local development. The method is based on the case study (Yin, 1984; 1994). According to Zainal (2007) "Case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study".

The analysis is articulated in two phases. The first phase involved the experience of Il Ciocco International Centre with particular acre to the second period of its cycle of life. The second phase involved all the Region of Garfagnana which is the rural area where the company is situated.

The research has been carried out moving from the most significant literature to the collection of data related to the economic development and to the demographic trends

of the local population. In the second phase a questionnaire has been delivered to local public and private actors and to opinion leaders at Regional and National level.

3. Local development of a rural area: the case study of Il Ciocco International Centre in Tuscany

In this scenario the number of tourists looking for a true, genuine, authentic experience of tourism based on ‘natural values’ is increasing. Rural destinations became a refuge from urban life and thanks to the rediscovery of ‘natural values’, new activities have started to be developed in rural destinations such as traditional commerce, craft and services. Unfortunately the reinvention of rural destination has been affected by the seasonality effects.

In Tuscany a significant experience of reinvention of a rural destination concerns the case of Garfagnana. In Garfagnana - the upper valley of the Serchio River, situated in the Lucca Province in the north-west of Tuscany in Italy - the reinvention process has been pushed by the presence of an important business company called ‘Il Ciocco International Centre’.

Il Ciocco International Centre is a family business company located in Garfagnana, situated in a park covering a surface of more than 2000 hectares, with an accommodation capacity of 950 beds comprising a hotel, a residence, a chalet and some flats. It offers meeting rooms, a Conference Palace, exhibition rooms, sports facilities, mobility infrastructures (internal roads, open-air parking lot, heliport) and a new Beauty and Spa Center. Il Ciocco started its activities in 1954, when Guelfo Marcucci, founder and owner, bought from a farmer a farmhouse and the land around it. In 1966, the farmhouse started being used as a hotel. In 1971 a new structure was built next to it with an accommodation capacity of around two hundred beds and two large meeting rooms allowing the development of congress activities. In 1976, another new structure was built, with an accommodation capacity of four hundred beds and an auditorium holding 750 seats and with further expansion following later. In the same year, holiday houses for young people were built, together with other facilities including: a swimming pool, soccer fields, riding schools, basketball and volleyball courts, tennis courts, natural trails for walking, mountain biking and for enduro, off-road vehicles and rally races. In 2000 an auditorium was built, with a capacity of 1000 seats.

Il Ciocco experience is very significant as example of development of a rural destination. Its cycle of life can be divided in two main phases: the first phase - from the beginning to the end of 1999 - concerns the development of Il Ciocco as business company with positive impacts on the territory, mainly in term of recruitment and job market, but without any effect in term of economic development for the Garfagnana area; the second phase - from 2000 - concerns the reinforcement of the link between Il Ciocco and the region where it is located.

The modern competitive dynamics in a globalized context changed also for companies like Il Ciocco the development strategies.

In the first phase Il Ciocco developed all the necessary characteristics to be considered not just as a business company, but as a destination. In the first phase the experience of Il Ciocco shows that the hotel is its main attraction element. The centre offers such a large number of activities that tourists can satisfy all their needs while staying in the

centre. The relation with the region and with its main public and private actors are based on synergies and integrations, and on the absence of any form of competition (Beteille, 1996).

The touristic development of the surrounding area has benefited from the presence of Il Ciocco, but only in the second phase of its cycle of life all the actors realized the importance to create a real system able to be in competition with other destinations all around the world.

In the second phase Il Ciocco International Centre realized that its development and its competition should be strictly related to the promotion and to the economic development of the Garfagnana Region. Also public actors realize the same necessity to give a perspective to their territories and to their communities by the development of an integrated tourism system.

Public policies in one hand and business strategies in the other hand try to realize a combination of actions in order to support the local economy following the model of an industrial area where the main business is surrounded by other businesses carrying out supplementary activities and services.

This paper investigated the change between the first and the second phase in order to analyse the experience of Il Ciocco International Centre as good practice of local development of a rural area that has become a rural destination.

After the investigation of Il Ciocco's experience this paper focused its attention on the following dimensions:

- public and private actors with interviews;
- registration of records related to the tourism dynamics in the Garfagnana Region;
- the development of new companies and of new businesses on the territory
- the dimensions of the local population;
- the tourist chain with particular care to the education system and the creation of new professional positions.

The promotion of Il Ciocco is linked to the promotion of the areas of Garfagnana and the Valley of the Serchio River. Despite being very well known, such areas are not able to simply rely on the fame of their names, as it happens in other geographical areas, such as the Chianti. Local promotion is one of the goals of this business. In order to promote its brand on the market, the business has gradually strengthened its relations with local institutions, and has developed new forms of cooperation with private actors. In view of promoting conference tourism, for example, Il Ciocco and other private operators created in 2000 the Convention Bureau Lucca e Valle del Serchio. The Centre has embraced some local traditions and values by preserving its existing contacts and promoting a cooperation with local authorities or institutions. The aim was not only to protect traditions, but also to encourage the development of tourism in the area through the promotion of the area itself and the organization of concrete initiatives sponsored by Il Ciocco such as a collaboration with the Consorzio Garfagnana Produce. Such close relations with the region were confirmed by a series of interviews to public and private opinion leaders.

Conclusion and future research

This paper is an exploratory short paper oriented to highlight the case of Il Ciocco in Tuscany in order to contribute with a case study to the debate on rural tourism local development. In particular this paper describing the peculiarities of Il Ciocco aims to highlight the existing link and in part already covered in literature between rural tourism and new and alternative models of hospitality.

This link is very important in the current context where the development and often uncontrolled growth of tourism collides with phenomena described in the literature by the term overtourism. The overtourism issues recall the importance of designing and developing alternative and innovative forms of hospitality. Hence the study of case studies like Il Ciocco in Toscana.

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