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Cinque Terre through the Eyes of Guidebooks (1840s-2010s): From Rugged Gems to (Overcrowded) Instagram Icons

Andrea Zanini

Department of Economics; University of Genoa (Italy); andrea.zanini@unige.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6272-3269>

Elisa Tizzoni

Department of Civilisation and Forms of Knowledge; University of Pisa (Italy); elisa.tizzoni@cfs.unipi.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9975-8596>

Riccardo Spinelli

Department of Economics; University of Genoa (Italy); riccardo.spinelli@unige.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6383-1667>

Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how tourist guidebooks can contribute to interpreting the evolution of a tourist destination and its image, by offering a long-term and regularly updated view over the place they describe. A case study is proposed, which analyses the Cinque Terre—in the eastern Ligurian Riviera—from the mid-19th century to the present. While the area is now internationally associated with debates on overtourism, its long-term transformation from isolated rural villages to a highly frequented destination remains insufficiently analysed through historical sources. By situating the Cinque Terre within the broader evolution of modern tourism and its representations, the study highlights the role of guidebooks not only as descriptive tools but also as agents influencing perceptions, expectations and visitor behaviour. The aim is to reconstruct how portrayals of the landscape, accessibility, services and visitor experience have changed, and to identify early signals of tourism pressure that emerged in guidebooks before becoming evident to local stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employs a qualitative, comparative analysis of a corpus of guidebooks published between the 1840s and the 2010s, including Murray, Baedeker (1877; 1906; 1913), Touring Club Italiano, and, later, Lonely Planet, Routard and Rick Steves. These sources, selected for their differing editorial traditions and readerships, allow for a diachronic examination of recurring themes, evaluative criteria and narrative shifts. The analysis focuses on representations of isolation, landscape character, mobility constraints, accommodation availability and tourist flows, tracing how these elements evolved in relation to infrastructural development and changing travel practices. Attention is also paid to explicit warnings regarding environmental risks and congestion, which began to arise well before overtourism entered public discourse.

Originality/value – By adopting a long-term approach, the paper shows that guidebooks can serve as early indicators of critical tensions linked to tourism growth, anticipating concerns later acknowledged by policymakers and scholars. The study contributes to tourism historiography by demonstrating the analytical value of guidebooks in understanding destination evolution and in

capturing changing tourist sensibilities.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that guidebooks offer insights that may support destination management, particularly in fragile environments such as the Cinque Terre. Their external, independent perspective can help identify early warning signals of imbalance between visitor flows, local communities and landscape conservation, informing strategies aimed at mitigating overtourism and promoting sustainable mobility.

Keywords

Guidebooks; Destination image; Cinque Terre; Overtourism; Sustainable tourism

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Alongside a substantial body of scholarship devoted to the genesis, structure and readerships of modern guidebooks, tourism historians have increasingly drawn on these publications as useful sources for reconstructing past travel practices and destination development. However, guidebooks are often employed in a rather instrumental way, especially in the absence of primary sources (such as archival ones) to fill a gap in the history of tourist places, without a systematic reflection on the cultural and editorial contexts that shape their production, and, above all, their potential value as long-term, context-sensitive sources tend to receive limited attention.

Starting from these premises, this article tries to adopt a different perspective: rather than treating guidebooks as ancillary material, it places them at the centre of the analysis and considers them as a coherent thread through which to examine the evolution of a tourist destination. Guidebooks possess a distinctive advantage over many other sources: they span long periods while retaining a relatively stable form, they are updated regularly, and they respond swiftly to changes in accessibility, services, visitor expectations and travel practices. Because of this combination of continuity and adaptability, they convey the image of a place as presented to prospective visitors (McGregor, 2000), which in turn determines tourist expectations and satisfaction (Lew, 1991). Recalling Urry’s (1990) “tourist gaze”, guidebooks choose and describe objects to be gazed upon, building up anticipation and expectations in tourists before they visit the area (Lee, 2001; Urry, 2002). Notably, they also capture subtle signals of change, including early indications of pressure on local infrastructure or the environment.

On this basis, the Cinque Terre, today an internationally renowned tourist destination, offers an ideal case study for assessing how guidebook narratives anticipated, mirrored, or shaped changing perceptions of a destination that has undergone profound socio-spatial and tourist transformations over the last two centuries. The aim of the analysis is not only to reconstruct the tourism history of the Cinque Terre and highlight the main turning points, but also to detect when the first signals of overtourism became visible in the guidebooks’ narrative. In this way, we demonstrate how guidebooks can provide destination managers

with useful information for monitoring the evolution of the destination's image and for detecting early warnings of perceived environmental and social degradation.

The article is organised as follows. Paragraph 2 describes the birth of tourist guidebooks as a new tourist genre and their value as historical sources. Paragraph 3 outlines changes that occurred in the images of Cinque Terre through direct examination and textual comparison of the different tourist guides published between the 1840s and the 2010s, emphasising the most important turning points. Paragraph 4 summarises the main findings of the research.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Tourist guidebooks: from “travelling companions” to historical source

From the 1830s onwards, rising living standards in countries undergoing economic development, combined with the spread of new consumption patterns, stimulated a growing interest in travel among the middle classes. Within this context, the emergence of new technological and commercial instruments facilitated what has since been described as the “industrialisation of tourism”, enabling the creation of a wide range of products and services designed to satisfy the expectations of an expanding consumer base (Tissot, 1996). Among the innovations that took shape during this period were the modern tourist guidebooks. These differed substantially from earlier forms of travel writing, such as itineraries—concerned primarily with indicating the routes to follow—or travel narratives, in which individual travellers recounted their personal experiences and occasionally offered practical advice to those wishing to retrace their journeys (Di Mauro, 1982).

The new guidebooks that quickly established themselves in the international market were distinctive in both their conception and structure. They were tailored to the needs of a more discerning and better-informed middle-class public who increasingly relied on modern means of transport such as railways and steamships. Compiled by authors who positioned themselves as experts and issued by publishing houses that often specialised in this genre, these guidebooks served above all as orientation tools. They proposed recommended itineraries, introduced potential destinations, and provided an array of maps, plans and illustrations. As trustworthy travelling companions, they guided tourists through unfamiliar places, indicated what was deemed worth visiting, and offered interpretative frameworks for appreciating the cultural, artistic or natural significance of each site. Their information was typically detailed, carefully verified and regularly updated; evaluations of locations and services sought to maintain impartiality. As a result, guidebooks acquired considerable cultural authority and exerted a strong influence on the choices of thousands of travellers (Enzensberger, 1996; Koshar, 1998; Palmowski, 2002). Among the most influential series to emerge alongside the rise of bourgeois tourism, and which rapidly secured international popularity, were those published by the London-based John Murray and the Rhineland publisher Karl Baedeker, whose guidebooks appeared in English, German and French (Lister & Gretton, 1993; Damien, 2010; Goodwin & Johnston, 2013; Hinrichsen, 1989; Palmowski, 2002; Bruce, 2011).

The decision of a publisher to include a place within a guidebook—and the tone and content of the accompanying description—played a key role in attracting potential visitors and could contribute to the transformation of little-known sites into recognised tourist destinations. This capacity for influence on tourist decisions persists to this day (Zillinger, 2006; Mazor-Tregerman et al., 2017), despite the evolution of tourist behaviour and the availability of a large amount of cheaper, free, and more convenient (mostly digital) sources of tourist information (Wong & Liu, 2011; Mieli & Zillinger, 2020).

Tourist guidebooks were—and still are—among the primary tools for tourism, and act as a mediating link between the tourist and the tourism destination (Therkelsen & Sorensen, 2005). As Zillinger (2006) notes, “guidebooks constitute an important medium for the dissemination of information” and serve as both “functional and symbolic objectives for tourist destinations” (p. 230). By virtue of this privileged position, they assume an active and direct role in the transmission and shaping of the destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999); their particular influence derives from their being perceived as independent sources, separate from local authorities and official promotional efforts (Zillinger, 2006; Mazor-Tregerman et al., 2017). As Wong and Liu (2011) underline, “guidebooks not only affect destination images, but also influence individual travel decisions. They show travellers both desirable and undesirable aspects of a destination and assist them in selecting from the available product options” (p. 616). Notably, their impact on tourists’ perceptions was even more evident in the past, when they often represented the sole point of reference available to visitors prior to their departure for the chosen destination (Marine-Roig, 2011).

2.2. Methodology

In line with, among others, Marine-Roig (2011), we believe that tourist guidebooks constitute a valuable secondary source for reconstructing the historical development of a destination and its image, “because they are one of the few image-projecting objects that have existed since the very beginning of tourism and that are still in use today” (p. 122). They are “witness of the history and tendencies of their time and convey image representations and the various identity elements ascribed to destinations” (p. 137). From our perspective, they make it possible to identify when and how a place acquired a tourist profile, which attractions were deemed worthy of attention, and what kinds of visitors it attracted, as well as the reputation it enjoyed at different moments in time. In addition, guidebooks provide useful evidence for tracing the evolution of local tourist services, particularly the emergence and transformation of businesses—most notably hotels and inns—specifically catering to travellers.

This study is based on a qualitative, comparative analysis of a corpus of tourist guidebooks published between the 1840s and the 2010s, including Murray, Baedeker, Touring Club Italiano and, in later periods, Lonely Planet, Routard and Rick Steves. As the typology of tourist guidebooks has changed significantly over time, it was neither possible nor methodologically appropriate to rely on a single, homogeneous category of sources throughout the entire period under consideration. Instead, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy—an effective type of non-probability sampling that seeks out certain criteria (Hunter, 2008): the analysis draws on those guidebooks that were most influential and widely circulated in each historical phase, and therefore most likely to shape travellers’ perceptions and practices. Selected for their differing editorial traditions and intended readerships, these sources enable a diachronic examination of recurring themes, evaluative criteria and narrative shifts. Furthermore, as Marine-Roig (2011) reports, guidebooks originating in foreign tourist markets—as most of those included in our sources—are particularly suitable, as “external non-governmental image-making agents would reflect changes in tourism image in a more politically neutral and global way than local governments would” (p. 121).

The guidebooks were examined following a chronological logic, which made it possible to identify moments of continuity and rupture in the representation of the Cinque Terre. The analysis focuses mainly on representations of isolation, landscape character, mobility constraints, accommodation availability and tourist flows, tracing how these elements changed in relation to infrastructural development and evolving travel practices. Particular attention is also paid to explicit warnings concerning environmental risks and congestion, which began to appear well before overtourism entered public discourse and which mark some

of the key turning points discussed in the following sections.

On this basis, the essay reconstructs the process through which the Cinque Terre—today one of Italy’s most internationally renowned destinations—gradually came to be recognised as a tourist area, despite having long remained on the margins of mainstream travel routes. More specifically, it examines how the image of these places evolved over time and assesses the extent to which tourist guidebooks contributed to shaping and consolidating this transformation.

3. The perception of (over)tourism in the Cinque Terre in the tourist guides

3.1. *The charm of isolation: the Cinque Terre before the connection to the road network*

Riomaggiore, Manarola, Corniglia, Vernazza, and Monterosso, five villages in the very eastern Ligurian Riviera collectively known as Cinque Terre, are nowadays one of Italy’s most popular destinations, attracting over 3 million visitors each year.

Over the centuries, the Cinque Terre reached notoriety among travellers and scientists for its rugged yet charming landscape, made of terraced slopes that drop sheer to the sea, which is the result of ancient cultivation practices that allowed local communities to settle in an area at high risk of hydrogeological instability. This area has also been known since the Middle Ages for its local wine production, which obtained the controlled designation of origin in 1973 and includes a particularly appreciated passito wine called *sciacchetra* (Terranova, 1984; Balletto, 1988).

Hence, in the 1840s, when the first tourist guides were published, the Cinque Terre appeared to travellers as a poor and backward area, with an enchanting landscape and climate but lacking the attractions sought by travellers (Zanini, 2021). In the description of the boating itinerary between Genoa and La Spezia offered in the first edition of Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy* (1842)¹, the Cinque Terre are defined as

A small district . . . belonging to five villages . . . known by the collective name of the Cinque Terre . . . very remarkable for the beauty of the scenery and for the primitive simplicity (at least on outward appearance, for these appearances are often deceitful) of its inhabitants. (*Handbook*, 1842, p. 119)

Similarly, the 1860 edition of the *Handbook* does not suggest any place of interest in the Cinque Terre: “The coast between Monterosso and Portovenere is extremely bold and arid, without any place of importance” (*Handbook*, 1860, p. 127).

Opened in 1874, the railway built along the eastern Ligurian coast improved the accessibility of the Cinque Terre, facilitating residents’ daily travel between the villages and the nearby city of La Spezia, which provided employment opportunities in the industrial sector and in the commercial and military port. Thus, the 1877 Baedeker guidebook listed the five train stations in the villages of the Cinque Terre, but provided no further information, except for some notes on the natural environment. However, the single-track railway line proved inadequate for long-distance travel; therefore, tourists had to face a long and challenging journey to reach the Cinque Terre; moreover, only Monterosso offered tourism facilities. Consequently, the 1906 edition of the Baedeker guidebook reported the opening of an inn in Monterosso (without further information), while the 1913 German edition of Baedeker’s *Riviera* mentioned the Pensione Maggiorasca, owned by a certain Frau Schmoll.

Broadly speaking, tourism in the Cinque Terre remained poorly developed until the early post-World

¹ Murray’s *Handbooks for Travellers* were published by John Murray in London between 1836 and the early 20th century.

War II years due to the villages' isolation, as they lacked direct access to the main road network and could only be reached by mule tracks, the railway line, or the sea (Casavecchia & Salvatori, 2002).

Yet, between the two World Wars, the guides of the Touring Club Italiano (TCI)—founded in Milan in 1894 to promote tourism and knowledge of the Italian regions—devoted relatively extensive attention to the Cinque Terre, compared to the brief hints found in the Baedeker guides in the previous decades.

The description of the area in the TCI guides largely reflected the traditional image painted by travellers and scholars in previous centuries: first, the landscape and environmental features were described, with comments on the typical Mediterranean vegetation and climate. Besides, the guides put emphasis on the traditional viticulture, which had played such a significant role in shaping the landscape and produced highly regarded wines. As for practical information useful to travellers, the guides warned readers about the isolation of the Cinque Terre, as they still lacked connections to the main road network; furthermore, the railway, the most practical link between the area and the rest of the world, was penalised by the fact that many sections were in tunnels, which prevented views of the landscape despite the train passing directly above the sea:

Levanto is followed by Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola, and Riomaggiore, making up the so-called Cinque Terre. This picturesque area enjoys excellent weather and is rich in olive, orange, and lemon trees. The Cinque Terre's strong (high-alcohol) wine, which enjoyed European renown in past centuries, is highly prized in the region. Vineyards are cultivated in many places on almost sheer cliffs. Unfortunately, this beautiful area is still devoid of road access, and the railway runs almost entirely in tunnels. (TCI, 1924, pp. 250–251, own translation)²

The portrayal of a visit to the Cinque Terre as an immersion in an environment still untouched by modernity and steeped in tradition—feasible only for tourists available to undertake a long and uncomfortable journey and give up the comfort of modern hotels—persisted even in the early post-World War II years, since the construction of the road that was supposed to connect the Cinque Terre to the main transport network (*strada litoranea*), only partially completed, began in the late 1950s.

In this case too, the most comprehensive sources of information are the TCI guidebooks that, while reiterating the traditional assets of the places (landscape, climate, wine), pointed out the shortages of accommodation facilities:

Cinque Terre, a picturesque region blessed with an excellent climate. . . . On the steep slopes of the coast, which in some places falls almost sheer, and in the valleys that crisscross it, extensive vineyards grow, producing a prized white wine, especially a passito, known in dialect as 'sciacchetra'. Due to the lack of road connections, the visit must be made by train or via mountain paths. Hotel comfort is modest in Monterosso, and non-existent in the other villages. (TCI, 1952, p. 418, own translation)³

3.2. First warning signals: the early TCI Guides' commitment to sustainable tourism

² Italian original: "A Levanto seguono Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola, Riomaggiore, costituenti le così dette Cinque Terre, il cui territorio è molto pittoresco, in ottime condizioni climatiche, ricco di ulivi, aranci e limoni. Apprezzatissimo nella regione, il vino alcoolico delle Cinque Terre, che ebbe, in alcuni secoli, rinomanza europea. I vigneti sono coltivati in molti luoghi sopra pareti quasi a picco. Il bellissimo territorio è purtroppo ancora privo di comunicazioni carrozzabili e la ferr. vi è quasi sempre nelle gallerie." (TCI, 1924, pp. 250–251)

³ Italian original: "Cinque Terre, pittoresca regione favorita da un clima ottimo. . . . Sui ripidi pendii del litorale, che in qualche punto precipita quasi a picco, e nelle vallette che lo solcano, estese coltivazioni a fasce di viti che forniscono un pregiato vino bianco, soprattutto passito, in dialetto chiamato 'sciacchetra'. Mancando le comunicazioni stradali, la visita deve essere fatta col treno o attraverso alpestri sentieri. Il conforto alberghiero è modesto a Monterosso, nullo negli altri paesi." (TCI, 1952, p. 418)

As reconstructed by previous studies (Tizzoni, 2022; Spinelli et al., 2024), the improvements in the coastal road network fostered the growth of tourism in the Cinque Terre. However, the tourism development in this area was far from being a linear process, as the constraints imposed by its peculiar morphology and the persistent lack of tourist services and facilities hindered the growth of tourism flows.

Furthermore, while local politicians and economic operators welcomed the improved accessibility of the Cinque Terre and the growth in visitor numbers, external observers and groups of resident population and long-time tourists feared the excessive urbanisation of the area and the loss of traditional identity. In addition, critics arose because the employment and business opportunities offered by tourism were further detaching young people from traditional sectors, particularly agriculture, which was essential to maintaining the traditional landscape.

Although the extreme impacts of tourism growth experienced by other Ligurian tourism resorts apparently did not affect the Cinque Terre, this area saw environmental and landscape transformations directly or indirectly connected with the tourism development. Nonetheless, over the decades, the persistence of typical environmental and landscape features has become pivotal to the tourist experience, based on visits to the villages and hiking.

The wave of environmental concerns throughout the 1970s further contributed to spreading concerns about the tourism-related damage to the natural and historical heritage of the Cinque Terre—which was its most relevant attraction—and about the need to plan and design the local tourism development, especially by integrating the coast with the inner areas, rich in underexploited tourism potential.

These ethical and environmental concerns found expression in the 1982 TCI guidebook to Liguria, which also devoted attention to the Cinque Terre hinterland, describing its typical characteristics, resulting from an economy based on agriculture, livestock farming, and forestry (TCI, 1982, p. 651).

Furthermore, the 1982 TCI guidebook argued that a turning point had been reached and took a clear stance on the future development of the Cinque Terre, claiming that the further expansion of tourism should not have disrupted the environmental balance that had been maintained until then:

Since the 1960s, there has been a rapid increase in tourism, so far limited to coastal resources and not destructive to the area's landscape and cultural heritage overall. The risk that uncontrolled further development of tourism-related activities could disrupt the environmental balance has been repeatedly noted on many occasions. (TCI, 1982, p. 652, own translation)⁴

The guidebook also recalled the debate accompanying the construction of the *strada litoranea* [coastal road] and sided with those who feared that increased road connections could lead to overtourism. Therefore, for the guide's author, the preservation of the Cinque Terre landscape and environment, and the quality of life of the residents required promoting sustainable mobility, based on rail and hiking:

The idea of breaking this 'isolation' by encouraging the development of an economically dynamic tourist district was the basis for planning the state road 370 (the Cinque Terre coastal road) years ago. . . . But the vigorous opposition of those who see overtourism as a threat to the integrity of the resources that underpin the area's high environmental value has so far slowed its implementation and perhaps permanently jeopardised its completion. Beyond the controversy, based on elements of real economic and cultural consistency, it must nevertheless be affirmed that the railway line (opened in 1874) and the consequent walking excursions remain the most suitable

⁴ Italian original: "Dagli anni '60 si è avuto in rapido incremento del turismo, per ora limitato alle sole risorse costiere e nel complesso non distruttivo del patrimonio paesistico e culturale della zona. Il rischio che un incontrollato, ulteriore sviluppo delle attività connesse al turismo possa spezzarne l'equilibrio ambientale, è stato da più parti ripetutamente segnalato." (TCI, Liguria, 1982, p. 652, own translation)

means for a correct approach to the landscape and environmental assets of this territory. (TCI, 1982, pp. 657–658, own translation)⁵

3.3. *In-between authenticity and overcrowding: symptoms of overtourism in the 1990s*

During the 1990s, the Lonely Planet guides, issued since 1973, became a travel companion for many visitors to Italian destinations.

Similarly to the tourist handbooks mentioned above, the Lonely Planet guides stressed the charm of the Cinque Terre's landscape and atmosphere. The preservation of historical and natural heritage made this area unique and undoubtedly different from mass tourism resorts; however, the contrast between the authentic, traditional aspect of the site and its economic dependence on the tourism sector and, above all, on US visitors, was also highlighted:

Miss the five magnificent villages of the Cinque Terre . . . and you will be missing some of Italy's most beautiful countryside. . . . The five tiny fishing villages appear to remain untouched by the tourist invasion that has blighted much of the Ligurian Coast. But their economies are as dependent on tourist dollars as the rest of the region. (Gillman & Gillman, 1993, p. 193)

Moreover, the increased tourism popularity of the area had begun to spread its effects on the tourism supply: the Lonely Planet guidebook maintained that it was easy to find accommodations, consisting mainly of affordable private lodgings; however, restaurant prices were relatively high compared to the quality of the food. As to the area's accessibility, the guidebook pointed out that tourists were required to park their cars outside the villages.

The 1996 edition of the Lonely Planet guidebook to Italy added further comments on the role of tourism in the Cinque Terre: given that tourism was a driving force of the local economy, this area maintained its peculiar, traditional features and was popular primarily among foreign tourists, while its relative isolation kept Italian visitors away.

Fishing and viticulture have been the two main sources of income over the centuries, but tourism now plays a big role as well—the location of the villages has hopefully saved them from the thoughtless resort development that blights much of the Ligurian coast. Oddly, the area is more popular with foreign than Italian tourists, for whom it is still largely 'undiscovered.' (Gillman & Simonis, 1996, p. 216)

As to accommodation availability and prices, however, the guidebook was less optimistic than the previous editions: on the one hand, hotels were often sold out, but there was plenty of private accommodation available on site, with prices that were neither low nor exorbitant; on the other hand, food quality in local restaurants was defined "poor" compared to the high prices. As to the area's accessibility, the road network between Vernazza and Monterosso was deemed inadequate ("mules are much better transport"), whereas the trail network was worth the journey, the main attraction being the spectacular trail overlooking the sea known as the *Via dell'Amore* [Love Trail].

During the same years, the Routard guide, published in France since 1973, also enjoyed widespread

⁵ Italian original: "Dall'idea di rompere questo 'isolamento' favorendo la formazione di un comprensorio turistico economicamente dinamico, nasceva anni fa la progettazione della statale 370 (Litoranea delle Cinque Terre). . . . Ma la vivace opposizione di chi, proprio da un turismo sovradimensionato ravvisa una minaccia all'integrità di quelle risorse che stanno alla base dell'alto pregio ambientale del comprensorio, ne ha finora rallentato l'esecuzione e forse definitivamente pregiudicato il completamento. Al di là della polemica, fondata su elementi di reale consistenza economica e culturale, va tuttavia affermato che la linea ferroviaria (aperta nel 1874) e il conseguente escursionismo pedonale restano i mezzi più consoni ad un corretto approccio dei beni paesistici e ambientali di questo territorio." (TCI, 1982, pp. 657–658)

circulation and shed light on the most relevant features of the Cinque Terre.

In the 1994 Routard guidebook to Northern Italy, the main assets of the “absolutely superb” Cinque Terre area were briefly listed, namely the “exceptional landscape” and the *sciacchetrà* wine (p. 90). Weak points were also highlighted, especially the risk of accidents on the *Via dell’Amore*—which local sources report having been closed to all traffic due to landslides in 1984 and fully reopened in 1995—as well as the lack of a road connection between the five villages. Regarding this, Routard (1994) mentioned a corniche route must unite La Spezia to Sestri Levante because, at the time, only the first part was finished between La Spezia and Manarola, over about twenty kilometres (p. 90).⁶

The Routard guidebook also recorded the first signs of saturation of the destination, pinpointed by widespread accommodation “sold out” in the high season, also due to residents’ tendency to rent rooms preferably for medium-long periods. Therefore, the Routard guidebook maintained that the train remained the most practical means of visiting the Cinque Terre and recommended staying overnight in La Spezia; trends rising over the last few years were predicted, especially the partial conversion of La Spezia from a port and industrial city to a tourist destination serving as a base for visiting the Cinque Terre, as is witnessed by the proliferation of B&Bs and private accommodation.

It’s difficult to find accommodation in the summer, which is why we recommend staying in La Spezia instead. Residents of the villages generally rent rooms for longer stays. See also the campsites we list in La Spezia, which are on the road to the Cinque Terre. (Routard, 1994, p. 91)⁷

3.4. *Coping with overtourism in the 2000s*

Over the decades, the Cinque Terre have been affected by recurring floods, fires, and water pollution, which have also gathered attention from the media.

These weaknesses, together with the process of heritagization that affected terraced landscapes throughout Europe between the 1980s and 1990s, have stimulated the adoption of measures to preserve the traditional landscape and the environment: the Cinque Terre were thus included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (1997) and the Cinque Terre National Park and Marine Protected Area were established in 1999 (Rossi, 2001; Storti, 2004; Van der Yeught, 2010). The Park was meant to pursue environmental protection and foster local development, also by enhancing sustainable tourism, despite old problems (including the deterioration of the no longer cultivated terraced landscape, the inadequate sewerage systems, the lack of some basic facilities, etc.) and new troubles, such as a judicial investigation into the park’s management in 2010 and a serious flood in 2011 (Agnoletti et al. 2012; Amore, 2024). The inclusion in UNESCO’s list, the National Park’s policies and even the 2011 flooding boosted the awareness of the Cinque Terre worldwide and enhanced the increase in the number of visitors since the early 2000s, exceeding 248,000 annual arrivals in 2019.

As mentioned above, the number of tourists and day trippers in the Cinque Terre is currently estimated at around 3,000,000 visitors per year; notably, in recent years, the growing number of cruise passengers in La Spezia contributed to a further increase in the number of day-trippers.

Thus, in the 2000s, on the one hand, tourist guides continued to emphasise the area’s traditional assets

⁶ French original: “Une route de corniche doit réunir La Spezia à Sestri Levante. Actuellement, seule la première partie est terminée entre La Spezia et Manarola, sur une vingtaine de kilomètres.” (Routard, 1994, p. 90).

⁷ French original: “Difficile de trouver de la place en saison, c’est pourquoi nous vous conseillons plutôt de loger à La Spezia. Les habitants des différents villages louent des chambres mais généralement pour plusieurs nuits. Voir aussi les campings que nous indiquons à La Spezia et qui se trouvent sur la route des Cinque Terre.” (Routard, 1994, p. 91)

(landscape, historic villages, trails), suggesting sustainable travel practices that could foster direct contact with the environment and local communities. On the other hand, references to the area's overcrowding during the high season increased, as well as suggestions on how to avoid the inconveniences of overtourism and the "tourist traps".

The description of the Cinque Terre in the 2001 TCI guidebook to Liguria referred to their recent inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List and the establishment of the National Park. Furthermore, it recommended avoiding reaching the villages by car, arguing that it was preferable to explore the area on foot, along the trails

Visiting the Cinque Terre—which have been part of the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1998—means delving into one of the most unspoilt historical and natural sites on the coast, and not just in Liguria. . . . The towns can also be reached by car, but this is not recommended, both for ecological and practical reasons, as in summer it is almost impossible to find parking and traffic is regulated by alternating one-way systems. . . . Many, however, maintain that the best way to get to know the Cinque Terre is to walk the challenging but well-maintained paths, which offer unforgettable views, scents, and breezes. (TCI, 2001, p. 199, own translation)⁸

Similarly, the 2004 Lonely Planet guidebook to Italy mentioned the UNESCO recognition and provided contact information for the Cinque Terre National Park and the services it offered to visitors.

Although the Cinque Terre National Park was created in 1999, it was not until 2002 that effective protective measures were taken. Information centres have now been set up, and walkers pay to use trails, which the park authorities close when numbers get too high. (Simonis, 2004, p. 192)

The guidebooks also included references to the drawbacks of the growing tourist presence: the 2001-2002 Routard guidebook to Northern Italy, listing the ways to reach the Cinque Terre, noted that access by car offered a scenic route but posed parking difficulties: "Watch out for illegal parking, or you might find your car in La Spezia and have to go back *a piedi* (on foot)! So take the train." (Routard, 2001-2002, p. 155, own translation)⁹ It also noted that during the high season there was a shortage of accommodations, especially for short stays, and that prices had increased due to the area's improved accessibility: "The corniche road linking La Spezia to Sestri Levante has now been completed. So it's packed, and prices have gone up" (Routard, 2001-2002, p. 154, own translation)¹⁰

More recently, Rick Steves, the author of travel guides and TV programmes who boosted the renown of the Cinque Terre among US travellers—thanks to an episode of his highly popular programme dedicated to this area that aired in 2002 (Steves & Griffith, 2002)—issued some tips for enjoying a stay in the Cinque Terre while avoiding the consequences of overtourism, which has become a common problem in the area:

When I first came to the Cinque Terre, then an isolated stretch of the Italian Riviera south of Genoa, it was a classic "back door": a string of five pastel-hued hamlets clinging to craggy seaside slopes and surrounded by steep, rocky vineyards. It was authentic, romantic, and without a tourist in sight. Fast forward several decades...

⁸ Italian original: "Visitare le Cinque Terre – che dal 1998 fanno parte della lista dei siti individuati dall'UNESCO come 'Patrimonio mondiale dell'Umanità' – significa immergersi in uno degli angoli di storia e natura più intatti della costa, non solo ligure. . . . Le località possono essere raggiunte anche in automobile, ma l'uso di tale mezzo è sconsigliato, sia per motivi 'ecologici' sia per motivi pratici, giacché in estate è quasi impossibile trovare parcheggio e le strade sono a senso unico alternato. . . . Molti comunque sostengono che il modo di visita migliore per conoscere le Cinque Terre sia quello di percorrerle a piedi gli impegnativi ma attrezzati sentieri, che sanno regalare scorci, odori e brezze indimenticabili." (TCI, 2001, p. 199)

⁹ French original: "Attention au parking sauvage, sous peine de retrouver votre voiture à la Spezia et de rentrer *a piedi*! Préférez donc le train." (Routard, 2001-2002, p. 155)

¹⁰ French original: "La route de corniche qui réunit La Spezia à Sestri Levante est maintenant terminée. Du coup, c'est bondé et les prix ont grimpé" (Routard, 2001-2002, p. 154).

and the once-sleepy villages are now on Instagram bucket lists and mobbed in high season by organized tours and cruise-ship excursions. . . . The result, especially when day-trippers hit, is that trains and station platforms are often mob scenes, the iconic coastal hiking trail becomes almost impassable, and the towns' tiny lanes are clogged to bursting. Even so, I still recommend this seductive corner of Italy. You can (and should) have a wonderful time here. Avoid the worst of the logjams by following these tips. (Rick Steves, 2019)

4. Conclusions

Tourist guides have proven a useful tool for assessing the transformations experienced by the Cinque Terre between the mid-19th century and the present, when they turned from isolated villages on the margins of industrial development to successful tourism destinations, currently exposed to the effects of overtourism. Far from simply recording practical information for travellers, the considered guidebooks return an evolving picture of the changing tourist experience and provide an overall interpretation of transformations affecting the destination over time.

Our research had to cope with limitations, as new editions of the guides are published at irregular intervals and texts are often reprinted from one edition to the next one without updating the contents; moreover, the heterogeneity of the editorial orientation and target audience of each guidebook series might hamper comparison. Despite these limitations, some noteworthy aspects emerge.

First, the guides display the long-term persistence of some traditional elements of the Cinque Terre's tourist image (especially in the Lonely Planet guides), such as its isolation and the rugged nature of its landscapes and inhabitants, even if social and territorial transformations have altered these aspects over the decades. At the same time, the guides, particularly those issues from the Touring Club and the Guide Routard, warned about the risks associated with the steady growth of visitors well before local stakeholders became aware of them. This is particularly evident in the case of the environmental impact of increasing tourism flows: the TCI guide, above all, sheds light on threats posed to the environment and landscape by increased accessibility of the Cinque Terre as early as the 1980s, well before the national park tackled such issues. As far as overtourism is concerned, tourist guides displayed an ambiguous attitude until the dawn of the new millennium: while the Cinque Terre were still portrayed as a niche destination, aimed at a narrow and motivated audience, the first signs of overcrowding (especially road congestion) were also emphasised. Between the late 1990s and the new millennium, overtourism became a recurring element in the guides, underpinned by advice on how to avoid the inconveniences associated with it. Thus, the guides have drawn attention to the consequences of overtourism long before public authorities adopted countermeasures, which came into force only recently.¹¹

These aspects prompt reflection on scholars' attitude towards overtourism in current literature, since the residents' mobilization against the excessive presence of tourists and the urban, economic, and social transformations associated with tourism monoculture gathered significantly greater attention than the tourists' perspective. Retracing the tourism history of the Cinque Terre "from the eyes of guidebooks", it is clear that tourists became aware of overtourism well before local stakeholders; besides, guidebooks provided an external, even critical, perspective that could have supported the decision-making process of local authorities and enterprises.

Our results have significant implications for contemporary destination managers. Previous research (Luongo et al, 2023) has proven that a sustainable destination image positively influences the sustainable

¹¹ We refer in particular to the tariff policies adopted from Summer 2024 on the regional railway line to discourage travel during peak seasons and de-seasonalise travel flows.

tourism intention and that tourists are more inclined to support destinations that actively promote and implement sustainable tourism initiatives. Destination management organisations should therefore prioritize efforts to showcase their commitment to sustainability, as a positive image can attract environmentally conscious tourists (Capone et al., 2023). From this perspective, a greater familiarity with tourist guidebooks—especially in terms of how the destination is portrayed and what places are labelled as “ought to be seen”—may help decision makers detecting warning signals as of degradation and overtourism at an early stage, complementing the outcomes of more formal diagnostics such as data-driven indexes (Cesarini & Terraglia, 2023). Similarly, with a more proactive attitude, destination authorities should have a stricter dialogue with the guidebook’s authors and publishers—without obviously undermining their independence—to more incisively communicate their efforts towards sustainability and to adjust the relative emphasis posed to the different local attractions, in the attempt to better distribute the tourist flows across the territory.

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