

**RELATIONAL TOURISM:
CHALLENGES AND CAPABILITIES**

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Abstract

The observed changes in the orientation of tourism demand, both in taste and in the needs and preferences of the tourist consumer, in the last three decades, have brought to the birth of new ways of interpreting the tourism phenomenon; among these we highlight Relational Tourism, a phenomenon that can be perceived as human-scale tourism, clearly based on territorial, cultural and environmental constraints that include travel formats such as rural tourism, cultural tourism, farm tourism, environmental tourism, outdoor activity tourism and many new ways, which have shown an important quantitative growth of Relational Tourism demand in Europe and internationally in the last decades, offering an alternative and increasingly more appreciated tourism to the traditional depersonalized and mass consumer oriented one.

In view of these potentials, the trees should let us see the forest, meaning that the peculiar characteristics which have led to the rise and triumph of the relational forms of tourism, could simultaneously lead to its decline and failure. Being a human-scale tourism, travel services depend heavily on both the benefits offered, usually from small size companies or SMEs, and also on the interaction with the context. Occurring in a particular territorial context and depending on the local culture and customs, Relational Tourism needs also shared infrastructure and equipment (communications, transport, health, safety, energy, water, etc.), land, public services and local suppliers, which imply a high demand for efficiency and quality. In this research, we perform a thematic overview of the previous topics. We begin from the characterization of Relational Tourism and its position within the Theory of Tourism. We then describe the changes and mutations of the orientation of tourist demand and its impact in view of Relational Tourism, later to go into the business and territorial challenges that Relational Tourism faces to reach maturity, taking into account the holistic view of current tourist areas and the difficulty of companies to meet some requirements.

The overview concludes with a reflection on the measures and mechanisms to respond to these challenges. In order to address these problems, the possible solution is to emphasize the relational dynamics among regional tourist operators, administrations and public institutions and local people, who play primary roles in Relational Tourism. It must respond to fragmentation with relatedness and cooperation, promoting a dynamic clustering of cooperation among the tourist SPWP, following the logic of shared destiny.

Nonetheless, it is essential that Public Authorities promote regional frameworks of cooperation between public and private land agents and are heavily involved in the improvement and efficiency of regional infrastructure and equipment.

At present, we can observe a certain euphoria about tourism in international media, many areas and territories in developing countries and their surrounding neighbors turn their attention to tourist phenomena, looking at the apparent ease of Relational Tourism response to growing socioeconomic demands. But Tourism now more than ever appears to be a complex phenomenon (and Relational Tourism is no exception) that seems to require a holistic view and complex mechanisms to be understood. Hence the need to focus on a topic of obvious actuality starting from a clear statement: Tourism should be a solution and not an added problem.

Key words: destination, relational tourism, medium-sized enterprises, development, rural development

CHARACTERIZATION OF RELATIONAL TOURISM

A conceptual and theoretical approach to Relational Tourism is essential to provide its proposals with more scientific content and insight. In the following chapters we will try to outline the identity of relational tourism starting from its most essential traits with a view to better conceptualizing the same.

Discovering the most fundamental and evident hallmarks entails outlining the essential characteristics of relational tourism. The first of them, that is derived from the innermost nature of this type of tourism, is *Relationality*: it is a tourism of encounter (Grolleau, 1987 and 1988) and sharing, where the tourist experience consists of fostering customized contact of tourists with the local hosting community by making tourists participate in the tasks, customs and way of life of the local community. In other words, the aim is to promote tourists' participation in the "culture" of the territory and its several manifestations through the knowledge of and coming into contact with its food and wine traditions, ethnocultural features, heritage, art, landscape, history and environment. This provides tourists with a number of feelings, emotions and distractions that will contribute to making their leisure time an all-engaging experience. Therefore, it seems quite clear that this travel format is characterized by sociability and relationship, whose overriding philosophy is to taste life by coming into contact with places and their inhabitants, enjoying the landscape, the local food products, their flavors and fragrances, etc.

When the aim is discovering a territory and sharing its "culture", in the broadest sense of the term, relational tourism implies a direct relationship with the territory and it is referred to as "territorial" or "local" tourism, directly related to the "genius loci"¹ or local "identity" and, it being peculiar and typical of a given place or territory, it is difficult to be imitated or reproduced in other locations.

This "local identity" is one of the main elements to attract tourist flows.

The relationality and local nature of relational tourism entail that tourist accommodation and restaurant services are mostly performed by local enterprises, usually small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are prevalently family-run enterprises, social economy enterprises, individual firms or self-employed entrepreneurs, all of them mainly based in the area. This is a fundamental feature in the identity of relational tourism since tourist services are offered by local SMEs providing accommodation and tourism basic complementary services.

Such tourism SMEs defined by Grolleau (1993) as "human-scale enterprises", although being able to offer flexible and customized tourism services (that is exactly what tourist consumers demand for), - due to their very own nature - show some evident structural limitations in the business field that may have an impact on both service quality and customer satisfaction.

This specificity makes relational tourism very different from other tourist products where supremacy of large companies and corporations is well-known.

When dealing with the territory and its culture, great attention must be paid to local people, since relational tourism is basically a kind of tourism based on *sociability*, where the reception of tourists by the hosting community, the care for them and the empathy towards them will have an impact on the tourism trend in that place. Thus, the local or territorial community itself becomes the fundamental active and passive agent in the development of relational tourism. In other words, the community participation

¹ *The Genius Loci is used to refer to the ensemble of characteristics or particular elements that make a place extraordinary, peculiar and unique and thus distinguish it from the other places. This expression derives from ancient Greek and Latin aphorisms according to which places and locations have a sort of guardian protecting spirit (genius), who is peculiar and unique and gives life to that place and its inhabitants shaping their character and identity and manifesting itself in all their expressions, thereby constituting the soul and essence of the place. Since it was indissolubly linked to the place, the spirit watched over and protected life in that place. As a consequence, this household divinity becomes a unity with the place it protects, embodying the very essence of the same.*

(De Kadt, 1979 A and B) is crucial in that local population shares and accepts both the benefits and the costs derived from the development of tourism activities in its territory: that is what Krippendorf (1982) considers as the fundamental “community involvement” for the functioning of tourism at a local level. This active participation by the community in the planning of tourism development is a common topic in the literature (Gunn, 1994; Hall, 2001; Inskip 1991, 1994, 1999; Crosby 1996; Solsona Monsonis, 1999; Schulte, 2003). We should not neglect the enormous social impact of tourism since it carries social innovation and transformation (Murphy, 1983); thus, the consensus about tourism of the local population is of crucial importance for the social –and ultimately economic – profitability of tourism.

Finally, the territorial or local nature of relational tourism implies a rather accurate environmental protection and management for two fundamental reasons: on the one hand, the natural environment and the landscape are the pillars upon which the tourist activity is developed and, on the other hand, they are simultaneously one of the most important attractions for tourists. Therefore, the endeavor to achieve a balance between economic goals and the conservation of tourist resources becomes a priority in the agendas for the management of the territory involved. In turn, the observed evolution towards an ever-growing attention by the users to the conservation and quality of the surrounding environment prompts stakeholders to take this aspect in great consideration when implementing relational tourism activities.

It should also be pointed out that such concern for environmental conservation is “something new” for many territories. Although it has always been present in many western countries, this concern for the environment has begun to materialize over the last 20 years in the rest of the world: initially regarded as something without value and thus susceptible of appropriation and exploitation, the natural environment is now enhanced and considered as a heritage for present and future generations and therefore susceptible of protection, conservation and regeneration through the promotion of an eco-efficient use.

A theoretical approach to relational tourism could be performed within one of the main frameworks of tourism theory, i.e. the systems theory. Analyzing tourism as a systemic phenomenon (Sessa, 1988; Mill and Morrison, 1985; Guibilato 1983) implies an adaptation of the General System Theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1945) to the tourist phenomenon, thereby considering it as a complex one, a dynamic whole made up of several parts permanently interacting among themselves. Hence, travelers interact with the territory and its population, thereby triggering a number of interactions and interconnections among the activated parts. From an open system viewpoint, the tourist activity depends on the social, geographic and cultural context in which it is developed, it being affected by the changes that may occur in this context. According to Merinero and Pulido (2009) the systemic approach to tourism entails the supersession of fragmented views and the formulation of a holistic perspective that may help to better understand a complex activity.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL TOURISM DEMAND: A FAVORABLE FRAMEWORK FOR RELATIONAL TOURISM

A common topic in the tourism literature of the last decades is the evident evolution observed both in the components of Tourism Demand (European Commission, 1990; WTO, 1991; WTO 1990) and in the changes of the tourist consumer’s trends and preferences (Torres Bernier, 1996). This evolution implies that the present-day tourism industry steers for a product/service customization, a greater participation of the tourist in the design of the activities to be performed in the place of destination, the configuration of the travel product according to the consumer’s preferences, the great abundance of tailor-made formulas for the tourism product sale, management and after-sales support, in which information and communication technologies play a key role, along with holiday deconcentration and seasonal adjustment.

Nevertheless, a marked emphasis is placed on the general service quality and in the strengthening of the new tourist motivations that would act as magnetic fields to attract tourist flows: the attention to

the environment and the environmental quality (Ehrlich and Mellado, 1993; Zimmer, 1990), sustainable development, the product "genuineness", the active role of the tourist, etc. These aspects are summarized in Table 2.

These new coordinates of the Demand are fully confirmed by the tourism marketing strategic plans of various official organizations and by scientific studies carried out in the major tourism outbound countries, such as Germany (Studenkreis fuer tourismus) or the Netherlands (Stichling Milieu Institut) where the new azimuths of tourism demand are "non-mass tourism", "greater contact with nature", "an acceptable level of environmental hygiene", and appealing complementary resources, and all that within a reasonable price range (García Lorca, 1994).

The observed consolidation of such trends over the last few years implies the transition from a typical "Fordist" model of the tourism economic structure, based on mass and rigidly seasonal tourism and pivoting on the concept of "all-inclusive package" juxtaposing all the basic services required by the tourist (travel + accommodation + stay) to a flexible production model, or "Toyotist" model, characterizing just-in-time production systems. It should be pointed out that the "holiday package" is the hard core of the Fordist tourism, a standardized and mass tourism model typical of the 1960s and the 1970s that is continuing until the present day, although with some changes and adjustments. The "Fordist Tourism" appears to be a rigidly seasonal model, subject to school holidays dates in the western world.

THE TRANSITION FROM MASS TOURISM TO INDIVIDUALIZED TOURISM.

The economies of scale and standardization represented the cornerstones of tourism management in the Fordist scheme: the aim was to reach high production and sales volumes and mass consumption was the means to achieve this goal. These schemes responded to the adaptation of the Taylorist or "assembly-line production" theory, typical of the manufacturing sector, to tourism activities: the end was merely to achieve high demand volumes and therefore high production and sales volumes with a simultaneous costs reduction, thereby producing "homogenized" services for undifferentiated groups of consumers (Fayos Solà, 1993).

So long as such was the case, tourism enterprises focused their attention on production cost minimization, without taking into account any other aspect. Certainly, this scheme could only be successful if consumers' motivations and experience - and thus their requirements and expectations - were very low or basic, such as the demand for beach resorts, or traveling to a place which was different from the place of living for a given period of time, or escaping from the everyday life, the quality of the consumed product not constituting a priority, and all that at a very low price.

In this framework, the consumer's satisfaction was derived from the mere fact that he could consume the product and not from the correlation between the product/service attributes and his expectations and requirements. Nevertheless, price was a fundamental factor in the differentiation of the destination. Since enterprises took these coordinates for granted, they opted for non-quality and low costs.

The conditions underlying mass tourism consumption phenomena underwent some structural changes that have implied a considerable evolution in the way to conceive and manage tourism products and destinations, starting from a fundamental consideration: the consumer's profile has changed considerably and the modern tourist is an experienced and "mature" consumer with a critical attitude in the choice of the holiday destination and is inclined to constantly select and change the same (Calderon Vazquez, 2005).

The modern tourist considers his holiday time as an "essential asset", since it is segmented into shorter periods, and active leisure as the guiding principle. This evolution has entailed a new configuration of the tourism consumer: an active tourist demanding for the quality, safety and understanding of the context. The present-day tourist moves to holiday destinations not only to "see", as in the past, but also to

“know” and, above all, to “do” (Avila and Barrado, 2005) and he needs to be informed beforehand about his activities during the holiday and how his time will be structured.

Additionally, it is evident that a key role in the new configuration of the tourism scenario is played by technology innovation (Werthner and Klein, 1999) and above all by the ICTs (Schertler and Berger, 1999) that have considerable impact on the tourism product/service production, in particular the marketing, sales, delivery, communication and promotion functions (Baker and Reinders, 1998).

Due to this transformation, we are now in a “New Tourism Era”, to use the words of Eduardo Fayos (1993), an author who believes that the fundamental milestones of this stage are: the maximum segmentation of the Demand, the flexibility of the Supply and distribution, and the use of diagonal integration and the economies of system, instead of the economies of scale, as means to achieve profitability.

THE BUSINESS AND TERRITORIAL CHALLENGES FACED BY RELATIONAL TOURISM

It seems evident that the observed changes in the components and motivations of present-day tourist consumers represent a very favorable context for the development of a kind of tourism that may be alternative to the traditional beach tourism (archetype of the Fordist tourism), as shown in the last two decades, in which the demand for travel formats with high relational content - such as rural tourism, environmental tourism, outdoor activity tourism, etc. - has grown considerably.

Obviously, this considerable increase over the last decades in the Demand of recreational, cultural and leisure activities in spaces that only three decades ago were not considered appealing by tourists (such as rural contexts, villages and medium-sized towns) has become a driving factor in generating the Supply of relational tourism, a Supply that is increasing in quantitative terms (AEIDIL, 1997).

The growth of Relational Tourism Supply appears logical if we consider the effects generated by tourist activities in the territory where they are performed.

Generally, tourism-related transactions chains are triggered: they are mostly small or invisible (a coffee or a drink in a bar, a taxi to move around, a meal, a souvenir, a ticket for a museum, playing on a golf course, taking a train to move to a near town, renting a car, hiring a coach for a tour, etc.) but significant, when they are repeatedly performed within the boundaries of a given area, in view of generating income and wealth in that context.

Therefore, relational tourism prompts the territorial economic activity, from a microeconomics perspective, starting from a “drag and drop” effect. The former refers to tourism impact on certain production sectors (such as construction, local trade, restaurant activities, agricultural and cattle-breeding production, handicraft products, non-conventional outlet channels for the sale of local products, etc.) and the latter refers to the development of tourism-related activities (transport, travel operator services, personal services, etc.) and income-generating activities that are complementary to traditional activities.

Moreover, we should not disregard the driving effect of tourism on the local labor market through the creation of jobs and employment opportunities for the most disadvantaged groups (women, young people, etc.) and the reconversion of redundant labor force from the traditional sectors. It is worth mentioning also the opportunities for the creation and development of small and medium-sized enterprises. Equally significant is the impact of tourism on the enhancement, conservation and sustainable use of the territorial heritage in its different aspects: the natural and environmental heritage, the monumental and architectural heritage, the historical and artistic heritage, the food and wine, anthropological and cultural heritage, traditions, etc.

Furthermore, the socio-economic effects of tourism are even more evident, in terms of intensity and impact capacity, when they are generated on small-scale areas, i.e. locally or regionally (WTO, 2001). In these small areas, the transversality of tourism and its cross-sectoral inductive effects are especially evident if we consider the proliferation of productive linkages and the drag effect on the whole economic area.

Now, the impact potential of relational tourism will directly depend on the intensity of tourist demand and the consumption capacity and, indirectly, on the production structure of the interested local economy, which will be able or not – depending on its characteristics and the circumstances – to respond to such stimuli. Therefore, the attitude of local stakeholders (public authorities, institutions, entrepreneurs, population) is decisive because in the absence of reaction, great opportunities for socio-economic development will be missed, or, on the contrary, excessive expectations or enthusiasm around tourism and its inductive capacity could lead to business and social behaviors that may be reactive to Tourist Demand and its fluctuations.

In the latter case, a very strong pressure would be exerted on local tourist initiatives, thereby causing excessive boost of the tourism development process. Such pressure would lead to an exponential increase in the accommodation capacity of the area. The obsession with increasing the accommodation capacity (seeking higher profits at all costs) results in the proliferation of accommodation facilities, thereby reducing tourist Supply to a mere accommodation service. Even if, after all, mistaking the number of bed places for profitability would be anything but a “reactive” behavior, typical of a Fordist tourism, based on the economies of scale, that would be increasingly more incongruous with the present individualized tourism coordinates, consisting of quality and satisfaction of the tourist consumer’s expectations.

An over-Supply, with an increasing response of the Demand in quantitative terms, could lead to mass tourism phenomena with consequent land speculation and environmental degradation. A mass consumer oriented tourism considerably decreases the general quality of the service and of the personalized service, that are exactly the genuine elements of relational tourism. This may result in the degradation of the hosting environment, both in natural and cultural terms, with, ultimately, a negative impact on the heart of relational tourism and its magnetic field, that is the local heritage and culture. In conclusion, a mass consumer approach entails the “industrialization” or standardization of relational tourism, thereby inevitably causing degradation of the context.

If the increase in the Demand does not offset the increase in the Supply, the consequence would be a serious Supply/Demand imbalance resulting in very low employment levels, a weak functioning of the facilities and stagnation, as well as the disappearance of economic profitability and the consequent difficulty to amortize the investments made and the impossibility to make new investments.

Besides reactive behaviors, another huge challenge for the good health of relational tourism consists of understanding the customer’s taste and requirements, first, and then satisfying them, taking into account the fact that, like any other consumer, the tourist wants to maximize his profits or benefits, both in terms of price and general quality of the tourist service (Lounsbury and Hoopes 1985; Santos Arrebola, 1999) and also as regards the expectations generated in the customer (Parasunaman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985, 1988, 1994). After all, tourist activities imply a discretionary use of the tourist’s holiday time and therefore an investment in terms of money and time; this time can be used in other ways and, thus, is increasingly more valued and cannot be swapped for whatever kind of tourist product. That is why the tourist consumer demands for high quality in the provision of the service, he being not willing to waste his time and money without receiving a high level of satisfaction in return, exactly like any other consumer, who, when buying a product, measures the benefit or utility that he may derive from that product and, accordingly, he makes the decision.

Besides the traditional concerns for matching the customer’s expectations with the tourist service actually received or perceived by the consumer, in the new tourism era the tourist’s holistic view should also be taken into account (Calderon Vazquez, 2005), since the consumer perceives the tourist service from a global perspective, beyond the individualized or partial view of each tourist service offerer/provider. Thus, if the tourist product for an accommodation services provider merely consists of the accommodation and the relevant board, for the consumer this is only a component of the global tourist product, which will also comprise a number of factors (landscape, care and attention to natural resources, level of care for the

heritage, time spent to arrive to the destination, directional marks, distance from a health center, safety, etc.); in relational tourism, such factors are absolutely decisive for the selection of the destination and the purchasing decision. This set of components constitutes what Fayós Solá (1993) defines as the "Integral Tourist Experience", which comprises a wide range of integral elements, from infrastructure and general services, the equipment, until natural and cultural resources. In short, the customer's expectations extend over the whole, or the product of the above-mentioned factors, since such factors interact each other and appear to the eyes of the tourist as a sort of tourist destination-system.

Obviously, the holistic perception of the tourist consumer complicates the management of the product on the part of the tourist services vendors, because in addition to quality in the provision of their services, they will also have to consider both the quality of other services and the quality of other elements (territorial infrastructure, communications, public services, equipment, energy supply, safety, etc.); these are elements that usually escape from their perception and control, but have a positive, or negative impact on the customer's global perception of the tourist product: his value judgments (positive or negative) on this product and the communication of the same to other potential customers (a simple conversation at home, with friends, in the work place or in a social meeting) could decisively affect the life of the tourist destination if, as Arturo Crosby argues, "The satisfaction of a visit to a given destination is derived from the result of a number of interrelated elements constituting an experience which is developed by the visitor before, during and after the visit. When one or more elements of this experience are negative, they break the experience-system *per se* and, as a consequence, the experience turns into a negative perception leading to subsequent frustration".

We should not forget that tourism is basically a service and, therefore, an intangible product which implies a human or mechanical service (Ureña López, 1998).

The "immateriality" of services entails a number of consequences: they cannot be consumed, tried or evaluated before they are bought. In the same way, the production, consumption and sale of the service occur simultaneously at the time of provision of the same; therefore, the interaction between the provider and the customer is so decisive for the performance of the service provision itself that most services could not be provided if the customer is not directly involved in their provision.

The immateriality of the service makes it impossible to store the same, as well as the production/consumption synchronism entails the impossibility to inventory, package or transport the service. Due to such constraints, it is imperative that the Tourist Services Supply be prepared and directed according to the Demand fluctuations or, if it is the case, that Demand be directed and oriented towards the Supply existing availabilities (Santesmases Mestre, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS AND REMARKS

From what has been stated in the previous chapters, relational tourism will have to face a number of fundamental challenges. The observed challenges entail a comprehensive approach of relational tourism, since the holistic view of the tourist implies a relational management of tourism, i.e. the creation of relational mechanisms linking the individual business units among themselves, thereby fostering their constant interaction. It seems clear that nowadays relational SMEs cannot survive if they act or compete as isolated units. They have necessarily to seek and promote interaction clustering dynamics as a way to achieve minimum levels of critical mass in terms of business, profitability and competitiveness. The Public Authorities involved in tourism development should, as far as possible, promote and stimulate entrepreneurial interaction and cooperation dynamics.

Moreover, such entrepreneurial interaction should be included within a framework of general territorial cooperation among all public and private stakeholders (organizations, associations, social leaders, etc.) involved in the development of tourist activities in the area.

Finally, since in the development of relational tourism, the "attitude" of the whole local population and their "receptivity" towards tourism are fundamental for tourism establishment and consolidation in the territory, it is extremely important for the success of tourism activities, to make people aware that the present and future of their territory depend on the implementation of a tourist development plan, in such a way that social consensus, acceptance of tourism, or at least non-belligerence against it, be the starting point of the tourist development in the territory.

At this very first stage, it is of paramount importance to stimulate tourism-supporting social behaviors, and in order to do so, a double approach is fundamental: this should include social awareness-raising and information campaigns molded on the culture and "modus vivendi" of the territory on the one hand, and on the other hand, demonstration actions of the potential of tourism as a driver of wealth and employment opportunities for the community.

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