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Editorial

Keeping Tourism in Sight: Territory, Tools, Meaning

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Abstract: This editorial introduces three contributions that, taken together, highlight current priorities for tourism science: territorial rebalancing, technological capability, and sustainable heritage governance. Anna Zollo, Biagio Simonetti, Songül Demir, and Michele De Lorenzo discuss proximity tourism as an empirical reconfiguration of demand and experience, arguing that its promises depend on planning, infrastructure, and community engagement rather than rhetoric. Claudio Rossi surveys the state of the art on artificial intelligence for tourism, focusing on accommodation providers and stressing the need to evaluate benefits and risks through organisational readiness and evidence-based monitoring. Giuseppe Avena, Romana Gargano, and Luisa Zaccuri analyse perceptions of the Zungri rupestrian site, showing how authenticity and cultural identity are undermined by accessibility and management constraints. The issue collectively calls for research designs that integrate quantitative indicators with qualitative meanings to inform policy and practice.

Keywords: *proximity tourism; sustainable tourism; tourism policy and governance; artificial intelligence in tourism; cultural heritage and identity; visitor perceptions.*

JEL Codes: Z30; Z32; Z38; O33; Z11.

In a period in which tourism studies are asked to be both empirically rigorous and intellectually humble, this issue of *Turistica – Italian Journal of Tourism* comes at the right moment. I write as an Italian statistician who has spent most of his professional life translating messy realities into models that are useful—but never definitive. Tourism is, by nature, a moving target: demand shifts with culture and technology; supply reacts through pricing, capacity, and narratives; and external shocks—public health, geopolitics, climate—can invalidate, overnight, what seemed a stable trend. From my desk in Teramo, I have learned that numbers do not speak alone: they require interpretation, triangulation, and a careful sense of scale (territorial, temporal, and social). The three contributions in this issue, taken together, give us precisely that: a grounded reflection on proximity and sustainability, a forward-looking synthesis on

artificial intelligence in tourism, and a focused cultural-heritage study that shows how meanings, emotions, and governance constraints intersect in peripheral destinations.

Anna Zollo, Biagio Simonetti, Songül Demir, and Michele De Lorenzo open the issue with “*Proximity Tourism between Experience and New Forms of Tourism*”, a paper that usefully reminds us that proximity tourism is not a slogan, but a measurable reconfiguration of behaviours, expectations, and regional balances. Their discussion is anchored in the Italian context, where tourism is simultaneously a national economic pillar and a highly uneven territorial phenomenon. The authors combine institutional data sources (notably those associated with national tourism monitoring) with qualitative assessments of trends and policy directions, and they explicitly integrate classical tourism–geography reasoning—observation, analysis, synthesis—with statistical techniques. This is not a trivial choice: in my experience, the greatest risk in tourism analytics is to confuse precision with relevance, or to treat “the dataset” as if it were the phenomenon. Zollo and colleagues instead keep the interpretative frame visible, showing how sustainable and proximity-based models may support longer-term regional development if—and only if—planning, infrastructure investment, and community engagement are treated as structural variables rather than decorative add-ons.

Claudio Rossi follows with “*AI for Tourism: State of the Art*”, and the tone shifts—appropriately—from territorial dynamics to technological capability. Rossi reviews how specialised and generative artificial intelligence can support hotels and other accommodation providers across marketing, communication, personalisation, and operations. The strength of the paper, in my view, is that it does not stop at enthusiasm: it recognises benefits and limitations, and it frames AI as an instrument whose value depends on organisational maturity, data practices, and managerial judgement. From a statistical standpoint, this is exactly where the conversation must go next. If tourism businesses adopt generative tools to create content, segment audiences, forecast demand, or streamline service delivery, then evaluation cannot remain anecdotal: we need measurable outcomes, counterfactual reasoning where possible, and a culture of monitoring that distinguishes short-term uplift from durable performance. Rossi’s synthesis is therefore a useful bridge between the fast-moving AI ecosystem and the slower, but necessary, work of building evidence—especially for small and medium-sized firms that may be tempted to outsource strategy to tools they do not fully understand.

The third contribution, by **Giuseppe Avena, Romana Gargano, and Luisa Zaccuri**, is titled “*Sustainability and Cultural Identity: A Textual Analysis of Perceptions of the Zungri Rupestrian Site*”, and it offers a careful case of how cultural tourism operates as meaning-making under constraint. The authors examine the Zungri rupestrian complex in Calabria—an emerging destination with remarkable archaeological value and, at the same time, significant infrastructural and geological vulnerabilities. Methodologically, they employ qualitative textual analysis on a corpus of online data capturing stakeholder and visitor perceptions. The core finding is striking in its simplicity: the site carries a high symbolic and emotional value (authenticity and spirituality recur as anchors), yet this positive identity is undermined by problems of accessibility and management. For those of us who work with indicators, this is a salutary reminder that “destination image” is not merely a marketing variable; it is co-produced, fragile, and deeply entangled with governance. In policy terms, the authors’ call for integrated strategies—protection, accessibility, participatory management—should be read as a technical agenda as well as a cultural one, because deseasonalisation and sustainable local development are not achieved by promotion alone, but by making the experience reliably reachable and responsibly curated.

Taken together, these three papers suggest a coherent research trajectory for tourism science in the next few years. Proximity tourism invites us to rethink spatial demand and regional equity; AI invites us to

rethink capability, productivity, and the ethics of automation; and cultural-heritage analysis invites us to rethink how identity and sustainability are actually perceived and negotiated on the ground. If there is one common lesson, it is that tourism systems are hybrid: quantitative signals and qualitative meanings constantly interact. As scholars, we should resist two temptations: to treat “innovation” as a substitute for governance, and to treat “sustainability” as a label rather than a measurable, lived balance among protection, access, and benefit distribution. The task ahead is not to choose between models and narratives, but to build research designs—statistically sound and culturally literate—that can inform decisions in real territories, with real constraints, and real communities.

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