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Cultural tourism as a tool for transformation in small and medium-sized towns

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Introduction

Tourism scholars regularly extol the merits of tourism as a tool for economic diversification in small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs), especially those with a narrow economic base, which witness chronic social problems like high unemployment and rapid depopulation. In recent years there have been numerous case studies of tourism's role in communities, especially those in predominantly rural and/or peripheral regions (Ioannides and Timothy, 2010; Lane, 1994; Scherf, 2021). Strangely enough, despite this research attention, most writings fail to clearly define what is precisely meant by SMSTs. For instance, some authors who write about tourism in small-town America focus on extremely small places (e.g., ones with populations under 5,000) (Davis and Morais, 2004). Others refer to SMSTs as ones whose populations range between 5,000 and 50,000 (Pecsek, 2016). Then there are those who consider towns that are even larger such as Della Lucia et al. (2017), who focused on Trento and Lecce in Italy, which respectively have populations of around 115,000 and 95,000.

What emerges from most academic writings on tourism in SMSTs is that rather than focus on the population of the communities under investigation, they treat them as ones located beyond the sphere of influence of a country's major metropolitan regions and secondary cores of economic and political power. Often, these SMSTs are in the midst of rural and/or peripheral regions. They also tend to be those that, at least traditionally, depend on a narrow range of economic activities (see for example, Remoaldo et al., 2020). Thus, in this chapter, rather than becoming bogged down in precise statistical definitions of what constitutes an SMST, the subjects of our investigation are towns and cities located on the lower end of a country's rank-size order. Importantly, these are places where tourism features as a dominant sector whose impacts

(both positive and negative) spread widely throughout the community. Of course, tourism is also a key industry in major metropolitan regions like Paris or Barcelona, but because of these cities' size and economic and political power the sector constitutes one part of a highly diversified economic base. In our study, the places we have in mind are ones where tourism, particularly cultural tourism, has become a vital part of their *raison d'être* and whose effects are widespread throughout the community.

Undoubtedly, there exists a broad range of such SMSTs. Seaside localities, pilgrimage centres, mountain resorts and spa towns immediately jump out as popular venues for visitors. Many of these boast a long history as destinations (Ioannides and Timothy, 2010; Walton, 1983). Additional types of SMSTs that lure tourists include gateway communities to national parks or wilderness areas, quaint rural communities, places with a rich historical heritage reflected through their built environment or those where a famous person or persons once lived. Further, there is an increasing number of SMSTs seeking to promote the arts or their culinary heritage, while events and festivals are popular in several localities as a means of attracting visitor spending (Kresl and Ietri, 2016; Scherf, 2021).

An important transformation that has occurred over the last 30 years or so is that the boundaries between leisure-related tourism and everyday life have gradually blurred. Since the 1990s, major cultural, political-economic and societal changes have been mirrored by a growing plurality of tourists' interests. The resort town for the purposes of 'simple leisure' – Rimini in Italy or Blackpool in the United Kingdom are the archetypical examples – no longer seemed to be enough. For many, though perhaps not all, the concept of a holiday began shifting towards an idea of personal growth and self-fulfilment to be reached in multiple ways. Through an immersive experience of places, no matter how distant from home nor how 'authentic' they are, individuals began hoping to achieve these traits (Uriely, 2005).

The social and cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity in tourism (Minca and Oakes, 2006; Urry, 1990) has also been paralleled by a major political-economic shift, whereby urban economies of all sizes must contend with deindustrialization or the loss in importance of an extractive activity (Mosedale, 2016). During these times, where neoliberalism has shaped the futures of places and people (Harvey, 2013), localities have been fiercely competing to attract footloose capital. In this game there are winners and losers (Cochrane, 2007; Rossi and Vanolo, 2012). Whereas the fortunes of larger metropolitan regions have varied because of differences in their respective comparative and competitive advantages, this shift has been particularly

critical for many SMSTs worldwide. Company towns, which experienced the shutdown of a factory, an agricultural processing plant or a mine, ended up losing their major economic source and were forced to reinvent themselves despite facing numerous obstacles and a weak competitive environment compared to other localities. For many such places, tourism emerged as a perceived panacea, offering hopes of economic revival and diversification (Bell and Jayne, 2006; Kresl and Ietri, 2016; Lorentzen and Van Heur, 2012). While some communities could capitalize on their proximity to natural amenities (e.g., coasts or pristine mountain regions) or their historical assets, most were forced to creatively reinvent themselves. Attracting so-called cultural tourists has often been seen as the way forward for many such places (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Pasquinelli and Bellini, 2017; Richards, 1996).

In this chapter, we describe the transformation in recent decades of SMSTs into cultural tourist destinations. First, we dig into literature primarily from urban studies and tourism research. Next, we define what is meant by cultural tourism, a problematic concept despite its recent success. We suggest that a way to better understand cultural tourism and SMSTs is by locating the topic at the crossroads of the cultural economy approach (Amin and Thrift, 2004) with urban geography. Correspondingly, we discuss some of the principal features characterizing contemporary SMSTs that have become cultural tourism destinations. Cultural tourism and SMSTs can also be understood by examining their role in wider urban networks. We demonstrate this through a short review of regional, macro-regional and transnational policies.

Although the narrative of cultural tourism as a tool for regenerating SMSTs in response to contemporary global challenges is well established, we express scepticism about embracing it as an unproblematic formula. We reflect our doubts by summarizing the unwanted side effects of tourism-led development. Importantly, we highlight how the limits of the strategy, which pursues cultural tourists, have become palpable during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020. By reflecting on the implications of the global pandemic for SMSTs we propose a future research agenda.

Thinking about cultural tourism: definitional challenges

Smith (2003, p. 29) describes cultural tourism as ‘an umbrella term for a range of tourism typologies and diverse activities which have a cultural focus’. The problem with her definition is that it is difficult to pinpoint what the ‘cultural focus’ of cultural tourism entails. Traditionally, observers have accepted that

practising cultural tourism includes visiting specific cultural attractions (e.g., museums, heritage sites and archaeological monuments) or attending artistic performances, concerts and festivals (Richards, 1996). In recent years, the 'cultural focus' of cultural tourism has significantly broadened, although, from an epistemological point of view, it has also been increasingly criticized (Smith, 2003). For Réau and Cousin (2009), tourism eminently constitutes a distinctive sphere. In sociology, the term pinpoints the realm made up of a set of practices through which one group of people remarks on its differences from another group (Bourdieu, 1984). After all, common definitions of cultural tourism implicitly restrict their cultural focus towards highbrow cultural expressions and authorized heritage discourse, privileged monumentality and grand narratives, in the understanding that the value of artefacts and sites is intrinsic, objective and tied to time, depth and scientific or expert judgement often based on aesthetic concerns (Smith, 2006).

For 50 years or so, however, the concept of 'cultural tourism' has been increasingly juxtaposed with that of 'mass tourism' thanks to a discursive repositioning initiated by several international organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Council of Monuments and Sites and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Cousin, 2008). Thus, today, whereas mass tourism conveys images of crowds of ill-behaved tourists who impose mostly negative impacts on the destinations they visit, cultural tourism implies an ideal global mobility embodying supposedly good forms of tourism. Perceptions that this form of tourism is low impact are used to legitimize cultural tourism's development (Cousin, 2008).

Regarding the scope of cultural tourism, we refer to the fact that common definitions overemphasize the consumption of arts and heritage in their narrowest sense (e.g., visiting museums, monuments and theatres). An initial critique of this narrow definition of cultural tourism derives from writings concerning the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), which stress that 'cultural tourism is as much based on experiencing as it is on sight-seeing' (Smith, 2003, p. 30). This critique is reinforced by the emerging refocusing of tourism as an encounter, relationship and negotiation within the symbolic/cultural domain in tourist destinations, which nurture a 'creative turn' in tourism (Richards, 2014). This draws from the debate in urban studies on creative cities (Florida, 2005; Landry and Bianchini, 1995). Yet the creative turn in tourism also hints at a restructuring of the processes of place making, criticizing mainstream practices of development of 'tourist places' (i.e., places and products that are meaningful for tourists or that attract tourist consumption), which unavoidably lead to a stereotyped and banal landscape (and experiences of it)

(Russo and Richards, 2016a, p. 5). The case studies provided by Scherf (2021) pinpoint six general themes, summarizing the relationship between creative tourism and 'smaller communities' (a term preferred to the one of SMSTs by the curator of the book): (1) the co-creation of experiences that feature unique local skills and knowledge by visitors and residents; (2) the engagement of visitor imagination by participation in tangible or intangible endogenous culture; (3) the generation or regeneration of sustainable cultural development for the host community; (4) the formation of creative networks to offer touristic experiences; (5) the examination of the processes, policies and methodologies around creative tourism; and (6) the creative representation of smaller communities. This means that the focus of creative tourism in SMSTs is more on the target of a tourist experience, shifting from specific objects and places to the actors of the cultural landscape they represent, including the residents. Consider Stoke-on-Trent that is not only the town where the book on *Urban Experience beyond the Metropolis* (Bell and Jayne, 2006) originated, but also the self-designated capital of pottery. Once there, visiting a pottery-making atelier which utilizes materials from the surroundings and observing the gestures of workers who create their art in a studio setting might be more attractive than visiting the pottery museum.

One way to understand cultural tourism while escaping its problematic narrow definition is to frame it in relation to major political-economic changes, with particular reference to the so-called cultural economy. This approach is especially fruitful for conceptualizing how value chains have been reconfigured in the last four decades, from production to consumption (Amin and Thrift, 2004). Cultural industries based on the mass commodification of culture have breathed fresh life into the economy, through new markets in leisure, media, arts, music, books and indeed tourism. These markets have created new forms of enterprise and played a major role in the economic regeneration of many localities throughout the world. This phenomenon has been evident in several major cities but also smaller communities worldwide, where industrial heritage sites have been reconfigured into spaces of cultural consumption for the purposes of attracting visitors (Hoffman et al., 2003).

In this context, a wider expression of material (including fashion, design and gastronomy) but also digital culture (e.g., video games) has emerged as an integral part of Western economic sectors. These have led to the designation of cultural and creative industries (Pratt, 1997). This 'industrial approach' focusing on the spatialized production of culture (Pratt, 2004) can be integrated with a 'territorial approach' (Lazzeroni et al., 2013; Santagata, 2010), highlighting the role that local assets may play in maintaining a set of intangible resources and socio-cultural relationships (such as passion, affective

components, moral sentiments, tacit awareness, trust). This means that cultural and creative industries are entangled with place as shown in the example of Stoke-on-Trent. Another case may be Cremona in Italy, one of the most famous production sites of violins for centuries. In 1996, the *Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari* was launched, followed by the ‘Cremona Liuteria’ brand in 2000. In 2012 UNESCO recognized the arts of luthiers in the list of intangible heritage, recognizing the link between the place and violin making (Battilani, 2018). Next, we discuss this ‘territorial’ aspect as a particular ‘plus’ for SMSTs which emerge as cultural tourist destinations.

Benchmarking models and networking policies for cultural tourism in SMSTs

The success of certain SMSTs as cultural and creative tourist destinations has generated a circuit of policy mobility, meaning the transfer and local adjustment of successful policy initiatives from one place to another in an attempt to emulate a similar degree of success (Temenos and McCann, 2013). We increasingly note the trickle down of initiatives, which are often spawned in larger metropolitan centres, down the urban hierarchy. Notable is the ‘Guggenheim effect’ seen when the Basque town of Bilbao rebranded itself from a manufacturing centre into a focal point for the arts following a massive culture-led urban generation intervention in the 1990s (González, 2011). This Guggenheim example prompted the copycat phenomenon whereby ‘star-architects’ are invited to add flare to urban landscapes since architecture is also a cultural tourism theme (Ebejer, 2021). Some SMSTs have been tempted to increase their urban distinctiveness by developing a contemporary architecture landmark, even if this is disconnected from its surroundings. Salerno, a medium-sized Italian coastal town with an ancient history, began to redevelop its maritime terminal and surrounding area through two important sequential projects announced approximately a decade ago. The maritime terminal was designed by the acclaimed international architect Zaha Hadid (inaugurated in 2016), while the Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill was commissioned to design the nearby promenade and square. Civic associations critiqued the latter’s project (named ‘the Crescent’) for its environmental impact. After a long legal battle, the project was partially modified (Pirone, 2017).

The Guggenheim phenomenon suggests yet another policy mobility, namely the tendency to replicate (at least to a degree) successful museums and cultural centres in other places, including SMSTs. This is not just a matter of imitating a successful model. Rather, the mobility strategy is based on the premise that

the project's success depends on local adjustment and social-economic embeddedness. For example, in 2010 the second Centre Pompidou was inaugurated in Metz with the aim to improve the cultural facilities offered in a disadvantaged region. This resulted while pursuing a decentralization strategy given that, traditionally, Paris has very much dominated in terms of French cultural offerings. A study by Krauss (2015) reveals that while the Centre Pompidou-Metz quickly developed a certain degree of embeddedness in the cultural networks of the region, this was not the case with regard to the economic actors. Soon after the new museum opened, most of the region's firms were unable to make significant use of the spaces of interaction offered by the centre for their networking. It is worth noting that, thus far, the only measurable direct impact on economic behaviour and activity relates to tourism-oriented economic sectors (Krauss, 2015).

Undoubtedly, successful cases may serve as the best practice inspiration for cultural and creative tourism projects in other localities. Such projects are also heavily boosted by specific cultural-political bodies, including UNESCO. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UNCCN) was launched in 2004 to promote cooperation among cities regardless of their size. This has certainly influenced several SMSTs, which are included in the network. Cities are awarded the UNCCN label when creativity – grouped as crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music – constitutes a major factor in their development. Membership can be used as a branding tool in the framework of local communication strategies. These, in turn, serve to attract investors and tourists, and to work jointly with cities in the network to build a stronger identity based on effective results through cooperation activities (Rosi, 2014). Although UNCCN includes certain major metropolitan areas and large cities, the current list of 246 places includes several SMSTs. One is the already mentioned town of Cremona, while another example is the Swedish town of Östersund. Located in the sparsely populated county of Jämtland, this is described on the UNCCN website as:

Östersund, UNESCO City of Gastronomy, is widely appreciated for its gastronomic culture, based on local sustainable food inspired from longstanding culinary traditions. Bringing together and supporting small entrepreneurs and farmers, Eldrimner, the Swedish National Centre for Small Scale Artisan Food Processing, provides guidance and supports training and product development demonstrating the importance of gastronomy in relation to the creative industries. The city's culinary tradition is intimately linked to its natural surroundings and the region's sustainable development efforts. (Creative Cities Network, 2022)

This community functions as the main market for agricultural products from the surrounding region and the symbiotic arrangement improves links

between town and country. Overall, tourism together with a rapidly expanding creative sector, including activities such as music, the performing arts and software design, have contributed to an annual growth of 5–10 per cent of Östersund and its surroundings (Creative Cities Network, 2022).

Several additional local development policies, which might not specifically address SMSTs, may, nevertheless, apply to many such communities. These local development policies are inspired by the networking and transnationalism put forth within the cultural policy context. For instance, there is the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme, whereby candidate cities develop a cultural programme aimed at emphasizing and leveraging upon the diversity and richness of European cultures. Increasingly, this involves the participation and ‘co-creation’ of culture as a form of community involvement (Nagy, 2018). While the ECoC is not explicitly a tourism-led project, the programme can be considered a tourism-related action. A tourism plan and the involvement of tourism stakeholders in the ECoC application is a success factor of candidate cities (Pasquinelli and Bellini, 2017). The ECoC programme was initially launched in 1985 and, since then, has been awarded to more than 60 cities. In the last decade, many European cultural capitals have been SMSTs. The choice of medium-sized towns such as Guimarães (Portugal) and Maribor (Slovenia) in 2012 or Rijeka (Croatia) and Galway (Ireland) in 2020/2021 reflects an effort to support cities and regions beyond the most famous European cultural and tourist cores.

Yet another programme, which specifically addresses cultural tourism, involves the European Cultural Routes (ECRs). ECRs are promoted as part of the European Union tourism policy in cooperation with the Council of Europe, the European Travel Commission, UNWTO and other international partners, which contribute to the development of ECRs via specific actions (European Commission, 2022). While the European Union perceives cultural routes as a means to promote lesser known destinations, particularly in rural regions, the most famous of these programmes, namely the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme, aims to use tourism to achieve cultural Europeanization and human rights. Often, the nodes connected by extended routes are SMSTs. In the case of the *Camino de Santiago*, which in 1987 was designated the first Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, the route has promoted tourism not only to Santiago de Compostela, but also to several other smaller towns including León, Astorga and Sarria (González and Medina, 2003).

Maintaining a critical approach towards tourism-led development in SMSTs

Earlier, we mentioned that cultural tourism results from a policy narrative that aims to promote an alternative to mass tourism given the latter's association with several negative impacts. Nevertheless, no evidence exists to suggest that so-called cultural tourism is more benign than other tourism forms, especially since this form of tourism has also been experiencing a 'massification' process in several destinations. One can only visualize the enormous crowds descending on a particular cultural attraction (e.g., Toledo in Spain) to know that the mass presence of 'cultural' tourists in a particular place is not always a welcome sight. In this section, we focus on two side effects of tourism development that apply to cultural tourism and specifically SMSTs, which attract culture-oriented visitors.

The first effect concerns urbanization. Urban regeneration in late capitalism has been associated, among others, with the growing popularity of the works of Florida (2002, 2005) as well as Landry and Bianchini (1995), that have resulted in the often abused idea of favouring the renaissance of obsolete urban space into buzzing districts, devoted to welcoming international knowledge workers and, consequently, investors. Related to this, a shift in urban branding based on the notion of culture instead of 'mere' entertainment has emerged (Vanolo, 2008, 2015). Much of the literature along these lines has traditionally focused on major cities, analysing large urban redevelopment projects that have turned former industrial spaces into cultural districts while the accompanying housing and retailing have ended up catering primarily to new wealthy residents, tourists and consumers of experiences as opposed to favouring the needs of long-time residents and workers.

One of the problems of the cultural and creative city mantra when we specifically refer to SMSTs is that it can be an 'awkward fit with smaller communities that do not have the infrastructure to support a creative class' (Scherf, 2021, p. 3). However, setting this argument aside, a major problem when it comes to urbanization in connection to cultural tourism is that this can result in gentrification. This process relates to the takeover of economically rundown areas by new development initiatives, which transform these into high-income spaces. Often, the original residents and businesses in these places end up being driven out by rising property values (Mendes, 2018).

While gentrification intersecting with tourism is generally studied with reference to large metropolises (Gravari-Barbas and Guinand, 2017), recent

research has investigated the phenomenon in smaller towns, often in connection with rural gentrification (Alonso González, 2017; Donaldson, 2018). One issue that this research reveals is that depopulated rural areas tend to have higher property vacancy rates compared to urban cores. Alonso González (2017) considers Santiago Millas in the Maragatería region of Spain. After having prospered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the village was nearly abandoned in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1990s, community members who had earlier emigrated for employment reasons returned. The economic and cultural capital of the returnees varied substantially from that of people who had remained. This significantly influenced the refurbishing of houses, causing changes in the social spaces of villages. The effect of the newcomers' permanent resettlement in the village also resulted in the appropriation of the community and social life, leading to the homogenization of the pre-existing aesthetic and social heterogeneity of the village. Thus, gentrification in SMSTs can adopt a more nuanced tone, albeit not less conflictual, than in major cities.

A second negative externality of tourism development relates to overtourism. Although the problems of visitor crowding and their effects on local communities and environments have been studied for decades (van der Borg et al., 1996), evidence exists that tourism's character in many locations has been changing rapidly since places are increasingly burdened by social, economic and environmental impacts associated with overvisitation. Cultural tourism is certainly not guilt-free when it comes to overtourism. Indeed, it is unfortunate that gaining the designation of a UNESCO World Heritage Site often serves as a recipe for disaster by inadvertently advertising the locality as a must-see on the bucket list of millions of potential visitors. Many historic SMSTs have been affected by the immense crowds who every day descend on them.

Addressing the case of mid-sized heritage cities, Russo (2002) discusses the 'vicious circle' in the development of tourism and heritage cities. This concept 'describes the self-feeding linkage between the emerging class of excursionist tourists in the later stages of a destination lifecycle, and the decline in a city's attractiveness' (Russo, 2002, p. 165). The original vicious cycle model was designed for medium-sized cities where tourism and other urban functions initially overlapped but increasingly became overrun by tourism-dedicated services, which eventually pushed out those catering solely to residents. More recently, Caldeira Neto Tomaz (2021) demonstrated that the small town of Český Krumlov in the Czech Republic experienced a significant increase of visits following its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992. A perfect example of a UNESCO-designated city with well-preserved heritage surrounded by a picturesque natural landscape, Český Krumlov gradually

began to lose its distinctive character. Its city centre has become dominated by tourist accommodation and businesses, some of which have little to do with local traditions and products. This has, in turn, driven many permanent residents away from the historical city centre.

Thus, despite the positive reviews often associated with cultural tourism-led development (OECD, 2009; UNWTO, 2022), this form of tourism can prove dangerous in the long term, especially when poorly planned and managed. The main reason why tourism's negative externalities are not seriously considered despite the existence of numerous warnings (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Weaver, 2006) has to do with the political economy. It is sadly obvious that most destinations, including SMSTs, are overwhelmingly growth-oriented. Tourism policies tend to emphasize maintaining a certain growth rate of visitors and visitor spending without considering that these towns' resources are finite and their carrying capacity has been compromised. Indeed, while many destinations have long dealt with overtourism and even though many residents often express enormous irritation about the takeover of their spaces by tourists, policymakers and other stakeholders regularly ignore these views, precisely because their focus is short-term profit-oriented and geared towards a quick fix to escape the community's economic woes. All in all, recent years have demonstrated that the way tourism has grown in several places, including popular SMSTs (as in the examples provided) exposes them to several dangers, which are hard to ignore. Seeking to better comprehend why many SMSTs continue to repeat the same mistakes and to understand how they can enhance their resilience to the shocks of rapid tourism growth may be a fruitful research path to engage with in the future.

Further, tourism is particularly vulnerable to shocks, such as economic crises, terrorist events, natural hazards or changing climate conditions. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has made palpable the vulnerability of tourism-dependent places given the travel restrictions imposed in many countries. Next, we focus more specifically on the issue of vulnerability and suggest possibilities for further research avenues.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The global pandemic, which began at the beginning of 2020, has devastated the tourism sector. Tourism arrivals have plummeted, consequently causing job losses in the sector and related activities. Indeed, the United Nations policy brief *Covid-19 and Transforming Tourism* (2020) indicates that international

arrivals were estimated to drop between 58 and 78 per cent during 2020 leading to a substantial reduction of visitor spending and the loss of approximately 100 million jobs. The report further mentioned that the most vulnerable people in the tourism industry were women and young people, many of whom were employed in small and medium-sized enterprises. With reference specifically to the cultural implications of the pandemic, the policy brief stated that because of the various lockdowns, numerous heritage sites and approximately 85,000 museums were forced to shut down for a considerable time.

A few months after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing implementation of 'lockdowns' in many localities, various reports and academic articles reflected on the pandemic's effects on tourism and discussed how this situation might serve as an opportunity to reset the industry. To begin with, the aforementioned United Nations policy brief (2020, p. 4) indicated that 'this crisis is also an unprecedented opportunity to transform the relationship of tourism with nature, climate and the economy'. Further, several scholars discussed what the global pandemic means for tourism's future. Ioannides and Gyimóthy (2020) questioned whether the pandemic-related crisis could serve as an opportunity for major transformations in the way tourism will evolve to mitigate its adverse effects on destinations. Though they were sceptical as to whether destinations can escape the path dependence dictated by a neoliberal growth-oriented mindset, they advocated that we must not miss the opportunity to shift our thinking about how tourism can be part of a more sustainable world. In outlining some of the emerging trends at the time of writing, we implicitly solicit research that – as we will see – will be of particular importance for those addressing SMSTs in their research (see concluding remarks). In fact, one trend of (post-)pandemic tourism which is of particular significance for SMSTs is the emergence of less crowded places, often those in more remote and peripheral regions, as alternative destinations for potential visitors wishing to escape destinations that have become the poster children of overtourism. As we describe below, this trend corresponds specifically to the so-called cultural tourism sphere.

International flights and rail travel were dramatically reduced or cancelled during lockdown while currently (at the time of writing) one can only travel to another country upon showing a vaccination pass. Of course, even before the outbreak of the pandemic, domestic tourism accounted for the major share of arrivals in most destinations despite the fact that it has long been international tourism that has been highlighted due to its perceived 'impressive' economic growth potential. Given the current conditions, focusing more specifically on domestic tourism can represent new opportunities for various destinations in several countries. For instance, at the time of writing, Australia was not

expected to reopen its borders to international travellers until mid-2022. In May 2021, the government launched a major campaign – *Holiday Here This Year* – to encourage Australians to take longer holidays in their own country (Australia, 2022).

As we put down the final touches to this chapter, it is hard to say whether domestic tourism will eventually balance any deficit arising from the decline of international arrivals and, if so, to what degree. Unfortunately, no solid data exist at this point. However, we hypothesize that SMSTs, which are targeted as cultural destinations, could provide the ingredients for discovery to potential domestic tourists who are inhibited from travelling abroad. Also, these SMSTs could open up the possibility of visiting an alternative to overcrowded major tourist cities precisely because they are lesser known and, perhaps, located in peripheral (harder-to-reach) regions. Even before the pandemic, a growing tendency had begun to emerge in many places whereby the adage ‘bigger is better’ was beginning to be questioned. Headlines called for renewed tourist desires for authentic, human-scale immersion in local life, culture and knowledge. This caused certain observers to regard SMSTs as potential destinations which can fulfil these wishes (Scherf, 2021). Further, many SMSTs possess traits that fuel their perception as safer to visit during a pandemic compared to more easily accessible cities. For instance, in a recent survey focusing on changes in tourist behaviour choices among Italian travellers (Corbisiero and Monaco, 2021), 60 per cent of respondents said they planned to avoid urban tourism and tourist cities in their (post-)pandemic trips, and 82.62 per cent of respondents stated that they would have preferred tourist destinations with large open spaces. SMSTs that are gateways to the countryside and to natural parks may have a significant competitive advantage compared to larger cities. As mentioned in the previous section, SMSTs are often the ‘nodes’ of cultural routes that run ‘off the beaten path’. Commonly, they offer the opportunity to merge cultural with outdoor tourism. For example, visitors to these places might be offered the opportunity to hike within a cultural and/or natural landscape.

Conclusion: towards a future research agenda for cultural tourism in SMSTs

Policymakers and other stakeholders increasingly present cultural tourism as a tool for generating local development and economic diversification in SMSTs, steering them away from economic stagnation (Richards and Duif, 2019). Such perceptions apply both to medium and small cities that

were formerly associated with manufacturing or primary-sector activities. Additionally, they relate to former mass tourism destinations that have entered a period of decline following a loss in their popularity. Last, SMSTs may represent the ideal context where tourists and local communities may more eagerly interact, providing a fruitful economic and cultural exchange, which maintains and renews local productive assets (Scherf, 2021).

In this chapter, we have clarified that the relationship between cultural tourism and SMSTs is complicated. To begin with, the definition of what cultural tourism entails is problematic, especially during times when the term has been broadened to encompass the notion of 'experience'. The embodied experience of 'the local' seems to be a specific successful key for cultural tourism (Russo and Richards, 2016b). Therefore, a future research agenda for cultural tourism in SMSTs may first include questions as to what meaningful and valuable uses of their (relational) 'smallness' SMSTs can develop specifically on the ground of tourism.

Some successful patterns – or best practices – for cultural tourism in SMSTs have emerged in the early 2000s based on the increasing role of the cultural and creative industries in the global economy, but these seem to be somewhat fragile and problematic if they are not 'territorialized'. Regional development policies promoted by transnational bodies, from the European Union to UNWTO, increasingly encourage cultural tourism in SMSTs by aiming to favour both knowledge transfer between tourism stakeholders in SMSTs and the promotion of less touristified cities and regions. However, the effectiveness of these policies cannot be taken for granted. A future research agenda should engage in 'testing' global policies on the ground of SMSTs. These policies often suggest cultural – and, increasingly, creative (Duxbury and Richards, 2019) – tourism as a tool for local development, but they still need to be tested through the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative analysis to show the long-term effectiveness of these policies. Is cultural and creative tourism enough to revive the economies of SMSTs? Are there any specific patterns through which SMSTs can develop long-term effectiveness of these policies? Are SMSTs more or less able to react to the deficiencies or the socially, culturally and economically deviant path that culture-led tourism development can bring along?

Poor planning, management and the common inability or lack of willingness to discuss cultural tourism within wider urban policies are also aspects that can eventually lead towards greater harm than good, especially in cases where severe overtourism is often the outcome as in the case of Český Krumlov. Considering this, the notion of 'carrying capacity' remains a valuable concept

for research on cultural tourism in SMSTs. However, applying capacity constraints to a destination might not go far enough when it comes to matters of sustainability. After all, while imposing an upper limit on visits may be desirable from an environmental standpoint, a limited number of rich and acculturated tourists may lead to extreme social inequities in a particular destination (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

The global pandemic highlighted the limits of tourism development given the sector's vulnerability to shocks. However, this global pandemic may possibly turn into a tourism opportunity for SMSTs, especially those that have not yet matured as destinations and do not suffer from overtourism. To this day, cultural tourism has mostly avoided peripheral regions and SMSTs that have only minimally been explored. Indeed, many such places can be transformed into proximity destinations, which are easily accessible to domestic tourists who are hesitant to travel abroad. While at the time of writing cultural/natural itineraries connecting peripheral areas are promoted as possible (post-) pandemic tourist destinations-to-be, little research exists demonstrating the success of such an approach. Considering that SMSTs are often included in these 'off-the-beaten-path' itineraries, a future research agenda could focus on SMSTs in the framework of (post-)pandemic tourism. In this regard, recent scholarship (Scherf, 2021) suggests that five interrelated circumstances may provide favourable conditions in enabling sustainable cultural development in smaller communities – and we suggest these may be extended to SMSTs. They are: (1) the host community recognizes and promotes its embedded sense of place, and is open to 'offer' it to visitors in a fruitful exchange; (2) cultural assets are determined collaboratively through community-led planning in line with sustainable development principles; (3) social and cultural networks band together to share resources, for co-promotion, but also to speak with a unified voice to policymakers, planners and funders; (4) collaboration doesn't only involve the host community stakeholders, but also takes place between tourists and locals, with visitors embodying the role of host community stakeholders; and (5) the presence of visitors with a new mindset. As Scherf (2021, p. 23) concludes, 'tucking into a local culture in this way as a visitor can only happen when the participative arena is manageable – or, put another way, when it is small'.

Last, we wish to highlight that our chapter results from thoughts and concepts which reveal a Western perspective (Winter, 2009). A future research agenda on SMSTs and cultural tourism that derives in parts of the world outside the Global North may bring to life diverse ways of understanding not only 'the smallness' of SMSTs in the context of tourism, but also notions of culture, cultural heritage and the tourist experience at large. It may also acknowledge

development patterns of SMSTs that have not yet been considered. Addressing the link between cultural tourism and SMSTs from a Global South perspective might offer a useful avenue of further research.

Suggestions for further reading

Russo, A.P. 2002. The 'vicious circle' of tourism development in heritage cities. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 29(1), 165–182.

This article specifically addresses middle-sized heritage cities, a specific kind of cultural tourism destination. A strong claim is made: 'tourism in heritage cities can prove to be unsustainable' (p. 166). Looking at the case of historic Venice, the author revisits the classic tourist destination lifecycle scheme providing a framework to analyse tourism dynamics in an evolutionary perspective. In doing so, and through a concrete case, it is shown how cultural tourism can 'eat SMSTs up' if not carefully managed within a larger urban policy and planning framework.

Russo, A.P. and Richards, G. eds. 2016. *Reinventing the local in tourism: producing, consuming and negotiating place*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Chapters in this edited collection investigate some of the forces that have led to new forms of host–guest interactions in various destinations. Contributors deal with issues like questioning what is actually perceived as 'local' in a particular destination, the role of peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (e.g., Airbnb) in reshaping tourist experiences and how, in some places, new products like street art tours create a new interpretation of what constitutes cultural tourism.

Scherf, K. 2021. *Creative tourism in smaller communities: place, culture and local representation*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

An edited collection of 11 chapters, this book provides updated case studies focusing on the recent shift from cultural to creative tourism. The shift is understood in the book not only in terms of 'object' – from museums to culinary arts or the film industry as an attraction – but also in terms of principles, and namely advocating for creative tourism to be based on collaborative, place-based models. The examples provided fall within most countries' definitions of small or at least medium-sized cities, but the specific conceptual focus is on 'small communities'.

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