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Roots tourism: history and experiences in France

Philippe Clairay

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Special Issue Roots Tourism

FUORI LUOGO

Rivista di Sociologia
del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia

Guest Editors

Tullio Romita

Antonella Perri

Philippe Clairay



Direttore Fabio Corbisiero
Caporedattore Carmine Urciuoli

ANNO VI – Volume 14 – Numero 1 – Gennaio 2023
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Roots tourism: history and experiences in France²

Introduction

It is significant to note that in the tourism bibliography available in France, there is today (2022) no book or academic work devoted to the topic of roots tourism. Only regional research (in Franche-Comté), some journal articles: Tereos (2010), Diasporas (2009) or a few allusions in general works, Cousin, S., Reau, B. (2009) or Violier, P., Duhamel P., Gay J.-C., Mondou V. (2021) evoke the subject, but in a very allusive way. The question is therefore to understand why France, compared to the Italian experience, accumulates such a delay in the development of roots tourism, when it has both the history, the territory, and a large community of expatriates or descendants of colonists around the world.

We will first review the scientific literature available in French language on the subject. By highlighting the gap between this academic literature that has already well analysed the principles of roots tourism, and the delay in experiences of implementation on the French territory, we will try to understand this paradox. We will examine the structural factors that hinder this development, then we will analyse the available resources and the population concerned by roots tourism. Finally, a regional case study on the development of roots tourism in Normandy will also be presented.

1. Definition

1.1. Academic literature

In France, one of the very first citations about roots tourism can be found in a master study by the University of Lyon, presented in 1998:

«It is symptomatic to note that cultural tourism is developing at a time when globalization and technology seem to be the leitmotifs. An individual, by some sort of compensation, seeks his roots, and this point favors cultural tourism». (Daoud, 1998, p. 43)

Twelve years later, Bachimon and Dério (2010), in an important article on affinity tourism, associate roots tourism to a familial form of cultural tourism:

«Regularly returning to the places of one's proven, supposed or imagined family origins to spend holidays and leisure time there is a form of retroactive mobility - at the margins, admittedly, but significant - to labor migrations directed towards large metropolises, be they regional, national, or international. The fact remains that the phenomenon is diversified, especially in terms of the involvement of the temporary migrant (in general), ranging from the simple genealogical consultation of a parish register to the more permanent settlement of workers or pensioners. If the identity pretext is apparently the same, the variations it takes on are multiple and complex, especially in terms of territorial recomposing». (Bachimon & Dério, 2010 p. 29)

One of the pioneer countries to mention roots tourism in scientific publications is Canada, and in particular Quebec, whose history with France is very fertile. A Quebec tourism specialist, Marie-Blanche Fourcade, gave this interesting definition of roots tourism in 2010:

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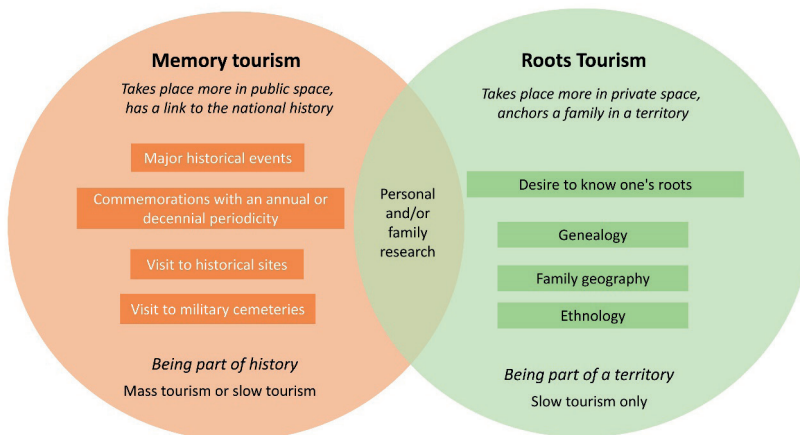
2 Received: 11/07/22. Revised: 11/12/22. Accepted: 30/12/22.

«One thing is certain, behind its apparent simplicity linked to the main vocation of visiting the land of one's ancestors, roots tourism reveals numerous configurations that are shaped by the historical and political context, interpretations, and practices. This diversity is only exacerbated by globalization, which clearly favours travel, openness to others and the redefinition of identities. Return tourism, in addition to its exponential growth in recent decades, is now part of a global social logic that allows us to rethink the relationship of the individual with the territories to which he or she belongs». (Fourcade, 2010, p. 4)

1.2 Roots Tourism is Cultural Tourism

Roots tourism is a cultural form of tourism, that naturally develops in a sustainable and experiential way. Roots tourism is a genealogical tourism too. Families, whether they have done genealogical research or not, are interested in knowing where they came from. Roots tourism is doubly a tourism of discovery with two sides: of one's own family and of unknown geographical connections. Roots tourism is thus diaspora tourism. But to be precise, it is necessary to distinguish roots tourism from memory tourism. If there is an obvious connection between these two forms of tourism, which is the individual and the family, the developmental methods and psychosocial forces in action are different (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Roots tourism: a tourism in search of meaning



Source: own elaboration

To complete this overview, it is worth mentioning the interesting work of Knafou (2017 and 2021), professor emeritus of geography at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, proposing another form of tourism called «reflexive tourism». It applies perfectly to tourism of memory, which is a form of stay in which the tourist is at the same time the producer and the actor of what he consumes. This means that the tourist in search of memory or roots, wonders while he acts on the object of his tourism. In addition, the author establishes a link between reflexive tourism and sustainable tourism. It seems that roots tourism fits into both categories.

1.3. Roots Tourism Limits

However, roots tourism can also have disadvantages, like being caricatural in its quest for authenticity. Bachimon and Derioz (2010) have warned in their very important study on affinity tourism, of the risks that roots tourism can deal with. Indeed, in the absence of real authenticity and face to the transformations linked to the natural evolution of villages and towns (i.e. their

modernization), roots tourism and its actors may tend to create stereotyped images, false settings, or even worse, to falsify history. This risk is shared with other types of tourism, especially those that promote historical re-enactments, whatever they may be.

Does this return to idealized sources, i.e., the concretization of the bond of affinity, whether strong or imaginary, through the episodic and lasting return to the country, lead to dead ends? Paradoxically, it mainly results in the transfer of lifestyles, aesthetics and incomes from the issuing space, a transfer to a fantasized place or landscape by «meta-tourists». This dynamic inevitably leads to profound alterations of the social and landscape environment of the host territory, which may lead to its remodeling according to the norms of departure country. The depth of the alteration, or even denaturation, will depend on the extent of the domination exercised and the relative distance (in time and space) of the diaspora concerned.

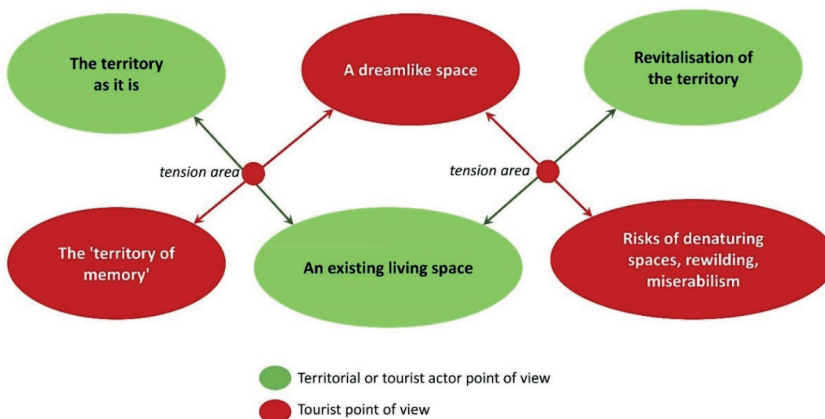
It is a matter of gradients. For some communities, the discovery of family roots in their country of origin is a first step towards more definitive fixations that can transcend the tourist attraction by incidentally or permanently reactivating settlement flows that had previously prevailed. Roots tourism can thus lead to real resettlement in the long term, especially when seasonal tourists become retirees looking for a return to their family origins. In most cases, roots tourism is purely factual and anecdotal, or even go unnoticed by remaining in the private sphere of friendly and familiar reception. However, it is likely to pass from one phase to the next, and thus vary in intensity.

The heritage aspect of roots tourism must also be considered, in the context of population ageing in Western countries. An increase in conservatism, in nostalgia, in the cult of remembrance and the taste for historical heritage is often observed. Those who can afford to invest in homes, buying antiques, making genealogical research to explore their family roots. Today, it is the commodification that marks this phenomenon, which began in amateurism.

This process of relocation, often incomplete insofar when it leads to round trips rather than definitive installation, can thus be defined both as reactionary to globalization, since it overvalues the original localization, but also, and paradoxically, as one of the figures of this globalization, since it supposes migration and travel. And it is this dialectic that maintains the dynamic described and makes roots tourism a very special phenomenon.

One of the main difficulty in roots tourism development is the adaptation to the reality of the terrain and the attention that must be paid to its authentic character (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Roots tourism: contradictory motivations



Source: own elaboration

However, one of the constant paradoxes in tourism history is its capacity to destroy its object, or at least to damage it, through over tourism, pollution, uncontrolled urbanism, or various fal-

sifications in national narratives. The issue is delicate because roots tourism should be the least invasive form of tourism, in search of an «authentic historical landscape». In the following case (Figure 3), roots are created through a staging of a tradition that is not as old as it seems. The company, a biscuit factory, was founded in 1995 in a specially created environment for selling biscuits in a nostalgic decoration. A kind of biscuit Disneyland! This example of true false can of course be multiplied, and one must be wary of promotional advertisements that repeatedly evoke the authenticity or typicality of a terroir, because territorial marketing is then at work.

Figure 3. Maison du Biscuit, 2017, Sortoville (Manche, France)



Source: CC BY-ND 2.0 FR

2. Roots tourism context and experiences in France

2.1. French Paradox

Only a few experiments are being developed in isolation on the French territory. However, France has all the necessary resources to develop this type of emerging tourism. Several factors explain this delay: a centralized administrative and political structuring of tourism, with actors whose missions are sometimes redundant, a slow awareness of this phenomenon, private actors who are only just beginning to take up the issue, and who are more used to mass tourism than to customized programs.

French tourism institutions are somewhat fragmented and can be a brake to the development of tourism experiments (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tourism institutions in France



Source. OCDE 2020

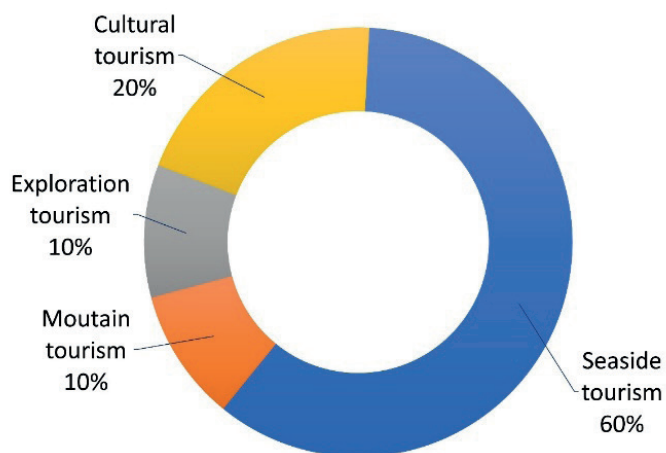
Since 2014, two main ministries guide tourism policies: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. To avoid these ministries working separately, an inter-ministerial committee was created to oversee the actions. However, it is clear from this organizational chart that some competences may overlap. This is the case at national and local level. France therefore does not have a ministry dedicated to tourism whose task would be entirely devoted to the development of this activity. The world's leading tourist destination in 2019, France was recently overtaken by Spain.

Another issue appears when interpreting this diagram: it concerns the attempts at decentralization in the 1980s. At the bottom of the diagram, there are regional and local tourist offices. One can therefore fully understand how things can be made difficult by this overlapping of structures. Because if the readability of this organizational chart is not easy for professionals, it is even less so for visitors, tourists, who are looking for clear and precise information. This leads to problems of governance and direction, as each institution tends to carry out its promotional activities independently. To return to the topic we are interested in, roots tourism, there is not even a trace of it in the various publications of the state agency Atout France, which is supposed to give the main guidelines and development axes in terms of tourism policy in our country.

It results of a systematic search that the term «roots tourism» is almost totally absent from the websites of French tourism institutions. Worse, on the website of Atout France, a search for «roots tourism» yields no results! But a search for «memory tourism» gives 27 results. This observation speaks volumes about the forms of tourism favored in France today. Roots tourism seems to be only an academic notion in France, while in Italy it is an operational reality in terms of tourism promotion and organization of stays (Perri, 2020). In France, there is no real hierarchical link between local tourism stakeholders, most of whom are associations, neither at departmental nor at regional level. This is a particularity and a difficulty in the implementation of promotional actions, each one tending to defend its territorial area. Each are placed on the same level in this scheme.

More anecdotally, a recent survey on roots or genealogical tourism in France (Gaujaj and Leininger, 2018) showed that cultural tourism is under-represented in schoolbooks, when seaside tourism is the most illustrated theme (Figure 5). This study is interesting because tourism offers powerful image systems that forge a collective imagination. Here again, roots tourism seems to be relegated to a secondary position in France, reflecting the level of its development.

Figure 5. Types of tourism represented in school textbooks in France (2018)



Source. Gaujaj et Leininger (2018)

2.2 Endogenous Roots Tourism

French history is marked by a very important rural exodus that, from the mid-19th century to the 1950s, moved a large amount of the rural population to the cities that were then booming. Paris, of course, benefited most from this workers influx. For a long time, the French poorest regions provided a cheap labor: Brittany, Auvergne, Savoy, Lorraine and, to a lesser degree, Normandy, were very important areas of intra-national emigration. The countryside emptied and the cities grew (Armengaud and Fine, 1983).

In these various cases, regional communities were formed in Paris, or in Marseille where an influential Corsican community developed. In 1963, the largest immigrant community in Paris came from the Auvergne region. This economic immigration was on a large scale. At the end of their working lives, the Auvergnats from Paris often returned to their native region to live out their final years. The same applies to the Breton community in Paris, which was also very numerous and had a common language: Breton. Nowadays, often settled for more than 100 years in the big French cities, some of their descendants are still travelling on the land of their ancestors, discovering their family origins. Many Parisians, descendants of these communities, return to settle in the Auvergne or Brittany regions (Beauchemin C., Hamel C., Simon, P. 2016). Another phenomenon remains to be explored: that of returning to the land of the ancestors. Indeed, with the Covid-19 crisis, France is experiencing a movement back to countryside life. What was thought to be a Covid crisis effect seems to be turning into a much more important and lasting movement. Abandoned houses in rural regions are now the subject of a real estate boom.

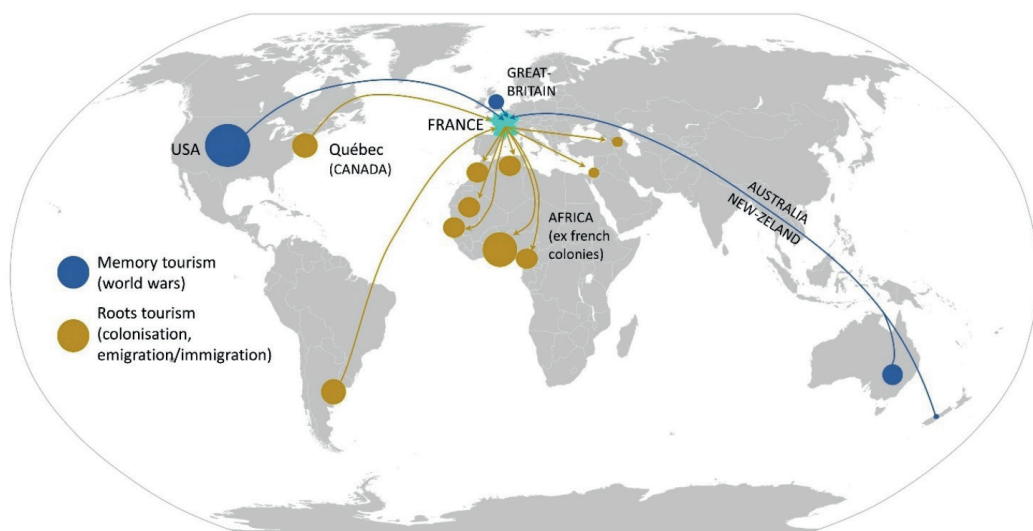
2.3 Exogenous or Extra-National Roots Tourism

In France, exogenous or extra-national roots tourism is developing in two directions. First, in North America: as we have seen, the first sociological research on roots tourism originated in Canada.

Historically, many of the inhabitants of Quebec have French, and more precisely Norman origins (Joyal, Linteau 2008). Thus, in the Orne countryside, there is a museum of Quebec emigration, and in Quebec, tour operators sell trips dedicated to roots tourism in France. But from France, few commercial structures go prospecting these tourists abroad, even if links still exist.

The second major stream of roots tourism in France concerns the historical relationship between France and its former colonies (Figure 6), particularly African ones. Today, many of the descendants of the first African emigrants are questioning their origins. Sometimes links have been broken over time and are being re-established between the African continent and Europe (Algeria). The dynamic African diaspora is organized by communities and often makes individual journeys to the countries of origin. In addition to Africa, we could mention the Armenian or Lebanese diasporas, which are very present and active. As can be seen, large diasporas are established in France, and family exchanges, again, spontaneous, are also a form of tourism of the roots which escapes statistics.

Figure 6. Roots tourism exogenous to France



Source: own elaboration

One region in France has managed to link its history to the desire for roots of some tourists from afar: Franche-Comté. The story begins between 1749 and 1752, when, mainly for religious reasons, Protestants from the Montbéliard region (department of Doubs, eastern France near Switzerland) left for the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. These 431 first immigrants from Montbéliard are the ancestors of approximately 60,000 French-speaking Canadians living today in the Quebec City region. One town was founded by them: Lunenburg, where several waves of French, Swiss and German Protestant emigrants followed. This specificity has repercussions to this day. The town has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site by the descendants of this community, and there are still strong links with the French town of Montbéliard. The website of the town's tourist office is one of the few in France to have a website page entirely dedicated to roots tourism¹. The history of this emigrant community is explained and suggestions for a stay in the footsteps of these ancestors are presented.

3. Roots Tourism at a Regional Scale: the Example of Normandy

Today in France, rare tourist companies advertise themselves as specialists in roots and origins tourism, more rarely genealogical tourism. Most promote a memorial tourism, linked to world conflicts. Several French regions are ancient battlefields. For World War I: Les Hauts de France (Nord, Pas de Calais, Somme) The Grand Est (Ardennes, Meuse, Marne) and Alsace; for World War II: Normandy and Provence.

In 2017, 30 per cent of tourist activity in Normandy was directly linked to the Second World War commemorative tourism. In that region where the 1944 landing took place, companies offer services to welcome the families of soldiers who disappeared during the fighting, who wish to visit the places where their ancestor passed away and where he was buried. France was particularly scarred by the two world wars. This history is still alive, and the most significant part of memory tourism is taking place in the regions concerned. Commemorative or memorial tourism concerned over 20 million visitors in 2018, including almost 7 million in Normandy. The official website of the Normandy Tourist Office presents memorial tourism as follows:

¹ <https://www.paysdemontbeliard-tourisme.com/>

«Among the military cemeteries in Normandy, we stopped at the most famous of them, at Colleville-sur-Mer. We invite you to discover this solemn place, a place of history and remembrance. When we arrived at the site, the 9388 white gravestones stretched out before our eyes. With a lump in our throats, we began our visit, with Omaha Beach in the distance. A marked path leads to the beach. You can imagine the soldiers' boats arriving in the distance on 6 June 1944, on Bloody Omaha». ² (Normandie Tourisme website text abstract, 2022) ³

In Normandy, 27 military cemeteries and 52 places (museums, heritage interpretation centers) are dedicated to the D-Day landing and the Second World War. Numerous visits are offered on this theme by the Normandy Tourist Office and local or regional tour operators. Of course, one may find it cynical to commercialize such a moving memory. This regional example clearly shows that memory tourism and roots tourism are often intertwined. Indeed, for the second or third generation of descendants of soldiers killed during the various wars, it is important to know, if not where their ancestors lived, at least where they suffered and died. Thus, a part of their roots is to be found on the battlefields.

Roots tourism in Normandy has a high development potential, due to its history. In the 16th century, the role of the Normans in the formation of the first settlements in what was to become New France, i.e., present-day Quebec. Mainly fishermen, these early settlers settled along the east coast, founding small ports. Many of these early migrants came from Normandy, mainly from its most rural and historically poorer part (such as in Perche region, Orne). Today, this history, orally transmitted on both sides of the Atlantic, is well known to historians, both Canadian and French. One unique museum is specially dedicated to this history: the Museum of French Emigration to Canada ⁴, in Tourouvre (Orne, France). The museum's contemporary and interactive setting invites visitors to a journey to New France (Figure 7). This former French colony covered a territory from the mouth of the St. Lawrence (Quebec) to the Mississippi Delta (Louisiana). 400 years ago, the Percherons were among the first to settle in these then unknown lands, to clear the forests, to cultivate the land, to build houses, in a word: to found a new country: Canada. The museum, opened in 2006, had about 8,000 visitors per year before the Covid-19 crisis. The distribution of its visitors has not been the subject of scientific publication.

Figure 7. Museum of French Emigration to Canada, Tourouvre (Orne, France)



Source: © Muséales de Tourouvre

² <https://www.normandie-tourisme.fr/visite-cimetiere-americain/>

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ <https://www.musealesdetourouvre.fr>

The museum's introductory text is quite explicit:

«Men, women, alone or with their families, artisans, lumberjacks, labourers, 'filles du roi', clergymen, soldiers, sailors, were the first, in the 17th century, to populate Canada. They left from Brittany, Poitou, Ile-de-France, Normandy (etc.) and Perche. They braved a transatlantic crossing, braved winters, cleared land and built their first homes on the banks of the St. Lawrence. With courage, they attempted and succeeded in the adventure of the New World. They settled in Quebec City, Côte de Beaupré, Île d'Orléans from 1634, and then in Montreal. Their names were Tremblay, Gagnon, Juchereau, Drouin or Boucher and they came from Tourouvre, Le Pin-la-Garenne or Mortagne-au-Perche... In the 17th century, they attempted the adventure of New France. Three centuries later, the links between Perche and Canada are still strong, as shown by the many descendants of these illustrious pioneers who return each year to follow in their ancestors' footsteps». (Museum of French Emigration to Canada, Tourouvre, Orne, website text abstract, 2022)⁵.

It is worth noting that since 1996, ten years before the creation of this museum, a Franco-Québec commission on the memory of commonplaces related to transatlantic emigration between these two countries has been created. It promotes memorial sites, research and conference cycles on this history shared by France and Quebec.

In France, the observation is relentless: only one private company, *Racines Voyages* (Figure 8), clearly claims to commercialize roots tourism trips, and it is based in Caen, Normandy⁶. Interviewed, its director, Ms Marie-Claire Prestavoine, shared her experience during a long phone conversation on 24 September 2021. The interview revealed a lack of coordination between public and private actors in an area that is central to the economy of a region like Normandy: tourism.

First, Mrs Prestavoine insists that memorial tourism and genealogical tourism do not correspond to the same definition, nor to the same services. In the first case, memorial tourism is linked to the various battlefields where soldiers of many nations died during the two world wars.

In the second case, it is a more family-friendly and proactive approach. As far as roots tourism is concerned, it is about going further. The services are tailor-made, according to the wishes of the customers. In addition to booking hotels and means of transport, it is a question of proposing the realization of the family tree and the discovery of places, sometimes unknown to the customers, where the family comes from. This is how stage tours are put together, in the footsteps of the ancestors. As Ms. Prestavoine reminds us, Ms. Nathalie Worthington, current director of the Juno Beach Centre (Juno is one of the Normandy landings where Anglo-Canadian troops landed in 1944), was able to prove through genealogical research that many of the Canadians who landed on this beach during D-Day were descendants of Normans who left for the American continent in the 17th century.

Figure 8. Racines Voyages, Carpiquet (Calvados, France)



Source: © Racines Voyages

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ <https://racinesvoyages.com/>

Conclusion

Will tourism industries, severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis, be resilient enough to reinvent, rethink or create new ways of discovering the world? From this perspective, roots tourism probably has a great future. It really has many qualities: it is an individual or family tourism, and it can be linked to a contemporary form of slow tourism, which has a low environmental impact due to its individualized character. It involves stays that are often longer than those offered by classic tourist circuits. Roots tourism provides a contemplative and emotional experience. But still a paradox remains: roots tourism is aimed at a diaspora throughout the world, and many of these descendants of emigrants now live modestly in distant countries. Individuals and families wanting to find out about their own origins are often held back by a reality that is both stark and commonplace: the cost of the journey. Opening this form of tourism to everyone can lead to the development of digital solutions, to share what cannot be shared through physical discovery of distant places.

In the now deserted villages from which the migrants left, much remains to be done. To promote, one must know, and to know, one must research, collect, and preserve. To accomplish this mission of cultural data collection, it is interesting to mention ethnological museums or interpretation centers that already exist in rural areas. Their long-standing experience, such as that of the French «écomusées», combine both a territorial and ethnological approach, through the prism of folk art and traditions. These museums preserve the memory of the inhabitants of a territory, their practices, and their everyday objects. All these cultural structures will certainly benefit, as will artisans and local people, from the development of roots tourism, both through a physical discovery and a virtual tour.

A great deal of ethnological work was already undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s to make an inventory of the cultural and ethnological specificities of the various French regions, but much remains to be done. This work can be a basis for the development of roots tourism, whatever the country observed. The growing number of demands to UNESCO for the recognition of original cultural practices or crafts in the intangible heritage of humanity is a manifestation of this trend. Another point raised in this research is crucial: the institutional organization of tourism. In France, the creation of a unique ministry would be welcome, to federate, propose and transform the territory's various initiatives into national tourism attractiveness program. It is likely that, faced with the huge tourist potential that roots tourism represents in France, many companies will be created, following the example of «Racines Voyages». But collaborations between the French central state, local authorities, companies, and universities remains to be reinforced, and in this field, Italian experience is showing us the way.

Today, in a post-pandemic context, some people think roots tourism as an alternative to mass tourism. I am not sure that mass tourism will disappear any time soon. Roots tourism is not an alternative, but another proposal. Roots tourism is a response to a contemporary need: that of human links, of geographical and historical landmarks, in the context of globalization. In a way, it is a question of repairing the broken links, or create new connections between individuals who want to invent a common future together by highlighting their roots first.

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