Back to the Roots: A Form of Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract. Roots tourism, a phenomenon that involves emigrants and their descendants returning to their lands of origin, is characterized by a high level of emotional involvement and a strong connection to family memory and local culture. Although often defined as "ancestral" or "nostalgic" tourism, roots tourism goes beyond a simple tourist visit: it is an inner journey, where places become symbols of belonging and identity. In Italy, this phenomenon is gaining attention through initiatives that promote the return of emigrants' descendants to their homeland. Italian communities around the world, especially in countries like Brazil, Argentina, and United States, are numerous and highly educated, and the desire to rediscover cultural roots is becoming increasingly widespread.

Roots tourism not only enhances the value of places of origin but also offers opportunities for economic growth in lesser-known regions, providing new avenues for development and revitalizing communities.

This type of tourism stands out for its emotional and cultural potential, as the traveler is not just a tourist but a member of a community seeking to re-establish a deep connection with their past, passed down by grandparents and parents. It is a phenomenon that touches on identity and memory and can therefore be considered a powerful tool for revitalizing marginal areas and fostering a renewed sense of belonging.

Keywords: Emigration · Roots tourism · Sustainable tourism

1 Tourism and Emigration

In 1994, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined tourism as "the activities of people traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for a total period not exceeding one consecutive year, for leisure, business, or other purposes not related to the exercise of a remunerated activity within the visited environment." Based on this definition, various types of tourism can be distinguished: religious, cultural, ecological, sports, and roots tourism. Therefore, we can say that one of the key factors in tourism is the ability of places to attract travelers who generate tourism.

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It is interesting to note that all forms of tourism involve the movement of a person for a certain period of time to a place different from their usual residence. In fact, what changes from one type of tourism to another are the reasons and activities involved. Consequently, to define roots tourism, it is necessary to consider the reasons and activities that drive the roots traveler and that, as we will see, lead them to visit lesser-known places that are more connected to identity and a sense of belonging than to traditional tourism.

Decision-making processes, although based on reasoning, are influenced by various factors such as context and emotions [1]. It is the context that generates emotions and drives "roots tourists" to reach remote and less attractive places, yet these places provide psychological well-being and a sense of inner peace. Conversely, we can also say that emotions, anticipation, memories, and stories give context and places a special significance. They transform them into sources of emotion and infuse them with a "touristic" appeal that would otherwise be unexpected. The phenomenon of roots tourism is, in fact, than any other deeply tied to the individual and to personal memories. It is a form of tourism that highlights the primacy of the person and the human dimension because it allows travelers to discover something that intimately belongs to them: family memory and roots.

Therefore, roots tourism can be a valuable tool for promoting and enhancing a territory among its communities living abroad. After all, returning to one's homeland has always been a recurring phenomenon in the history of migration. However, only recently it has been recognized as a distinct tourism experience, worthy of being valued and encouraged. In recent times, this phenomenon has been gaining traction in Italy, while some countries, especially Israel but also Ireland, Scotland, and Albania, have long been investing in the promotion of their land and culture among their diasporic communities. They have adopted a targeted strategy by organizing a series of events aimed at their expatriated descendants in the areas most affected by emigration. This is the case, for example, of the project launched by Ireland in 2013, "*The Gathering Ireland*", which established a series of events aimed at promoting Irish culture among potential visitors of Irish descent living abroad. It is estimated that there are 70 million people of Irish origin worldwide, with 40 million residing in the United States.

The objectives of the project included:

1. increasing tourism by attracting more visitors from overseas;
2. creating lasting connections with the Irish diaspora around the world;
3. spreading Irish pride and promoting the country's image and reputation abroad.

The project led to a rise in tourism revenues and contributed to job growth in the sector [2].

Following the strategy adopted by the aforementioned diasporic communities, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) declared 2024 as the Year of Italian Roots Worldwide [3, 4]. Among the initiatives that embraced this call from MAECI, special mention should be made of the *Piccolo Festival delle Spartenze. Migrazioni e Cultura*, one of the best practices active in the national territory for almost 10 years. Launched in 2016, the Festival began in Calabria, one of the Italian regions most affected by emigration, and in one of the villages most impacted by the phenomenon of abandonment (Paludi). The event aims to serve as a catalyst, capable of revitalizing and promoting a village and its surrounding area; it seeks to attract members

of the diaspora back to the land of their ancestors, fostering and strengthening roots tourism. In summary, the event aims to heal the cultural and "sentimental" rift between those who left and those who stayed behind, waiting for the return of their children to their homeland.

Dedicate an itinerant festival to migrations is a strategic and priority choice, as in Italy's history over the past two centuries, there has not been such a persistent, pervasive, and, in some aspects, paradoxical phenomenon as migratory movements. Just consider that, since 1876, more than 30 million Italians have left Italy [5–7] (Fig. 1), and the number of Italian descendants scattered around the world now exceeds 80 million.



Fig. 1. Italians waiting to be admitted to the Ellis Island processing center, New York 1910 [Fonte: Everett Collection/Shutterstock]

In this regard, MAECI states that "Roots Tourism potentially involves an estimated pool of between 60 and 80 million descendants of Italian emigrants worldwide, most of whom reside in the Americas, South Africa, Australia, and European countries" [8]. In addition to recently becoming a "land of immigrants," Italy continues to be a "land of emigrants": since 2020, Italy has seen a decrease of about 652,000 residents; during the same period, however, the number of people choosing to live outside national borders has continued to grow (+11.8%). Today, the community of Italians residing abroad, according to data provided by the Registry of Italians Living Abroad (AIRE) of the MAECI, stands at 6.134 million people, mostly young individuals between the ages of 18 and 34 [9].

Of these, 54.2% are in Europe, 40.6% in the Americas (over 2.4 million, of which 2 million are in Central and South America), 2.7% in Oceania, 1.3% in Asia, and 1.1% in Africa [7] (Fig. 2).

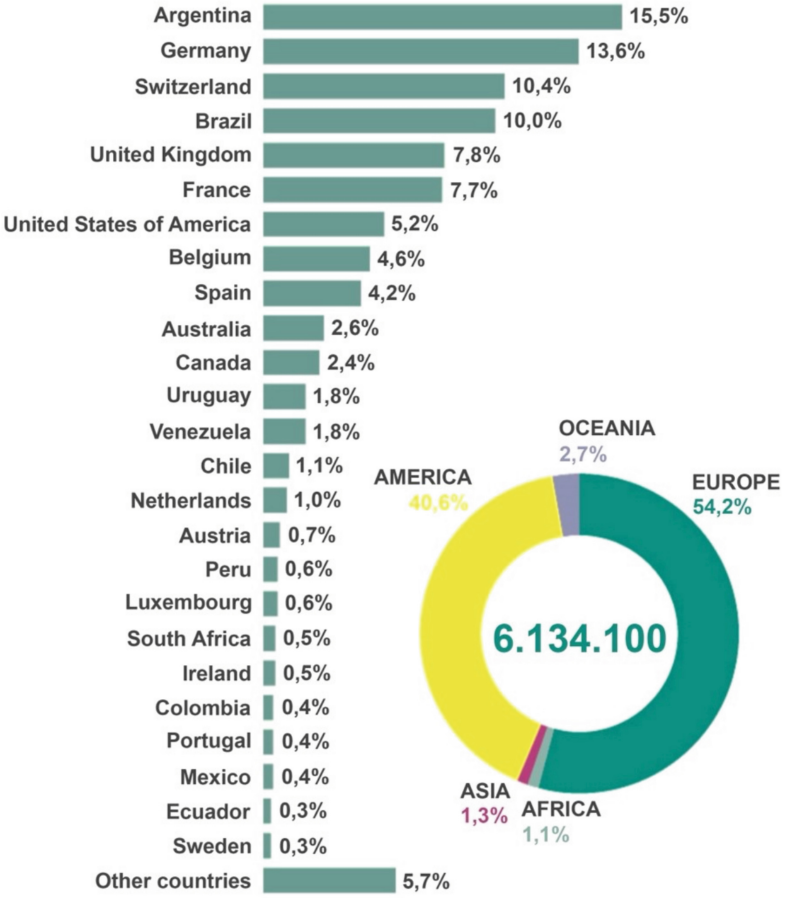

Fig. 2. Destination of residence [Source: Licata, 2024].

In conclusion, the community of Italian citizens officially registered with AIRE has surpassed the population of foreigners regularly residing in the country [10].

2 Roots Tourism

Roots tourism refers to the journey made by migrants or their descendants who return to their land of origin for vacation [11]. However, the phenomenon does not have a single, definitive name. Over the years, it has also been referred to as tourism of origins or return tourism, ancestral or genealogical tourism, diaspora or memory tourism, and nostalgic or sentimental tourism [12]. Definitions that all appear in some way incomplete, "since none manages to encompass all the implications of an experience that is not just about moving through space but is also and above all an inner journey" [13], a movement within oneself.

Among the definitions listed above, the one that most closely defines the phenomenon in question is "roots tourism," a definition that most emphasizes the high emotional involvement that a journey in search of oneself and one's family history entails.

More than tourism, these are characteristics that bring the roots journey closer to a pilgrim's path. And precisely because the emotional involvement is so intense, "the word 'tourism' should be used with caution when referring to the returns of our emigrants and their children to the land of origin." The definitions "roots tourism" and "roots journey," while indicating the same phenomenon, have meanings and semantic fields that only partially overlap: the two terms evoke different imaginations, describe the phenomenon in different ways, and highlight distinct aspects. In this sense, the term "journey" should be preferred over the term "tourism," as the latter only partially addresses the symbolic and emotional value of a journey that changes the life of the one who undertakes it.

Thus, it is a tourism segment with vast potential that, to grow, needs both specific investments and qualified studies and research, capable of providing professionals with the knowledge and data essential to best welcome the roots traveler. This traveler has a double, ambivalent psychological nature, as they are both a tourist, external to the community, and, at the same time, a community member, internal to the community.

3 Root Tourists

The largest communities of Italian descendants are found in Brazil (25 million), Argentina (22–23 million), and the United States (around 20 million); among the regions of origin, Veneto and Calabria rank at the top [14].

Among them, over half hold a degree or a post-graduate qualification: this data not only indicates the spread of academic degrees among the Italian and Italic populations worldwide but also highlights the importance of considering the level of education as a significant element in the process of designing communication and tourism offerings [15].

The knowledge of the Italian language among participants varies, but the majority would be interested in learning the language and therefore attending Italian courses during their roots trip. This data suggests the need to offer language and cultural learning opportunities specifically targeted at this group of tourists. A significant component emerging from the research concerns descendants with Italian citizenship: one-third has never been to Italy, and nearly all express the desire to visit their place of origin [16].

Among the possible activities, the most desired is visiting places connected to family memories and meeting relatives, clearly indicating a desire to reconnect with one's roots.

The profile of the roots traveler/tourist is that of an Italian descendant (mainly third or fourth generation), highly educated, with a strong longing for Italy. The trip is stationary, often for an extended period, and the traveler "is willing to make financial sacrifices to connect with their origins and, in addition to wanting to meet their family and explore the places of their roots, is highly interested in taking Italian language and culture courses, culinary workshops, and activities aimed at learning about ancient crafts" [17].

These are valuable data for developing targeted tourism offerings and promoting authentic and emotional roots tourism, particularly for regions that are currently less popular, such as Calabria, Abruzzo, Basilicata, and Molise.

4 Root Countries

Anthropological places par excellence are villages. They are complex artifacts of architecture, streets, alleys, houses, relationships, experiences and social practices. They are places "where the inhabitants live alongside their patron saints, their deceased, their memories" [18], where the sense of place is still deeply felt. These are the small towns of the interior, those that belong to the very core of Italy (as opposed to the flesh of the plains and cities), according to the famous definition of Rossi Doria [19].

These are the villages of the inland areas, once teeming with life and today largely uninhabited due to the many departures; emigration, which once allowed for the development and rebirth of entire communities, is now one of the symbols of abandonment and escape.

Today, the villages speak to us of uninhibitedness, beauty, new escapes, stays, remnants (objects, houses), returns, and ruins: we are not faced with the ancient monumentlike ruins that so captivated the travelers of the *Grand Tour*.

The rubble, the remnants of the village, speak to us of small stories, small centers, small communities, intimate contexts: this is what roots travelers will find. Their journey will thus be one in which they will immerse themselves among the ruins, the relics of the village, chasing shadows, filling voids, and collecting fragments.

It will be an intimate, minimal journey that will encourage self-discovery and offer the opportunity to grasp the meaning that places hold. Precisely because in the villages, the sense, the feeling of place is still strong, the identity with the place is at its fullest, and the individual is not anonymous to others: everyone knows everything about everyone, for better or for worse (Fig. 3).

This makes departures deeply painful: the entire village, as if it were a funeral procession, would accompany the emigrants to the edge of the settlement, with scenes of tears and embraces that are part of our collective imagery.

But the strong sense of identity also makes the return more emotional and festive: this time, the procession seems like a rite of rebirth. And, in a liquid world where we are losing our connection to places, perhaps roots travel can generate new forms of belonging, serving as a way to refocus attention on places, on their role as containers of stories and bonds, and on their sacredness.

As a result of the migratory hemorrhage, the entire village becomes a place of worship, a pilgrimage destination, for roots travel. And if the village becomes a sacred place of worship, then roots travel becomes a new pilgrimage, acquiring the ritual significance that ancient pilgrimages had in mending fractures and separations. And so, from the *caritas loci* of the Dominicans, we arrive at the cult of the village for emigrants, a place that orients its gaze in the world, even when living far away.

On this love, nostalgia then takes root, a sentiment coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer to describe a type of illness originating from the poignant desire to return to one's homeland.

In this way, place and nostalgia reach us, passing through Giovanni Pascoli, Cesare Pavese, Mario Merola, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and other roots travelers.



Fig. 3. In February 2025, Vico del Gargano Mayor Raffaele Sciscio sent out a large number of letters to those who left the Apulian town to seek their fortunes in Argentina, Australia and other European countries: the goal is to rediscover and enhance the cultural, human and social patrimonio of the emigrant families, inviting their descendants to see Vico del Gargano not only as a memory, but as a tourist destination of excellence [Source: www.gazzettah24.it/vico-del-gargano-lancia-il-turismo-delle-radici-lettera-ai-vichesi-nel-mondo/].

5 The Feeling of Places

It becomes essential to define the sentiment of places. Places are organisms that change in meaning and significance depending on the presence or absence of humans. We all have sacred places that we love because of memories, emotions, personal, family, or collective stories. We are the relationship we have managed and chosen to establish with places. "We are our place, our places: all the real or imaginary places we have lived, accepted, discarded, combined, removed, invented" [20]. We are also the places that have told us their stories, the ones we have dreamed of, left behind, and that, at the moment of farewell, appear more beautiful than ever.

A place is a space that is inhabited, anthropized, humanized, and recognized by the people who feel a part of it. But it is also the product of cultural productions, the images that have shaped it and been inherited. It is a shared experience among those who remain, those who return, and those who have left forever. It is also the sum of the relationships that have been established from it. A place is not only the landscape, but it is also composed of houses, smells, sounds, objects, and social relationships [21]. A place is not just a geographical location, a spatial arrangement, but it is also a "dimension of the mind that requires a symbolic organization woven with time, memory, and oblivion" [22].

An anthropological place is a defined and known space inhabited by a community that defines it in relation to an external space, unknown and therefore threatening, dangerous. The people of the same place are and feel united by gestures, rituals, stories, sensations, perceptions, emotions, memories, festivals, and deities linked to it, to the point that many

recent tools aim to present geographies of territories based on this collective experiential and emotional heritage [23]. We inhabit places, but places inhabit us, they possess us, sometimes even if we have never physically lived in them, as in the case of Italian descendants.

Thus, places, the environment, and space profoundly influence the formation of identity, to the point where we speak of "place identity" to indicate a deep feeling we have towards a place.

Place identity is at its highest in those locations that are difficult to reach and inconvenient to live in, which are, in fact, the ones most affected by diasporic exodus. However, despite everything, emigrants and their descendants remain deeply connected to the "remote" places of their origins [24]. According to Environmental Psychology, the discipline that studies the emotional processes characterizing the bonds individuals establish with places, there are many types of attachment (ancestral, functional, symbolic) that we feel towards places, and different categories that lead us to experience deep emotions for them.

Of particular relevance to roots tourism is the emotional-family category, which "concerns attachment to the place […] that saw the birth and growth of one's ancestors: […] an attachment not only personal but often familial and traditional, which refers to roots and can even be passed down from generation to generation through oral transmission" [25] (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Roots tourism as an emotional journey [https://pixabay.com/it/photos/vecchiaia-giovent ùmano-nonna-360714/].

6 Conclusions

Emigration is a radical experience that profoundly changes those who undertake it and their descendants. All have gone through multilingual disorientations, all have refinished identities, life practices, roots. Roots journeys begin with departure. Leaving, staying and returning stand together, because leaving grounds the need to return: an imperious, violent need arises that never abandons those who leave. A feeling that is nurtured, handed down, until it becomes a journey of roots. These journeys are possible because someone and/or something has remained to wait, guarding the places of ancient roots. Rediscovering one's roots is a spiritual exercise, an ascetic journey, a pilgrimage deep into the soul that changes the mind and heart, both outwardly and inwardly. More than moving through space, one travels within oneself.

To leave, to stay, to return, to get lost, to uproot, to root, to re-root: a continuous challenge, a vertigo, that can generate, invent a new way of being community. That is why root journeys are tourism but, at the same time, they can be a great opportunity for collective rebirth. They are a palingenesis, a way to rewrite the history of the communities that inhabit the villages of Italy's margins that are increasingly at risk of abandonment.

Moreover, such trips are an example of sustainable tourism since they are aimed at recovering the culture of the places of origin constituted by the enjoyment of the places and foods of the local economy and respect for the territory. Such actions benefit the community whose roots tourists originate from.

Ultimately, the journey of roots has something salvific in it, it is a healing journey, the regaining of a space, the search for a new center to give new meaning to places. If emigration is one of the names for abandonment, the journey of roots can be one of the names for the rebirth of villages in Italy's margin, a way to heal the ancient rift and corroborate communities.

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