

Article

New Opportunities for Cruise Tourism: The Case of Italian Historic Towns

Stefania Mangano * and Gian Marco Ugolini

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche—DISPO, Università degli Studi di Genova, 16126 Genova, Italy;
gianmarco.ugolini@unige.it

* Correspondence: stefania.mangano@unige.it; Tel.: +39-010-2095-1161

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Abstract: The cruise industry has grown worldwide in the last decades and, today, it is often associated with high levels of pollution and overtourism. This is especially true of areas where tourism cruises are a long-established sector, such as the Mediterranean and Italy in particular, where there is growing concern of the consequences of excessive pressure on popular tourist destinations. To reduce such side effects, it is necessary to develop new and sustainable tourism management policies. Our study explores the potential of the diversification of shore excursions offered by cruise lines to relieve pressure on popular destinations. As a case study, we focus on a subset of Italian villages that have received quality certifications (Bandiere arancioni and/or Borghi più belli d'Italia) because of their artistic, historical, cultural, and aesthetic values. Thanks to their proximity to major Italian ports, these villages offer opportunities for shore excursions alternative to some classic and very popular destinations such as Rome, Venice, Pisa, and Florence. The benefits of shore excursions to peripheral destinations are particularly relevant when visits include overnights.

Keywords: cruise ships; shore excursions; Italian historic towns; environmental pressure

1. Introduction

Cruise tourism is a growth sector around the world [1], and it is a particularly relevant theme in tourism studies. Previous research has focussed on quantitative aspects such as number of passengers, busiest ports, and economic return [2–9]. Scholars have looked at socioeconomic characteristics of passengers [10–12], reasons for travelling on a cruise ship [13,14], passengers' satisfaction linked with particular types of trips [15], and at residents' perception of cruise passengers [16–19], while very little has been written on shore activities offered to passengers by the cruise lines [20–22]. González-Relaño et al. [23] analysed the opportunities that passengers have to know and appreciate a certain area through shore activities directly offered by cruise lines: cruise ships should not be intended as floating hotels [24,25], but they can represent alternative means to discover new territories. González-Relaño et al. [23] demonstrated how a high number of shore excursions is not necessarily linked to a high number of destinations, with consequent significant pressure on the natural environment, for example, in some UNESCO heritage islands [26] as well as on the social context, the cases of Venice [27,28], Cadiz [29,30], and Udo (South Korea) [31] being particularly significant. Considering that “in the case of cruise tourism, some sustainable tourism concepts will be less exact and create trade-offs” [32], (p. 59), reducing pressure from shore excursions can represent a small step in order to reduce the invasiveness of this phenomenon. The case of Venice, for example “shows how cruise tourism is a complex issue in relation to the sustainability paradigm” [33], (p. 93). With the recent growth of the cruise industry, there is increasing need to respect and cooperate with places visited. By collaborating with local communities, the cruise industry is exploring new and alternative ways to manage visitors' flows and encourage responsible tourism [1].

Focussing on the case of Italy, the aim of this work is to analyse whether and how ship lines can integrate their shore excursions by including some lesser known destinations of cultural, environmental, and historical interest, such as small towns of historic interest with a quality certification (Bandiere arancioni and/or Borghi più belli d'Italia). In particular, the analysis focusses on highly touristic areas where the diversification of shore excursions can help in reducing pressure on some sites and contribute to develop the economy of marginal areas [34–36]. In addition, tourists who repeated the same cruise trip more than once would benefit from the opportunity to explore new places thanks to the identification of new shore excursions [37]. In many cases, excursions are focussed on well-known local attractions and contribute to the congestion and overcrowding of port cities and nearby historical cities [38]. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce pressure on these places. In fact, as argued by the Cruise Lines International Association “with increased demand and growth in the cruise industry comes responsibility to foster respect and cooperation with the places we visit. In collaboration with local communities, the cruise industry is exploring new and creative ways to manage the flow of visitors and implement the highest standards of responsible tourism” [1], (p. 9). In order to succeed, partnerships with local governments, staggered arrivals and departures, excursion diversification, shoreside power, and local passenger spending are all crucial elements [38]. In some cases, local tour operators have begun to offer new shore excursions, distributing visitors to secondary sites [38]. In this way, they expand the tourist hinterland, according to a phenomenon which Gui e Russo defined as cruise regionalisation [39]. They provide new opportunities to broaden the local visiting area to a regional level, not only helping to decongest the city centres but also promoting less-known tourist attractions [39]. Another element to consider is that the tourist hinterland is different in every port and that limited time is the most influential element regarding cruise passenger behaviour within a destination, acting as a restrictive factor for visiting the tourist hinterland [25,38,40–42].

Firstly, the paper analyses recent trends of the Italian cruise industry in order to identify the ports with the highest number of passengers as they are potentially those which mostly congest the most popular destinations. Secondly, shore excursions from ports with more than 300,000 handled passengers have been classified and quantified. For this work, we focussed on the main cruise lines operating in the Italian market: Costa Crociere, Royal Caribbean, and MSC. The analysis then focusses on Italian historic towns with a quality certification (Bandiere arancioni and/or Borghi più belli d'Italia). Due to their historical, cultural, and artistic heritage, these towns and villages are worth being included within the range of shore excursions offered to passengers. Alongside slow tourism (in particular, the walking paths) and food and wine, the enhancement of these destinations is one of the targets of the Piano Strategico del Turismo (Strategic Plan for Tourism) whose aim is to make Italian tourism more sustainable not only from an environmental but also from a social point of view. In order to do this, one aim is the economic development of inner areas, chronically affected by depopulation processes mainly due to lack of job opportunities [43].

2. Materials and Methods

The quantitative approach consists of the analysis of official data (Risposte turismo, Cruise Lines International Association) and in the elaboration of information from the webpages of Costa Crociere [44], Royal Caribbean [45], MSC Crociere [46], Bandiere arancioni [47] and Borghi più belli d'Italia [48]. Alongside official data from the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the data are collected in an integrated database which includes geographical information.

Official data allowed us to assess the position of the Italian cruise industry in the European market and to identify the Italian ports with more than 300,000 handled passengers in 2018. The analysis focussed on 11 ports (Bari, Cagliari, Civitavecchia, Genoa, La Spezia, Livorno, Messina, Naples, Palermo, Savona, Venice). Information on shore excursions in 2016/17 in the above ports has been obtained from the Costa Crociere, MSC, and Royal Caribbean Cruises webpages. Shore excursions have been classified based on destination, type of activity, and recurrence of certain localities. The quantified and qualified offer is indicative, as these cruise lines represent ca. 80% of the Italian cruise industry [49].

Data from the Bandiere arancioni and/or the Borghi più belli websites have been codified and inserted in the database, including information on their time distances from the 11 ports. The analysis on time distances has been carried out by using Google Maps, which allowed us to identify places of interest located less than a 90 min drive from one of the 11 ports in normal traffic conditions. These are 95 municipalities in total, as illustrated in Table 1. The time range choice considers the realistic possibility of reaching such destinations in a day trip. Although these trips have an impact in terms of pollution, they can reduce pressure on popular overcrowded destinations and contribute to open up new tourism market opportunities for lesser known destinations.

Table 1. Regional distribution of places with one quality certification and less than a 90 min drive from one of the 11 ports.

Region	Municipalities with Villages Which Have Obtained a Quality Certification
Campania	Atrani; Cerreto Sannita; Conca dei Marini; Furore; Montesarchio; Nusco; Sant'Agata de' Goti; Vietri sul Mare
Lazio	Acquapendente; Bagnoregio; Bolsena; Bomarzo; Calcata; Caprarola; Castel Gandolfo; Magliano Sabina; Nemi; Sutri; Trevignano Romano; Tuscania; Vitorchiano
Liguria	Airole; Ameglia; Apricale; Borgio Verezzi; Brugnato; Campo Ligure; Castelbianco; Castelnuovo Magra; Castelvechio di Rocca Barbena; Cervo; Finale Ligure; Framura; Laigueglia; Lerici; Millesimo; Moneglia; Noli; Pignone; Sassello; Seborga; Toirano; Varese Ligure; Vernazza; Zuccarello
Apulia	Alberobello; Cisternino; Locorotondo
Sardinia	Carloforte; Laconi; Sardara
Sicily	Castelmola; Castiglione di Sicilia; Castoreale; Cefalù; Erice; Montalbano Elicona; Novara di Sicilia; Petralia Soprana; Petralia Sottana; Salemi; Sambuca di Sicilia; San Marco d'Alunzio; Savoca
Toscana	Barberino Val d'Elsa; Barga; Casale Marittimo; Castelnuovo di Val di Cecina; Certaldo; Coreglia Antelminelli; Fosdinovo; Isola del Giglio; Manciano; Massa Marittima; Monte Argentario; Montecarlo; Montescudaio; Peccioli; Pescia; Pitigliano; Pomarance; San Gimignano; Sorano; Suvereto; Vinci; Volterra
Veneto	Arquà Petrarca; Asolo; Cison di Valmarino; Follina; Marostica; Mel; Montagnana; Portobuffolè; Soave; Valeggio sul Mincio

For this initial study we focussed on locations in the same regions as, and less than a 90 min drive from the 11 analysed ports. We excluded other historic villages in internal regions, regardless of their distance from the 11 analysed ports. We focussed on Venice because it is greatly subject to pressure due to both cruise ships and, more generally, to chronic overtourism. Drawing upon this methodological approach, further analysis will include other municipalities in all the Italian regions, but similar studies can also involve other areas in Europe and around the world.

3. Results

3.1. Trends and Characteristics of the Cruise Industry

Often, the cruise industry is either positively or negatively influenced by external factors such as the economic and geopolitical context but also fashions and trends. At present, there are several criticalities for the development and consolidation of this sector; however, in recent times, the cruise industry has grown considerably worldwide, becoming a real global phenomenon characterised both in terms of offerings and of demand by a geographical context which covers all the continents [50]. At global level, the constant growth of the cruise industry in terms of increased passengers and dockings also depends on the introduction of new ships with growing carrying capacity and high levels of occupation, which contribute averagely to positive variations. However, the cruise industry

in the Mediterranean shows a slight contraction compared to Asia and the Caribbean, although the number of available daily beds in 2018 reached 28 million, one million more than the previous year [1].

In general, trends in the Italian cruise industry are strictly related to the overall situation in the Mediterranean basin [51]: the establishment of international cruise ship areas involves more than a country and often performances of different areas are linked to each other. The decrease of transits and passengers of a certain country is often absorbed by the increase of another country's performance: the attractiveness of a country is not only given to its tourist development, but also to the economic competitiveness of its ports and to the security perception by passengers in a world characterised by high levels of unsafety due to wars, terrorism, etc.

The cruise traffic in the first 10 ports of the Mediterranean in 2018 registered 14 million passengers and more than 4600 dockings, confirming Italy's leadership with 6 ports (with Civitavecchia ranking 2nd and Venice, Naples, Genoa, Savona, and Livorno respectively 5th, 6th, 7th, 9th, and 10th). In the same year, the Italian cruise traffic reached 11 million handled passengers with more than 4600 dockings, showing increasing values compared to the previous year, respectively of +9.7% passengers and +0.5% dockings. In 2017 the number of passengers and ports of call decreased respectively by 8.2% and 7.1% compared to 2016.

In 2018, 58 Italian ports were interested by cruise traffic and every maritime region of Italy had at least one port involved, except for Basilicata and Molise. There are 11 ports with an overall number of handled passengers (sailings/landings and transits) over 300,000 units (Figure 1) corresponding to more than 90% or the national passenger traffic and 70% of the ports of call [51]; therefore, the average number of passengers for each of the 11 ports of call (3.104) is significantly higher than that of other ports (727).

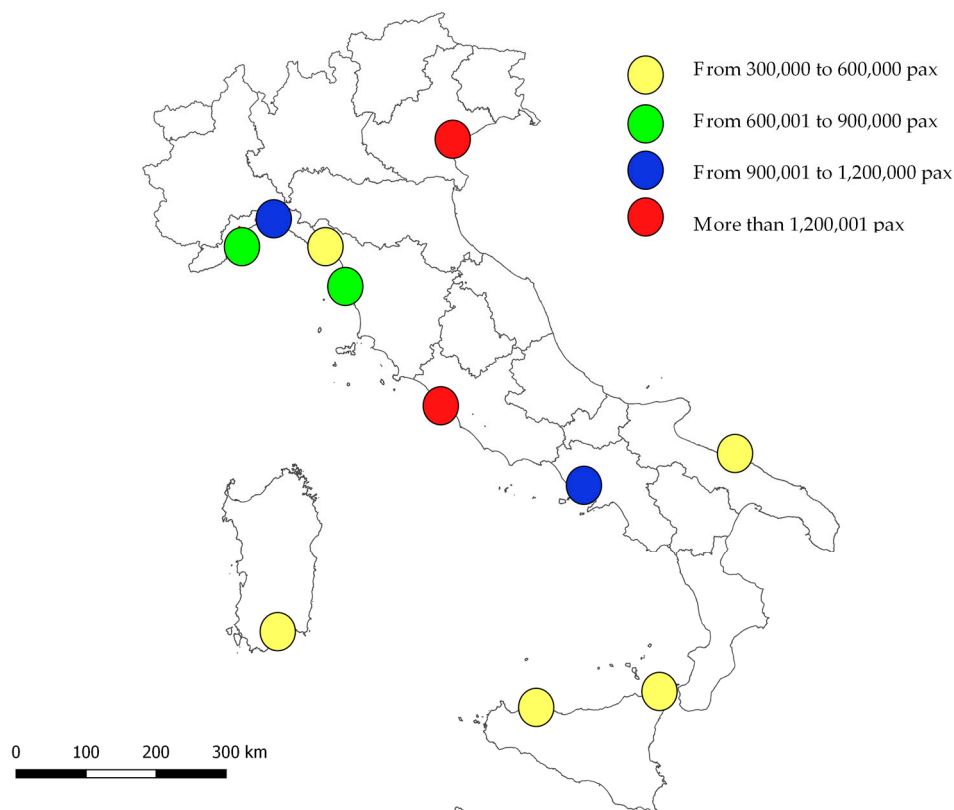


Figure 1. The 11 Italian ports with more than 300,000 handled passengers.

The data are particularly interesting as they show the pressure that ship landings have on the most popular destinations. In this sense, the ports of Liguria, particularly Savona, are the ones that can theoretically generate larger pressure on the most popular places of interest. Typically, shore excursions

result in the concentration of a high number of visitors over a short time (between 4–8 h) in certain destinations, most of which are already affected by high tourist pressure.

More than 50% of handled passengers involve 4 ports: Civitavecchia, Naples, Venice, and Genoa (37.6% of the ports of call altogether). The data suggests a certain predominance of the Tyrrhenian coast with 9 out of 11 ports, while in the Adriatic coast, only Venice and Bari handled more than 300,000 passengers in 2018 (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of handled passengers and calls in the Italian ports with more than 300,000 passengers in 2018.

Ports	Handled Passengers		Calls		Average Value by Call
	a.v.	%	a.v.	%	
Civitavecchia	2,441,737	22.0	760	16.3	3213
Venice	1,560,579	14.0	502	10.8	3109
Naples	1,068,797	9.6	379	8.1	2820
Genoa	1,011,398	9.1	229	4.9	4417
Savona	848,487	7.6	195	4.2	4351
Livorno	786,136	7.1	354	7.6	2221
Palermo	577,934	5.2	172	3.7	3360
Bari	572,906	5.2	213	4.6	2690
La Spezia	448,204	4.0	129	2.8	3474
Cagliari	394,697	3.6	143	3.1	2760
Messina	372,365	3.4	172	3.7	2165
Total ports with more than 300,000 passengers	10,083,240	90.8	3248	69.7	3104
Other ports	1,024,673	9.2	1410	30.3	727
Total Italian ports	11,107,913	100.0	4658	100.0	2385

3.2. The Shore Excursions of the Main Cruise Lines in Italy

Cruises consist of a diversified offer, primarily based on the route [52] but also on excursions that are possible from both home ports and ports of call [53]. In general, shore excursions offered by cruise lines mainly involve destinations close to the port of call or in the immediate surroundings.

The shore excursion offer for the 11 Italian ports (Table 2) has been elaborated from a previous study which looked at the online catalogues of Royal Caribbean, Costa Crociere, and MSC for 2016/17 and selected the ports which handled at least 300,000 passengers. The total amount of excursions considered is 284, with Royal Caribbean being the company with the largest number of offerings (39.3% of the total), followed by Costa Crociere (36.1%) and MSC (24.6%). In terms of localities, those explicitly named are 49, while in other cases, more general definitions not related to any specific destination are used: this is the case for Cinque Terre (6), Tuscany (5), Etna and Sardinia (4), Vesuvio (3), and Liguria/Tuscany (2). We did not consider excursions to the Principality of Monaco from the port of Savona (2 in total) as this is an extra Italian destination. The shore excursions have been categorised based on the type of activities summarised in the following classification [23].

- Panoramic: A type of shore excursions aimed at showing the different features of a city with no specific focus and where the cultural aspect is not a priority. Offered in all 11 ports.
- Culinary: Implies the tasting of typical Italian products (pasta, cheeses, wines, liquors), sometimes with the direct involvement of tourists in the practical making of the products. Offered in all 11 ports.
- Active: Cultural and/or sport activities where passengers are involved in hiking and cycling tours in natural environments and historical centres. Offered in all 11 ports.
- Cultural: Traditional cultural visits to monuments, archaeological sites, museums, churches/sanctuaries, etc. Offered in 10 out of 11 ports (except for Genoa).

- Cultural/panoramic: Coach tours with short stops aimed at providing an overview of the main points of interest. Offered in 8 out of 11 ports (except for Bari, Palermo, and Savona).
- Panoramic/active: These excursions offer overviews of the main points of interest, but unlike the previous case, they entail the use of particular means of transport such as jeeps, gondolas, and ferries. Offered in 8 out of 11 ports (except for Bari, Palermo, and Savona).
- Shopping: These mainly consist of trips to shopping malls and outlets and they are not explicitly linked to the purchase of local products. Only offered in 5 ports (Civitavecchia, La Spezia, Naples, Savona, and Venice).

Despite this large variety of options, the number of destinations is significantly smaller. Figure 2 shows the excursions distribution by municipality, underlying how some destinations are characterised by a high number of excursions (more than 15): these are Rome (37), Venice (32), Florence (29), Pisa (22), and Genoa (16). Other destinations with a high concentration of excursions are Cagliari (13); Naples, Capri, and Taormina (9 each); and Palermo (8). Destinations with a number of excursions, between 4 and 6, are mainly located in the South and Islands with the exception of the Ligurian municipalities of Portofino and La Spezia with respectively 5 and 4. Destinations with smaller numbers (up to 3) are mainly located in Apulia, Sicily, and Sardinia.

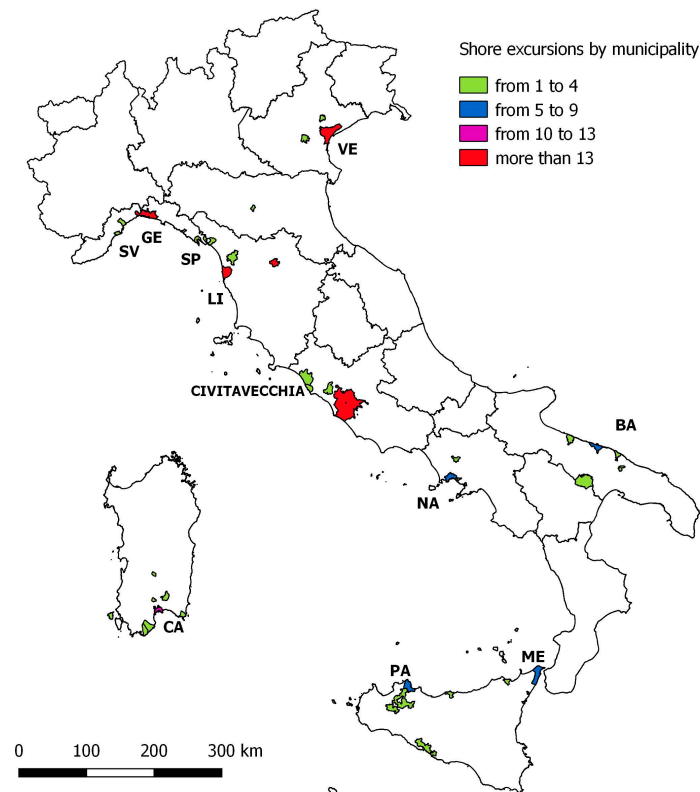


Figure 2. Shore excursions distribution by municipality.

Venice is the destination of almost all the excursions starting from its port, while Rome is by far the most common destination from the port Civitavecchia, which has been defined as the large port of the capital city [24]. Florence and Pisa are reached from La Spezia and Livorno, while Genoa is also a destination of excursions starting from the Savona port.

The uneven distribution of excursions in some Italian ports raises questions about their sustainability, particularly in the long term. Is an overall offer of 49 destinations, including some of the most visited sites in the country, still a winning policy? What would be the alternatives? The following paragraph assesses the opportunity provided by Italian villages indicated by the Italian

Strategic Plan for Tourism 2017/22 as strategic destinations at which to diversify and broaden the national tourism offer by enhancing an immense historical–cultural patrimony, today, only partly known to a public niche. In recent times, there has been a shift in the concept and management model of cruises. Ship companies have diversified shore excursions and the various types of cruise trips are being increasingly associated to the services they offer. Operators have greater bargaining power on the potential options offered by the territory, attracting and introducing users to new places and experiences that make their trip unique and unforgettable [54].

This operation would relieve pressure on large centres of Italian cultural tourism such as Venice, Pisa, Florence, and Rome by encouraging those who have already visited these destinations once or more times to explore other areas. In order to do so, the development of specific sustainable tourism policies appears of crucial importance.

3.3. Pressure Distribution Strategies: The Case of Italian Villages

The *Bandiere arancioni* is an initiative established in 1998 from the collaboration between Touring Club Italiano (TCI) and Assessorato al Turismo of Liguria Region following a broad reflection on how to stimulate, involve, and promote internal areas [55]. It represents a first step towards the inclusion of small, marginal places in national tourism development policies. It is a quality label based on the voluntary candidacy of towns and villages (the so-called *borghi*) characterised by valuable cultural and artistic heritage. In addition, applicants have to meet the following requirements: (1) the town has to be included in a municipality of the inland area with no coastal stretches; (2) the population should not exceed 15,000 inhabitants. Municipalities can apply either on their own or through projects involving other associations or institutions such as Regions, the Local Action Group and Mountain Communities [47]. It is important that candidates: -have well-organised tourist structures; -enhance their identity and specificity; -offer accessible cultural, artistic, and architectural resources; -adopt sustainable policies (green energy, recycling waste, community buying groups); -have a well-conserved and unaltered historical centre; -do not have potential threats to the landscape integrity [34,55–58].

In 2001, the Consulta del Turismo of the Associazione dei Comuni Italiani (ANCI) promoted the *Borghi più belli d'Italia*. The initiative was aimed at enhancing the great patrimony of history, art, culture, environment, and culture of small Italian centres which are largely neglected by tourists and visitors [50]; in addition, the *Borghi più belli d'Italia* project aims at reducing depopulation and increases job occupation in economically depressed areas. Even in this case, applications are on a voluntary basis, provided that the population does not exceed 2000 inhabitants in the historic town and 15,000 in the whole municipality and that the presence of valuable architectural and natural elements is certified by documents held at the Council and/or Soprintendenze Archeologiche, Belle Arti e Paesaggio: these are peripheral agencies of the Ministry of Heritage and Cultural Activities in charge of identifying, studying, and protecting landscape and heritage assets, projecting their management, coordinating their restoration and, if needed, their removal and exportation. They also enhance and promote heritage through cultural activities for the public. In addition, historical buildings in the urban area have to prevail and create an aesthetically homogeneous landscape with high urban and architectural quality.

In both cases, the awarded municipalities can be subject to unannounced controls to verify that they still meet the due requirements. The certificate acquisition does not have to be considered as an achieved goal but, rather, as the beginning of a process [34]. The achievement and maintenance of the title are of crucial importance as this label has a strategic role in the negotiation process between local actors and international tour operators, cruise companies, and other organisations and agencies which acknowledge the award as a quality label of a territory.

These certificates have to be interpreted as tools that allow minor centres to establish an additional offer to that of more developed tourism systems by contributing to the creation of an integrated product, marked diversification, and tourist seasonal adjustment [56].

The Italian Strategic Plan for Tourism 2017/22 stressed the importance of a diversification in the tourism offer by encouraging the enhancement and conservation of historical villages, pathways, and slow tourism in general, elaborating tourism implementation plans based on shared and participatory actions and practices discussed and developed in online platforms, meetings of the Permanent Tourism Committee, interministerial tables, and focus groups with stakeholders.

In this context, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism declared 2016 as the Year of the Borghi [59], an initiative aimed at enhancing the artistic, cultural, natural, and human patrimony of places that can significantly contribute to the tourism development of the whole country [43]. Following this, the General Direction of Tourism of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism promoted further projects such as an atlas of Italian touristic towns and villages as well as active collaboration between *borghi*-related tourism offer and other cultural–touristic institutions (UNESCO sites, protected areas) through slow mobility infrastructures (pathways, cycling routes, historical railways). Costa Crociere and Trenitalia, alongside the Club dei Borghi più belli d’Italia, promoted an initiative called “I Borghi, patrimonio da scoprire e valorizzare” (The *borghi*, a patrimony to discover and enhance). This initiative intends to share part of the historical–cultural and artistic patrimony not included within the offer of cruise lines amongst a wider national and international public. This is a pilot project which entails the creation of walking tours with the active involvement of local communities, aimed at promoting not only the artistic and environmental patrimony, but also local craftsmanship and food and wine. The idea behind the project is well summarised by the president of the Borghi più belli d’Italia association Fiorello Primi: this is a great occasion for our *borghi* to show their attractiveness to an international public, narrate their history and traditions, and make them discover the art of “well living” and the most authentic Italianness that they represent [60]. Projects like this are important not only for the tourists, but also for the potential input to the economy of less-known destinations that contribute to the uniqueness of the touristic and cultural offerings of the Belpaese. The offerings of Costa Crociere range from classic destinations such as Rome, Naples, Florence, and Venice to alternative proposals linked not only to tangible but also to intangible cultural heritage through the promotion of craftsmanship and food and wine. However, these initiatives only involve a limited number of places, 10 in total, all in the list of the Borghi più belli d’Italia (Seborga and Montemarcello in Liguria; Arquà Petrarca in Veneto; Civita di Bagnoregio in Lazio; Locorotondo in Puglia; Castiglione di Sicilia, Montalbano Elicona and Salemi in Sicilia; Atrani in Campania), except for Orvieto in Umbria, identified in 2016 as most beautiful village of Italy by the web community of PaesiOnline [61]. Their selection was based on proximity with the Costa ports of call, accessibility, and reception capacity, in addition to the uniqueness of the experience.

In the case of Trenitalia, the historical centre of the 25 selected towns and villages had to be within walking distance from the station (less than 1.5–2 km). The villages are Bard, Valle D’Aosta; Mombaldone, Orta San Giulio, Vogogna, Piemonte; Moneglia, Finalborgo, Laigueglia, Borgo Verezzi, Campo Ligure, Vernazza in Liguria; Chiusa, Egna, Vipiteno in Trentino; Montagnana in Veneto; Venzone in Friuli Venezia Giulia; Brisighella in Emilia Romagna; Buonconvento in Toscana; Grottammare nelle Marche; Castiglione Del Lago, Spello, Passignano Sul Trasimeno in Umbria; Tagliacozzo in Abruzzo; Vietri Sul Mare in Campania; Chianalea in Calabria; Cefalù in Sicilia. Out of a total of 262 Borghi più Belli in 2018, 34 were included in the two projects (one is promoted in both of them), while in the same year, 227 *borghi* had the Bandiera arancione certification (Figure 3). In total, the Italian towns with at least one certification were 416. In fact, there are 72 villages included in the two lists: 10 in Marche; 8 in Emilia Romagna, Toscana, and Umbria; 6 in Liguria and Puglia; 5 in Calabria, Lombardia, and Piemonte; 4 in Veneto; 2 in Trentino Alto Adige; and 1 in Abruzzo, Basilicata, Lazio, Molise, and Valle d’Aosta. In terms of geographical concentration of the awards, central Italy has the greatest number of towns and villages, while both the western and eastern coast (particularly in northeast Italy) have a low number of borghi. This can be explained by the fact that only towns and villages located in the hinterland can be awarded a Bandiera arancione, and that coastal areas, where tourism is more developed, are less in need of further visibility and of enriching their offerings.

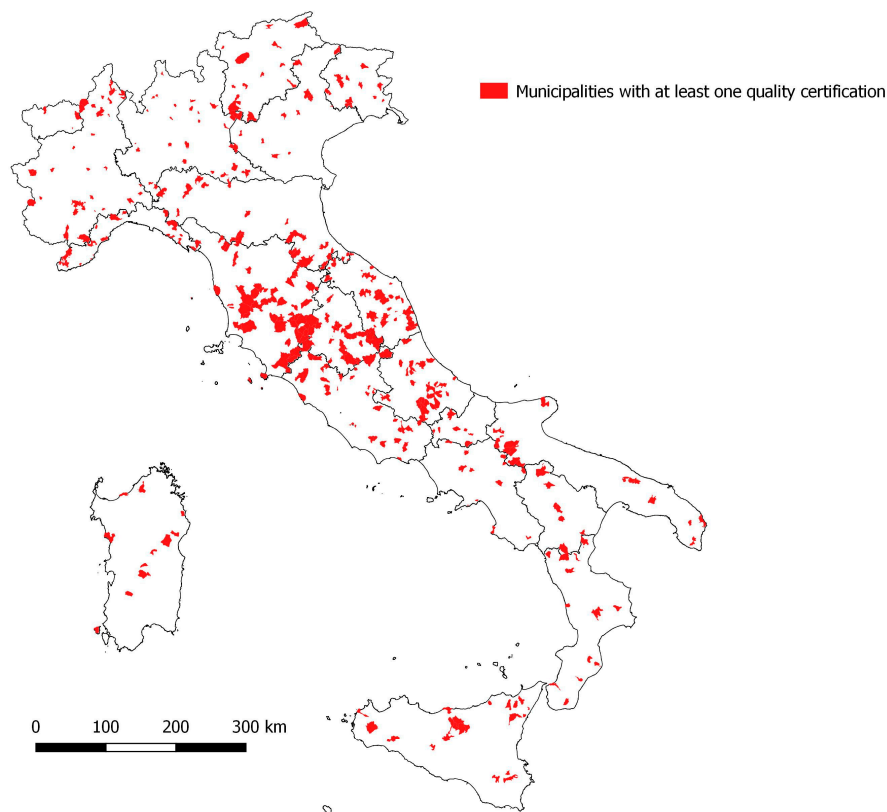


Figure 3. Italian municipalities with at least one quality certification.

In the age of experiential tourism, a visit to these villages can offer a unique experience which makes the entire holiday unforgettable, contributing to relieving pressure on crowded tourist destinations in favour of less-frequented areas, especially during the week. This process would be beneficial for the local economy, contrasting demographic depopulation and ageing, thanks to new job opportunities.

A cruise trip needs to be something more than a standard holiday on a ship involving stops at some ports without acknowledging the territorial diversity in terms of format, style of reception, areas of navigation and itineraries, shore excursions, length, fares, onboard entertainment, etc. [50]. Instead, it can be an opportunity to discover lesser known areas, cultures, and local identities as suggestions that are as interesting as the more famous and traditional destinations.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In general, shore excursions take place in very famous destinations near docking ports: this is the case of the ports of Venice and Genoa, where most of the excursions take place in the historical centres of the two cities. In other cases, the offer includes consolidated tourist destinations at some distance from the port: for example, most of the shore excursions from Civitavecchia take to Rome and in many cases passengers from La Spezia go to Florence. This type of very short excursion does not allow that deep and intimate connection between visitors and the territory that makes a tourist experience unique and environmentally sustainable. Very often, cruise passengers contribute to the saturation of areas already subject to huge anthropic and environmental pressure, such as the Cinque Terre, Liguria, or classic destinations of cultural tourism which would benefit from tourist dispersal policies.

One possibility discussed here is the involvement of alternative destinations such as historic towns and villages (the *borghi*) which have obtained a quality certification due to their historical, cultural and natural patrimony. The cases discussed above demonstrate how currently shore excursions take place even in moderately distant destinations. For this analysis, we selected towns and villages with at least one quality certification and less than a 90 min drive from one or more of the 11 ports with

more than 300,000 handled passengers in 2018. This is a purely experimental operation which only involves locations in the same regions as the 11 analysed ports. However, it is possible to extend this work to other regions with places that meet the criteria of distance and quality discussed above. In total, 95 destinations were selected: in terms of kilometers, they range from 140 km between Valleggio sul Mincio and Venice to less than 10 km between Lerici and La Spezia. Ports with the highest number of potential destinations are Civitavecchia (17), Livorno (16) and Savona (14), followed by Venice and La Spezia (10), Naples (8), Palermo (7), Messina (6), Bari and Cagliari (3), and Genoa (1) (Table 1). Only for the case of Civitavecchia, in Lazio, some villages located in southern Tuscany have been considered, since Civitavecchia, despite being in another region, is the closest port to these destinations (Figure 4).

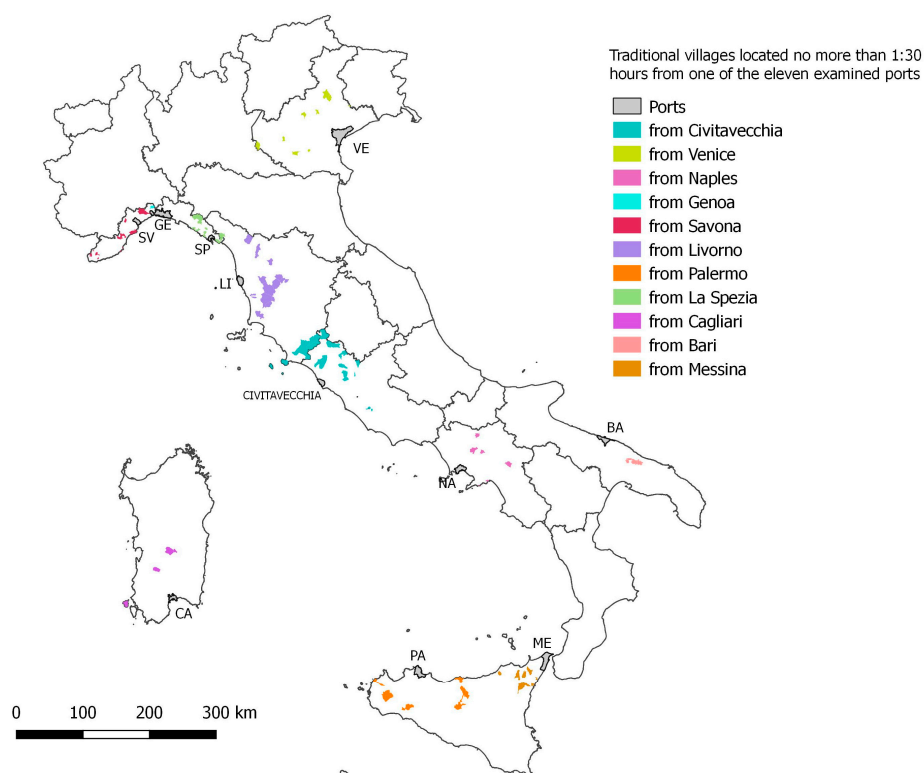


Figure 4. Municipalities with historic villages which obtained one quality certification and less than 90 min drive from one of the 11 examined ports.

The results are partly conditioned by the number of villages placed within the regions where the ports are located (Figure 5): almost 20% of the villages are in Tuscany and Lazio overall (respectively 47 and 35), while 7.2% are in Liguria (30), mainly in the provinces of Imperia, Savona, and La Spezia. Venice (80%), Palermo and Messina (65%), and Naples (57%) have a very high incidence out of the total of their regions. Bari and Cagliari instead have a very low incidence, with values around 18% and 27%.

The case of Venice is a remarkable one. As already underlined, the *Serenissima* is the destination for almost all the shore excursions from its port (except for 2), and it is greatly subject to pressure due to both cruise ships and, more generally, to chronic overtourism [26].

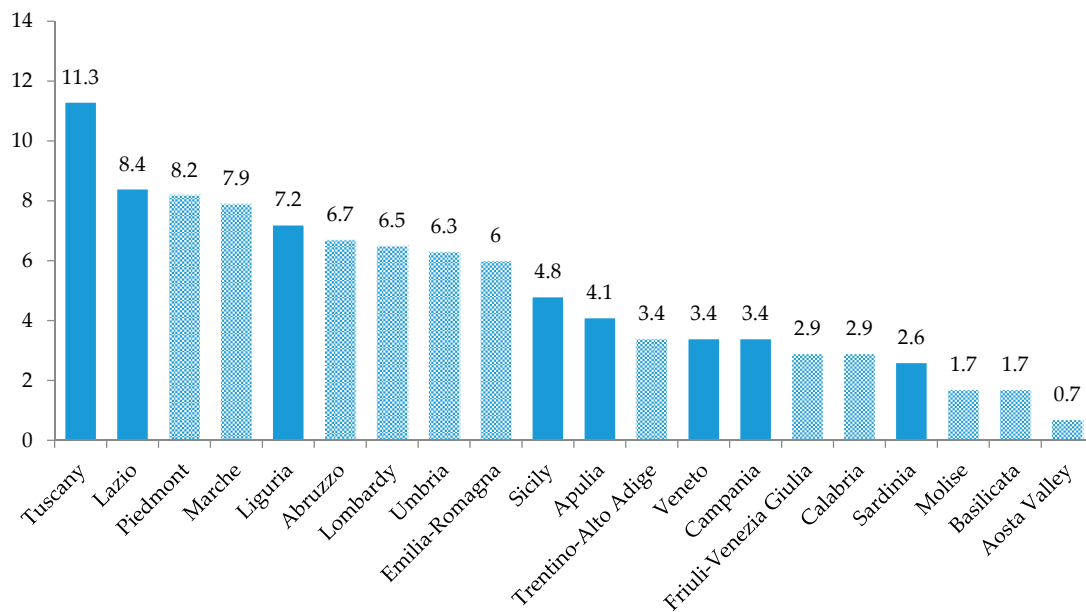


Figure 5. Regional distribution of villages with at least one certification (%): blue colour shows the regions with at least one port with more than 300,000 handled passengers.

For this and other cases, it is crucial to encourage cruise passengers to explore alternative destinations; this idea applies particularly to passengers who repeat the same trip more than once, whose numbers are increasing [37]. For Venice, potential new destinations are Padua and Verona, but many other small towns might offer sustainable alternatives in terms of enhancement of local production and, more generally, a unique and undiscovered historical, architectural, and artistic patrimony. In addition, Venice is often a port of call, and many passengers stay in the city some days before embarking or at the end of the trip, with the possibility of visiting other cities and villages in the surroundings.

As shown in Figure 6, there are 10 places less than a 90 min drive from Venice. Their territorial distribution allows us to design excursions which include up to 3–4 destinations, depending on the chosen localities and the excursions length.

Once times and distances have been defined and potential places identified, the first step in the project would entail the assessment and testing of a pilot itinerary by taking into account the needs of various stakeholders involved in the process, in particular:

- Terminal managers
- Ship lines
- Local administrators
- Port authorities
- Tourists
- Local population

Different targeted approaches for the various stakeholders would involve in-depth interviews and focus groups for the first four actors, while surveys would be used for tourists and the local population. Therefore, it is important to undertake participative and bottom-up processes in order to involve as many categories as possible, particularly those representing the local population, not only citizens but also stakeholder representatives in order to develop a quality and sustainable offer. In order to be successful, this operation needs to be well received from a social, environmental, and economic point of view, and its positive feedbacks have to be monitored in the medium–long term.



Figure 6. Villages with at least one of the two certifications within one hour and a half from Venice port.

The proposed project is in line with the current Italian Strategic Plan for Tourism and can potentially be applied to other countries where, like in Italy, there is increasing tourist pressure due to the cruise ship industry. In this sense, cruise lines would benefit from a broader range of options to include in their shore excursions. This would relieve pressure on destinations affected by overtourism and could contribute to the social and economic sustainability of underdeveloped and marginal areas. A short visit to less-known areas might stimulate tourists to undertake further, longer, and more sustainable trips which would allow a deeper connection and understanding of a place's essence and nature. In recent years, an increasing number of passengers have taken advantage of cruises as a way to discover parts of the world which are worth of being explored and appreciated in a deeper way. A lesser known excursion destination can benefit from significant visitor flows as, through word-of-mouth, it can attract a higher number of people in the long term [15,22,40].

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