

CYCLING TOURISM IN ITALY: A GROWING SEGMENT

For cycling tourism, or tourism by bicycle, we mean itinerant travels or day excursions, without competitive reasons.

The distinctive characteristic of this type of vacation is the substitution of the traditional touristic destination with the journey itself, during which it is possible to appreciate the environmental and cultural specificities of a place, getting in touch with the naturalistic and urban landscape, culture and traditions. This type of tourism is by definition slow and sustainable, allowing to benefit from and to preserve the environment at the same time.

Cycling tourism is a new way to live vacations and sport being in touch with nature, a travel philosophy that fits perfectly with the new tendency of environment valorisation and more human and healthy time management. For these reasons it is becoming a growing phenomenon abroad and in Italy between young people and adults.

According to the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) definition, adventure tourism should include at least two of these three features: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion. Cycling tourism, as one of the fastest growing categories in adventure tourism, brings in over EUR 44 billion annually to the continent, resulting from 2.3 billion cycling trips with a tourism value in 2014³. Compared to mass tourism, cycling tourism's contribution to the local economy per person is greater. For example, as cyclists have the very limited carrying capacity, a visiting cyclist spends an average of 35 Euros per day on locally provided food and services, while the car-borne visitor's spending is about 10.3 Euros.⁴

The main outbound markets of the European tourism sector are Germany and the UK, while Austria, Denmark and France are the principal destinations.

In Italy, cycling tourism is a growing segment. Data published by Italian Bike Hotel Consortium highlight that the tourist season in 2012 recorded 1.500.000 cycling tourist presence on the national territory, 300.000 in the region Emilia Romagna, and the 50% of that in Riccione, with a dominant share (80%) of foreign tourists. In Italy, some tourism associations and consortiums are specialized in cycling tourism, as for example the Italy Bike Hostels founded in 2000 by a group of hoteliers and the Italian Mountain Biking School. Nevertheless, nowadays, cycling tourism has unexplored potentialities on our territory, and it gives a minimal contribution to Italian tourism.

Even if the Italian territory is suitable for this type of tourism, because of the landscape beauty and the mild climate, effort and attentions are needed to develop it. A country that decides to propose itself to cycling tourists has to adapt its product through a series of interventions like the following:

- 1.** The territory must have a trail network for cycling tourists, which can be realized specifically for them or can benefit of existent secondary roads, preferably in close contact with nature and cultural sites; it should be as much as possible flat and not too long, 50-60 km if the offer is referred to tourists and not professionals. Moreover, this network needs to be supported by cartography and specific signals.
- 2.** It is necessary that the tourists can come in touch with the territory.
- 3.** The territory must have appropriate accommodation services, with a specific attention to cycling tourists: three/four stars hotels, B&Bs, hostels, farmhouses.
- 4.** Collaboration between private enterprises and public organizations is required.

Some of the most important advantage in developing this form of tourism is its characteristic of not being in competition with the traditional touristic offer of the area. On the contrary, it completes the tourist offer by qualifying the entire product. In fact, it is one of the few tourist segments that produces effects on:

- 1. Deseasonalization:** the best months for a cycling trip are in spring and autumn, since the climate is not too hot and ideal for outdoor sports and interaction with nature. Generally, these months represent the low season for hoteliers who have their activities situated in seaside and mountain destinations, and so this type of tourism gives the possibility to extend the tourist season.
- 2. Increasing the arrivals:** this type of vacation is more and more popular among tourists, especially from North Europe and principally from Germany. It could be a strategic market in Italy, mainly because in spring and autumn the main outbound countries' cities are too cold to practice this sport.
- 3. Increasing employment:** cycling tourism specific qualified operators like cycling tourist guide and managerial figures in sport and touristic field.

In Emilia Romagna you can find different types of tourism as cultural tourism, with lots of artistic and historical cities, spa and wellness tourism, with different spa centers, naturalistic and green tourism because of the presence of natural parks, but certainly beach tourism in the most developed product. In 2014 there was 9.258.737 arrivals and 35.549.444 presences in the hospitality establishments. Demand is composed mainly by Italian tourists, 72,5% of arrivals and 72% of presences, while inbound tourists from abroad constitute 27,5% of arrivals and 28% of presences, and the principal market is the German one. Therefore, most of the presences and arrivals are recorded during the summer season, with pick in July and August. Seasonality has always been one of the biggest problems in the offer of this territory, with several hoteliers limiting their season on the 100 summer days and close their activities for the rest of the year.

The cyclist tourism segment is one of those to which the operators from Emilia-Romagna, have directed their attentions to overcome the seasonality problem. Cycling tourism has been greatly supported by the regional government in different provinces of Emilia-Romagna. There are also ten cycle paths that run through nine regional parks and one nature reserve in Emilia-Romagna. Some of the paths can be easily done in half day or one day, thus it can also attract people without the advanced cycling experience. On the website, tourists can get access to the necessary information like the path length, difficulty, duration and the local cultural and environmental resources. Some paths are also connected to the Trenitalia railway system, so the cyclists can easily transport their bikes to the destination paths by train. The regional government also provides the free foldable guide and roadmaps online, and visitor centers you can ask for information or help from along the path.

The Union of tourists' operators in Emilia Romagna created "Terrabici", the new club of regional bikes product that will be responsible to market internationally locations and territories of Emilia Romagna as a bike destination, presenting a unique offer for an increasingly growing bicycle tourism demand. Even the Head of Tourism in Emilia Romagna highlights the benefits of cycling: "Deseasonalization, higher occupation of the rooms, value of the territory, eco-tourism, differentiation of customers, a positive deriving effect to the summer season becoming part of a larger promotional circuit".

The data confirmed the growth trend of this product; in 2013 in Emilia Romagna, the second Italian region after the Trentino Alto Adige for presences of cyclist tourist, 300 thousand bike tourist arrivals were registered, for a total of about 1.4 million visitors. Visitors are for

the 85% foreign (coming mainly from Germany, Benelux, Austria, Great Britain, Switzerland, France, the US, Scandinavia, Canada, Australia) and find hospitality in approximately 300 regional specialized accommodations.

Today, diversifying the customer mix and identify possible additional segments to conquer and retain, like that of mountain bikers, is not only beneficial, but also a necessary investment in the light of the rapid changes in lifestyles and consumer of the demand. Specialization is, in fact, the marketing goal of those who want to chase success, by focusing on continuous improvement and increasing quality of the hotels.

Not only has the area to adapt to offer this type of product, but hoteliers as well have to adapt their facilities to accommodate cyclists, who seek accommodation with closed and safe premises for the custody of the bike, areas equipped where you can repair or fix bicycles and the presence of competent staff... Among the services considered of primary importance is the presence of one or more workstations to access the web. Another fact that emerges in particular is related to food: cyclists (and more generally "nature tourists") prefer to consume products from organic farming, prepared according to local traditions, further confirming the respect for the environment.

CASE STUDY: HOTEL DORY

In this regard, we review the example of a hotel in Riccione that has been one of the first to target tourists on the two wheels in the city. Hotel Dory, even if it reaches, as many other three stars structures of the Adriatic Coast, a good percentage of occupation in the typical one hundred days between mid-May and mid-September, aspired to adjust the seasonality of its business. Thus, the owner of the hotel, taking part in various seminars and exhibitions on cycling tourism, came to the decision in 1997 to accommodate a new type of tourists, i.e. cyclists. Since 1997, many cyclists from all over the world have spent their holidays in Riccione together with their bicycle. For them, the Hotel Dory has studied the most beautiful cycling routes, sorted by difficulty, distance, and height difference. You cross villages and olive groves, medieval fortresses and gorges, covering territories of great charm on the border between Romagna, Marche and Tuscany. Hotel Dory provides formidable cycling guides and takes the greatest care in the creation of homogeneous groups.

Those who choose the hotel Dory choose an "all-inclusive" package. There are many services that the hotel offers, but we're going to name a few of them. Hotel Dory offers its cyclists guests secure storage and video surveillance for 150 bicycles, because for them the bike is a precious asset, not only from the emotional point of view, but also for its real value; a workshop equipped for the ordinary mechanical interventions; a washing area for bikes, so that cyclists can wash their "jewel" first to place it in the deposit; a daily mechanic service, inside the hotel, for small repairs or adjustments; two minibuses for emergency and mechanical assistance for the most difficult routes; a laundry service for technical clothing; agreements with specialist bicycle stores; daily shuttle services from the Rimini airport and from Riccione train Station; an "Aqua wellness area" with large outdoor whirlpool, sauna, Turkish bath, 2 outdoor spa pools, geysers and waterfalls; a special catering service for athletes' food needs; a traditional dinner from Romagna with tasting of local products, including "Sangiovese" and "Limoncino". The hotel also offers services for the non-cyclists companions. For example, it organizes a "Nordic Walking" excursions with professional guides, a transportation service for a tasting experience at the farm of oil, wine, cheese, ham, salami, products and sweets; a boat excursion aboard an authentic

"Gozzo Sorrentino"; cooking lessons about "Homemade pasta and Piadina" and 15 bicycles for strolling the city. To make the vacation even more attractive, Hotel Dory has enriched its offer with an unforgettable and priceless experience: the opportunity to cycle together with a famous rider. Commenting the path, taking a photo, asking for an autograph and drinking something with him in the evening are memories that will remain etched in the minds of the protagonists forever.

MARKETING ACTIONS

Bike Hotels focus their marketing strategy on a single goal: to introduce measures aimed at getting fans of cycling, Italian and foreign, with particular regard to the German-speaking market. For this reason it is necessary that hotel companies well conceive the strategy to be adopted, because the demand of the bicycle tourism is a niche market commercially attractive, but to be conquered, and requires professionalism and deep knowledge of the sporty customers. Once the type of customer to focus on is identified, you can define essential services to offer and how to equip the hotel. Then you need to enter the market by communicating the product of your offer, through promotional and commercial activities targeted. The message that must be communicated regardless of the type of action performed is that the staff knows the needs of cyclists and the hotel is perfectly suited to their needs. The marketing efforts that are more effective to reach the world of bikers are: participation in fairs cycling; advertising activity in trade magazines; direct mail; telemarketing; web marketing. All these marketing actions can be very beneficial, but obviously one has to assess the costs and understand how to invest. For example, hosts that are in place quite unknown in terms of cycling must focus a lot on a promotional campaign, because, even if the costs can be quite high, it is from this that success will depend. However, after the critical period of start-up, promotional and commercial actions can be gradually reduced, exploiting a very effective indirect advertising instrument (if positive): word of mouth. The cyclists are generally part of a group of friends who love cycling, or a cycling association. For this reason, if they are satisfied in Bike Hotel, they will share their experience to all those who share their passion, by showing photos taken during your stay, explaining the routes taken and the places visited. Word of mouth has, therefore, an exponential value in this segment, because it is easy to get a multiplier effect. The effect, however, is even greater in the case of a negative word of mouth. To prevent the spread of dissatisfaction in customers (and therefore negative judgments), it is essential to ensure the quality standards promised and, build structures and services suitable for mountain bikers. If managed well, word of mouth can, therefore, become an excellent, and completely free, marketing action. For this reason one should always feed it, both during the stay, through many small daily actions aimed at guests from all the hotel staff, and tourists return home, maintaining contacts.

Moreover, Internet and the electronic commerce are now essential both as a sales channel and as a promotional tool that can reach unimaginable user segments. The structure of the website must be simple and easy to navigate; it must be interactive; it must be able to engage and attract the visitor who, in this way, can choose, express opinions, type keywords, download documents. In addition, to provide a real image of the hotel and of the locations where it is, it 'is good to include photos or virtual images, to allow the users to enter into the environment that interests them and move inside. It is also essential to provide a complete and concise view of the services offered, possibly broken down by category so they are better identified.

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