

Analysing Italian Historical Small Towns: A Cultural and Geographic Mosaic of Identity

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Abstract: The recent increase in the Tourism sector has underlined its economic centrality, contributing to 9,1% of global GDP in 2023. The European Union holds a significant position, counting more than 50% of international arrivals. This, in turn, can be translated into considerable economic effects that positively affect the member states. Among such states, Italy has been ranked in the top five international destinations, registering over 57 million tourist inflows. Such an increase has been driven by affluence in major cities and the modern trend of rediscovering historical small towns (HST). This research aims to analyse the components of this trend, underscoring the geographical position and features of the HSTs throughout the Italian territory. Moreover, a descriptive analysis with quantitative data and a SWOT analysis will be conducted to assess their distribution through the Italian territory and their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Preliminary findings reveal that regions such as Central Italy host the highest concentration of villages, while climate change and depopulation threaten their viability. By analysing these HSTs, the study aims to inform strategic planning for sustainable tourism development, enhancing local identities and preserving cultural heritage while positioning these areas as viable alternatives in the global tourism landscape.

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism constitutes a pivotal force in driving economic growth and job creation while serving as a social need (Agovino et al., 2017; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Streimikiene et al. (2021) recognize this sector as one of the most important economic sectors in leading countries worldwide, contributing approximately 9.1% to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (nearly 10 trillion U.S. dollars) (Statista 2023). In this international perspective, the European Union (EU) holds a dominant position (Roman et al., 2020), counting over 50% of global international tourist arrivals, with over 700 million people visiting the region (Statista, 2024). This substantial number of tourists can be translated into a significant economic effect across the EU countries, as the travel and tourism sector contributed more than two trillion euros to the continent's GDP that year (Statista, 2024). For this reason, the EU tourism policy seeks to provide directives and regulations for the member states to maintain the status of the top global destination while transforming it into a sustainable place to visit, considering its social and environmental dimensions (European Commission,

2024). Among EU countries, Italy holds a significant position, ranking in the top five international tourist destinations, with 57.3 million arrivals in 2023 (Castellano et al., 2020; ISTAT, 2024; Statista, 2023). Here, tourism represents one of the core economic sectors, offering a considerable amount of job opportunities and contributing to 18% of the domestic GDP (in 2023) (OECD, 2010; ISTAT, 2024). In this context, the latest measurements show an increase in visitor numbers higher than the national average (9.5%). Such increments regarded some Italian regions such as Lazio (25.3%), Lombardy (16.8%), Sicily (13.9%), Campania (13.3%), and Aosta Valley (11%) (Italian Ministry of Tourism, 2023). According to Barbera et al. (2022), two main factors have driven such increases: the tourist flows in regional capitals as Rome, Milan, Palermo, Naples, and Aosta and the modern trend of rediscovering Historical Small Towns (HST). Such a trend embraces the quest for authenticity, including cultural and social identities, traditions, memories, local features, and rural landscapes, prompting local, national, and European authorities to address evolving tourism demands (Garau, 2015). This, in turn, has significantly impacted Italian HSTs, elevating them as emerging

spots and positioning them as appealing alternatives to major cultural cities (Biconne, 2020). Many of these villages in Italy are known as “Borghi” or HSTs. They typically have no more than 5,000 residents and, according to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Cultural Activities and Tourism (MIBACT), possess “a valuable cultural heritage, whose preservation and enhancement are highly significant for the national system, as they embody authenticity, uniqueness, and beauty distinctive qualities of Italy’s tourism appeal” (Bizzarri & Micera, 2021). Despite the growing interest, there is a lack of identification and categorizing of Italian villages and their potential. To fill this gap, this study will provide an overview of the typologies and related features of Italian HSTs. In addition, a SWOT analysis can be conducted to identify internal factors, such as strengths and weaknesses, and external factors, like opportunities and threats, that can enable or impede the historical small-town mission.

To this end, preliminary results will provide insights to pave the way for further HSTs valorizations.

2 METHODOLOGY

This analysis employs a mixed approach, employing a descriptive study with quantitative data and a qualitative analysis through the SWOT Analysis. The dataset used for the identification of each “borgo” includes information from the International Federation “Les Villages plus belle de la Terre” and “I Borghi più Belli d’Italia” together with data from multiple sources, including the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica in Italian) and Statista, Google Maps and geographical information systems (GIS). The data has been collected on the year of observation (2023) as well as the geographical zone (NUTS1), region (NUTS2), and province (NUTS3) according to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) established with the Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 (European Commission 2023). The dataset analysis allows the assessment of the number per region. Hence, the HSTs were classified based on geographical position first and geographical features second. In the first phase, the HSTs distribution was performed, and the sites were according to the geographical classification provided by ISTAT (north, centre, south, and island) (ISTAT, 2023). Then, to deepen the analysis, a further classification considered the geographical features, individuating three categories: Mountain HSTs (MB), referring to

sites located at a certain altitude above 600 meters above sea level; Coastal HSTs (CB) if it has a direct connection with sea or a large lake; Rural HSTs (RB) if it is characterized by hilly territory, low population density (less than 200 inhabitants per square kilometre) and sparse distribution of housing. The different territorial identities reflect different focuses in terms of economy, culture, and technology (Capello, 2019). For this reason, understanding the diverse advantages and barriers characterizing the various typologies of the HSTs can provide helpful information to foster effective policies and support local development. At this stage, a SWOT has been conducted, highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each category of the HSTs (Almutairi et al., 2022; Bisu et al., 2024). (Witara et al., 2024). This, in turn, aims to provide a clearer understanding of HSTs distribution and the specific challenges that must be addressed to enhance valorisation, supporting strategic planning and decision-making processes effectively.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the International Federation “Les Plus Beaux Villages de la Terre” (2024), Italy with 363 villages, holds the first position in terms of number of villages, followed by France (178), Spain (116), Japan (58), Switzerland and Lichstein (50) and Wallonia (32). Considering the HSTs’ geographic position, it has been possible to notice a heterogeneous distribution among the different areas of the Italian territory has been observed (Table 1).

These preliminary results highlight that “Central Italy” has the largest number of villages, with 149. Here, regions like Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche are known for their well-preserved medieval and Renaissance villages (such as San Gimignano and Urbino), often considered pillars of tourism and regional identity. Differently, Northern Italy shows a varied distribution of villages, totalling 131. In such areas, regions such as Liguria and Lombardy present the highest number of villages, perhaps due to the development of many small, isolated villages, often perched on cliffs or nestled in valleys. In contrast, industrialized regions like Veneto and Emilia-Romagna also maintain a considerable number of HSTs, reflecting a balance between urban development and rural preservation in northern Italy. Moreover, the southern part of Italy shows fewer people, with only 50 HSTs. This lower number may reflect the South's historical economic and industrial challenges and the migration trends of people

Table 1 - Distribution of villages in Italy, Source: I Borghi più belli d'Italia, Elaboration: Authors.

Region	Number of HSTs
North of Italy	
Aosta Valley	3
Piedmont	19
Lombardy	26
Veneto	11
Trentino-South Tyrol	16
Friuli Venezia Giulia	13
Liguria	27
Emilia Romagna	16
Central Italy	
Tuscany	30
Marche	31
Umbria	32
Lazio	26
Abruzzo	26
Molise	4
South of Italy	
Campania	13
Apulia	13
Basilicata	9
Calabria	15
Islands	
Sicily	24
Sardinia	9

(approximately 1.1 million) moving from southern regions to northern regions for better economic opportunities, resulting in rural depopulation (Lepore, 2020; ISTAT, 2021). Lastly, the Italian Islands (Sicily and Sardinia) have a total of 33 HSTs, with a greater concentration in Sicily (24). This could be due to Sicily's historical significance as a cultural and trade crossroads, which led to the establishment of numerous settlements. In Sardinia, the context is slightly different, as social and economic development may hinder the valorization process (Garau et al., 2019). Despite its unique landscapes and panoramas, this region ranks among the lowest in Italy for the number of sites, placing third from the bottom alongside Basilicata. These preliminary

findings pave the way for a further classification that integrates geographical location and geographical features, leading to the following categorization (Figure 1):

This, in turn, enables a better understanding of local identities, distinguishing the HSTs by geographical position and features underlining historical and cultural practices inherent to each area. By analysing the distribution of the HSTs and considering such classification (Table 2), it has been possible to gain a picture of the Italian panorama.

Table 2 - Numerical distribution of Italian HSTs, Source: Authors.

Area	MB	CB	RB	Total
North	92	17	31	140
Centre	95	16	26	137
South	42	14	3	59
Islands	20	5	2	27
Total	249	52	62	363

The prominent presence of MB and RB in northern and central Italy likely reflects the historical settlement patterns. These areas are characterized by communities that have adapted to the challenges related to transportation routes and economic and social infrastructure, demonstrating impressive resilience and adapting to challenging and shifting natural conditions (Ehrlich et al., 2021; Wyss et al., 2022). This adaptation is evident in how these communities have maintained their cultural heritage and sustainable practices over generations. From this perspective, these HSTs offer attractions that leverage mountain features, aligning with recent experiential tourist needs by promoting winter sports such as hiking and skiing and providing opportunities for adventure (Steiger et al., 2024). In contrast, CB is typically favoured for its sea views and recreational opportunities next to the sea. Here, tourists often gravitate towards relaxing pursuits such as sunbathing, sailing, and nautical sports (European

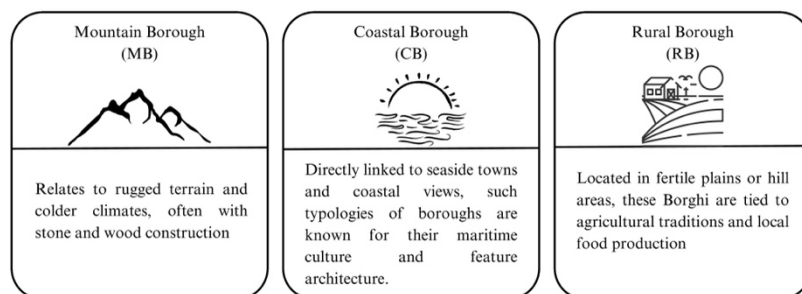


Figure 1. Categories of HSTs Source: Authors.

STRENGTHS			WEAKNESSES		
MB	CB	RB	MB	CB	RB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mountain landscapes appeal Cooler climate and mountainous terrain promote unique flora, fauna, and outdoor activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coastal view, Landscapes and Sunsets Maritime Culture, Food and Lifestyle Identity tied to the sea, fishing and nautical heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fertile land support local agricultural production Strong connection with nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited agricultural land Restricted local food production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High Vulnerability to sea-level rise, storm and coastal erosion Seasonal Tourism can lead to economic instability Dependence on tourism and fishing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scarce infrastructures due to rural setting Lack of modern facilities Vulnerable demographic trends
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expansion of adventure tourism Potential to satisfy the sustainable tourism demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growth in marine ecotourism Sustainable food and culinary tourism Increased demand for waterfront properties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expansion of agro-tourism and rural cultures Eco-friendly accommodation Growing interest on 0km food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural Disaster and related risks Risk of depopulation Economic dependence on seasonal tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overfishing and marine pollution Increasing cost for coastal defenses and infrastructure Competition from other seaside destinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depopulation of young people Traditional agricultural based economy Irregular weather patterns
MB	CB	RB	MB	CB	RB
OPPORTUNITIES			THREATS		

Figure 2. SWOT Analysis of Italian HST. Source: Authors.

Commission, 2024b). However, more than such information is needed. A SWOT analysis has been employed, underlining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Figure 2).

The SWOT analysis of HSTs reveals distinct patterns across mountain, coastal, and rural settings, each presenting challenges and opportunities for sustainable development and preservation. As Bitušiková (2021) observed, these settlements often serve as repositories of cultural heritage.

Mountain-based historical towns benefit from their unique landscape heritage and climatic conditions, which increasingly align with growing adventure tourism trends (Apollo and Andreychouk 2022). These locations often preserve traditional architectural elements and cultural practices that have evolved in response to their geographical constraints. However, they face significant challenges related to accessibility and economic sustainability, particularly during off-peak seasons. Research by Romeo et al., (2020) indicates that mountain communities often struggle with limited agricultural capacity and restricted local food production, leading to increased dependence on external supply chains.

Maritime culture and heritage of coastal historical towns create unique opportunities for tourism (Ounanian et al., 2021). However, these communities face escalating challenges from climate change impacts. According to Major and Juhola (2021), coastal settlements are increasingly vulnerable to storm surges and rising sea levels, necessitating substantial investments in protective infrastructure. The seasonal nature of tourism in these areas, while

providing essential economic benefits, also creates significant social and infrastructural pressures during peak periods.

Rural historical towns possess fertile agricultural land and strong connections to nature; however, they face significant demographic challenges. Eurostat (2024) article on rural communities highlights how the lack of modern infrastructure and limited economic opportunities contribute to youth outmigration. However, these areas are experiencing renewed interest through the growing popularity of agritourism and eco-friendly travel experiences (Ndhlovu and Dube, 2024).

Across all three typologies, common threads emerge regarding the opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The post-pandemic shift toward experiential and authentic travel experiences has created new possibilities for these historical settlements (Sunder and Dixit, 2023). However, this opportunity must be balanced against the threat of overtourism and the need to preserve local cultural identity (Capocchi et al., 2019; Dodds & Butler, 2019).

The analysis suggests that successful development strategies must address three key areas: infrastructure modernization, economic diversification, and environmental resilience. The future viability of HSTs depends on their ability to adapt to changing demographic and economic patterns while preserving their unique cultural and architectural heritage (Božić et al., 2019).

Analyzing these SWOT Factors has played an essential role in understanding internal and external

elements interacting with each HSTs category. In this sense, the natural landscapes of the Italian HSTs represent a common strength. Indeed, Skowronek et al. (2018) emphasized the landscape's role, making them a critical component in pursuing sustainable tourism, balancing and preserving natural and cultural heritage with social needs and economic interests. Achieving this balance depends on carefully assessing how landscapes are described, evolve, and manage their resources effectively (Skowronek et al., 2018).

In addition, the mild climate needs to be considered, as it fosters seasonal tourism in winter, mainly MB; in summer, CB, autumn, and spring, RB is the leading destination. This, in turn, creates the basis for the latest opportunities in sustainable tourism, encompassing ecological, financial, societal, and cultural development elements (Pan et al., 2018). Thus, it contributes to achieving environmental sustainability, economic viability, and ethical and social equity (Pan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, local, seasonal products are experiencing renewed appreciation, and the process involved in their creation enhances their significance in modern contexts (Gonda et al., 2021). Indeed, Choe & Kim (2018) emphasized that tourists seek experiences that broaden their knowledge or cultural understanding through local products. This might include discovering new cooking methods, exploring the origins of specific ingredients, or uncovering the stories behind traditional dishes (Choe & Kim, 2018). However, difficulties do exist. The effects of climate change led to hydrological and meteorological irregularities (Mokhov et al., 2022), resulting in extreme weather events and unpredictable rainfall patterns, posing significant risks to natural ecosystems but also to social and economic ones (European Commission, 2024a). Moreover, the trend of younger mountain people migrating to cities and other countries is leading to the depopulation of mountainous regions and the consequent economic decline (Rey, 2015). Furthermore, phenomenon such as overtourism can bring negative effects, such as excessive number of visitors, disruptive or inappropriate behavior by tourists, tension between locals and tourists, overcrowding, pressure on infrastructure, loss of cultural authenticity, diminished amenities, a decline in residents' quality of life, and reduced tourists experiences (Dodds & Butler, 2019). In this regard, technological solutions are widely considered essential for addressing, or at least reducing, the effects of overtourism and its adverse impacts on destinations (Gretzel, 2021). This, in turn, can lead to the development of an e-tourism

system where digitalization is integrated into every phase of the travel industry (Hamid et al., 2021). Moreover, implementing digital solutions such as digital platforms and e-commerce for local artisans could facilitate the trading of local businesses, improving the overall local markets and providing users with secure, reliable, and efficient solutions (Kalyan et al., 2024). From this perspective, an essential element is represented by the collaboration with local institutions, which allows HSTs to pool resources, secure shared infrastructure funding, and build collective resilience to sustain growth and adaptability in the face of actual and future challenges.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Harnessing the potential of Italian HSTs has emerged as a significant catalyst for national tourism, connecting local communities with tourists worldwide. The descriptive analysis of these HST reveals 363 Italian sites, which exhibit a heterogeneous distribution primarily concentrated in central and northern regions. This, in turn, reflects the nation's historical significance as a hearth of Italian culture and heritage, where many traditional practices and local customs have flourished over centuries. Moreover, examining these HSTs' geographical position and features provided a picture of how they are distributed across Italian territory. In this sense, a SWOT analysis identified strengths and opportunities, weaknesses and potential threats. The evaluation of the sites distribution and the assessment of their critical components leads to preliminary results. This, in turn, can provide helpful information so that public and private stakeholders can improve strategies to guide and guide a better decision-making process to bolster local and national tourism. In conclusion, promoting and valorizing local identities and the historical significance of these HSTs can effectively position these areas as attractive destinations that celebrate and preserve Italian traditions. Such initiatives enable better visibility and viability, ensuring the maintenance of their status as integral components of international tourism. The collaboration among various stakeholders, including local governments, tourism boards, and community organizations, can create a more cohesive approach to promoting these destinations while ensuring their cultural heritage is respected and preserved for future generations. These preliminary results will pave the way for initiatives designed to elevate the visibility and sustainability of Italian "Borghi" and solidify

their role as critical elements in national and international tourism strategies.

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