

ARCH Partnership Programme European Tourism: Building a Sustainable Future



“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”
(Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa)

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Summary

Sicily epitomises for me much of what has been lost in the UK – strong sense of family ties; traditions and pride in local foods; sense of local place and local identity. Globally, destinations promote a medley of brands - Scotland is known internationally for its imagery in relation to tartan, whisky and heritage; Italy for its culture, food and history. Perhaps though Sicily is less recognisable to its external markets, this can only be addressed by collaborative working and forward planning by tourism businesses and the public sector who have a common goal in recognising that sustainable economic benefit should not be gained from quick wins but from focused strategic planning in maintaining a natural balance of resources.

The People



Acknowledgements

My thanks to ARCH network and their Sicilian partners, ***The Istituto Technico Commerciale per Geometri e per il Turismo, Milazzo***, for the opportunity to partake in and the facilitation of this programme. The well thought through tinerary showcased a wide variety and range of tourism development, allowing the participants a true insight into the people, products and resources that contribute to the authentic Sicilian tourism experience. The professionalism, passion and uplifting approach of our hosts Loredana Celebre, a consultant for the Regional Tourism Office in Milazzo and Rosella Alosi, an English teacher at the partner organisation, along with those too many to mention, all contributed to what was a memorable and welcoming visit to Sicily. Our Catalan friends, all from the ***'Associacio de professionals de turisme de la administracions locals de Catalunya'*** entertained us all en route with their musicality and sense of fun.

1. Introduction

Our busy itinerary was filled with visits to examples of art, culture, heritage, accommodation, food production, agritourism, all complimented with the added value of authentic food experiences and collectively each contributing in their unique way to Sicily's tourism offer. With an objective of the programme being 'knowledge exchange', a formal conference was incorporated into the programme held at the Sicilian partner institution. Personally, the knowledge I acquired both first hand through visiting businesses (in Scotland called FAM Trips), and in the interactions with our international partners, provided me with a more precious and memorable learning experience.

The environment – built and natural



The overall aim of the partnership programme being *building a sustainable future for tourism in Europe*, the focus of my report will be on those aspects that I feel I can influence back in Scotland through my teaching and industry links that will enable Scotland, particularly Ayrshire, to build an authentic and sustainable tourism sector. The culture of the food, the integration of contemporary art and the visit to the rural hill top town of Novara di Sicilia, left lasting impressions of a culture both new and old that provided an integrated and sustainable bedrock for the Sicilian tourism experience.

2. The context of sustainability

'Development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)

Sustainable development as a concept has its roots in the 1980's, first appearing in the Brundtland Commission report as a development approach to provide 'a cure' for the ills of ill planned developments such as 'mass tourism' - a phenomenon that had spread like a rash throughout the 1960's-80's across European coastal fringes, transforming once quiet fishing villages into mass tourist ghettos. The emergence of mass tourism in the 1960's, enabled by advances in technology, paid holidays and packaged deals had resulted in new destinations offering the allure of sun, sand and sea to tourists travelling en masse to new destinations who often commodified their culture through staged authenticity and heritage. In this rush to gain economically from this fashionable trend, destinations sacrificed their values and their environment in order to earn much needed income and gain economic prosperity from this mass tourism 'industry' – this was modernity! Only time has determined that such an approach would degrade the very resource on which tourism depended.

Since 2006, the EU has recognised 'tourism' as a key sector within the EU economy but has adopted a sustainable development approach, embedded and recognised in two directions of policy influence:

- minimizing the negative impacts of tourism on society/environment
- maximizing tourism's positive and creative contribution to local economies, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, the quality of life of hosts and visitors

Most certainly my experience in Sicily would certainly confirm that local communities and businesses are well versed in conserving their cultural heritage, but perhaps what is less apparent is the willingness to share these experiences with other locals in order to build sustainable networks of mutual benefit that could strengthen the product offer and promote a collective tourism approach to development.

3. The Case Study - Sicily

So to Sicily, at least in the areas we visited, there was fortunately little evidence of the legacy of the 'rash assault' of the late 20th century mass tourism phenomenon. Indeed the impression was of a destination as yet little untouched by the global tourism phenomenon despite the infrastructure that supported access to the island.

My existing preconceptions of Sicily were blown away as our group of travellers, after arriving at Catania airport, weary and bleary, were swiftly transported away towards our destination in Milazzo, the Hotel Riviera Lido, our base for the exchange.. Despite having travelled widely around mainland Italy, I smiled to myself as I thought of my childhood which had clearly left me with the impression that Sicily was 'small'. My personal childhood memory of my mother chanting *'Big booted Italy kicked little Sicily into the Mediterranean Sea'* (in order for me to pass for my geography test) was being severely challenged. I was unprepared for the flatted urbanisation that seemed to cling to the coastal fringe – providing accommodation for the 4+ million inhabitants. Endless tunnels carved into the hillside lined our route - a two hour drive from the airport.

My first impression of Milazzo, was now in sight eerily illuminated by floodlights from an oil refinery that appeared to dominate the landscape – a sustainable development perhaps for local employment but at what

cost to the setting and natural environment – the tourism resource? Parallels could be drawn however to many coastal fringes industrial developments – but this was once again challenging my imaginings and preconceptions of my destination.

Ah.... but what delight was in store! Raising the bedroom shutters early morning, there to my left a vista more akin to my visual imaginings – a fishing boat putting in the bay, pulling in its catch, illuminated in the early morning light and casting an air of tranquillity over the scene. To my right, the refinery now stripped of its illuminations, appeared less dominating and threatening to the visual vista.



3.1 Our base - Milazzo

Milazzo has many similarities with the more remote parts of Scotland, in that it is distanced from mainland Italy and has suffered in the past from a lack of funding and resources. Tourism is an important industry in Sicily and the school and tourist office offer training and support to emerging and developing tourism initiatives. Milazzo itself is on a promontory, once an important port the old walled city is a legacy of the former strategic importance of the area. Unfortunately, we had no time to explore Milazzo but did hear from a local tourism agent who told us of the revival of ancient vine yards thanks to the opening of a large wine factory. The area had much to offer – cruises around the natural marine reserve, ‘Slow Tours’, bike trails, small family run hotels, beaches.... My impression was of an area much loved by locals endorsed by the travel agents’s comment - *‘People from the area know the area.’* Clearly, Pride and Passion is inherent whereas in Scotland, the lack of local knowledge among local communities of what their area has to offer have been recently highlighted as a weakness.

3.2 The Conference

The host for the morning -the Istituto tecnico Commerciale per Geometri e Statale’– a vocational technical school in Milazzo offering courses in tourism, rural development, rural business, agriculture, environment and recreation. The subject areas very similar to those offered in my workplace - the Scottish Agricultural College albeit at a lower level. The audience for the conference some 150- 200 Italian students and invited guests who listened patiently to the English presentations.

Perhaps my lasting impression of the majority of this young audience was of regular young people who were rooted in Sicilian culture and as yet to widely experience first hand the global society. Very few had travelled outwith the national borders endorsing my growing realisation that the outbound opportunities were limited and domestic tourism was indeed embedded as a family tradition, a factor strengthening the pride and passion in local culture and food. Domestic tourism was embedded in the culture.

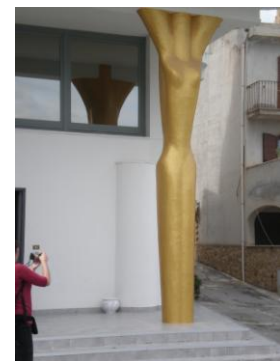
The impact of social media networks can be seen to be a catalyst for change in many political societies – however the questions posed eloquently in English, by some of this young audience, indicated that although within the young audience there was a desire for change and the concept of business networking was treated with intrigue and a little suspicion especially, by those historically in business, the young were eager to embrace in sharing ideas and working collaboratively for the good of the area but lacked the know-how. Upskilling, in the art of networking and selling the benefits of successful networking models is one for future development.

Over the years I have presented to various audience, engaging at the outset with young people is essential. I have to admit to displaying the epitomy of Scottish cultural tat – the see you Jimmy hat! Designed really as an ice-breaker - *my see you Jimmy* adorned the head of one young Sicilian spotted at the coffee break. The presenters worked well as a team – unrehearsed however well balanced – James in particular creating a stir with his Gaelic musicality and at the coffee break gathering quite a crowd of groupies eager to hear more and sign up to his Facebook site. Once warmed up, the questions during the Q&A session from the students were both probing and thought provoking while posed remarkably eloquently in English– the future of tourism would be in safe in their hands!



3.3 Out and About

3.3.1 Contemporary Art



The sculpture 'La Finestra sul Mare' was the meeting place for our introduction to the artist Salvatore Presti, a gentleman who commands the attention of his audience, a maverick openly reflecting to his audience on the

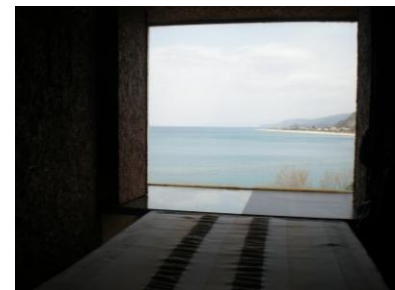
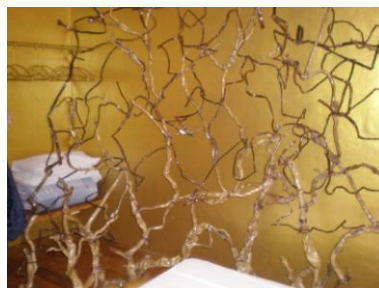
influence of the Mafia in Sicilian business circle.

His creative legacy the 'Fiumara d'Arte' (the largest European art of contemporary sculptures, not on our itinerary was unfortunate as there are interesting parallels to a live project in Scotland that aims to use contemporary sculptures in forests in south-west Scotland. However a good Case Study to further research and present to my Scottish colleagues.

On our itinerary however is the 'The Hotel 'Atelier sul Mare', Presti's showpiece. Effectively a museum of contemporary art both externally and internally and now HQ of a foundation for the arts the hotel oozes the unexplained



The collection of bedrooms, each designed by international artists and dating from 1990, offer an alternative and unique experience of sleeping within a living art work. The predominant theme is water – the sea, treated as a fundamental element and purifier of life, the return to man's basic origins and hence to humankind's very existence¹. Each artist interprets this idea in different ways- my personal favourite being the simplicity of Maurizio Mochetti's, 1992 masterpiece entitled 'Energy'.



For me this contemporary treasure epitomised that there is role for contemporary art in the development of sustainable tourism and one to support in future development

¹ http://www.messina-sicilia.it/english/fiumara_d_arte.htm

3.3.2 Agritourism - Villa Nicetta



Sicily has over 500 agriturismo – all which are on working farms with a focus on local produce. Within this 30 hectares, the produce grown included tomatoes, aubergines, lemons, grapefruit, olives, vegetables....Arriving at dusk, we were met by the owner's son-in-law Guiseppe, our guide for our visit to this family run agriturismo business, which had been in the current family since the 18th century. Guiseppe proved to be an ambassador not only for Villa Nicetta, but for the local attractions. It was interesting to note the main focus of his 'sell' was not on the accommodation, charming though it was, but on the wide variety of experiences and activities that were on offer in the area. In Scotland, we talk of selling on an area through partnership and networking but I would challenge any local accommodation provider in Scotland, to sell his area as enthusiastically as Guiseppe. The strategic location of Villa Nicetta, we were assured, enabled visitors to be well placed to enjoy the many excursions from visiting the Aeolian islands to enjoying the local natural environment – forest, trekking, eagles. Villa Nicetta was sold as 'home' for the visit. Guiseppe's day job was as a travel agent in Palermo – a happy coincidence I would say for the family business as he was well placed not only to sell on the area but to promote the family business. Nevertheless, the pride and passion with which he spoke was tangible and the Villa Nicetta experience charming.





Authenticity was all around - all rooms had been restored in the tradition of the area, hauntingly portrayed in the early darkness. The restaurant open to non-residents, offered only the best of the area's natural, local ingredients including cheeses. Our taste buds were charmed by Rosa's cooking – her craft producing tastes of Villa Nicetta delivered with skill and humility.



In Scotland, local food is high on the agenda of the Scottish Government. The Scottish food tourism experience is improving but the lack of skilled and passionate chefs is an issue. The revival of long lost traditions and culinary skills would add value to the Scottish food experience.....one to lobby for in curriculum planning.

Many academics struggle to find a definition of 'agritourism' that represents the Scottish offer. In Scotland, many farms have diversified into tourism but have failed to encapsulate or indeed do not wish to promote an authentic experience that is based on the produce of their labours. Have we lost the real meaning – the soul? Notably the main market for Villa Nicetta is the domestic market - clearly the passion and interest in 'food' is part of Italian culture and creates a demand for provenance and a slow way of gastronomy that is embedded in the Slow Food Movement that has its origin in Italy.

3.3.3 Slow Food

"Slow Food unites the pleasure of food with responsibility, sustainability and harmony with nature" (Carlo Petrini, Founder of Slow Food Movement, Italy)

Throughout our visit local produce was served to us always with a story to tell. From our first meal at the Hotel Atelier sul Mare, where we were served local fish caught by local fishermen, to a 'light' lunch at the local restaurant in Novara de Sicilia, where each dish was carefully explained by our host. It is easy to see why

'Slow Food' had its roots in Italy – indeed the Italian food experience is embedded in the philosophy of the movement. Internationally, Slow Food's 100,000 members bring the Slow Food philosophy to life through the events and activities they organize in their communities. In Novara di Sicilia we were no to be disappointed. A cheese race provided the entertainment and brought out a competitive 'spirit' and an international challenge.



3.3.4 A rural community - Novara di Sicilia

Winding our way up towards the skyline of the Peloritani Mountains, we were greeted warmly by Dr Antonino Gentile, a gynaecologist and local Slow Food convivium leader. Novara di Sicilia once boasted a population of 12,000 that had now dwindled attributed to young people moving away from the area and the construction of a motorway (way down in the valley) that bypassed the township. The current population of around 1000, consisted of 200 Romanians who it was said were well integrated into the local agricultural community, acquiring traditional agricultural Sicilian methods of production. Many rural areas in Scotland have seen similar patterns of out migration and use eastern European labour to fill the skills gap but integration is not so apparent. Many of the buildings were derelict and Novara had an air of a bygone age and neglect. Locals however are now being encouraged to undertake renovations and we were proudly shown around a beautifully restored B&B with a pricing structure that I personally thought was fair value for money and reflected average UK prices - 80-120 Euros per night in high season. However there was no evidence of promotional material and clearly a need to devise a route to market. I thought of Ayrshire's recently formed Ayrshire Bed & Breakfast Association (ABBA) that has strengthen the collective product offer, sharing marketing and promotional costs – a lesson perhaps for our Sicilian partners.



A visit to a small local farm, where the production of the local cheese 'Maiorchino' (made from both goat and sheep milk), has an artisan heritage dating back to circa 2000BC. On viewing this ancient process, I smiled as I thought of the UK legislation that would have prohibited such an insight! Perhaps in Scotland we tend to sanitize the production experience and lose the connection with authenticity. Cured meats were also a product of the farm – the pigs I'm happy to say were sleeping in a field, with the end product strung up in thatched buildings designed for the smoking process.



This entrepreneurial farming family had clearly well developed business skills, as later in the day when we purchased our local food products from the Novara local small supermarket, the farm produce was on display and sold to us by the farmer's family.

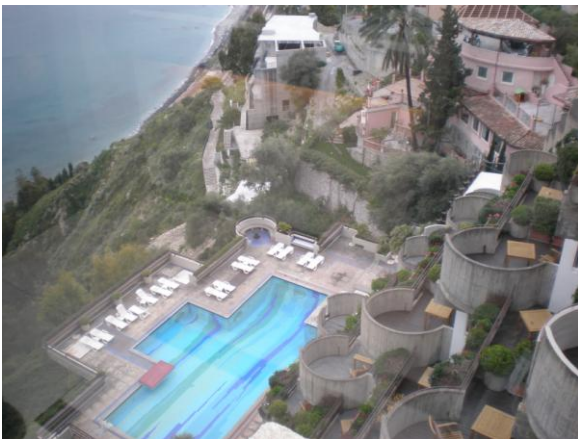
Food and culture are inextricably linked. The 'Apostles Finger', a traditional sweet made of pastry and ricotta cheese, traditionally made after Easter, has heritage dating back to around 1100AD when it was brought to the area by the Cistercian monks.



Food and culture in Scotland do have cultural links – the Arbroath Smokie has recently been awarded a PGI with the heritage of the community is important in the story of the smoked fish process. In general, Scotland's communities lack the intense passion for authenticity in food that is apparent throughout this visit. This passion must be ignited for Scotland to compete with destinations that have identity through their food product. The question in my mind is how to evoke this passion and inspire local communities and producers to resurrect recipes and methods that can keep traditions alive and sustain rural communities.

3.3.5 Hotel Monte Tauro

From authenticity to modernity, the Hotel Monte Tauro, which clings to the coastal cliffs of Taormina, first opened in 1970, is now part of the Angala Hotel Group, a relatively new player in the Italian hospitality sector. The spotlight here is on superior standard accommodation focused on 21st century lifestyles. International markets include the UK, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Finland and the USA. With 80% occupancy in the high season, the hotel closes over the winter months reopening mid March.



Parallels may be drawn with hotels in many Mediterranean mass tourist destinations, where all year round business is not sustainable over the quieter winter months due to lack of domestic visitors who seek more authentic experiences.

4. Applying my learning experience

Since returning to Scotland, I have developed a programme of Ayrshire Familiarisation (FAM) visits aimed at the business sector to improve product knowledge and encourage businesses to 'sell on' Ayrshire to the tourist. I hope to inspire many 'Guiseppees'!

The role of 'local food' in tourism is one close to my heart and currently high on the agenda of Scotland Food and Drink, an organisation that has a vision to see Scotland become known as the land of food and drink. For me however, the challenge is to engage with rural communities and encourage the growth of artisan food producers who can revive the story telling and traditions around local food to create a sense of place and authentic experience.

For my students, Sicily has provided me with a wealth of Case Study examples to enrich the delivery of academic theory. For me it was a wonderful experience!

Thank you ARCH network and thank you to all project partners.