

# EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM AND COMMUNITY NARRATIVES: NON-TOURIST GUIDEBOOK OF USSITA

## TURISMO EXPERIENCIAL Y NARRATIVAS COMUNITARIAS: GUÍA NO TURÍSTICA DE USSITA

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### Abstract

In recent decades, experiential tourism studies have developed strongly within a transforming tourism development paradigm. The enhancement of the territory is more focused on its intangible resources, and experience becomes a strategic concern within a renewed way of practicing tourism where individuals look primarily for what to experience. Tourism becomes an opportunity to create and exchange experiences by challenging conventional tourism practices and advocating new value references and new forms of tourism including experiential tourism. This article will focus on the relationship between experiential tourism and community narratives: the Non tourism Project, and particularly the Non tourism Guidebook of Ussita, a small Italian municipality in an inland area and an earthquake victim, will be presented. Non tourism is a way of understanding the encounter between a community and those from outside: the non tourist seeks an intimate and authentic relationship with a territory and the community rediscovers its identity through a collective narrative.

The paper aims to investigate whether community narratives can help transform tourism into an enriching and meaningful experience, creating deep bonds between tourists and the places they visit, promoting sustainability, and enhancing local cultural heritage. The non-tourist guide, as a result of the local community's collective storytelling experience, brings tourists closer to experiential ways of visiting and has enabled the local community to rediscover its identity through the use of narrative practices. This article aims to highlight how non-tourist guides can also be a tool for dialogue between tourists and the community through the proposal of experiential itineraries. The experience of non-tourist guides is purely Italian and is at an early but interesting stage of diffusion, with volumes covering both urban contexts and smaller and inland territories. The article is the result of an initial exploratory work (Yin, 2017) that offered a preliminary understanding of the opportunity that non-tourist guides have to promote sustainability, enhancing local resources and offering significant benefits to both tourists and host communities.

**Keywords:** Tourist experience, community narratives, non tourism guidebook.

**JEL Codes:** D91, Z32, Z38

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## Resumen

En las últimas décadas, los estudios sobre turismo experiencial se han desarrollado con fuerza dentro de un paradigma turístico en transformación. La puesta en valor del territorio se centra más en sus recursos intangibles, y la experiencia se convierte en un elemento estratégico dentro de una forma renovada de practicar el turismo en la que los individuos buscan vivencias. El turismo se convierte en una oportunidad para crear e intercambiar experiencias desafiando las prácticas turísticas convencionales y abogando por nuevas referencias de valor y nuevas formas de turismo, incluido el turismo experiencial. Este artículo se centrará en la relación entre el turismo experiencial y las narrativas comunitarias: se presentará el proyecto “No-turístico” y, en particular, la Guía no-turística de Ussita, un pequeño municipio italiano situado en una zona del interior y víctima de un terremoto. El Proyecto “no turístico” es una forma de entender el encuentro entre una comunidad y los visitantes: el turista busca una relación íntima y auténtica con un territorio y la comunidad redescubre su identidad a través de una narrativa colectiva.

El trabajo pretende investigar si las narrativas comunitarias pueden ayudar a transformar el turismo en una experiencia enriquecedora y significativa, creando lazos profundos entre los turistas y los lugares que visitan, promoviendo la sostenibilidad y valorizando el patrimonio cultural local.

La guía no-turística, como resultado de la experiencia de narración colectiva de la comunidad local, acerca los turistas a formas vivenciales de visita y permite a la comunidad local redescubrir su identidad mediante el uso de prácticas narrativas. Este artículo pretende destacar cómo las guías no-turísticas pueden ser también una herramienta de diálogo entre los turistas y la comunidad a través de la propuesta de itinerarios experienciales. La experiencia de las guías no-turísticas es puramente italiana y se encuentra en una fase temprana, pero interesante de difusión, con volúmenes que abarcan tanto contextos urbanos como territorios más pequeños y del interior. El artículo es el resultado de un trabajo exploratorio inicial (Yin, 2017) que ofreció una comprensión preliminar de la potencialidad que tienen las guías no-turísticas para promover la sostenibilidad, valorizando los recursos locales y ofreciendo importantes beneficios, tanto para los turistas, como para las comunidades anfitrionas.

**Palabras clave:** Experiencia turística, narrativas comunitarias, guía no turística.

**Códigos JEL:** D91, Z32, Z38

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The article is a preliminary and exploratory study on the non-tourist guide of Ussita, a small inland municipality in the Marche region of Italy, severely damaged by the 2016 earthquake. The Italian publishing house Ediciclo, in 2020, launched a collection of volumes composed of community editions, led by creatives who establish themselves in local communities, designed to promote a new idea of conscious tourism: Non-tourism, hence the name of the series. This publishing operation embraces the most recent trends in both theory and practice that characterize tourism, offering insights into alternative and unconventional forms of tourism. The study of non-tourist guides is part of current studies that advocate the need to reduce the negative impact of mass tourism by promoting itineraries and visiting practices that respect the environment and local culture (Font and McCabe, 2021; Goodwin, 2017; Graci *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, they can contribute to a more responsible use of cultural and natural resources. Another area of research to which to relate the analysis of the case of non-tour guides is certainly studies on experiential tourism. Indeed, the contents of non-tour guides offer authentic and immersive experiences that allow visitors to learn more about the local culture, enriching the tourism offer and improving



tourist satisfaction. Studying the case of non-tourist guides also means approaching those scientific contributions that emphasize the importance of involving local communities in local tourism development strategies. This article will highlight how non-tourist guides facilitate this involvement, becoming mediators between tourists and the community by ensuring that tourism practices are in line with local needs and values. The relationship between participatory practices and local tourism development is increasingly recognized in recent literature (Chan *et al.*, 2021; Borrelli *et al.*, 2023). Participatory practices enable the creation of authentic and meaningful tourism experiences, where tourists can interact directly with the local community, participate in traditional activities, and learn directly from residents, enhancing the quality of their experience. They also involve local communities in decision-making processes concerning tourism development. Thus, their needs, expectations, and resources are better ensured (Reisinger, 2019). This is precisely one of the aims of the non-tourist guide project: to turn local communities into reference points for the transmission of territorial identity features that need to be enhanced, made known, and handed down to future generations. New responsibilities and protagonism are triggered where citizens contribute to tourism development choices. The community also becomes aware of the value of its territorial heritage with collective narrative forms to build sustainable and inclusive local tourism development. The non-tourist guides are a very recent experience and came up beside other similar but occasional editorial ideas that arose from the desire to promote a different approach to travel. A path that leads to an ideal dialogue with people, which means taking into account the habits, customs, and culture of the place, but also respecting the environment in which they live. Editorial proposals that are founded on the principles of responsible tourism. The study of non-tourist guides can be placed near community maps, which represent how the local community observes, values, and perceives its territory, its memories, its transformations, and current reality. They represent a participatory process that involves inhabitants in an exercise of identity self-representation and recognition of the values of the place where they live (Madau, 2015; Zaleckis *et al.*, 2023). This article highlights how non-tourist guides extend these modes of representation of territorial value themes to tourism narratives. Proposing a preliminary study on non-tourist guides means building a new model capable of connecting the experiences and needs of communities, and re-establishing new frames of meaning to design territorial and tourism policies. Non-tourism is a project that renews the sense of place and gives it greater authenticity. The article begins by highlighting how non-tourist guides can be innovative tools that bring tourists and communities closer together through an experiential knowledge of the territory. Starting from an in-depth study of the role of experience in tourism, the article will dwell on the observation of the non-tourist guide of Ussita to highlight the importance of narrating the diversity of places, their identity aspects against the harmonization and homologation of cultural models now dissonant with the transformations that contemporary society presents. Although the research is at an early stage, it will specifically seek to highlight whether community narratives can help transform tourism into an enriching and meaningful experience, creating deep ties between tourists and the places, supporting sustainability, and promoting local cultural heritage. After this introduction, the paper presents a methodology section followed by the description of the theoretical framework of the research. Section 4 describes the non-tourist guidebook. Results of the research are reported in section 5. Finally, section 6 presents the main conclusions of this work, limitations and future research lines.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The specific features of this first study entailed a methodological choice that essentially turned to the study of the content on the official website of the Sineglossa Associations and

“*Cosa accade se abitiamo*” (hereafter C.A.S.A.<sup>2</sup>), which collaborated in the drafting of the non-tourist guide. Focused interviews were held with a member of the Sineglossa Association Board and the chairwoman of the C.A.S.A. association, who are the main subjects that coordinated and realized the non-tourist guide project. These initial interviews allow an understanding of the characteristics of Ussita’s non-tourist guide project, the community’s role in local tourism development, the experiential nature of the proposed tourist itineraries. The interviews made it possible to understand the philosophy behind the writing of the non-tourist guide and its characteristics, as well as the idea of tourism that the authors desired for their territory. The same data made it possible to begin to outline the role that communities can play, through participatory narratives, in local tourism development, and finally the experiential character of the proposed tourist itineraries. The interviews were conducted in an informal dimension which, for the initial phase of the research and the cognitive objective of this work, was the most interesting. A discussion with a non-tourist, indicated by the chairwoman of the C.A.S.A. association, sought to bring out the experiential features of the guide’s contents and the evaluation of her experience as a user of the guidebook. The methodological approach used was qualitative, which allowed an initial in-depth observation of the non-tourist guide’s experience in Ussita. Future developments of the research will expand the number of interviewees, especially among residents and tourists, reaching them in the numerous places described in the guide. This choice will come from the acknowledgment that setting constitutes a strategic aspect of field research.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The way of experiencing tourism is constantly changing in synchronous with the transformations of society, which in contemporary times has been considered an elusive and liquid entity (Bauman, 2020). This fluidity can be transferred to tourism, where the tourist is increasingly changeable in his preferences and needs, continuously seeking unique, memorable, and authentic individual experiences. Tourism has never been a stranger to the experiential revolution triggered by the studies of Pine and Gilmore (1998), even though it is experiential by definition, as traveling and vacationing are, by their nature, experiences (Lee and Smith, 2015; Oh *et al.*, 2007). Tourism naturally leads to experiencing feelings of pleasure; As travel and tourism are related to the desire, aesthetic, and poetic state of humans (Morin, 2002), which is, in itself, the most proper place for an extraordinary experience. The increase in individual time devoted to satisfying passions and subjective needs has made it possible for broad social strata to experience tourism as a symbolic-experiential value. This phenomenon has simultaneously led to both the massification of tourism and the emergence of new types of tourism.

Despite the growing demand and the trend towards standardization and homogenization of services, contemporary times have seen the emergence of a multitude of tourist practices and activities, as well as opportunities for travel experiences. Tourism is no longer an activity regulated by a precise system of times and places that unfolds in the experience of each tourist according to a “collective rhythm” (Savelli, 2012, p. 229). It now cuts across structured social subsystems, not locking itself into the rules of any of them, neither the economic nor the cultural; instead, it unites them in “an interstitial space that can become everyone’s and no one’s land in its way” (Savelli, 2012, p. 230). There is an emergence of transversal paths whose character is linked to the subjective experience of the individual rather than to an objective

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<sup>2</sup> The acronym means “house” in Italian, and means “What happens if we inhabit”



condition defined by society (Urbain, 1997). Cohen (1979) had already theorized various ways of experiencing tourism, which he presented in a path centered on authenticity, according to an increasing order of detachment from one's community by the subject who carries them out (Savelli, 2012). Cohen proposed a continuum of tourism experiences ranging from the pursuit of simple and immediate pleasure to a deeper search for meaning. Experience becomes a strategic concern, a new attribute of value, establishing a strategic paradigm, a new framework of meaning for a "new tourism" where individuals, as Rifkin (2000) had already emphasized, do not seek what to own, but what to experience. Experience itself thus becomes the main product provided by the tourism and hospitality industry. In contrast to rational problem-solving and utilitarian functions, experiential consumption involves the pursuit of "fantasies, feelings, and fun" (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 135). Tourism is, therefore, the main vehicle for the creation and exchange of experiences, challenging traditional tourism, and opening up to new value categories and forms of tourism, such as slow, responsible, sustainable, and experiential tourism. Tourism, unsurprisingly, is considered one of the most significant phenomena of contemporary times, expressing its complexity and transformations (Bauman 2020; Urry and Larsen, 2011; MacCannell, 2013). Tourism, vacationing, and traveling are more significant phenomena than have so far been considered by most scholars, and the social sciences play a very important role in affirming this complexity (Corbisiero, 2022). Touristic practices, even in their most standardized versions, always involve a break from habitual activities and contrast with everyday life, configuring themselves as an institutionalized space for experimentation and social transformation (Corbisiero, 2022). It is precisely in this transformative context that the tourist aspires to have an experiential grip on their tourism making it distinct from their everyday life, a grip that allows them to define an active and performative role (Gemini, 2008) favoring an experiential, interactive, and sensory tourism dynamic. Moving away from a dominance of the visual dimension and the stereotypical reproduction of sight (Gemini, 2008), shifting towards a tourist experience that evolves from doing to feeling. This transition entails a shift in the tourist experience towards a multisensory dimension that Gemini has defined as performance.

Tourism, and tourist practices, are increasingly becoming an emotional space, a means of self-assertion to experience something unique, memorable, and transformative (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017; Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2023). In this regard, Pearce and Zare (2017) conceptualize tourism experiences, highlighting the holistic synchronization of their sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral, and relational components. In this changed paradigm, the emotional quality of tourism develops: new travellers seek suggestive and emotionally charged tourist activities that confer uniqueness and subjectivity to their travel experiences. The tourist experience is defined and delineated by the emotions that the external environment elicits in the tourist, and it is characterized by the desire to explore and co-create, which is typical of contemporary tourists (Campos *et al.*, 2018). This results in a new cultural model of behavior that implies a change in the way tourism experiences are conceived, moving towards the concept of slowness and its declination in tourism. Similarly, slowness attributes tourism as an innovative value on the possibility of characterizing the tourist experience not so much based on the qualities of the 'product', but rather on self-directed behavioral models. The relationship between tourism and slowness thus implies a redefinition of current tourist practices, which are increasingly influenced by a new sense of environmental responsibility of the tourist and the search for authentic experiences. Therefore, slow tourism is configured as capable of enhancing the genius loci, establishing active relationships with the local community, and promoting slower rhythms of life and consumption of the tourism product, in a vision of real and not presumed sustainability. Slow tourism, often associated with experiential tourism, has been gaining significant momentum in recent decades (Huang *et al.*, 2023). People travel

to appreciate an alternative tourist experience that emphasizes deeper and more meaningful interactions with the local population and environment.

### 3.1. Tourism experiences and social media: brief reflections

How the tourist experience is lived has indeed been transformed through cultural and generational changes, as well as the increasingly constant use of the Internet and mobile devices, which have become very important tools in the development of the tourism industry. Social media platforms have become popular tools that enable the intensification and memorialization of on-site travel experiences through the publication of photos/videos online. Due to the increase of individual empowerment through information and communication technology, tourist experiences have intensified and multiplied, creating richer experiences. Social media platforms have allowed tourists to digitize and share emotions and experiential moments on a much larger scale than in the past (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). These platforms have increased the dissemination of real-time recordings and sharing, as well as the increase in tourist experiences. Reviews and content generated through digital platforms and social networks can transform the value of the experience and influence final decisions. Technology has thus transformed the way tourists plan their trips, purchase accommodation offers, communicate, and interact with the local people they have chosen to visit. This has generated new possibilities for travellers, creating more opportunities to choose and experience tourism in a more authentic and personalized way. The new generations of tourists are composed of young people born and raised in the digital age. Generation Z and Millennials seek authentic and personalized tourism experiences. Technology is ever-present in their daily activities, and it is a frequently used tool in planning their trips quickly and independently. When searching for the tourist experience, both Generation Z and Millennials seek authenticity, cultural engagement, and meaningful experiences (Jiang *et al.*, 2022). Despite the increasingly prominent role of social media and new technologies and their excessive use, different tourism narrative experiences are emerging, and they emphasize proposals for knowledge of territories that enable less standardized and massified tourism experiences. The reference is to those participatory design experiences, which led in Italy to the drafting of non-touristic guidebooks conceived and realized through processes that have consistently and constructively involved the resident community, favoring communication of the territory far from the logic of commodification and exclusive attention on the tourism sector alone. Non-touristic guidebooks are forms of narrative that are representative of local communities and immersed in the complexity of the relationships that characterize everyday life. For this reason, non-touristic guidebooks can transform travel and visits into unique, memorable, and immersive tourist experiences.

## 4. NON-TOURIST GUIDEBOOK: EXPERIENTIAL PATHS BEYOND ESTABLISHED TOURISM ITINERARIES

Non-tourism is a series of guidebooks created by community editorial teams designed to promote a new idea of conscious tourism. They are published in Italy by Ediciclo and designed by Sineglossa, and Riverrun, a hub of cultural innovation. The focus of this work will be the non-touristic guidebook of Ussita designed by Sineglossa and coordinated by C.A.S.A, a social promotion association based in Frontignano, a small hamlet of Ussita.

Ussita is a small town in the inner area of the Marche region in Italy, severely damaged by the earthquake of 2016. Sineglossa is a cultural organization that applies contemporary art processes to the challenges of modern times to build virtuous models of sustainable development. As reported on the website <https://sineglossa.it>, the organization aims to “experiment and share



new tools for interpreting and transforming the present, capable of confronting its complexity. To redefine the values that guidebook our choices and imagine, together, other possible and more humane futures.” Within this general purpose, the organization’s commitment is also to support a new idea of tourism different from the commonly practiced, especially mass tourism. A tourism that embraces the values of experientiality, slowness, and sustainability of local development. The Non-tourism project therefore seeks to contribute to the definition of new ways of doing tourism capable of offering an alternative to a system that has too often consumed and erased the identity features, underlying the same tourist destinations (Gainsforth, 2020), and destroying them along with the liveability of cities, to the point of “killing” them (D’Eramo, 2019, p. 91).

Non-tourism also opposes to the mismanagement of tourist flows by local administrations that have excessively focused on economic factors, particularly in terms of arrivals and presences, without giving proper attention to the economic and social benefits for local communities. The consequences of these choices, in addition to altering the daily life of residents, generate negative impacts on the quality of the tourist experience. Since there is no alternative to tourism within tourism, it is necessary to rethink tourism practices without denying them. The contribution of the Non-tourism project fits into this complexity, acting in the particularly strategic area of storytelling applied to the tourism sector. The proposal of non-touristic guidebooks contributes to the elaboration of a shared vision of tourism development, through which the identity traits of territories, development objectives, power relationships, and collaborative ties are renegotiated collectively. Value is given to a new relationship between tourists and communities to redefine the identity of the places that are narrated and then visited. Non-tourism, as outlined on the website <https://nonturismo.org/>, is a “*particular attitude of non-tourists and of the welcoming community that leads the former to seek an intimate and authentic relationship with a territory, following the paths and deviations designed by the inhabitants, and the latter to rediscover and reconstruct itself in its uniqueness.*”

The uniqueness of the Non-tourism project lies in the way it considers the encounter between the local community and those external to it, particularly with a tourist seeking an experiential relationship that goes beyond mere consumption of the visited places. Non-tourism sees in the interaction between the tourist and the territory the moment when the tourist experience manifests in a relationship of mutual relationality. From this perspective, the relational dynamic established between the place, the local community inhabiting it, and the tourist can be defined as resonant (Rosa, 2020). The Non-tourism project also seeks to counteract the trend towards homogenization of places, suggesting to the tourist to abandon habitual behaviours to establish a different relationship and bond with the visited environment. On one hand, the non-tourist seeks an experiential dimension with the territory, and on the other hand, the community has the opportunity to rediscover its identity through collective storytelling. Rosa (2020), as highlighted earlier, describes this connection as a resonant relationship: tourist experiences are positive in this case because of vibrant and engaged relationships. The Non-tourism project thus fosters experiential tourism practices that lead to resonant relationships, which are the premise for the growth of both tourists and inhabitants through qualitatively characterized experiences. The itineraries and tourism proposals, curiosities, anecdotes, and deviations proposed by community editorial teams become the tool to activate this resonance. Non-touristic guides are indeed written by local communities through participatory processes that have led to the establishment of community editorial teams whose participants have regularly met to produce the texts of the publications, offering the local community the opportunity to discuss and define what makes their place unique, remembering the past and imagining the future.

The community is therefore the main voice of the guidebook, engaging with experts, sociologists, historians, photographers, and accompanying the non-tourist during their visit.

The presence of experts alongside the local community has allowed the genius loci of the Ussita territory to translate into a new narrative that enriches over time. The guidebooks become an opportunity for communities to renew feelings of attachment and belonging to their territories, offering tourists the chance to share their memories and involve them in the same process of defining their identity. It is evident that the parties in relation, tourists and communities, do not approach the visited place from a manipulative or instrumental perspective. The sense of belonging also manifest for the reader of the guidebook, the non-tourist

*“feels to access an oral and sentimental memory and to be able to be part of it”*  
(Chiara C.A.S.A Association, March 2, 2024).

In this perspective, the non-tourist desires to integrate into the visited territory and to experience the journey not as the consumption of pleasure but as a series of encounters. Non-touristic guidebooks reinforce the social dimension of resonance and experientiality. The reading of the territory presented in the guidebooks belongs to those who have lived in that territory forever, with a load of emotions. The project of non-touristic guidebooks asks the tourist to embrace these emotions, to enter the communities, and, albeit temporarily, to become part of them. The experience of Non-tourism asks the tourist not to settle, but to grasp and make their own the complexity and depth of a place. The concept of resonant relationship returns, interpreting the tourist's relationship with the visited environment in a resonant manner allows the latter to be understood in terms of constructing authentic experiences that require the tourist not to simply observe the territory, but to adopt the perspective of those who inhabit it. Only in this way a more complete level of knowledge and understanding of the territory can be achieved. The content of non-touristic guidebooks is indeed addressed to a tourist who sees experience as the motivation guiding the choice of the territory to visit and who gravitates towards the predominance of immaterial values that satisfy their subjective needs, such as self-realization and happiness (Birenboim, 2016).

Experientiality thus finds its practical expression in the Non-tourism project with proposals that create connections on a physical, emotional, social, and intellectual level, as they offer experiences through which the tourist engages with people, stories, and traditions of the places. For this reason, Non-touristic guidebooks valorise the concept of genius loci, which embodies the emotions and atmospheres, and that, beyond any tangible aspect, composes unique social relationships representative of collective identity and of the image of the local community. The genius loci, not surprisingly considered by Sineglossa one of the three fundamental ingredients<sup>3</sup> for drafting a non-touristic guidebook, is an essential aspect to activate powerful and transformative experiences of the place (Huang *et al.*, 2024). Historically, the term genius loci was considered the guardian spirit that presided over and protected a particular place (Schulz, 1980). Over time, the term genius loci have come to mean the unique quality of a place. Lappin (2015) talks about an inner spark of nature, and this ineffable and exceptional character of a place contributes to creating unique experiences. By enhancing the genius loci, storytelling becomes a means of immersive communication that significantly influences the tourist experience and highlights the underlying processes of human and environmental activity, as well as the relationships that relate to the connection between the settled community and the surrounding environment, or the concept of territoriality (Battaglini, 2014, 2022; Raffenstein, 2012). The narrative goes beyond the simple transmission of facts, emotionally and cognitively engaging tourists and residents, thereby transforming their levels of involvement and satisfaction (Hannam and Ryan,

<sup>3</sup> The other two are emergencies and visions ([www.sineglossa.it](http://www.sineglossa.it)).



2019). In non-touristic guidebooks, we find an explicit and marked emphasis on the role that narratives play in evoking a range of emotions, shaping emotional connections, and fostering lasting bonds with the described territory that one chooses to visit. Along these lines, Nadia, a non-tourist, emphasizes how the texts of the non-touristic guidebook of Ussita (an experience that will be further explored in the next paragraph) have influenced the future choices of her life, creating deep ties with the places visited that led her to purchase a house:

*“With the Non-Tourism Guidebook in hand, while following the last itinerary, that of Frontignano (when everything was still frozen in the aftermath of the 2016 earthquake), on a day I would describe as magical, I was so enchanted by this whole story that I decided to buy a little house up there, lightning decision, made just like that, without much calculation and guesswork, those choices that: ‘...I’m probably making a foolish move, but I feel happiness in my heart!!!’” (Nadia, non-tourist, March 26, 2024)*

This testimony captures the transformative power of the Non-Tourism Guidebook and how it inspired Nadia to make a life-changing decision based on her deep connection to the place. Indeed, Nadia’s words highlight the profound connection between the well-being generated by the cultural and tourist experiences offered in the Non-Tourism Guidebook and the attachment to the tourist destination. Her decision not only to recommend or revisit the place, but to purchase a house there underscores the transformative impact of the experiences described in the guidebook. It suggests that the guidebook not only enhances her enjoyment of the destination, but also influences her long-term decisions and sense of belonging to the community. In other words, the emotional and cognitive involvement generated by the experiences described in the non-tourism guidebook contributed to create a strong emotional bond between Nadia and the destination. This bond goes beyond a single travel experience, extending to a deeper level of attachment to the place, to the extent that it prompted her to consider purchasing a property. This demonstrates how tourist experiences, when lived authentically and meaningfully, can have a lasting impact on individual’s perception of places and life decisions.

## **5. THE NON-TOURISM GUIDEBOOK OF USSITA IN THE MARCHE REGION OF ITALY: FIRST RESULTS OF AN EXPLORATORY WORK**

The project of the Non-Tourism Guidebook of Ussita was born from the collaboration between the C.A.S.A. association (see note 1) and the cultural organization Sineglossa (photography 1).

Ussita (photography 2-3) is a tiny municipality of 364 inhabitants located in the inner area of the province of Macerata in the Marche region (Photography 2, 3).

It is a municipality that experienced a significant earthquake in 2016, which heavily damaged its territory (photography 4).

Over the last few decades, it has undergone major processes of social, economic, and cultural transformation, like other inner areas of the central Italian Apennines, associated with a progressive demographic decline, aging population, and low birth rates (De Rossi, 2019; Tantillo, 2023). The idea of the non-touristic guidebook emerged at a particular moment in the history of Ussita, where, in addition to the aforementioned processes, the trauma of the earthquake altered its already fragile economic and social balances. With a reactionary impulse, the local community felt the need to narrate its story, rediscovering the history of its territory to strengthen ties and relationships that the earthquake risked permanently erasing, making a

**PHOTOGRAPHY 1. NON TOURIST GUIDEBOOK OF USSITA**

Source: Sineglossa organization

**PHOTOGRAPHY 2. PANORAMIC VIEW**

Source: Sineglossa organization

significant identity heritage irretrievable. The non-touristic guidebook, by directly involving the resident community, made it possible to renew the sense of attachment and belonging to their territory, giving voice and protagonism to the inhabitants (Photography 5).

The guidebook was defined by the narration of events and shared memories of the people involved in the project. Through these stories, residents understood the connection with their



### PHOTOGRAPHY 3. PANORAMIC VIEW



Source: Sineglossa organization

### PHOTOGRAPHY 4. EARTHQUAKE-DAMAGED CHURCH



Source: Sineglossa organization

territory and invested in possible paths of rebirth. Initially, the guidebook was necessary for the community itself, which reinforced bonds of belonging and re-appropriation with the territory of Ussita through the recounting of emotions, places, stories, and traditions. The voice of the community was supported by the presence of artists, writers, photographers, and historians to accompany the new non-tourists on itineraries and tourist routes with a strong experiential characterization. The Ussita guidebook has been described as a mobile guide, in tune with the territory it portrays, a land marked by the earthquake that welcomes tourists through images and

## PHOTOGRAPHY 5. INHABITANT OF USSITA



Source: Sineglossa organization

texts that simultaneously speak of past, present, and imagination ([www.sineglossa.it](http://www.sineglossa.it)). Travelers are offered two itineraries: “Living Here” and “From the Valley to the Peaks.” The first collects the stories of the inhabitants through the proposal of eight paths, where the tourist is involved in the life of the community through naturalistic and cultural explorations that bring back to the post-earthquake daily life and the history of the territory. The second includes a series of itineraries from the valley floor to Monte Bove, a symbol of the territory. In this part of the guidebook, the tourist can become the protagonist of their tourist experience, having the opportunity to customize their route. The main voice of the guidebook is that of the community, which accompanies the non-tourist to

*“itineraries and paths stitched with stories of the past, challenges of the present, and visions of rebirth”* (<https://www.ediciclo.it/blog/dettaglio/nasce-una-nuova-collana-nonturismo/>).

The narrative is addressed to the tourists seeking an authentic and relational experience with the territory looking for forms of unconventional, slow tourism that activate transformative dynamics of territories supporting the principles of sustainability, awareness, as well as respect, care, and valorization. Slowness and sociability seem to be the two main characteristics of the non-touristic guidebook of Ussita, which is addressed to tourists who want to expand time, observe, and experience spaces, changing the forms of knowledge and enhancement of places and local communities. Slowing down leads to being more conscious tourists, less impactful on the environment, and closer to local communities. The slow approach to tourism modifies its typologies, which are increasingly aimed at enhancing experiences related to sustainability and to the relationship with inhabitants and territories. In the guidebook, addressing tourists, this relationship is explicitly invited: “Walk, stop, read, and restart” (Non-Touristic Guidebook of Ussita, 19), “While you are on the way, we will ask you to stop at some points where we have stories to tell you or to make you imagine with memories and recollections of the inhabitants, who have contributed to writing them, but above all, to live them and telling them” (Non-Touristic Guidebook of Ussita, 19) (Photography 6, 7).



PHOTOGRAPHY 6. INSIDE PAGES OF THE GUIDEBOOK



Source: Sineglossa organization

PHOTOGRAPHY 7. INSIDE PAGES OF THE GUIDEBOOK



Source: Sineglossa organization

In extracts of the non-tourism guidebook like the one mentioned above, the experiential trait of the guidebook emerges, where tourist proposals are interpreted as active participation and involvement, and imply a deep connection with the visited territory and the social fabric. The non-tourist becomes part of the community.

*“To the non-tourist, it is said: come, explore, and then return, because each time the experience will be different.” (Chiara, C.A.S.A Association, March 2, 2024)*

The non-tourist is not limited to a static observation experience based on the dominance of the visual dimension of the experience itself (Gemini, 2008). Instead, the guidebook emphasizes the creation of tourist activities that privilege experiential, interactive, immersive, and sensory dynamics. In the Ussita guidebook, the non-tourist is encouraged to establish a relationship with the Ussita community, engaging in interactions with it: certain parts of the guidebook intentionally remain open-ended or require activities that actively involve and engage the tourist first-hand.

This results in experiential tourism that leverages the individual’s emotional sphere, allowing them to acquire multi-sensory experiences through direct participation in the life of the visited communities. The Ussita Non-Tourism Guidebook responds to a growing demand for immersive, emotionally rich, and authentic experiences that foster greater interactions and human connections not only with the communities visited (Sheldon, 2020) but also with the environment itself. The non-tourism guidebook can be described as a guidebook that gives weight to emotions, which can trigger emotional transformations in its users, that occur due to a spontaneous spark (Sheldon, 2020) that shakes the tourists out of their comfort zones. Activating transformative moments following tourism experiences is an emotionally intense, and sensorially impressive act, that requires a certain level of psychological openness for its manifestation (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017). The idea of emotional transformations suggests that tourist experiences can have a significant impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of travellers. Through meaningful encounters, moments of reflection, and openness to new perspectives, tourists can live experiences that push them beyond their emotional boundaries and encourage them to explore new parts of themselves and the world around them. This kind of transformation requires a certain level of openness and an attitude of acceptance toward the experiences and people encountered along the way. This is what happened to the non-tourist in Ussita

*“I began to flip through and read and listen, what a surprise! At a slow pace, unusual for me, with the guidebook in hand, I traversed the various itineraries, imagining another time, other voices, other expectations, dreams, fears, and disappointments. I smiled and I darkened imagining what is now difficult to find again. Moreover, I didn’t just get to know a Ussita made of beautiful paths, authentic nature, and enchanting hamlets (despite the earthquake), but I was able to reflect on what perhaps could have been avoided, on that subtle line between tourism and respect, and for this, I feel immensely enriched, transformed. Ussita is in my heart because the stories in the guidebook are genuine, those authentic voices touch you inside, they make you feel part of the community of today and yesterday.” (Nadia, non-tourist, March 26, 2024).*

The content of the interview can also be invoked to support the importance of the relationship, as previously mentioned, between the non-tourist and the territory, where the emphasis is not on the consumption of a need but on the resonant relationship between tourist,



community, and environment. The non-tourism guidebook of Ussita proposes a knowledge of the territories that belong to those who live in those places with sensitivity and special emotions, and the non-tourist, through the guidebook, embraces these emotions and becomes an active and accepted part of the community.

The unique and distinctive paths allow the tourist to experience something different from what traditional guidebooks offer, and to feel the same feelings as those who live in the visited territories, bringing them closer to the real community. The non-touristic guidebook of Ussita offers tourists the opportunity to dive into an authentic and meaningful experience, which goes beyond the act of simply visiting conventional tourist sites. Rather than limiting themselves to a superficial exploration of the points of interest, this guidebook invites travellers to emotionally connect with the territory, understand its history, grasp its challenges, and share the emotions of the local community. Through unique and unexplored itineraries, tourists can experience the territory more deeply, living the same emotions and feelings that characterize the daily life of the inhabitants. This approach not only enriches traveller's experience but also creates a stronger and more authentic bond with the local community. Furthermore, the non-touristic guidebook promotes open and reciprocal dialogue between tourists and the community, encouraging encounters and cultural exchange. In this way, tourists become not only passive spectators but also active participants in the life of the community, contributing to its rebirth and development. The non-touristic guidebook of Ussita enriches the concept of tourist experience, conveying the importance of human relationships and connection with the territory.

### **5.1. Future possibilities for local tourism development among experiences, narratives, and communities**

The experience of the Non-Touristic Guidebook of Ussita leads to development choices capable of blending cultural, social, and technical innovation, and forms of participation that contribute to a shared, endogenous, and community-oriented territorial vision, also aimed at promoting sustainable tourism development. The experience of non-touristic guidebooks contributes to changing the reference paradigms in terms of attractiveness, competitiveness, and territorial development, particularly by valorizing the immaterial aspects of the territory and reinforcing the correlation between these aspects and the construction of a territory's image, recalling the concept of territorial identity.

The promotion and choices of territorial development strategies do not merely involve creating images and brands, they are decisions that refer to what Gemini (2008) defines as the representational construction of a territory, based solely on the visual dimension of the experience and the externally produced representations of territories. Instead, the new paradigms support and encourage strategies built through more articulated processes than simply offering a product, aimed at the pursuit of more complex objectives than mere attractiveness (de Salvo and Pizzi, 2023). The focus on the immateriality of development entails changes in the goals to pursue, even in terms of attractiveness. These goals go beyond the formulation of policies targeted at specific subjects or the stimulation of the local economy and are therefore able to give rise to innovative pathways of territorial development particularly oriented towards enhancing territorial capital (de Salvo and Pizzi, 2023).

These changes prompt us to consider the opportunity to move away from narrative modalities of places solely aimed at recounting their competitiveness and attractiveness. New narrative modalities, such as grassroots creativity exemplified by non-touristic guidebooks, are increasingly used to craft collective stories that are functional to the development of cultural and territorial promotion strategies. These modalities encourage the local community to co-create,

propose experiences, and share cultural content through active participation. Through its involvement, the community of Ussita also had the opportunity to renew its attachment to the territory. Voices that are generally not considered in territorial development processes, typically decided far from the communities themselves, have been given a platform. Often, these top-down projects are homogenizing and completely disconnected from real contact with communities, their stories, and their peculiarities. Instead, promoting the involvement of local communities through forms of active citizenship also means creating the cultural prerequisites for democratic management of decision-making processes that underlie tourism development policies.

Shared narratives are more representative of the heritage of local communities and contribute to countering those narratives propagated by dominant cultures, which often reproduce messages and slogans far removed from the places they attempt to describe. Often, what is communicated is what a place should become rather than valuing, describing, and conveying what it is (Hudak, 2019). Non-touristic guidebooks propose a form of narrative that represents local communities with a strong territorializing power, that is deeply linked to local sustainable development. These narrative forms operate within local development processes, which are in turn immersed in the complexity of the relationships that characterize the daily life of a territory. They are a participatory process that involves residents in an exercise of self-identity representation and recognition of the values of the place they live in (Zaleckis *et al.*, 2023). In this way, the community becomes aware of the tangible and symbolic richness of its territory, contributing to the formulation and implementation of conservation and protection strategies, but above all, of development strategies. This outlines a way of narrating the territory, and consequently a way of defining its future development trajectories, that consider places as spaces of emotional, sensory, and experiential relationships. Some authors refer to the concept of emotional maps (Correggiari, 2016) and, more specifically, sensory maps. The community narrative of territories thus involves reference communities in an extended and inclusive way, activating participatory practices capable of enhancing the territorial and touristic dimension of places. The experience of community stories helps residents to reclaim, through territorial activation paths, a common heritage of memory that is transformed into emotions and experiential knowledge paths.

Experiences like non-touristic guidebooks are proving to be significant for the adoption of bottom-up approaches that valorise and promote the territory, but above all, for their role in highlighting the importance of narrating the diversity of places and their identity aspects, contrasting the harmonization and homogenization of cultural models that are now dissonant with the transformations contemporary society presents. Communities become indispensable reference points for communicating the identity values to be cherished, made known, and passed down to future generations. The contribution of citizens to tourism development choices through greater awareness of the value of their territorial heritage, which is also acquired through the use of innovative narrative modes to build sustainable and inclusive local development, introduces new responsibilities and new roles. We are facing a profound transformation, moving from an elitist conception of territorial use to one that turns its gaze at those subjects defining the value of territorial heritage elements and transforming them into knowledge proposals, in which experientiality becomes one of the most characteristic traits. Nowadays, narrating the territory is a challenge to develop new local dynamics intimately linked to local culture. Allowing to bring to life and to make known the stratification of the collective knowledge of which territories are the expression.

The territory thus becomes a shared heritage of intertwined, overlapping, reinterpreted, and mediated narratives from its communities, presenting itself as an optimal context for authentic tourism experiences that are established through empathic relationships between inhabitants and external visitors. Narratives like those of non-touristic guidebooks are aimed at tourists



interested in establishing empathic connections with the resident community, sharing the same relational space (Pollice *et al.*, 2020). This allows an unmediated relationship that enables tourists to enter into a deep connection that leads to knowledge and awareness of local values, to the point of making them feel like temporary inhabitants, thus also maximizing the value of the tourist experience. The visions of the territories produced in this specific way transcend the individual sense, defining shared narratives: a large part of the territorial heritage, especially the immaterial aspects, can only be understood through the medium of the local community, which allows the place to be experienced in its most ephemeral and intangible aspects (de Salvo and Pizzi, 2023). Pollice (2017) defines this kind of narrative as community-oriented: the community, as the custodian of immaterial resources, itself becomes a territorial attraction, renewing a sense of attachment to its territory through the narration of emotions, experiences, memories, and stories linked to the place itself. In conclusion, in community-oriented narration, the community itself becomes an integral part of the territorial attraction through the sharing of emotions, experiences, and stories related to the place.

More specifically, Pollice (2017) developed this idea, highlighting how community narration can be a powerful tool to engage tourists and promote a sense of belonging to the territory. He emphasizes that community-oriented narration not only valorises the immaterial heritage of a place but also the active role of the community in defining the tourist experience. De Salvo and Pizzi (2023) have explored the link between territorial narration and sustainable development, highlighting how local narratives can contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the cultural and environmental heritage of a region. They suggest that involving the community in the narration process not only strengthens the emotional bond of residents with the territory but can also attract tourists looking for authentic and shared experiences.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The article has attempted to relate experiential tourism and the most recent expressions of the community narrative of territories. It highlighted how they are complementary fields in providing authentic, engaging, and sustainable tourism experiences that enhance cultural and natural heritage and promote an emotional and meaningful bond between tourists and the local community. The non-tourist guidebook of Ussita places the experientiality and the narrative near interconnecting them and highlights how they mutually influence each other in:

1. **Definition of authentic experiences:** experiential tourism focuses on proposing authentic and meaningful experiences that go beyond simply visiting tourist sites. Community narrative plays a fundamental role in creating these authentic experiences, bringing back local stories, traditions, and cultures that allow tourists to connect deeply with the area and its community. It is no coincidence that Ussita's non-tourist guidebook in its subtitle writes about unpublished detours narrated by the inhabitants.
2. **Involvement of tourists:** experiential tourism often actively involves visitors in experiences and activities, allowing them to participate directly in the life of local communities. Tourists are encouraged to participate in enhancing and respecting the area they visit. Community narrative provides the context and framework for this involvement, conveying the stories and cultural elements that make the experiences meaningful and engaging for tourists.
3. **Exploitation of intangible heritage:** experiential tourism is mainly based on the exploitation of intangible territorial resources, in particular in the article reference was

made to the stories told by local communities. Community narrative is essential to preserve and transmit this heritage, securing memory through writing and enabling tourists to immerse themselves in the cultures and traditions of the places they visit.

4. **Promotion of participatory dynamics:** experiential tourism often promotes tourism practices that place communities and outsiders near, co-creating and living the same territorial experience. Tourists on the one hand attempt an intimate and authentic relationship with a territory and the community on the other rediscovers its identity through a collective narrative.

Community narratives, if included in territorial development policies, could encourage a more inclusive and participatory approach that does not disregard the needs and aspirations of local communities. Community narratives, enriched by the experiential and sensorial dimension, can play a fundamental role in territorial development and the promotion of sustainable tourism. In the case of the Non tourism project, the narration, through the proposal of emotional experiences and new ways of knowing the territories, transforms how tourists perceive and interact with the places they visit. The creation of sensory and emotional experiences through narration also contributes to a deeper and more engaging understanding of the territory, stimulating an emotional bond between tourists and the place and promoting an authentic vision of it. Community narrative is a powerful tool for enhancing and preserving the identity and diversity of territories, promoting responsible tourism, and the meaningful involvement of local communities in sustainable development.

Experiences such as non-tourist guidebooks are found to be tools for adopting bottom-up approaches in the exploitation and promotion of the territory and can be approached to Participatory Place Branding practices, a set of branding practices designed to create a territorial image that is not only inspired by the narrative of the place produced by local stakeholders with a merely consultative attitude (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Hudak, 2019; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014), but that goes as far as including them in the design and making them owners of the result, i.e. the brand. Lambert (2013) and Zenker and Erfgen (2014), argue that it is possible to design a participatory branding process that includes inhabitants stably and constructively, overcoming the limitations of dirigiste and top-down approaches, as well as the negative aspects of an unorganised and unhelpful narrative for global competition between territories.

The initiative of non-tourist guidebooks is indeed important not only to narrate the diversity of places and their identity aspects but also to contrast cultural homologation and promote an authentic and respectful vision of local contexts, which often risk being overpowered by foreign cultural models. Local communities also become key players in communicating the territory's identity values and transmitting them to future generations. This leads to greater awareness and participation of citizens in tourism development choices, as the intrinsic value of the territorial heritage is recognised, and efforts are made to preserve it through innovative narrative modes.

Finally, the experiential and sensorial dimension of community narratives adds depth and richness to the understanding and appreciation of the territory, thus helping to promote sustainable tourism and the real involvement of local communities in territorial development.

The small number of interviews and the informality of the contact with the interviewees constitutes a limitation of the study; to cope with this, it is needed a comparative analysis with other non-tourist guides published in Italy, to understand the real impact of projects for the development of experiential tourism. The study on Ussita is to be extended with the administration of questionnaires to a sample, to be defined through the procedure of reasoned choice. Respondents will be identified according to quotas relating to specific socio-demographic



characteristics (Di Franco, 2010). The aim is to understand to what extent the non-tourist guide, through dialogue and cultural exchange between tourists and communities, can lead on the one hand to enhance a more intimate and authentic relationship of tourists with the visited territories and on the other allow communities to rediscover their identity through forms of collective narration. Further development of the work is to bring the experience of tourist guides and the Non-tourism project back into the studies on over-tourism and the need to limit the negative impact of mass tourism that nullifies the experiential character. One could elaborate on how the self-narration to external subjects gives back to the communities their power of agency and becomes a process of co-construction and co-evolution, through which communities attribute symbols and meanings to local resources and peculiarities, making their own identity emerge (Banini and Ilovan, 2021). From the exploratory study, it emerges how the non-tourist guide of Ussita narrates the territory of an inland area that does not want to be simply made available to be used and exploited. The narration of the place has served to reknit the ties of the community, also weakened by the earthquake, to strengthen it internally, but opening up to new value categories and forms of tourism, slow, fair, sustainable, and experiential, theoretical paradigms to which this article has constantly referred.

## FUNDING

This research has not received any external fund.

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