Responsible tourism in Europe and accommodation: a new challenge

By Sergio Fadini
Responsible Tourism scholar

This research aims at drawing attention on how responsible tourism can be an important factor in empowering tourism as a social force, and in particular for what concerns hospitality facilities. The sector of hospitality today represents a valuable business in tourism. Many tourists travel as individuals, using online booking to select an accommodation facility and make a reservation. Responsible tourism is a new way of thinking tourism where each stakeholder, whether local communities, tourists or tour operators, is equally important. Furthermore there is an analysis of the social, environmental and economic dimensions relative to the journey to a particular destination. Responsible tourism started by helping local communities living in destinations where the tourist impact was very heavy, however today the scope has changed, it has taken on a global approach and it is possible to think in terms of responsible tourism for each destination; in fact all kinds of tourism can be more responsible.

In Europe responsible tour operators have started to look into responsible accommodation facilities and a number of online booking websites dedicated to responsible accommodation is now available.

This paper focuses on this topic, comparing responsible tourism concepts. It analyses the possible links between responsible tourism approaches and hospitality today. We should ask ourselves: what does "responsible accommodation" mean? What are the main characteristics of responsible online booking?

1. Hospitality facilities in tourism

In Europe estimates related to tourist hospitality facilities have revealed almost 900 million arrivals in 2013 (Eurostat; 2015), a figure in constant growth that should be viewed in the light of the digital revolution that has been underway for the last twenty years.

The Internet revolution has in fact created the conditions in the tourist sector for a new way to sell
and purchase theme products. Potential clients have taken the habit of customizing their own holiday plans and in turn tourist operators have begun to specialize in offering tailor-made solutions. In order to meet the new challenges most tours operators have turned into Online Travel Agencies (OTA) (Becheri and Biella; 2013).

The tourist hospitality sector has also been influenced by the strengthening of these two phenomena, in fact on Internet there are plenty of websites where one can choose and book, or at least view accommodation facilities.

The worldwide success of OTA in the hospitality sector is indisputable: a research made by Del Chiappa (2013) in Italy has highlighted how tourists prefer OTA for their reliability, the possibility of booking online, the ample choice on offer, the opportunity to readily find special offers and to compare the various brands reputation thanks to reviews submitted by customers who have used a facility.

Websites such as Venere, Expedia, Booking.com but also Trip advisor, renowned for their reviews option open to everybody and now connected to Hostelworld, or Trivago a website specialized in the comparison of hotel prices, have all become leaders in the tourist sector. These websites have at most 20 years of experience and they have been the pioneers of the new frontier of hospitality connected to new technologies.

Venere was set up in Italy in 1995 and began to work on the European market in 2000. It declares to have over 200.000 tourist facilities on offer and has been entirely taken over by the group Expedia Inc. just as Trip advisor, set up in 2000 and Trivago, created in 2005.

Expedia Inc. was founded in 1996 and since 2005 it has been an autonomous reality, comprising in addition to the above mentioned travel websites, Hotels.com, that declares to have 240.000 facilities on offer.

Booking.com was born in the same year as Expedia and today declares to have over 600.000 hospitality facilities in 200 nations. It is connected to the Villas website which comprises 250.000 houses.

Usually in these web portals information on a receptive structure is tied up to standard factors such as their price, especially if there is an ongoing offer, or to the number of rooms and services available, that are generally quite similar in each website.
Great attention is given to customer satisfaction, thanks to the possibility given to travellers to express reviews on their experience in a particular facility.

How does responsible tourism approach the hospitality sector in the light of these changes?

2. Responsible tourism in Europe and hospitality facilities

The concept of responsible tourism was developed as a result of evaluating some of the potential problems connected with tourism such as the environmental, economic and social impact it has on destinations (Nash, 2001; Pieroni, 2003; Barretto, 2007 Goodwin, 2009; Rivera-Mateos, Rodríguez-García, 2012; Leslie, 2012).

Unlike other terms that may describe activities, resorts or types of tourist, responsible tourism is a cross cutting concept, linked to ethics and sustainability (Font, 2011). It is an umbrella term that may comprise specific forms of tourism (Laurent, 2003).

In 2002, the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) was drawn up a document known as the “Declaration of Cape Town”, containing 7 points that according to the ICRT characterize responsible tourism (see tab.1).

| 1. | minimises negative economic, environmental, and social impacts; |
| 2. | generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry; |
| 3. | involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances; |
| 4. | makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world’s diversity; |
| 5. | provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues; |
| 6. | provides access for physically challenged people; |
| 7. | is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence. |

Source: ICRT, 2002

In recent years, the term “responsible” has been gaining importance in debates on international tourism (Cañana 2012). Until 2002 the term “responsible tourism” was used in Europe from just a
few organizations working mostly on awareness; only some of them organized trips. Since 2002, the map of responsible tourism in central and western Europe has changed and is now quite different compared to its origins: the number of tour operators has increased, mostly in Spain, where there aren't big organizations at level II; affiliations are on the increase within some level II organizations in Italy and Germany; there is some differentiation between the types of activities implemented, and tour operators are increasing in this sector (Fadini, 2013).

Over the last years individual facilities have come into being: they apply responsible tourism values, especially in industrialized countries, where over the past ten years these sort of trips have been organized. The entry in this market of individual tourist services provider represents a turning point, but also a big question mark on how to match theory and practice.

Until a few years ago, only two types of establishments could be found within European level II responsible tourism organizations: tour operators, who selected accommodation facilities and any other services required for their travel arrangements in accordance with the organizations they belonged to; and other establishments involved with awareness, pressure or protest campaigns on issues concerning the impact of tourism on destinations, from the environmental and local communities point of view.

The selection of hospitality facilities offered by tour operators for trips organized in the southern countries were intended to promote family-owned or locally-managed facilities as an opportunity to break from conventional tourism which used to rely on facilities built and managed by entrepreneurs from the Westernized society (Laurent, 2003).

But in a European country the number of facilities managed by local people is significantly larger than the number of hotel chains or any other hospitality facility managed by foreign entrepreneurs. Hence the question: in countries where tourism has long been well established and the local population offers more options, can this parameter be the only one that needs to be respected? If so, we must conclude that in industrialized countries anyone who chooses local service providers is practicing responsible tourism.

Well-structured establishments usually require their operators to make careful choices when planning a tour package, as well as during and after the trip. Nothing was ever said about what individual tourist services providers should do, or, as in this research, what the facility managers
should do.

In Italy the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR) decided in 2014 to realize the first manual on responsible hospitality, in order to create a link between its values and the efforts of individual hospitality facilities. Unlike the criteria set by the Spanish chain the parameters to respect in Italy are not laid out, though some suggestions on how to manage in a responsible way the hospitality facility are made. So it is not a guideline and there are no hypothesized verifications. This document will officially be introduced in 2015. The intent of AITR is to combine its vision of responsible tourism with social justice, adapting its historical documents, such as Carta Italia, which has the limit of being addressed to tour operators. Each point of the manual deals with a different issue: critical consumption, energy, labour, environment, links with the local territory, ties with the local community, accessibility, relationships with the guests, quality; and a theme dedicated to what happens when the guest leaves.

3. The research

Surveys that evaluate responsible tourism in connection with the hospitality sector are indeed few and far between, in fact hardly any are found on responsible tourism operators and their way of choosing their facilities for their customers; neither on how the individual hospitality establishment try to differentiate themselves, nor on websites dedicated to tourist accommodation committed to responsible tourism values.

This research aims at casting some light on these aspects, analysing how responsible tourism operators have evolved in Europe, examining the situation of individual structures and finally focusing on those websites specialized in responsible tourism accommodation.

I chosen all the websites in Europe that I found, where it's clear the link with responsible tourism values.

3.1 Individual accommodation facilities

Until 2012 the World Responsible Tourism Awards had only two categories on tourist accommodation facilities: one pertaining local communities and the other one the environment. In the first category the award took into account those hotels, lodges or other types of
accommodation with a positive impact on the local supply chain and local people. This category could comprise a B&B, hotel, camp site, eco-lodge, organic farm, home stay, renovated barn, ski lodge, hostel, tree-house, villa, chalet or any other type of accommodation. No European accommodation has won this award, only two English accommodation facilities have been highly commended: an organic farm (B&B) and an eco-friendly hotel. Different is the situation for the best accommodation in environmental terms, where there have been many European winners or highly commended facilities.

According to 2014 data, in Italy several accommodation facilities are members of AITR: a hotel managed by a cooperative sensitive to the problems of migrants and the homeless; an ethical farmhouse; some networks of bed and breakfast promoting sustainable development, an eco-friendly hotel; various hostels.

Hospitality facilities differ from one another; it is a broad and interesting perspective, because if we considered responsible tourism a concept that could be applied throughout the world, these facilities could represent an important model for the choices selected by those tourist operators interested in organizing trips in several areas, or for the do-it-yourself type of tourists. But precisely for this reason, it would be really useful to understand what should mark them out from other similar structures.

But they lack a characterisation tying these different ways of putting into practice the values of responsible tourism.

The rest of the European scene does not offer many options for what concerns hospitality facilities, the responsible tourism establishments being represented mostly by tour operators, cultural or environmental associations or NGO. The only exception is Spain with the Spanish chain Fuerte hotels. They boast to have recommended responsible tourism for the last 60 years (Fuerte hotels 2013), a rather improbable claim since the term has been in use for only the last thirty years, conceived as an activity that has to coexist in harmony with the environment as well as our cultural and socio-economic surroundings.

It certainly is not an individual structure but a hotel chain, so their approach is more articulated than an individual accommodation facility, yet it maintains nevertheless the logic of one.

They have adopted sustainability as their guiding principle and have incorporated new
management systems that ensure a minimal impact on the environment while at the same time promoting the local culture and economy. And there is also a focus on people’s wellbeing, including that of their customers and employees and even of people who are in need and at risk. They assert that it is important to think of the cultural, social and economic environment in which they work as if it were a jewel that ought to be cherished.

Moreover, they have implemented several development programmes and cultural projects to help boosting the local economy and improving the quality of life of people with special needs. They also plan to ensure the conservation and development of local customs and traditions that ought not to be forgotten.

Up to 2013 they published a report of their commitment in the environmental, economic and social fields, representing the 3 axes of sustainable and responsible tourism; and for what concerns the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), they disclosed the network of their local actors with whom they interacted on top of other interesting and verifiable parameters, as for instance the fact of having set themselves the parameter of adhering to purchasing at least 50% of their products from local suppliers. A comparative graph allowed the assessment of its development.

3.2 The choices of the responsible tour operator

Over the last years the situation has also evolved among the operators of responsible tourism.

In the 1990s the Vagabondo network of accommodation facilities was set up in Italy, the first national experiment trying to give equal importance to the 3 axes of sustainable development: the environmental, economic and social dimension. The evaluation cards of the affiliated facilities available on the website encompassed the managers’ commitments in the environmental, social and local economy fields. However, it is not active anymore.

With the advent of the third millennium the concept of creating websites specialized in responsible hospitality, either exclusively or in a complementary way, are steadily increasing.

In 2001 the first international web portal entirely dedicated to responsible hospitality facilities was set up: Responsible Travel.

Some of these websites did not last long, others are still in existence but have remained confined to a national level. The slow tourism web portal became international in 2014 and it has been
attempting its relaunch after a rather weak debut.

Not all of them have however evolved along the lines of conventional tourism. An example was the French web portal Achetons Durable, inactive since 2013, which recommended travellers to select facilities that adopted energy consumption reduction policies; that developed a rubbish management plan, from the point of purchase to that of re-use; that paid particular attention to the materials and the products used in building the facility; that made the staff and the customers aware of the sustainable development of the facility. A list of about forty accommodation facilities followed in each of which its specificity was well evident although booking was not possible.

The Voyageons autrement, another responsible tourism web portal, that has a section dedicated to accommodation facilities, offers eco-touristic establishments but in this case too there is no possibility to book, only a link to the website of each facility. As above, in each facility’s evaluation card the characteristics that make them close to the concept of responsible tourism are well highlighted.

The Italian Equotube offers its 200 hospitality facilities through smartboxes specialized in responsible travel and accommodations to be purchased online through the fair trade process and the Lega Coop circuit.

In the section dedicated to tourist accommodation facilities, Equotube proposes “a responsible weekend to take you away from the everyday hustle and bustle life of the city”. The offers are aimed at different targets: “for those who love nature or tradition, for those who want to discover new places through the eyes of those who live there every day, for those who love to travel slowly”.

Equotube demands the structures interested in joining the project to meet at least 70% of the 13 parameters taken into account and to respect the Charter of the Principles of Responsible Tourism drafted by AITR. Again, these questions address various issues, in keeping with the tradition of responsible tourism. The environmental parameters are dominant, being 6 out of 13. One question is related to social tourism as a form of accessible tourism. Two are based on economic solidarity values, the other two are based on the concept of territory usage and meeting the local community.

Table 1 - Equotube questions

| 1. Is the structure placed in a particular natural environment? If so, is it in line with the... |
Specialized brands have also been launched, but they generally take on a very narrow interpretation of responsible tourism, simply confining it to environmental awareness. An example of this is Ecolabel, set up in 2003, whose evaluation for awarding their label focuses exclusively on environmental factors such as garbage management and energy and water saving.

3.3 Websites available for online booking

In Europe there are other websites specialized in tourist accommodation facilities, providing explicit references to responsible tourism values and online booking.

These websites employ various criteria, first and foremost the environment, while at the same time taking into consideration social issues weighing on ethical choices and the connections with the local social and productive fabric.

To understand the various differences between them and to compare them to conventional tourism websites, I inserted my B&B in each of these websites. Before being accepted all of them ask applicants to compile a card from which it should emerge their degree of closeness with the criteria
at the basis of each site. Ermes and Slow tourism also provide a judgment for their answers, while the others just insert their answers in a card that immediately shows its differences as to what it is found in the OTAs websites.

However a facility intending to make ethical choices will hardly be able to communicate it in a conventional online booking website. Nevertheless, only in those websites dedicated to these issues tourists can find information that is not pertaining only to costs or facilities. Today conventional booking websites simply aim at publishing technical information concerning accommodation.

The managers of the Responsible Travel website, online pioneers of responsible tourism, in addition to pointing out their careful selection of their suppliers in the accommodation sector, focus on other issues: local character and authenticity, travel like a local and responsibility. They are interested in hotel design, staffing, food and experiences that reflect local character and differences. They believe that the commodification or falsification of cultures and history in tourism is demeaning to guests and local people; they prefer something truthful, sincere and genuine.

It is assumed that those who join their website “have a real passion for the place in which they operate and they believe that there is a link between thoughtful hoteliers who care about their impact on destinations, local people and the authentic and local experiences”.

In fact, to be admitted one must show real work to address two or more environmental and social issues that are most relevant at a local level.

If the questions on the environment are similar in each website, the social ones are particularly important because they touch on issues such as social knowledge of the area and known production lines, commitments to improve society, voluntary or charitable activities and job relations with employees. All subject to a personal perspective where the emphasis is placed on demonstrating daily contacts with the above mentioned issues.

Responsible Travel, making clear references to responsible tourism on its homepage, also created a card that gives you only the classic information, two lines of description, price and any ongoing offers. Then if one is interested in learning more, they can visit the profile of the chosen structure to get the detailed information, which represents an added value.
Table 2 – Responsible Travel questions about local communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About Local communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Campaigning for change: describe specific local issues, campaigns and results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Volunteering &amp; charity: describe specific projects you help and how they benefit the local community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A fair deal: give details of how many people you employ from the local area and what they do. Describe how you support their training &amp; development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Local crafts and culture: describe how you and your guests buy local products and visit cultural centre/attractions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Travelling with respect: what do you provide guests with to ensure they get the warmest local welcome?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Responsible Travel

The experience of Vivi Sostenibile is recent but it has immediately asserted itself, using an original slogan to launch their circuit of hospitality facilities, called Human Destination: "Don't ask yourself where, but who", where therefore the attention passes from the facility to its manager. In the card to be compiled there are questions about the followings matters: eco friendly, that means a nature-friendly facility; accessibility; children; animals; human relationships. An innovative approach where children and animals enjoy special attention. At the beginning of 2015, 47 facilities were inserted in the incoming website, and from April online booking was made possible.

Vivi Sostenibile has two different websites: a more generic one on sustainability; the other only for booking accommodation. In the latter the message about the importance of the manager’s role becomes immediately clear. There are no other theoretical explanations.

Table 3: Vivi Sostenibile’s main questions on children and animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDREN ORIENTED:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of games for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little camping bed – Crib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Carrier Backpack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basin for bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricycle, baby bicycle with wheels, Child seats for adult’s bikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discounts/free pass for babies or large families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PET ORIENTED:
Animals allowed
Fenced-in zone
Food bowls
Basin to refresh dogs
Source: Vivi Sostenibile

The Italian website Ermes is committed to promoting travel awareness and is aimed at responsible tourists. Any accommodation facility wishing to join Ermes must declare their commitment on several issues. This website also combines environmental matters with other issues related to both respect of travellers and various other questions related to the socio-economic field.

However, the number of facilities available is not clear as Ermes’ browser comprises undifferentiated facilities, even those that have not undergone the initial test, totalling over 20,000 establishments, most of which have nothing to do with responsible tourism. In 2014 Ermes began to look into boosting their activities, by introducing some smartbox packages comprising 24 responsible tourism facilities.

On Ermes’ website tourists can choose from the search options those relating to the facility’s environmental impact and the networks it belongs to. In the list of filtered facilities there is no further information whereas in each facility information sheet there are two graphic tables, one for their environmental impact assessment (each facility can evaluate it voluntarily), the other on 5 parameters, which however are not responsible tourism criteria.

Table 4 – Ermes’ questions

- ecological and environmental sustainability;
- economic equity;
- social responsibility and ethical awareness;
- awareness and enhancement of the cultural dimension;
- enhancement of travelling;
- protection of children from sex tourism;
- information and transparency for travellers.
Source: Ermes

The Slow Tourism website encourages the affiliation of hospitality facilities with the goal of playing a part in safeguarding the territory through the adoption of best practices capable of reducing the
environmental impact and by setting themselves apart in the tourism market by improving hospitality quality.

For those tourist businesses wishing to join them, Slow Tourism have created a 6 point ethical code explaining their philosophy coupled with a hospitality quality manual for each type of facility summarizing their commitments, subdivided into the following areas: reception and hospitality, catering, environmental protection, energy-saving, cooperation with the local communities and a memorandum for their guests.

Table 5 – Slow Tourism questions

| 1 - Respect the man. The productions must promote a sustainable social development, non-discrimination and inclusion, where possible, of disadvantaged groups |
| 2 - Respect for the environment |
| 3 - Protection of health |
| 4 - Use of environmentally friendly products in the production and processing line |
| 5 - Typical products that give continuity and value to the local culture |
| 6 - Informative messages and a clear communication for the consumer |

Source: Slow Tourism

To join Slow Tourism, one has to meet their quality requirements, based on high levels of hospitality as well as environmental care and safeguard, cooperation with the local community to enhance the whole territory and promotion of natural and cultural resources. The belief is that these factors “create wealth for local communities while helping to raise awareness of local traditions and to ensure a healthy environment, essential to develop sustainable tourism”.

The new Slow Tourism website offers better information than it did in the past. Now one can quickly find interesting information as well as a classification of each type of accommodation, determined by the organization (sorted by colours - green, orange and grey).

5. Conclusions

The analysis carried out shows how in Europe the focus on accommodation facilities is changing for those who appreciate responsible tourism values.

The differences from conventional tourism are huge: each of the evaluated websites highlights
some typical aspects of responsible tourism, which significantly sets them apart from the conventional tourism approach. In addition to environmental aspects, rightly included but in some cases quite dominant, responsible behaviours of managers are highlighted in respect to their employees or other workers, with great attention focused on the territory and their social work. The creation of a responsible hospitality charter by AITR is an important step, as these kinds of documents can become reference points for the whole movement of responsible tourism, strengthening it.

In general, the information available on the purpose of responsible tourism and the information provided by tourist facilities evaluation cards are quite substantial and the significance of the criteria applied gets significant exposure.

But the challenge for these websites is to be able to remain on the market and not only to suggest values.

With the exception of Responsible Travel, that has an international vocation and comprises several accommodation facilities, all the other sites that were analysed have few affiliated establishments, thus serving as merely niche activities. Only in few cases there is a good use of technology to offer competitive services and not simply for display purposes, starting from the service of online booking.

The sector of tourist accommodation therefore can be an important springboard for those promoting responsible tourism, as it allows both do-it-yourself tourists and specialized tour operators to choose from a variety of services, differentiated according to a variety of factors.

Bibliography

Eurostat (2015) *Arrivals at tourist accommodation establishments*. Available at:


