

Case Study: Sicily - Building a sustainable future for tourism in Europe

The information contributing to the following case study is taken from a report on a Leonardo funded learning journey to Sicily, through the ARCH Partnership Programme: 'European Tourism: Building a Sustainable Future'.



***The key issues covered within this case study are:
Sustainability in tourism; Agritourism; Slow Food; food tourism and culture.***

Introduction

Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, lies southwest of the Italian mainland with the *Strait of Messina* physically separating Sicily from Calabria in southern Italy by 3km at its narrowest point. Historically, this central location has resulted in Sicily being considered a strategic location for Mediterranean trade routes and during periods of unrest, a key strategic stronghold. Sicily thus has a complex history of occupation from civilizations whose culture and traditions have been woven into not only the physical artifacts but the way of life and socio-cultural characteristics of the Sicilian population. The Romans, Greeks, Spanish, Turks, Asians and Africans, who have at one time occupied areas of Sicily, have left behind a melting pot of multicultural roots.



Sicily's population of 5.1 million is distributed largely around the coastal periphery, contrasting with the almost uninhabited inland zones of the Sicilian Apennines; Etna, the Erei, Iblei and other high ground in the west, clearly contrasting with the largely populated coastal fringe. Sicilians today are an eclectic society. Nevertheless there is a strong sense of family ties; tradition and pride in local food; sense of place and local identity.

Economically prior to World War II (1939-45), Sicily boasted many feudal estates relying mainly on cereal cultivation and animal husbandry. In the 1950's, the Southern Italy Development Fund (instigated by the National Government) led to land ownership reforms, increasing the amount of land available for cultivation and the development of the island's economy.

In the 21st Century, the main agricultural products are, as in the past, cereal crops with animal husbandry continuing through the raising of cattle, mules, donkeys and sheep. Exports now include olives, citrus fruits, almonds, figs, grapes, cotton, tuna and sardines. Sicily is a manufacturer of processed foods, chemicals, refined petroleum, fertilizers with important petroleum fields in the southeast. This industrial development has been enabled by the improvements in Sicily's road system; tunnels bury deep through the rocky landscape carrying the population, goods, tourists and internal train network.

Tourism

Sicily's tourist offer is diverse. With a 1,000km coastline, the sun, sea and sand entices both independent and packaged tourists, domestic and non-domestic (mainly European), to the beaches, their tourism experience being enriched with visits to open air heritage sites such as the *Teatro Greco* – a Greek Amphitheatre in Taormina; to bustling cities such as Palermo; medieval villages such as Novara de Sicilia; and Mount Etna, most probably Sicily's most celebrated natural phenomenon. Sicily has also a softer option for tourists who seek to experience Sicily's natural larder and explore the rural areas. *Agriturismo*, tourism related to a farms and local produce, has been encouraged by national legislation since 1985 and is thriving in rural areas.

The development of tourism is fundamental to the economic prosperity of Sicily, nowadays developers and communities must recognise the importance of a sustainable approach.

The context of sustainability

Sustainable development may be defined as:

'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 that associated with '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 offered 'commodified' cultural experiences through staged authentic representations of their heritage. In this rush to gain economically from this fashionable trend, destinations to an extent, 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 thus:

- 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

Within Sicily there is evidence to suggest that local communities and businesses are well versed in conserving their cultural heritage through their passion for local food linked with traditional and heritage. Food together with culture has the ability to create real 'identity' in the global tourism market. The story behind the food production and processes, linked intrinsically to the agricultural heritage, together form a tourism offer that is sustainably linked to the way of life of rural communities.

A rural community - Novara di Sicilia

Novara di Sicilia which lies in the Peloritani Mountain range, once boasted a population of 12,000 that has now dwindled to around 1000, attributed to the out migration of young people combined with the negative economic impact of the construction of a motorway (way down in the valley) that now bypasses the township resulting in a downturn in retail and trading. Agriculture had once been a thriving industry with

traditional crops such as chestnuts, hazelnuts and olives together with the rearing of sheep, goats and sheep sustaining the local rural economy. The current population of around 1000 inhabitants consists of 200 Romanians, well integrated into the local agricultural community, acquiring traditional Sicilian agricultural methods of production.

Farming is still evident in the village; 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, is an example of how locals have kept alive ancient production methods not hindered by excessive EU legislation. This connection with authenticity enabling visitors an insight into an ancient process.



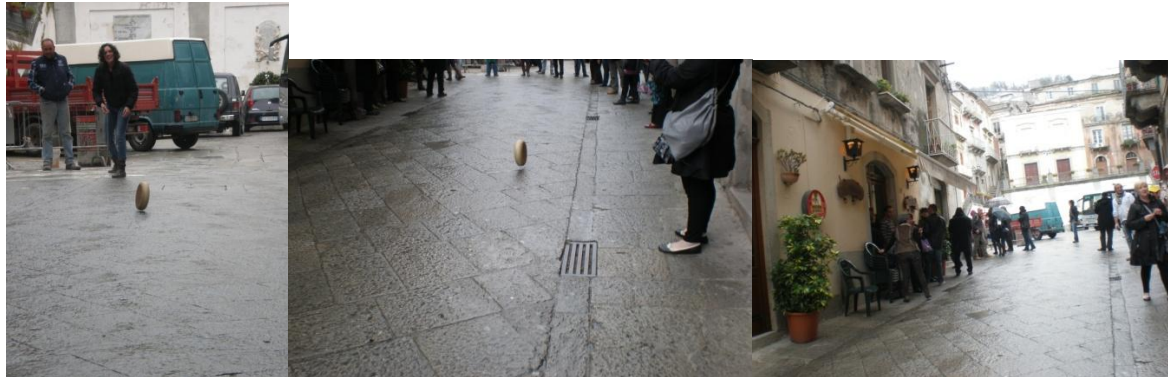
The farm also produced cured pork strung up in traditional thatched buildings designed for the smoking process. Tastings of the farm products were offered *al fresco* to visitors, at a long wooden table in a shed overlooking the farm, with the owner explaining the nuances of cheese and meat on offer.



The entrepreneurial farming family had developed key business skills; an outlet for their local farm products was a local convenience store - the Novara small supermarket, where members of the farming family were on hand to sell and package their produce, sealed for transit.

Novara di Sicilia has long been associated with cheese making and the tradition of cheese rolling, dating back to the 17th century, is still practiced today. Held in Piazza Michele Bertolami, the race typically takes place during carnival celebrations and can attract hundreds of villagers and tourists. The 25lb pecorino

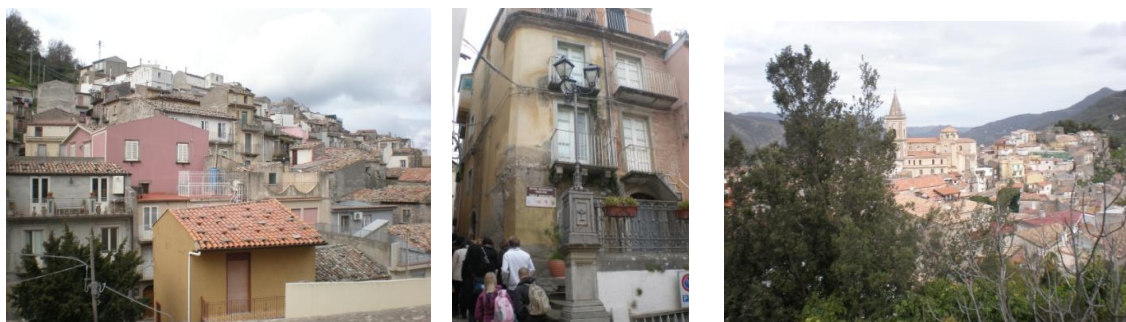
cheese is launched by a strap ('mazzacorto') wrapped around it - with the cheese travelling up to 1km through the historic streets.



Food and culture are inextricably linked in the village. 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. A baker in a local 'tea shop' explained and demonstrated the baking process, linking the story with the product.



Novara de Sicilia, due to out migration, had an air of a bygone age and with many of the village buildings derelict and empty. Locals are now being encouraged to undertake renovations and entrepreneurial activity was evident in a beautifully restored B&B, charging around 80-120 Euros per night in high season. However, there was lack of evidence of associated promotional material or market awareness, highlighting the necessity to upskill locals in the business of tourism and promotion through training.



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 the areas visited, local produce was served always with a story to tell. From the first meal at the Hotel Atelier sul Mare, where the group 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 the host. It was evident why ‘Slow Food’ had its roots in Italy – 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.

Agritourism - Villa Nicetta

Sicily has over 500 *Agrituristiche* – all which are on working farms with a focus on local produce. Villa Nicetta, dating back to the 18th century, lies 2km inland from the coast opposite the Aeolian Islands. It is a cluster of old outbuildings around a central courtyard, partly and sympathetically restored to provide an authentic experience for guest accommodation.



Within this 30 hectares, the produce grown included tomatoes, aubergines, lemons, grapefruit, olives, vegetables.... 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.

A wide variety of experiences and activities were on offer in the area. The strategic location of Villa Nicetta, enables visitors to be well placed to enjoy the many excursions from visiting the Aeolian islands to enjoying the local natural environment – forest, trekking, eagles with Villa Nicetta being sold as ‘home’ for the visit.



Villa Nicetta's on site restaurant, open to non-residents, offered only the best of the villa's and area's natural, local ingredients including cheeses. The food was a testament to the craft of Rosa, the in-house chef, who used local produce to create a memorable food experience.



Conclusion

In Sicily, the importance of local food is woven into the fabric of local culture and the authenticity of the food tourism experience is 'real'. There is much to be learned from the Sicilians regarding the revival of long lost traditions and culinary skills that could be applied to other destinations.

Level 1: General discussion points and exercises

1. Discuss the factors that have contributed to Sicily's cultural tourism product offer.
2. Explain why developers and communities should adopt a sustainable approach to tourism development.
3. Outline the challenges that may arise in developing sustainable tourism in Sicily.
4. Explain the term '*commodified cultural experience*'.
5. Identify the factors that may contribute to a memorable food tourism experience.
6. Explain the relationship between food, tourism and culture.
7. In Novara de Sicilia, evaluate the role of food in the tourism experience.

Level 2: Group Exercises - Presentations could be developed

1. **Slow Food** <http://www.slowfood.com>
 - Outline the philosophy of the Slow Food Movement
 - Explain the term 'Convivium' and provide an example of a Convivium in your country
 - Outline the advantages of developing a 'Slow Food' destination
2. **Villa Nicetta** <http://www.villanicetta.it/england/storia.html>
 - Explain the term *Agriturismo*
 - Identify Villa Nicetta's key tourism markets
 - Outline the activities on offer at Villa Nicetta
 - Evaluate the potential of Villa Nicetta to expand its current offer

Level 3: Further Research Activity

Log on to http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism/index_en.htm

- In 2011 the EU "Sustainable tourism" preparatory action focuses on which main objectives?