

The Alpine Range: a Bridge between Cultures

A new multi-level approach to tourism economy

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Keywords:

Alpine Range, tourism, mutual transformation, knowledge transfer, committed traveller, cultural heritage

Since prehistoric times the Alpine range never ceased to be a cultural connection point. Despite being an obvious natural obstacle, the Alps have also regularly been a physical bridge between different worlds.

Important trade and migration routes crisscrossed the Alps, essential to the communication network between the Mediterranean world and the rest of Europe. The same routes once traced by roman legionaries were subsequently used for trading and migration purposes.

Routes and paths crossing the Alps have always been a mean and a drive for cultural exchange. Every aspect of mountain life reveals traces of mutual interaction: similar architectural solutions to environmental problems, cuisine, languages, local dialects, agricultural techniques, etc.

Eventually, traditional routes were replaced by quicker and more effective infrastructure and several traditional paths were progressively abandoned. Modern engineering and daring bridges simplified the crossing of arduous ravines and, starting in the last century, several tunnels bypassed the mountains more directly and rapidly, both by railway and road.

Many cross-Alps trails are now being rediscovered as hiking trails, increasingly popular among tourists, searching a closer approach to nature and local culture. Studying the impact Alpine trade routes once had as bridges between peoples, we wish to propose a tourism development strategy, in which local heritage and committed travellers play a key role in an economic and cultural transformation process. To freeze a version of an ideal past, wishing to protect it, may result in museification of culture: host and guest should be mutually influenced and transformed by a cultural experience.

This paper's main aim is to give these routes their original significance in relation to cultural exchange and mutual influence. We wish to study the economic development potential of cross-Alpine trails as tourist routes, metaphorical and real bridges between cultures: bridges between past and present, urban environment and remote local communities, tourism and local cultural heritage.