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Tourism development in small cities on the example of Pistoia in Tuscany

Abstract

The dynamic development of tourism in many regions of the world causes competition boost which, in turn, leads to a variety of changes in tourist offers. Tourism is an alternative for other types of economic activity, this relates to spatial units of diverse area, including cities. The tourist function can become the mechanism of local development for cities and the protection of the cultural and natural heritage. The main goal of the article is to present the tourist potential of a historical city and the possibilities of further development of tourist movement in light of current tendencies of the world tourist market. The paper also includes an attempt to analyze the structure of tourist product of the city of Pistoia basing on its location as a neighbor of such large tourist centers as Florence or Pisa.

Key words: authenticity; competitiveness; cultural tourism; urban tourism

Introduction

Urban tourism is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism and includes well-known historical towns, large urban centers, midsize cities, as well as small towns with a broad offering of tourist attractions (Mika, 2007). A close relative of urban tourism is cultural tourism, which is defined as a set of tourist behaviors resulting from an interest in the heritage of material and nonmaterial culture. There is a variety of definitions of cultural tourism (Hughes, 1996; Bonet, 2003) including very narrow ones that associate cultural tourism with visits to museums and archaeological sites, as well as broad ones that blur out the lines between cultural tourism and other forms of tourism (ICOMOS, 2002).

In Italy, cultural tourism ranks second, only behind leisure tourism (24.3% vs. 31.6% of the market share) (Touring Club Italia, 2007). Tuscany is one of the most attractive regions of Italy characterized by significant biodiversity, rich cultural heritage (material and nonmaterial), and good tourist infrastructure. The region features large urban centers, midsize cities, and small towns with a limited tourist offering. This yields the question: How can midsize cities and small towns function

in a competitive market dominated by large tourist centers? The answer may lie in the motivations and preferences of tourists seeking hospitality and authenticity.

The main purpose of the paper is to describe the tourism potential of Pistoia and its opportunities to increase tourist traffic in light of global trends in the tourism market. The paper also attempts to analyze the city's tourist offering in the context of its renowned and large neighbors such as Florence and Pisa. However, the main object of research is the city of Pistoia, which also happens to be located in one of the most important tourist regions in Italy (Tuscany). Data for this paper were obtained in the course of a three-week field study.

Pistoia's place in Tuscany

The province of Pistoia is located in northern Tuscany – one of the most important and most visited regions in all of Italy. Northern Tuscany features six UNESCO World Heritage Sites: (1) historical center of Florence (1982), (2) cathedral plaza in Pisa (1987), (3) historical center of San Gimignano (1990), (4) historical center of Siena (1995), (5) city center in Pienza (1996), and the Val d'Orcia Valley (2004). Tuscany is a leading European center of art and culture with 550 museums and galleries – this accounts for more than 10% of all museums in Italy. The region's capital of Florence is considered an urban bestseller, and one of the top twenty art cities in the world (van der Borg, Costa & Gotti, 1995). Florence is located on the Arno River at the foot of the Apennines. It is a regional tourist magnet, drawing 3,257,000 tourists in 2011. Its *Galleria degli Uffizi* is considered one of the most important museums in the world. Other key art cities in Tuscany include Siena, Pisa, and Lucca.



Fig. 1. Tuscany – administrative divisions

Source: <http://www.solitalia.it/regioni/toscana/provincia-pistoia/>

The province of Pistoia covers an area of 965 km² and borders to the north with the provinces of Modena and Bologna, to the east with the province of Prato, to the south with the provinces of Florence and Pisa, and to the west with the province of Lucca (Fig. 1). Pistoia is divided into 22 communes (townships). The largest and most important commune is the capital commune of Pistoia, which includes the medieval city of Pistoia.

Tourist attractiveness of Pistoia

The city and commune of Pistoia are located at the foot of the Apennine Mountains between the Tyrrhenian Coast in the west, but with no direct access, and the world famous city of Florence to the southeast. Its total area is 236.7 km², which is 25% of the total area of the province of Pistoia. The city and commune of Pistoia are inhabited by 90,147 residents (www.provincia.pistoia.it). The commune features diverse relief that includes mountains in the north (elevation of more than 1,600 m), the Montalbano Ridge to the south, as well as the foothills of the Apennines, and finally lowlands in the central part featuring a broad plain found as low as 40 meters above sea level. The commune's diverse relief offers visitors a chance to experience a variety of landscapes and pursue an array of sports.

Pistoia is a medieval city rooted in antiquity. It is older than neighboring Florence. Numerous Ligurian and pseudo-Ligurian archaeological finds show that the valley where the city is now located has been inhabited since the 2nd century BC. The city of Pistoia was most likely founded by Roman soldiers of the Flaminius army in 187 BC. The soldiers' camp was to have been located there. The Roman army was said to have been looking for food in the area during Rome's war with Liguria. The name Pistoia is said to be derived from the Roman word "pistoria", which means "bread oven" in Latin. Another potential origin of the name is said to be two Etruscan words – Pist and Oros. The former meant gate and the latter mountain (Tigri, 1990). Over the next few centuries, Pistoia had changed hands frequently. Its rulers included the Goths, Lombards, and Franks.

The commune of Pistoia began to emerge as a political institution towards the end of the 11th century and significantly expanded its borders following its wars with neighboring Florence, Lucca, and Bologna. The arrival of the relic of St. James in 1144 opened the way for larger pilgrimages. As Pistoia became a mandatory waypoint along the *Via Francigena* pilgrimage route, it reaped the financial benefits of numerous pilgrimages including those headed farther to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The city's fortunes declined in the 14th century due to internal conflict between its affluent families as well as due to wars with neighboring Lucca and Florence. This state of affairs lasted until the 17th century when Pistoia regained its status as a strategic commercial waypoint between Central and Northern Italy. In 1861 Pistoia joined the Kingdom of Italy (D'Afflitto, Falletti, 1999).

Pistoia's medieval district boasts itself with a large array of sites with historical and artistic significance including 65 sites valued for their architecture and building technology. Eighteen of the sites are churches. The most valuable artifact in Pistoia is the silver altar of St. James located in the beautiful Cathedral of St. Zeno. The altar is a masterpiece of medieval religious art. The city also features several beautiful plazas surrounded by historical palaces. Pistoia has 17 sites with cultural and artistic significance including 10 museums located within 100 meters of each other. The city also has 15 hotels located in historical townhouses. In addition, the city's heritage is enriched by 50 cultural associations including 15 musical associations. Pistoia hosts more than 600 events of all types per year (Briganti, 2004) including the very popular Pistoia Blues Festival and the *Giostra dell'Orso* (Bear Tournament) in July.

One niche tourist product of Pistoia is greenhouse plants. The city is the European leader in the production of ornamental plants, both in terms of acreage and plant diversity. Pistoia has served as a synonym for greenhouse plants for a very long time. The residents of Pistoia have been able to cultivate and popularize every type of plant. The mild climate and fertile soil of the Ombrone Valley helped spark the greenhouse plant production in Pistoia 150 years ago. Today the region features 1,500 plant producers working on an area of more than 5,200 hectares including 1,000 hectares of covered cultivation. Pistoia's greenhouses can be visited by tourists. Hence, Pistoia is considered the European capital of cultivated bushes and small trees (C. Vezzosi, 2009). This form of economic activity not only helps attract tourists, but also attracts European business owners involved in the production and sales of ornamental plants.

Tourist management and tourist traffic

The city of Pistoia features a wide variety of lodging options including luxury mansions, hotels, bed & breakfasts, private houses, single rooms, apartments, and agricultural lodging options. According to the Pistoia Office of Statistics, the commune possessed 82 lodging facilities in 2011 featuring 1,593 hotel beds (1,376 beds in 2008). The city has 16 hotels and most are three-star facilities with a total of 498 hotel beds (31.3% of total). In addition, four-star hotels in Pistoia offer 170 hotel beds (10.7%). Pistoia also has 24 bed & breakfast facilities and 23 agricultural lodging options. The type of lodging facility that stands out is historical lodging facilities with a total of 227 hotel beds available year-round. Finally, single guestrooms in Pistoia offer the smallest number of hotel beds – only 5.1%. In general, year-round accommodations constitute 90.4% of all accommodations available in Pistoia. The hotel bed density index for Pistoia Commune is 6.72 and the hotel bed growth index is 31.34.

In 2010 Pistoia Commune possessed a total of 190 eating establishments including 40 restaurants, 113 bars, 18 pizzerias, and 19 other places. Most eating establishments in Pistoia are located in the city center, especially close to the

Piazza del Duomo, one of the most beautiful plazas in Italy. The quality of the city's restaurants spans the full price spectrum.

Supplementary infrastructure helps increase the tourist attractiveness of a given area. Rapid growth in recreational services has been observed in the Pistoia area in recent years. Local sports and recreational facilities help meet the needs of tourists by offering the chance to pursue a variety of forms of recreation and entertainment. Tourists visiting Pistoia can take part in a variety of sports events and other mass events. The commune features two tennis courts, three softball and basketball courts, one public pool, thirteen municipal gyms, rock walls, one bow practice range, one auto racing track, one sports stadium, four ice rinks, and twenty sports clubs. In addition, Pistoia hosts three theaters, three cinemas, one philharmonic, and ten museums featuring a wealth of original works of art.

The city of Pistoia can be easily reached by motorway A11 linked with the Florence – Sea national motorway system, as well as by national highway 64 (*Porrettana*) linking it with Ferrara and cities in the Emilia-Romagna region. Other roads that lead to Pistoia include regional highway 66 (*Pistoiese*) to Florence and regional highway 12 (*dell'Abetone* and *dell Brennero*), as well as regional highway 435 (*Lucchese*) to Western Tuscany (Ruozi, 2009). Pistoia and all other towns in the province are also within easy reach via the Lazzi, Copit, and CAP bus lines (www.lazzi.it).

The Pistoia Commune is linked to the national railway network via regional rail to Florence, Prato, and Pisa. The main rail line in the region runs via Florence, Prato, Pistoia, Lucca, and Pisa. Another regional rail line runs across the northern part of Pistoia Province from Pistoia West Station to Porrettana Terme and Bologna.

There are no civilian airports in Pistoia Province. The two closest airports are Galileo Galilei Airport in Pisa and Amerigo Vespucci Airport in Florence. The airport in Pisa is located about 60 kilometers away from Pistoia. The Pisa Airport Railway Station links Pisa with Florence (Santa Maria Novella Station) via Lucca and Pistoia. Tourists can reach Pistoia from Vespucci Airport in Florence via train and then bus. There is also a direct bus line from Vespucci Airport to Pistoia. Tourists can reach Pistoia from any international airport in Tuscany within 30 to 40 minutes by car, train, or bus.

The city of Pistoia offers tourists and residents a convenient Park & Bus transportation system with a number of municipal parking lots located around the city linked to the city center via city buses. Pistoia supports ecological transportation and its urban bike rental system helps achieve this goal. The system is called "Pistoia on Bikes" and is financed by the Ministry of the Environment. Bike riders use an electronic card to borrow almost 40 bikes stationed throughout the city's historical center.

Pistoia attracts a small number of tourists despite having a lot to offer. This includes easy road access, close proximity to world class centers of tourism, great architecture, rich local culture and old city, local flavor and hospitality, and an array of good lodging options. Over the last decade, the largest number of tourists (64,674) was recorded in the year 2000 – of which 23,369 were foreign tourists.

The number of tourists decreased steadily between 2001 and 2004 to 34,927 – of which only 11,467 were foreign tourists. In 2010 the number of tourists increased to 49,940 – of which 20,611 were foreign tourists. The number of tourists increased again in 2011 to 52,270 – of which 21,320 were foreign tourists. For comparison, neighboring Pisa hosted 646,914 tourists in 2011, while Lucca hosted 241,540 tourists, Prato 190,927 tourists, and Florence 3,257,061 tourists (www.regione.toscana.it).

Statistical data indicate that most tourists in Pistoia are domestic tourists – mostly from Lombardy, Latium, and Tuscany. This is confirmed by C. Massidda and I. Etzo (2012) who studied Italian tourist traffic. On the other hand, Pistoia's foreign tourists usually come from Germany, France, Holland, Great Britain, and the United States. Other sources of tourist traffic include Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Denmark, Austria, and Poland. Most tourists visiting Pistoia between 2000 and 2010 stayed at three-star and four-star hotels. Agricultural lodging facilities as well as historic mansions were also popular with tourists (www.provincia.pistoia.it). Tourists stay an average of 2.8 days in Pistoia, which is similar to that for most other European cities with significant cultural heritage (Costa & van der Borg, 1992, van der Borg, Costa & Gotti, 1995).

A key characteristic of tourism in Pistoia Commune is its seasonality. In the field of tourism, seasonality may be defined as fluctuations in tourist-related characteristics over time. This includes tourist volume, tourist expenditures, automobile traffic on motorways, railway traffic, employment in the tourist services sector, and the number of tickets sold related to tourist attractions (Butler, 1994). Seasonality produces an array of negative effects. It is the goal of tourism researchers to reduce the magnitude of these effects via the diversification of tourist offering. One way to reduce fluctuations in the case of Pistoia would be to promote the city and its region even more as a destination for lovers of ornamental greenhouse plants. This could, in itself, become a key characteristic of Pistoia.

Most tourist stays occur between June and October. This is true for both domestic and foreign tourists. Some of the reasons for this include summer vacations, very good weather, as well as major summer cultural events taking place in Pistoia (www.provincia.pistoia.it). The Pistoia Blues Festival has been held for 34 years and draws thousands of young blues fans from around the world. This festival and other local events help promote the city worldwide and increase demand for its goods and services (Attanasia et al., 2013).

Hospitality and authenticity as characteristics of tourist offering

The growth of the global tourist sector – as manifested via increasing tourist traffic and growing tourist infrastructure – creates the need for competitive analysis and action. The competitiveness of a region or tourist center may be defined as the ability to compete with other regions or tourist centers for tourist traffic. Research literature provides a growing number of studies on this very issue: (Alavi & Yasin,

2000; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Enright & Newton, 2004; Kozak, 2002; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000; Ruhanen, 2007; Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2008). An especially difficult situation arises when two regions or tourist centers of very different size, but offering similar tourist attractions, compete with one another. This is the case with Pistoia, which is a historical city that must compete with the much larger and more well-known Florence – a city characterized by more commercial (mass) tourism.

In light of the continuing commercialization of tourism around the world, there is a growing need for environmental, cultural, and artistic authenticity (Taylor, 2001). The tourist sector in Pistoia is growing rapidly, and the city's government wants to strengthen the city's image as a city of art and culture and to improve its tourist services (www.comune.pistoia.it). The issue with cultural tourism is smart management of cultural heritage in order to maintain a sustainable approach to development. The challenge for smaller cities that wish to attract culture-oriented tourists is the balance between the identification of unique cultural attributes and a smart way to market them to the general public and link them with the business strategies of major international tour operators (Russoa & van der Borg, 2002; Rizzo & Throsby, 2006; Peacock & Rizzo, 2008). However, it is often difficult to prove that World Heritage Sites can attract large numbers of tourists (Cellini, 2010). This suggests that a more integrated approach using lesser known cultural sites may be more productive, instead of focusing promotional efforts on superstar sites (Cuccia & Rizzo, 2010).

The tourist sector is increasingly becoming a manufactured product featuring novel tourist attractions and standardized services (Durydiwka, Duda-Gromada, 2011). Current research does not unequivocally indicate whether the “manufacturing” of a tourist product draws or repels tourists. The global tourist marketplace is filled with artificial tourist attractions, and authenticity is becoming a rare commodity. This is especially true in well-established tourist markets such as Italy.

In the case of cities where cultural tourism sites are not enough to build a viable tourist sector, other cultural assets may be used in conjunction with tourist attractions. This may include special events, restaurants and bars, and high quality tourist infrastructure. However, the original source of local cultural value and image must not be lost (Russoa & van der Borg, 2002). According to research on economic cycles and how they affect domestic and foreign tourist traffic in Italy as well as the competitiveness of the Italian tourist market (Guizzardi & Mazzocchi, 2010), price levels and price elasticity as well as special events are key factors driving tourist demand in Italy.

Aside from authenticity, the other key element of a competitive tourist offering is hospitality. Kaczmarek, Stasiak, and Włodarczyk (2008) define hospitality as a way of managing a given area that creates a safe and comfortable environment for tourists and links physical infrastructure with friendly local attitudes. Hence, it may be

assumed that the higher the percentage of local residents who are friendly and wish to be good hosts, the more hospitable a given community may be said to be.

A reputation for hospitality is a key element of the nonmaterial value of an entity in the tourist sector and may help it gain competitive advantage. Pistoia is a quiet city where tourists may observe real life in Tuscany, which includes hospitality, openness, and the Italian rhythm of life. Hospitality can make all the difference in a competitive tourist marketplace. It may take on a more intuitive form or a more institutional form. However, the basis of any form of hospitality is service quality and organizational culture. Research literature describes hospitality as a cohesive set of trained behaviors aimed at customers (Piasta, 2007).

Customer satisfaction and general well-being may be used to indirectly evaluate the competitiveness of a given tourist area. Attractiveness in a tourist sense may be defined as easy access to a given geographic area, proper management of local tourist services, meeting customer needs, and general tourist welfare. According to empirical research by Cracolici & Nijkamp (2008), high volume of tourist traffic does not always equal high rates of customer satisfaction. Poor service quality may reduce the competitive advantage of a given tourist area over time. Conversely, high service quality may improve the competitiveness of an area.

The above may lead to the conclusion that tourist volume may indirectly affect the quality of tourist services. Small and midsize tourist towns, which welcome tourists in an authentic manner, possess immense potential in a world filled with mainstream trends. Customized customer care and direct host – customer interactions are possible at lower tourist volumes, while major tourist centers suffer the problem of anonymity, both on the part of the host and that of the customer. Lower tourist volumes in Pistoia are paradoxically an asset. An increase in tourist numbers may fundamentally alter the nature of the city. Commercialization of tourist services may outweigh Pistoia's authenticity and hospitality at some future point in time. In turn, this may indirectly reduce the city's tourist attractiveness.

Pistoia is a city whose art and culture await discovery. Its rich offering of attractions has not yet been fully taken advantage of by the general public (Ruozi, 2009). The city's tourist offering may need to be supplemented by promoting its identity, which consists of three basic ingredients:

- history, art, culture, local traditions
- craftsmanship, high quality local products
- diverse local natural environment

The above ingredients are the key strengths of the city and commune of Pistoia. The city needs to find a place for itself along the trail of a new type of tourist – one who visits mostly small and midsize cities not yet affected by mass tourism (Mariotti, Romei, 2009). In this rapidly changing tourist marketplace, yet another form of tourism is available – niche tourism. This form of tourism is based on high quality service and simple and authentic attractions valued by individuals searching for unique local arts and traditions.

However, history and architecture are not the only determinants of the attractiveness of a city. A number of other components are needed, as every city has many faces: history, culture, architecture, commerce, entertainment. Pistoia is a city that yields an optimal mix of each of the mentioned facets of urban geography. The city is also taking steps to diversify its hotel offering and improve existing tourist infrastructure (Ruozi, 2009).

Conclusions

Tourism has become a favorite growth strategy for governments of many cities, regardless of size. Cities are attempting to create a niche for themselves in the local or global tourism marketplace. The tourist economy is developed in conjunction with other strategic sectors of the municipal economy (Mariotti, Romei, 2009). Investment in the promotion of tourist attractions, improved tourist infrastructure, and diversification of the tourist offering are all ways to increase tourist traffic and the revenues it generates.

It is world class competitors such as Florence and Pisa, and to some extent Lucca and Prato, that reduce tourist traffic to Pistoia, a city with a rich history and architecture as well as good tourist infrastructure and easy accessibility. Cultural heritage is a fundamental tourist attraction in Pistoia and puts the city on the tourist map of Italy. The city needs to emphasize all aspects of its character including its architecture, arts, traditions, folklore, and material culture. All of these aspects make Pistoia authentic and unique. The city offers rich artistic heritage associated with music, exhibits, events, a historic district, parks, gardens, commerce, services, and high quality tourist guides.

Pistoia also offers social and cultural options normally associated with sophisticated metropolitan areas including pedestrian-friendly zones and so-called slow living. Tourists can take advantage of organ recitals at Romanesque churches, visit a decorative plant garden, view new varieties of roses and decorative bushes, or follow the Olive Oil and Wine Trail or the Scent and Color Trail (*Appennino Pistoiese*).

In summary, it is difficult to know whether the success of Pistoia as a smaller tourist town will depend on increased tourist traffic – in effect, commercialization at the expense of authenticity and hospitality – or whether the city should maintain its genuine character, which will draw fewer tourists, but they will be tourists with a greater awareness of the purpose of their visit.

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