
Academic Research Paper

Proximity Tourism between Experience and New Forms of Tourism

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Abstract: This study explores the evolution and regional impact of tourism in Italy, with particular attention to sustainable tourism practices. It situates the analysis within the broader economic and cultural context of the country and underscores the crucial role that sustainable tourism can play in supporting regional development. Using a multidisciplinary approach, this research integrates multiple data sources to analyse tourism dynamics in Italy. Data from institutions such as ISTAT and ENIT are complemented by qualitative assessments of industry trends and governmental reports, while statistical techniques are applied to evaluate tourism patterns and their economic implications. The study also draws on classical tourism-geography methods: observation, used to examine phenomena across different territorial scales; analysis, which decomposes the tourism system into its constituent parts (Iuga, 2009); and synthesis, which reintegrates analytical results to support interpretative frameworks (Cocean, 2002). These approaches, together with the traditional distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods, provide a comprehensive basis for studying sustainable tourism. The findings highlight the central role of tourism in Italy's economy and underscore the potential of sustainable tourism as a driver of long-term development. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering an updated overview of tourism dynamics across Italian regions and by identifying avenues for further research on emerging models of sustainable and proximity-based tourism. The study

highlights the need for strategic planning and policy action to strengthen sustainable tourism in Italian regions. Practical implications include targeted marketing, infrastructure investment, and community engagement. Embracing sustainable principles can enhance Italy's competitiveness while preserving its cultural and environmental heritage.

Keywords: *Tourism; Sustainable tourism; Italian regions; Economic impact; COVID-19 pandemic.*

JEL Codes: L83; O18; R11

1. Introduction

Tourism represents a vital component of Italy's economic system. Since ancient times, the country has occupied a privileged place in the collective imagination as a destination to be visited at least once in a lifetime—a place where culture, art, beauty, and culinary traditions converge, accompanied by the symbolic “nectar of the gods,” wine. Scholarly literature generally traces the emergence of tourism as an economic sector to the early twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of the first forms of mass tourism (Berrino, 2011).

However, the earliest organised tourism activities—characterised by the presence of an intermediary—date back to 1841, when the English pioneer Thomas Cook exploited the new opportunities offered by railway travel by organising a group excursion from Leicester to Loughborough for 570 participants at the cost of one shilling each (Cook, 1841; Towner, 1996). From these early initiatives, the tourism system gradually evolved, initially consolidating mass tourism and, over time, shifting towards more responsible and sustainable forms of travel (UNWTO, 2018).

Over the years, the sector has demonstrated a remarkable ability to reorganise itself and to maximise the distinctive features that define Italy's tourism offer. Today, the notion of tourism extends well beyond traditional travel, incorporating a wider range of leisure activities designed to satisfy increasingly sophisticated and diversified tourist-consumer expectations (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

According to official statistics, approximately 1.4 billion tourists travelled worldwide in 2018—an increase of 5% over the previous year—generating global expenditure of around 1,450 billion dollars, rising to approximately 1,700 billion when including passenger transport (UNWTO, 2019; ISTAT, 2019).

In the global ranking of the most visited countries, France leads with 89 million arrivals, followed by Spain (83 million) and the United States (80 million). Italy occupies fifth place with 62 million visitors (UNWTO, 2019). Regionally, Europe and the Middle East recorded a 5% increase in arrivals compared to 2017, while Asia-Pacific and Africa grew by 7%. The Americas, by contrast, registered only a modest 2% increase (UNWTO, 2019).

2. Data and impact of the tourism sector in Italy

The tourism system in Italy is highly complex and multifaceted. It can be understood as an interconnected network of elements whose components influence one another and, in turn, shape the overall structure and functioning of the system. In this perspective, tourism may be viewed as a supply chain composed of a wide range of economic activities—both directly and indirectly related to tourism—that operate through a sequence of coordinated and interdependent phases. This integrated

organisation is fundamental to the creation, distribution, and consumption of tourism services (Baggio, 2017; Cooper et al., 2008).

As previously noted, tourism in Italy generates approximately 93 billion euros in direct value and accounts for around 13% of national GDP, contributing to a total turnover of 232.2 billion euros. The sector also accounts for 15% of overall employment, involving an estimated 3.5 million workers (ISTAT, 2019; WTTC, 2019). Key actors in the industry include tour operators organising domestic and international travel; independent travel agencies and major global distribution networks; and travel management companies specialising in business travel and event logistics. Collectively, these segments produce a turnover exceeding 20 billion euros, represent more than 13,000 firms, and employ over 75,000 people (Bank of Italy, 2019; Federturismo Confindustria, 2019).

The COVID-19 lockdown had a dramatic impact on this system, causing a severe contraction in turnover. Businesses in this segment recorded losses amounting to two-thirds of their revenues when comparing April 2020 with the same month in 2019, with declines ranging from 20% upward depending on the activity (ISTAT, 2020; Confcommercio, 2021).

Among the sectors most severely affected was the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) segment. Prior to the pandemic, MICE activities generated 65.5 billion euros in turnover, contributed 36.2 billion euros to national GDP, and supported approximately 569,000 jobs (Oxford Economics, 2018). Notably, about 40% of total hotel overnight stays in Italy were attributable to MICE-related travel, while participation in events reached 56.4 million attendees annually (Italialive Events & Live Industry, 2020).

According to estimates from the Bank of Italy, conference and event tourism represented roughly 13% of total GDP generated by the tourism industry. In the first half of 2020 alone, losses exceeded 4 billion euros—1.5 billion in March alone—highlighting the vulnerability of this high-value segment (Bank of Italy, 2020).

Understanding these dynamics requires a solid theoretical framework and a clear positioning within the existing research field. A rigorous review of the literature is essential to identify the principal scholarly contributions, define the conceptual foundations of the study, and justify the research questions that guide the analysis (Tranfield et al., 2003; Webster & Watson, 2002).

This contextualisation helps situate the Italian tourism system within broader debates on economic resilience, sustainability, supply-chain integration, and the evolving structure of tourism demand (UNWTO, 2020; Hall et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-method research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of tourism dynamics in Italy, particularly within the growing context of proximity tourism and emerging models of sustainable development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The quantitative component is grounded in official available statistics—primarily those provided by ISTAT and the Bank of Italy, jointly with ENIT, as well as Ciset Ca' Foscari—which offer detailed information on tourist flows, expenditure behaviour, seasonality patterns, regional competitiveness, and post-pandemic variations (Carboni et al., 2020; ISTAT, 2020; Ciset, 2021). These datasets were gathered through systematic desk research, carefully cross-validated to ensure reliability, and analysed using descriptive statistics as well as comparative trend analysis between pre- and post-COVID periods

(UNWTO, 2020).

To complement the numerical evidence, a qualitative component was developed to capture interpretative and contextual dimensions that quantitative measures alone cannot fully explain. This qualitative strand includes the content analysis of national and regional policy documents, tourism development strategies, sectoral reports, and recent academic contributions on sustainable, experiential, and proximity tourism (Hall & Williams, 2008; Richards, 2018). Such materials provide insights into institutional priorities, evolving consumer behaviours, and structural adjustments within the tourism system.

Furthermore, the study draws on classical methodological principles from tourism geography—specifically observation, analysis, and synthesis methods (Iuga, 2009; Cocean, 2002). The observation method enables the examination of socio-territorial dynamics across multiple scales, from local to national. The analysis method decomposes the tourism system into its functional elements, allowing for a clearer understanding of the role and interdependence of each component. The synthesis method subsequently reintegrates these elements, producing a coherent interpretative framework capable of explaining how territorial transformations influence tourism patterns and vice versa (Baggio & Sainaghi, 2011).

The adoption of a mixed-method design is justified by the intrinsically multidimensional nature of tourism, which encompasses economic, social, cultural, and territorial dimensions (Tribe, 2009; Williams & Shaw, 2011). Understanding the complexity of tourism—especially in a period marked by behavioural change and structural uncertainty—requires the integration of measurable indicators with interpretative tools. This approach enables the study to capture the interplay between short-term disruptions, such as those generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and longer-term transformations that are paving the way for new, more sustainable forms of tourism (Gössling et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2021).

4. Covid-19 and post Covid-19 which strategies?

According to estimates from the bimonthly report of the International Tourist Flow Forecasting Model developed by Ciset–Ca' Foscari for late 2020, global tourism flows were expected to exceed 1.5 billion international arrivals, representing an absolute increase of approximately 130 million over the previous year. For Italy, projections indicated a growth rate of 3.5%, corresponding to an estimated 74 million projected total arrivals (Ciset, 2019). These forecasts, however, were swiftly invalidated by the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led instead to a dramatic contraction of approximately 30–40% in international tourism flows.

It is important to note that even before the pandemic, the traditional tourism paradigm had begun to show signs of strain. Growing dissatisfaction with overcrowded destinations and concerns about environmental degradation had already encouraged the emergence of new tourism strategies, particularly those centred on slow, localised and individual forms of travel. These trends favoured less congested areas—mountain regions, lakes, rural landscapes and other low-density environments—where visitors could seek more authentic, sustainable and personalised experiences.

A significant conceptual shift that gained prominence during this period is the transition from overtourism to undertourism. Overtourism refers to the overcrowding of destinations at specific times, generating “disruptive effects” on socio-cultural environments, natural ecosystems, urban infrastructure and the overall quality of life for residents. Such pressures often lead to irreversible environmental damage and growing tensions between visitors and host communities.

By contrast, undertourism promotes alternative destinations—lesser-known, unusual or emerging territories—that offer new narratives and emphasise meaningful interactions with people, places,

culture and local identities. This shift has also contributed to the rise of the staycation, a form of holiday taken close to home or within one's own country. While this model can relieve pressure on overburdened destinations and foster local economies, it also carries potential risks, such as the creation of aesthetically appealing but functionally superficial "non-places," or the reorientation of entire territorial systems toward purely managerial and service-based logics.

Data from the Centro Studi TCI provide further insight into the distribution of tourism spending in Italy. For every 100 euros spent by domestic and international tourists, more than one-third is allocated to the accommodation sector. Restaurants receive approximately 13 euros, while commerce—mainly shopping—accounts for 12 euros. Air transport absorbs around 7 euros, followed by other modes of transport (rail, maritime and road) at roughly 6 euros. Intermediary services, such as travel agencies and tour operators, receive about 4 euros, and cultural, recreational and sports services just over 3 euros. The remaining 20 euros are distributed across a variety of additional services, including insurance and general expenses not classified among the main categories.

These figures illustrate not only the economic weight of the tourism sector but also the complexity of its value chain, reinforcing the relevance of rethinking tourism models in light of the structural changes accelerated by the pandemic.

5. Training and New Agreement: tools for quality of work in tourism in Italy

In recent years, alongside the gradual recovery of tourist flows following the shock of the pandemic, employment in the tourism sector has undergone a profound transformation. This transition has been driven both by increased investment in professional training and by changing consumption patterns, which together have contributed to the renewal of the National Collective Labour Agreement for Tourism. After the dramatic decline experienced during the pandemic, the sector has once again begun to generate employment, reaching more than three million workers—approximately 13% of the Italian workforce. This recovery reflects not only a quantitative rebound but also a qualitative evolution, as the sector has required a significant reorganisation of professional profiles and skill sets.

The resurgence of tourism has also exposed a crucial challenge: the growing difficulty companies face in recruiting qualified personnel. The shortage affects both traditional and emerging roles, ranging from management positions to front-line staff such as chefs, waiters and receptionists, as well as specialised professionals including digital marketing experts, sustainability managers and innovation specialists. This mismatch between labour supply and demand has become one of the most pressing structural issues in the sector.

In response, public institutions, trade associations and tourism operators have intensified efforts to promote professional training and continuous skills development (reskilling and upskilling). New training initiatives have been introduced at regional and national levels to prepare hospitality workers; advanced programmes have been developed in digital marketing, revenue management and technological innovation in hospitality; and specialised courses have emerged focusing on sustainable tourism, experiential tourism and food-and-wine tourism. Additional initiatives include retraining pathways for workers displaced during the pandemic and targeted programmes for new professional roles such as wine tourism guides, digital tour leaders, wellness practitioners and sustainability technicians.

Training has therefore become a strategic lever not only for bridging the skills gap and aligning labour supply with the evolving needs of the market, but also for stabilising employment and enhancing

the quality of services offered to visitors. At the same time, the growing demand for experiential, identity-based and sustainable tourism has contributed to the emergence of entirely new professions and the transformation of traditional ones. Providing a standard service is no longer sufficient: workers must be flexible, technologically competent and oriented towards relational and communicative skills.

These transformations have also been reflected in collective bargaining processes, culminating in the renewal of the National Collective Labour Agreement for Tourism (2024–2027), signed in July 2024 by FIPE-Confcommercio, Angem and Legacoop Produzione e Servizi on behalf of employers, and by Filcams Cgil, Fisascat Cisl and Uiltucs Uil on behalf of workers. The renewal pursues two primary objectives: modernising the regulatory framework and improving working conditions throughout the sector.

The main innovations introduced by the agreement can be summarised as follows:

1. **Progressive salary increases** distributed over five instalments, aimed at enhancing the sector's attractiveness and competitiveness;
2. **Updated regulations for fixed-term contracts**, allowing for extensions beyond 12 months up to a maximum of 24 months;
3. **Reclassification of professional profiles**, recognising new competencies related to digital technologies, service quality, and experiential tourism;
4. **Stronger incentives for supplementary bargaining**, including performance bonuses linked to business results, customer satisfaction and service quality;
5. **Measures to support work–life balance and parenting**, intended to make work schedules more sustainable and reduce turnover among skilled workers.

After years of instability and uncertainty, the renewal of the agreement provides a more solid regulatory foundation, promoting skill development and employment stability. Nevertheless, several structural challenges persist: persistent seasonality, difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified personnel, often unfavourable working conditions, and high turnover rates.

The key challenge for the coming years will be to align the quantitative growth of tourist flows with a qualitative evolution in employment. This will require sustained investment in continuous training, innovation in services and technologies, improved work–life balance measures, and the development of clearer and more recognisable professional career paths. Only through the integration of these elements will it be possible to transform the post-pandemic recovery into long-term, structural and sustainable change for the tourism sector.

6. Conclusions

It is particularly interesting to examine whether the strategies currently being implemented to revitalise tourism in Italy are capable of responding to the questions posed by anthropologist Alessandra Guigoni, who provocatively asked: “Has the Covid-19 epidemic put an end to traditional tourism experiences? Will we now have to travel in a different way, engaging more with thought, hearing and sight, and less with touch, taste and smell?”. These questions challenge us to reflect critically on how the sensory, relational and symbolic dimensions of tourism may evolve in a post-pandemic world.

In this context, it is essential to avoid flattening the tourism offer by replicating experiential prototypes that are already widespread in the market—an approach that risks reducing competition to

pricing alone. Instead, destinations and operators must continuously renew and diversify the portfolio of experiences, placing emphasis on originality, authenticity and alignment with visitors' expectations. Only by providing personalised and distinctive experiences can destinations generate added experiential value. This, in turn, increases visitors' willingness to pay higher prices, as the perceived benefits—emotional, cultural, sensory—are perceived as unique and meaningful.

In this perspective, the act of travelling becomes a means rather than an end. What truly matters is the experiential reconstruction that visitors construct through the interplay of memory, imagination and place. This process involves a sensory appropriation of landscapes, stories, material traces and atmospheres that animate individual perception and create lasting memories. Smells, colours, sounds and tactile elements are therefore not secondary details but essential components in shaping the imagined and lived scenario.

Within the post-pandemic tourism landscape, promotional strategies must also adapt to the changing expectations of travellers. A variety of incentives—such as complimentary nights, temporary travel insurance, third-night extensions, room upgrades, gift cards, added-value services (late check-out, welcome products, food-and-beverage credits), wellness packages or free access to cultural and recreational facilities—can enrich the visitor experience and respond to the growing demand for flexibility, reassurance and customisation.

The concept of experiential tourism thus emerges as an evolution beyond models focused primarily on the possession of goods or infrastructures (what could be defined as “dotational tourism”). Instead, it emphasises the intangible and identity-based dimensions of tourism—those linked to culture, heritage, emotions and community narratives. One of the most prominent expressions of experiential tourism is food tourism. Italy is widely recognised as a leading global destination for gastronomy enthusiasts: searches for food trucks and street-food experiences are among the most popular online, while visitors increasingly include historic restaurants, artisanal food producers, wineries, dairies and cooking workshops in their itineraries. Here, travellers seek not only to consume food but to participate in its cultural production, learning to prepare traditional dishes “from the inside”.

These experiential laboratories must now adapt to new post-COVID requirements, embracing formats that are less physical and more technological, where distancing, hygiene and digital interaction play a growing role. At the same time, rural areas and small towns have become emblematic of undertourism and slow tourism. Whereas pre-pandemic food-and-wine experiences were often centred inside cellars or tasting rooms, during and after COVID-19 they shifted outdoors—to vineyards, orchards or open-air farm spaces—where natural distancing is easier to maintain. Here, edutainment initiatives such as educational harvests, picnics among the rows and open-air tastings are expanding the range of experiences, combining playfulness, learning and sustainability in a simple yet engaging way.

As a final consideration, tourism in the near future is expected to be “poorer”—not necessarily in terms of quality, but in economic terms—due to the wider financial crisis and reduced household spending capacity. Trips may also be shorter, particularly as many companies encouraged employees to use accumulated vacation days during the pandemic. This scenario calls for adaptive, resilient and creative strategies capable of supporting the sector while addressing new patterns of demand and consumption.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this paper. There are no financial, commercial, or other relationships that could be perceived by the academic community as potential sources of conflict.

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