



Rural Tourism and Walkability. Compare Sardinia and Gran Canaria Models

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Abstract. The tourism crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic has caused many communities to rethink and review tourism. In fact, in European countries, many destinations are now focused on more inclusive and sustainable measures rather than over tourism, so they have invested in sustainability to create tourist-friendly places. The rural areas, in particular, are affected by a demand motivated by a longing for discovery and authenticity, and they seem to be working towards a multi-scalar planning: walkability and digitalization stand out as fundamental choices to meet the needs of tourists and residents. In this context, the paper aims, after a preliminary review of the literature on rural areas' walkability, to highlight the relationship between rural walkability and tourism through the analysis and comparison of two rural paths: the Mining Path of Santa Barbara (Sardinia, Italy) and the Path of Saint James (Gran Canaria, Spain). It represents virtuous examples of fruition and enhancement of the insular landscape, promoting a place-based approach for a sustainable and cohesive local development.

Keywords: Walkability tourism · Rural tourism · Undertourism · Sustainable tourism

1 Introduction

The regeneration of territories and a new use of spaces in different destinations. This is the topic widely debated among researchers and institutions in the light of the economic and social crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourism is the economic sector that has suffered the greatest losses when different countries have been forced to suspend their internal and cross-border relations. The high restrictions and general insecurity

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discouraged travel, but fueled the desire for escape and leisure by motivating potential travellers to seek places with a strong identity and outdoor experiences with more contact with nature [1, 2]. In this way, following the European policies moving for decades to improve territorial balances and achieve the objectives of sustainability and cohesion, several destinations have developed local development strategies combining tourism, walkability and sustainable mobility [3]. More attention is focused on the revitalization of internal rural areas, that is spaces with low population and economic attractiveness, even in the presence of significant landscape resources [4]. In these areas, the place-based governance approach is highlighted through initiatives and measures aimed at designing new geographical configurations based on the valorization of resources to increase territories' attractiveness and competitiveness. The rural tourism activity must be initiated with a participative project by transforming the condition of peripherality through the creation of identity networks [5, 6].

The paper, after a review of the literature on the relationship between rural tourism and walkability, aims to analyze two rural tourism paths in the islands of Gran Canaria (Spain) and Sardinia (Italy) organized with a structured offer of resources and services for a sustainable fruition of the internal areas. The paper is composed, in addition to the Introduction, by four other paragraphs: Sect. 2. Related works, Sect. 3. Rural tourism paths: models in Sardinia and Gran Canaria, Sect. 3.1 The Path of Santa Barbara (Sardinia – Italy) and Sect. 3.2 The Path of Saint James (Gran Canaria – Spain), Sect. 4. Highlights of the two paths and Sect. 5. Conclusions.

2 Related Works

Rural tourism can be considered as a real strategy for the development of internal areas. According to their own needs and peculiarities, each territory activates different forms of rural tourism: agritourism, cultural and natural itineraries, eno-gastronomic tourism, *albergo diffuso* are some examples. The rural realities embracing this tourist practice try to achieve the objectives of sustainability to create multifunctional places where the conservation and enhancement of resources is combined with the growth of economic and social value of the territory. In its broadest meaning, we can consider it as an experiential tourism that allows tourists to experience the rural landscape [7–9]. The tourist demand for a greater contact with the identity of places is expressed in several studies and rural tourism practices can represent an opportunity to improve the quality of travel of tourists and the quality of life of destinations [10–12]. This slow philosophy of travel, combined with increased accessibility and walkability of sites (pedestrian and bicycle paths, use of public transport), brings environmental, social and economic benefits [1, 3, 13]. Indeed, improving the walkability of spaces helps to make resources more attractive both physically and emotionally. Achieving this goal requires enhancing spatial connectivity by creating integrated pathways in which hospitality and mobility make safe and sustainable “crossings” for residents and tourists [14, 15]. Walkability, in its first meaning, relates to multiple studies that focus on sustainable city living. Indeed, it is combined with “pedestrian well-being”, whereby users of urban spaces can move easily and safely [16–19]. In the context of urban zoning, the assessment of the level of efficient and effective walkability can be measured and verified on indicators such as,

for example, traffic safety, crime/security, connectivity, suitability and accessibility [17, 20–22]. Likewise, it is necessary to remember that the decision to move by foot is not to be attributed only to the degree of quality of organization of the “built” environment, but must also be related to individual peculiarities, including age, gender, ethnicity and income. Although the planning of routes and spaces for walking has essentially involved cities, it also seems to be of interest in rural areas. Some academic contributions support the idea that rural walks allow a conscious fruition of the rural world [18, 23–25].

3 Rural Tourism Paths Models

3.1 The *Path of Santa Barbara* (Sardinia – Italy)

Sardinia is the second largest island in Italy and its resident population at 31 December 2021 was 1,590,044 (ISTAT, 2022). In addition to these, 16.5 million tourists (summer 2021) who have visited the Island for vacations dedicated mainly to the beach market [26]. In order to deseasonalize and diversify tourist flows, an integrated cultural tourism destination is proposed on the island. The richness of the cultural heritage is also manifested through the religious paths: 33% of the island’s monumental heritage consists of churches or religious buildings. This heritage has been organized by the Region of Sardinia since 2012 with the institution of the “Register of Sardinian Paths and Religious and Spiritual Tourist Routes”. The Register currently identifies eight paths that, for the areas involved, represent an opportunity for recovery and valorization of marginal landscapes [27]. The Santa Barbara path in Sulcis-Iglesiente is one of these itineraries. The path is also the only route included in the “Atlas of the Italian Paths” and, besides the religious value, it promotes a slow tourism closely linked to the conservation-promotion of the mining and natural heritage. In fact, the path of Santa Barbara is part of an area affected by important mining activities active until the 90s and today included in the geomineral park of Sardinia. This park, officially instituted in October 2001 to safeguard and enhance the architectural and landscape heritage, covers an area of 3,500 hectares, involves 90 municipalities and represents an atypical case among national parks due to the discontinuity of mineral deposits located in different regions of Sardinia.

The Santa Barbara Mining path has a ring route, passable in clockwise, crossing 25 municipalities, with a total length of about 500 km, 75% of which takes place on paths, mule tracks, cart tracks and driveways. It is divided into 30 stages of varying difficulty and lengths, which can be covered on foot, by bicycle or horse. The mining-landscape crossed can be defined in ‘*transition*’, that is, which changes over time due to both the geomorphological characteristics of the site and the mining activity that has affected the territory over time. The tourist offer is linked to the uniqueness of the context, involving different types of users, such as: pilgrims, tourists and sportsmen. The context is rich in natural and anthropogenic elements (landfills, mine muds and abandoned buildings), characterised by a complex geological heritage and of industrial archaeology - mineral deposits, excavations and mine dumps and buildings - as well as by archeological sites - domus de janas, nuraghi, sacred wells, etc. - and natural heritage (beaches, cliffs, lagoons, etc.) [18, 28–30] (Fig. 1).

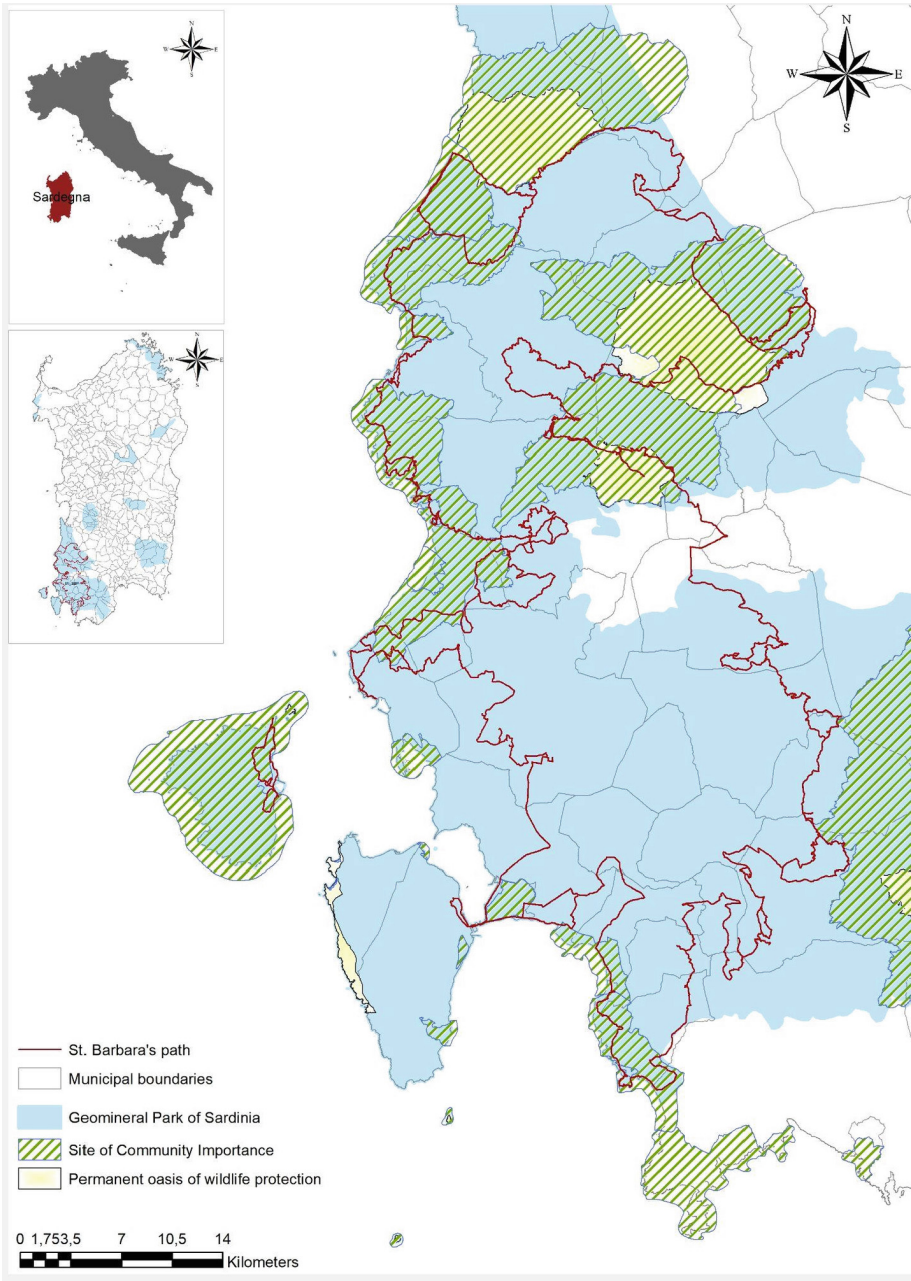


Fig. 1. St. Barbara path (Sardinia, Italy). Territorial framework within the Geomineral Historic and Environmental Park of Sardinia and with natural sites.

3.2 The *Path of Saint James* (Gran Canaria – Spain)

In terms of extension, Gran Canaria is the third largest of the eight islands that make up the Canarian archipelago, and its resident population as of December 31, 2021 was 852,688 [31] (ISTAC 2022). In addition to these, there are 1,789,513 tourists who have elected the Island for vacations dedicated mainly to the beach market [32] (Tourism Gran Canaria, 2021). Gran Canaria is known as a sun and beach destination which means that the numbers of tourists who visited the islands has been always high. In fact, in the pre-pandemic era, in 2019, 4,267,382 visited Gran Canaria and in 2018 the rate was similar with 4,509,829 visitors [33] (ISTAC 2020). Consequently, tourism is, indeed, centred on the combination of sun and sea. However, over the last few years the mass tourism of sun and beach has been questioned due to their negative impacts on the local economy and on the environment. One of the conclusions that local administration and management staff have obtained was to rethink the tourism model of the Canary islands providing and adopting sustainable development strategies. In other words, to diversify the offer through the valorization of landscape resources and the more active involvement of rural areas. These areas, subject to depopulation and other criticalities typical of internal areas [5], hold most of the environmental (natural monuments, special and integral reserves, natural and rural parks) and cultural (archaeological sites, museums, monuments, real estate) attractions. The actions carried out to motivate alternative tourists are highlighted in the form of experiential itineraries where nature, villages and local production firms describe the territory's identity [34].

The St. James' Path is one of these routes, which crosses the island from Maspalomas (South) to Gáldar (North). This route is proposed as a trip to the interior of the island, highlighting the landscape, flora, fauna, gastronomy, historical and ethnographic heritage and the rich island network of trails and paths, through which you can get to know the authentic essence of the island, a long-distance route that crosses the island from south to north through the peaks of the island. The history of the Path came from a religious story in which a ship was surprised in the middle of a storm in the south of Gran Canaria. On board, there were Galician sailors, who were devotees of Apostle Santiago, so in the middle of the storm they started to pray for their lives. If they survived, they promised to take the figure of the saint to the highest in the seen earth [35].

Nowadays, there are cultural, ethnographic and historical values involved. Usually the path consists of three stages for a total of 66 km and takes about 23 h to complete: Maspalomas-Tunte (28 km), Tunte-Cruz de Tejada (17 km) and Cruz de Tejada-Gáldar (21 km). There are eight municipalities directly involved and they include Tejada, Artenara, Valleseco, Moya, Gáldar, San Bartolomé de Tirajana, Vega de San Mateo and Santa Maria de Guía (Fig. 2). A large part of this trail was used by the ancient inhabitants of the island as a communication route from the south to the north and, later, it came to be used by herders who practised transhumance, -that is, the seasonal migration of livestock in search of better pastures-, and by pilgrims. The path begins in the south of the island, in the Maspalomas dunes, to enter the centre through the Caldera de Tirajana, winding its walls to reach the Tejada caldera and descend through the agro-pastoral landscapes of the North of Gran Canaria, next to the most recent volcanoes of the island. As a reference to the destination of the road, another volcanic cone emerges, the Mountain of Gáldar, visible from the midlands and the entire north coast of the island, so that in addition to

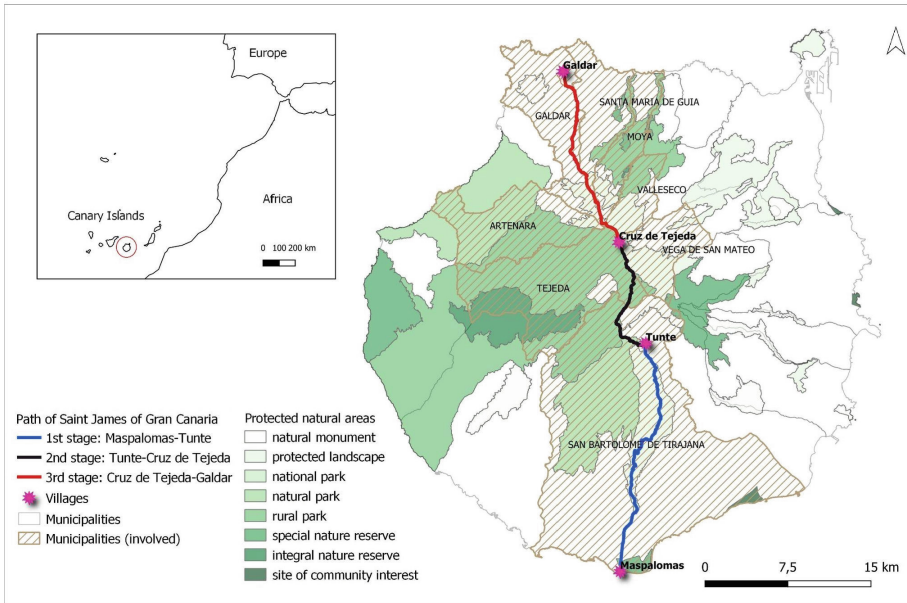


Fig. 2. St. James path and protected areas in Gran Canaria (Spain).

the values described, entering its different stages is considered as an authentic “Route Between Volcanoes” that takes us back to the volcanic origin of the island [35]. The type of track is 38% hiking trail, 31% rural road and 31% paved road. Tourists and pilgrims, in addition to satisfying their religious needs, are able to enjoy a naturalistic and cultural experience. The path crosses between volcanoes and, among the many natural and cultural resources, we would like to remember two of them in particular: Montañas Sagradas and Risco Caído, which have been declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2019. The Cultural Landscape of Risco Caído and the Sacred Mountain Areas of Gran Canaria is, like all cultural landscapes, the product of a specific geography and its interaction with its inhabitants. The mountainous centre of Gran Canaria, extraordinary in its geomorphology and biogeography, is also extraordinary due to the fact that two radically different cultures have occupied it continuously for more than 1,500 years. A pre-Hispanic occupation by populations from the Amazing (Berber) cultural orbit of North Africa who probably arrived in Gran Canaria around the turn of the era, was succeeded after the Castilian conquest of the island at the end of the 15th century by a European civilization in the dawn of the Modern Age. Current Canarian society is heir to both [35].

4 Highlights of the Two Paths

The comparison between the two methods has the purpose of highlighting any point of contact and/or elements-characteristics that could allow an improvement for both, also through the identification of the relative strengths and weaknesses. From the comparison you can put it as both paths are of religious origin with an important sporting propensity. They develop in landscapes with a strong natural geological value and mining production. The methodological approach underlying the project has two different systems: Santa Barbara circular path and Santiago de Compostela linear path that join points of interest.

The two paths have good accessibility and all related information is widely disseminated on the web social media. Most of the paths develop in the original tracks, with no or almost no interference from vehicular traffic (Fig. 3).

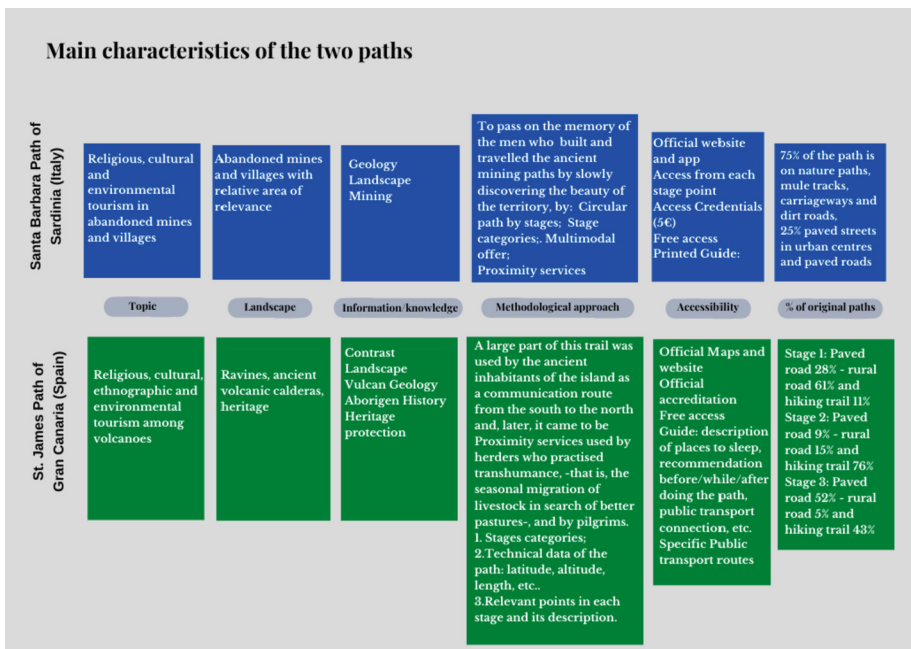


Fig. 3. Main characteristics of the two paths (All Authors 2022).

The strengths and weaknesses can instead be shown in the Fig. 4.

Finally, from the comparison it emerges that in the two paths there is a pre-eminent natural environmental dimension over the anthropic one, the latter characterized by both ancient archaeology and industrial. Precisely in this sense, the environmental dimension has stimulated the use of trails for sporting and leisure purposes, gradually contrasting both with over tourism and with xenophilic tourism. The trails therefore lead both towards slow tourism and proximity [36].

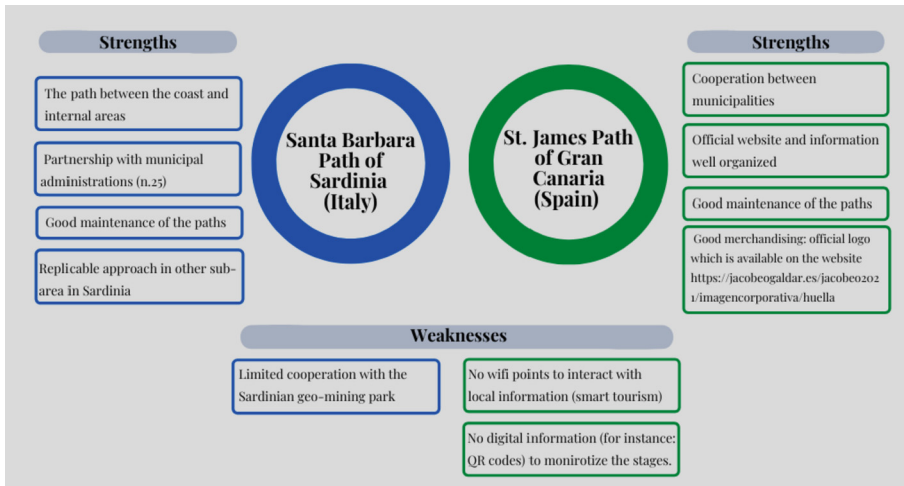


Fig. 4. Strength and weakness of the two paths (All Authors 2022).

5 Conclusions

In this paper the focus lied on two island religious-cultural itineraries: Santa Barbara path in Sardinia and St. James path in Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain). The destinations are both affected by mass tourism and are working to develop alternatives and sustainable tourism activities. In particular, it is the internal areas of the two islands that suffer from a lack of the traditional circuits of the tourist offer. Therefore, it outlines the need to change the current tourism model and stressed the importance of “making an in-depth reflection”, so it seems to conclude that the main axis of action of these new tourism models is to “work around Diversification, Dispersion and Differentiation”. In fact, the both areas analyzed in this article are moving towards the differentiation through the valorization and promotion of their identity. Furthermore, these resources have been organized as an itinerary to allow tourists and residents to live an authentic experience. This implies the daily involvement of operators and local communities that join together to consolidate the local development of the territory. The *trait d’union* is represented by the religious, cultural, ethnographic and environmental elements. On one hand, religious tradition and infrastructure such as churches and sacristies are mapped on the itineraries as the most relevant points of interest in order to provide visitors with local history and culture. On the other hand, landscapes through these internal areas give tourists the opportunity to interact directly with nature. Offering an alternative to sun and beach mass tourism. Taking into account this, it seems that rural tourism is a perfect solution to promote the socio-economic and territorial development of the areas that organize its offer. The two paths are an example of a structured rural offer that has become a territorial regeneration catalyst. According to the principles of sustainable planning, both paths satisfy the requirement of accessibility because they are easily accessible and walkable by different users. These users have the possibility to combine walking with other alternatives and slow mobility (especially cycling and horseback riding) and to enjoy along the trail of different landscape peculiarities (natural and cultural heritage).

The synergies created between the different local actors of the municipalities involved have allowed them to organize an integrated system of accommodation and services to support the paths. Finally, it is also essential to focus on the virtuous activation of smart systems. This would make it possible to correct weaknesses and satisfy the European mission for greater territorial cohesion.

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