

Cultural Tourism and Local Communities



By Paolo Vitti

Cultural tourism is a source of economic growth and job development. The revenues produced by cultural tourism not only benefit those working in the sector but are substantial for the preservation, enhancement, and presentation of heritage. Sites that are in disrepair are restored or rehabilitated, with resources aiming to support the development of cultural tourism. The rehabilitation of Maqam Nabi Musa (Jericho),

financed by the European Union, is a noteworthy example. Several studies, such as the report *Heritage Counts for Europe* promoted by Europa Nostra in 2018, show that heritage is positive for the economy, society, culture, and the environment of a country.

The growth of cultural tourism in the last decades has impacted the strategies of many countries which seek to attract tourists as a means for economic growth. However, the outcomes are not always positive. The promotion of mass tourism has had unexpected and negative effects, with people visiting only targeted monuments, with packages that make it impossible to engage with the history and identity of places. Heritage sites have become overcrowded in such a way that these places are often experienced in a superficial way. Visits are restricted to itineraries designed to ensure that visitors spend as little time as possible in the site to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of people. While minor sites stay out of the mainstream, the most visited monuments are subject to unprecedented stress and decay, caused by the massive number of visitors, to the point that in noteworthy sites, such as the Acropolis of Athens or Machu Picchu in Peru, access is restricted to only a few areas. Such limitations protect the monuments but also fail to give a full and satisfactory understanding of heritage values.

To overcome the negative effects described above, current trends tend to redesign cultural tourism approaches and offer a more authentic experience to visitors. The new cultural tourism policies focus on heritage sites that are less frequented and scattered throughout a wider territory. The call for a more sustainable tourism involves a change in habits and packages, with longer sojourns spread in less famous venues, where tourists can have intense experiences and appreciate the culture, history, and traditions of local communities.

Against a tourism dominated by the “pro-growth” approach – focused on the profit of tourism corporates – a sustainable cultural tourism should be integrated into local communities who have the right to benefit from investments that can improve their quality of life. Instead of merely focusing on job opportunities, the

interest is in investing in social and cultural growth. Certainly not a straightforward objective, and definitely a goal that is unachievable without the convinced and strong support of the political leaders and decision makers.

Cultural heritage also has a very important role in encouraging our critical thinking, the way we live and behave, and can inspire more sustainable lifestyles. Heritage sites were generated by societies that were markedly different from our own. While we are aware that our society has experienced impressive improvements in the quality of life during the past 100 years, we are also struck by how much our life has become alienating. If we turn our attention to the historic towns, we realize that old cities expressed a strong sense of identity, whereas current cities are anonymous. At the same time, historic cities were more

The domes of Maqam Nabi Musa merge with the desert around creating a continuum between nature and architecture.



inclusive and had no social barriers. Interaction between human beings was open, promoting social equality, inclusiveness, and cultural dialogue. It is well known that past societies were distinguished by a higher cohesiveness and sense of intercultural dialogue than the current ones. Cultural tourism can thus be an educational tool, particularly if we think of the younger generations traveling to discover places and countries.

It requires much effort to understand how different past societies were, and it is possible only if travelers are offered the possibility to engage with local communities and places, and not remain fixed in their comfort zone. In the rehabilitation of Maqam Nabi Musa, we did not want to transform the site into a typical guesthouse for religious purposes, but we wanted people to experience the simplicity in which past communities used the rooms around the *maqam* of the Prophet Moses. We attempted to have as little night illumination as possible in order to reduce light pollution and make the night sky visible and the surrounding desert a vibrant reality. We wanted the visitors to have to adapt to the site, and not vice versa, in order to understand the richness of its history and the holiness of the place. After all, one of the significant and positive aspects of tourism is to be confronted with what is new and different. In this manner, tourism fosters cultural exchange and offers interaction and dialogue between the cultures of the visitors and those of local communities, resulting in mutual growth.

A cultural tourism policy in Palestine should thus be intended as a wider action to promote sustainable development, employment, regional attractiveness, creativity, know-how, identity, innovation with increased social cohesion, quality of life, and cultural exchange. Effectiveness and endurance of interventions is, however, a challenge. Current weaknesses in the sector show that the strategy needs to be broad, concrete, sustainable, and resilient. This strategy must include a more rational use of local resources, thus raising awareness of topics related to ecological and environmental sustainability. Tourism is typically ecologically unsustainable, unless guidelines are given to create ecological approaches. Setting principles for environmental sustainability could be a positive message for awareness raising within the community about topics related to climate change and reduction of consumption and CO₂ emissions.

On the other hand, actions need to take into consideration the particular context of the West Bank. The present land-use limitation policies in Palestine, including restrictions on movement and access, as well as limited control over the majority of the historical sites, are key factors for identifying places with strong potential for investing successfully in cultural tourism. Proposals could take advantage of the recent rehabilitation of Maqam Nabi Musa and focus



Sugar mills in Jericho. Water was an important resource for the community and the economy of the city.

the new interventions in the area of Jericho. The wider region around Jericho can offer attractive packages for tourism, including archaeological, natural, historical, and religious sites, oriented towards a sustainable strategy for tourism. Participation of local communities can be twinned with a stronger effort to connect visitors with the local multicultural cultural components, including a synagogue, churches, and monasteries, and a well-rooted tradition in agricultural activities and water management.

Given this reality, it is mandatory that any activity involving cultural tourism include the participation of local people and promote those traditions that are related to the use and perception of places. It is not simply a matter of taking advantage of the cultural traditions that have not been lost, but it is a real investment to recover practices and places that are still recorded in the memory of people and places, and bring them back to life in order to be acknowledged, perceived, and used by people to redeem them from oblivion.

Local communities have to take part in the discussion from its early stages. The participative spirit of the interventions can shape decisions and change the focus from the authorized narratives expressed by political and governmental bodies. This grassroots approach can be the discriminating factor that will establish the success of future actions. In this process, all the associations that had been working with cultural heritage in Palestine become

crucial partners. These associations hold the connection between the places and the local communities, and are of seminal importance for any successful strategy. Only in this way can tourism assume its role in service to human needs rather than to the domain of corporate profits and growth agendas.

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