

NEW FRAMEWORKS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED CULTURAL TOURISM

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Abstract

Cultural heritage becomes an asset which allows widening the tourism offer or developing tourism in places where the activity had not been traditional. Local communities play a significant role in the development of tourism, especially in those cases where tourism is perceived as an instrument for local development. The implementation of community-based tourism requires planning and capacity building among all stakeholders. In this framework, the purpose of this paper is analysing a community-based tourism programme, Tourism Villages, implemented in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Key words: heritage, cultural tourism, community-based tourism, Argentina

Cultural heritage and tourism

Cultural heritage constitutes an important resource for the development of tourism. Françoise Choay (1992: 25) proposes that the concept of “historic monument” was a creation of the Renaissance; the valorization of the Roman culture in the 15th Century inducted travels from different parts of the Italian peninsula, and later from other European countries, to Rome, with the purpose of a direct contact with the relicts of the past. This was the root of the *Grand Tour*, which is considered the anticipation of tours as we know them today (Patin, 2012: 19). In modern language, the *Grand Tour* was a product of cultural tourism, reserved for economic and social elites. Mass tourism, which became predominant over the second half of the 20th Century, was based on holydays, sun and beach rather than on cultural experiences although the visit to museums and monuments could be a secondary aspect of the trips. The traditional definition of “cultural tourism” focused, as expressed in the ICOMOS Charter of 1976, in the knowledge of historic and artistic monuments and sites.

Several important changes occurred over the last decades in the fields of heritage and of tourism. The concept of heritage was notably extended and encompasses today a wide range of interrelated natural and cultural, tangible and intangible components that act, as a dynamic system, as the symbolic referent of the cultural identity of communities (Prats, 1997: 22). New heritage categories, as cultural landscapes or cultural routes, extend the notion of heritage to a territorial scale and stress the relationship between tangible and intangible components. At the same time, the conceptualisation of heritage as a social construction considers local communities as a main stakeholder in the identification, protection and management processes.

Mass tourism based on sun and beach has been complemented by a significant development of alternative modalities, such as, among others, ecotourism, cultural, religious, gastronomic or health tourism. The long summer holidays have been generally replaced for shorter periods distributed throughout the year. Travellers seek new experiences, sometimes during weekends or short breaks and not far away from their everyday habitat; planned group trips are replaced for self-planned ones since the development of TICs facilitates information and booking of services. In this framework, the consideration of local heritage as a main tourism resource contributes to widening and diversifying the tourism offer and becomes an opportunity for integral development of involved communities. The model of community-based tourism places local population as a main actor in the processes of heritage management and provision of services for visitors; the ICOMOS International Charter on Cultural Tourism, 1999, focuses in the role of local communities and in the role of tourism as an enabler for local development.

The extension of the definition of heritage and of tourism modalities has led to new definitions of cultural tourism; the World Tourism Organization expressed in 2005 that cultural tourism consists in the movement of people to cultural attractions with the purpose of achieving new information and experiences and satisfying their cultural necessities. Marketing studies tend to replace the term “necessity” by “motivation”, which, according to Amirou (2012: 41) is placed in the realm of imaginary rather than in the reality.

The implementation of a heritage and community-based tourism scheme requires not only planning but also capacity building among decision makers, investors, heritage experts, tourism professionals and local communities. It is usual that heritage assets, in their role of tourism resources, are included in the tourism offer without the necessary steps that include the elaboration of tourism products.

In this theoretical framework, the purpose of this paper is analysing a specific community-based tourism programme, *Pueblos Turísticos* (Tourism Villages), designed and implemented by the tourism agency of the government of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, with the aim of answering some questions about new frameworks for community-based cultural tourism.

Tourism resources of the province of Buenos Aires

The province of Buenos Aires is the largest in Argentina, 307,571 Km² and 16, 5 million inhabitants, more than a third part of the population of the whole country. The provincial territory belongs to the area of the vast plains of central Argentina and is limited to the east by the Plata River and the Atlantic Ocean. Two ranges of hills, in the south, are the most remarkable geographical accidents of the huge plain.

Only the northern part of the territory had been occupied by the Spaniards between the 15th and the early 19th Century. After the independence of Argentina in 1816, the plains were occupied and colonized in a short span of time, especially by immigrants that arrived in Argentina from several European countries. This process was facilitated by the extension of the railway and many villages flourished next to railway stations. Argentina underwent several political and economic crises from 1930 onwards. As a result, agricultural activities decayed, most railway services were interrupted and rural villages started a process of economic and social stagnation and depopulation.

The countryside, especially large farms known as *estancias*, was the traditional place of summer holidays for wealthy families of Buenos Aires over the 19th Century. By the end of the century, it became fashionable for upper social classes to spend the holidays by the sea. Over the first half of the 20th Century, several resort cities flourished along the sea shore of the province, facilitated by the extension of the rails and the construction of accommodation facilities (Wallingre, 2007). Rural tourism had an impulse since the 1980s. For the owners of large *estancias*, opening them to the visitors implied the possibility of balancing the decay of agriculture (Schlüter, 2001: 163). The tourist offer is wide and diverse: from a day in the countryside to spending several days lodging in a historic *estancia*, participating in rural activities and enjoying the peaceful landscape; gastronomy has also become a main tourist attraction (Schlüter, 2003). (Fig. 1) The expansion of tourism took to several local governments to seek the possibility of becoming part of the offer, especially for weekends or short breaks, and local heritage became an asset for the development of tourism activities.

The “Tourism Villages” Programme

This Programme, launched by the provincial Secretary of Tourism, aims at promoting and encouraging the development of sustainable tourism activities and enterprises in small towns of the Province of Buenos Aires, creating identity, sources of employment and resources and stopping depopulation by encouraging the sense of belonging. The basis of the programme is enhancing heritage assets existing in small towns and generating self-sustainable tourism enterprises where the local community is the main stakeholder of the process. It is interesting mentioning that the Programme is identified with the motto “Find the authentic”.

Besides sustainability, the Programme aims at equity, in the sense that tourism services are provided directly by local residents and benefits must be integrated into the town’s economy, fostering redistribution and generation of value. It is addressed to small towns, which implies rural, coastal or island settlements less than 2000 inhabitants, which possess potential tourism attractiveness and a wish to develop tourism activities.

The Programme consists of five sub-programmes which are articulated and include a series of planned and measurable actions:

- a.- Survey: it includes the identification of existing cultural, natural and human resources and of the population’s expectations. This stage allows identifying products to be developed and the potential of the town as a tourism destination.
- b.- Capacity building: creation of awareness of local population on the importance of tourism, creation of local working groups and training human resources on specific aspects of tourism.
- c.- Development: establishment of criteria for the elaboration of tourism products, study of the possibilities of integration with neighbouring areas to generate a regional tourism offer, foster the development of required tourism infrastructure and promote rooting by the enhancement of cultural heritage.
- d.- Promotion: creation of communication methods and instruments, participation in tourism fairs and workshops, creation of a local websites.
- e.- Integration: this stage is oriented to the articulation among different governmental agencies and the network of villages participating in the Programme.

Presently, 20 villages participate in the Programme, most of them small rural settlements. The products depend of the nature and characteristics of each of the villages but cultural heritage appears as a main attraction. Depending of the specific village, main heritage assets are the rural cultural landscape, traditional or vernacular architecture, railway stations and intangible components such as handicrafts, rural activities and gastronomy.

The success of the products depends on several factors, among them the distance between the village and the main emission centres, which are the large provincial cities. It is worth mentioning that the most usual way of visit is the daily excursion and that, except food, visitors do not spend much money.

It is difficult to establish a conclusion on the success of the Programme; there are partial statistics and the situation varies from village to village. It becomes clear, nevertheless, that this programme has widened and diversified the tourism offer at provincial level and, for some villages, it implies a new, though weak, source of economic revenue and creation of employment. A very specific case is the village of Isla Santiago, located some 15 Km from La Plata, capital city of the province and next to the La Plata port and to the shore of the Plata River. It is a small village populated by farmers and fishermen, which was practically isolated over decades and only reachable by water. The village is characterised by narrow pedestrian streets and pile-dwellings constructed in wood and corrugated iron. (Fig. 2) A paved road linking the island to the regional network was habilitated some ten years ago and in 2011 the village entered the “Tourism Villages” Programme. Infrastructure in the village is basic to satisfy the necessities of visitors and some inhabitants found in informal commerce, especially related to gastronomy, a source of additional revenues. Although the area of the banks of the Plata River is protected on the basis of their landscape values, there is no specific protection for the architectural heritage. The impact of visitors is low but the lack of appropriate planning is evident; the facilitation of the accessibility, the incompleteness of protection measures and the ongoing works of extension of the port become factors of risk for the integrity and authenticity of the site.

Conclusions

The confrontation between the theoretical framework and the reality of some villages integrated to the Programme allows some conclusions related to community-based tourism. The Programme is based on the current concept of cultural heritage since it includes a wide range of tangible and intangible components and on the active role of local communities in the development of tourism activities. Nevertheless, from a tourism point of view, most of the heritage assets located in the villages have local values and few possibilities of attracting visitors by themselves, especially considering that in some cases the villages are located far away from large cities that constitute the main emission centres. According to studies on tourism demand, most visitors are not especially motivated by cultural heritage but by enjoying an experience in places different from their everyday milieu. It is also evident that there is a lack of adequate heritage protection and tourism planning. According to Troncoso and Almirón (2005), the existence of cultural heritage does not imply its tourism activation; what is generally promoted are cultural resources which are not always provided with the necessary infrastructure to become tourism products.

This situation should not be perceived as negative but as an opportunity to enhance efforts to a deeper work that allows at the same time heritage protection and valorization and adequate tourism exploitation with the active participation of local communities. In this sense and within this specific geo-cultural context, it seems that new frameworks for community-based cultural tourism must include reinforcement of some tasks; among them more specific heritage protection measures, adequate budgets for heritage conservation and a more planned participation of communities in the processes of decisions making and of provision of tourism services.

This case can also lead to some reflections on the very concept of cultural tourism. Tourism is a cultural practice *per se*; in contemporary urban societies, the motivation to break with the everyday routine and to live new experiences becomes evident; tourists are not always motivated by visiting components of cultural heritage, but their desire of new experiences take them to enjoy cultural features of the visited sites, be a local museum or traditional food. According to Amirou (2000: 1) it is the imaginary that can transform a neutral place in a tourism destination. The awareness of local communities regarding their own cultural values and their active participation in the tourism activation of those values become the basis for new frameworks of cultural tourism and can contribute to consider heritage and landscape as instrument for sustainable development.

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Pueblos Turísticos, <http://www.pueblosturisticos.tur.ar/>



Figure 1. Historic rural establishment, *estancia*, opened to visitors.



Figure 2. Corrugated iron piled-dwelling in Isla Santiago village.