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The experiential value of Sustainable Rural Tourism as a response to
Covid-19 and as a solution to Overtourism:
the case of the Roman countryside.

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4.3. Villa Cavalletti

Villa Cavalletti is a complex located on a slope in Grottaferrata overlooking the city of Rome that includes: a Tuscolan villa, a centuries-old park, olive groves and vineyards and a newly renovated building. The unique aspect of Villa Cavalletti is its rich and various history as it dates back to the 17th century, as well as the re-qualification process which was purposely “based on the actualization of the ancient destinations: hospitality, education and agricultural production”. The strategy that was put into place when Villa Cavalletti became operational again (in 2018) was the diversification of their activities in order to stay true to the Villa’s historical identity. For this reason, the complex of Villa Cavalletti includes:

- *Education.* In Villa Cavalletti there are a hospitality institute (which is linked to the strong enogastronomic tradition of the territory), a humanities-focused high school (which is conceived as a way to enhance the territorial culture) and a kindergarten.
- *Wellness.* Villa Cavalletti has a Wellness Centre that provides treatments, as well as yoga classes.
- *Accommodation.* The Villa provides three rooms in one building and three different types of holiday houses.
- *Organic production.* Villa Cavalletti produces wine, extra virgin olive oil, creams, flour and pasta. Those products are sold directly at the agritourism but can also be purchased on their e-commerce. This is quite unique to Villa Cavalletti as most agritourisms of the area do not display that level of digital awareness.

In addition, Villa Cavalletti offers a wide range of educational and entertaining activities, as well as hosting events such as congresses and team-building activities for companies. In general, the activities can be divided in three categories: sports & wellness, guided tours (both cultural and naturalistic), and enogastronomic tours and tastings. The decision to offer all those activities is derived from their desire to fully valorize their territory leveraging on all its potential aspects. This strong connection to the territory is the *fil rouge* of all their initiatives and is the core value of Villa Cavalletti which is highly conveyed in their communication, both on their website and on their social media accounts.

An interesting aspect unique to Villa Cavalletti is that they have a digitalized brochure on which they explain who they are and what they do, designed in a very eye-catching way (Fig. 28).

This represents another instant in which Villa Cavalletti proves to be highly digitalized, and thus innovative.



Figure 28: Villa Cavalletti's digital brochure

From the brochure, there is a direct link to the e-commerce on which it is possible to buy all the food and wine they produce in their property. The brochure represents a great way to make it easier for potential visitors to get to know them. Their website allows customers to book the rooms or the apartments and pay directly on there. The fixed prices of both types of accommodations are in line with the local prices. Villa Cavalletti is also present on many booking platforms, such as Booking, Expedia and Agoda. They are also included as recommended accommodations on the Visit Castelli Romani website, as well as on the Ospitalità Castelli Romani one. Their presence on TripAdvisor is fairly new – as the first review is from August 2020 – and as a result the reviews are only a few but they are exceptionally positive which can contribute to attracting more visitors in the future.

As mentioned before, their strong bond with the territory of the Castelli Romani is clear in everything they do: how they communicate on their website and on their social media accounts, the initiatives they take part in and, especially, in the synergy that they have created with other operators in the area. This synergy results in Villa Cavalletti being promoted by the other operators who post about their collaborations or write articles about them – thus giving Villa

Cavalletti more visibility. Their collaborative streak can also be observed in the initiative that they have proposed in December 2020 that consisted in offering their guests a full menu delivery to their rooms thanks to their agreement with local restaurants.

Their presence on Social Media is significantly strategic to the promotion of their property. As a matter of fact, their posts on Facebook and Instagram are consistent and coherent to their mission and the messages on their website. All the services and activities provided by Villa Cavalletti are promoted focusing on the strengths and values that characterize them. Moreover, the posts are often highly informative in regard to Villa Cavalletti's story, the way they produce their products and how they can be beneficial to costumers and, in general, the values they stand for. In particular, what is always highlighted is the relationship to the Castelli Romani territory, which is their core value, as mentioned before. This also applies to their YouTube videos as the intent behind them is to showcase the beauty of the property and its gardens which are strongly linked to the story of the Castelli Romani.

Facebook and Instagram are equally used to promote all their initiatives, such as specific offers and activities available at Villa Cavalletti. The only difference is that Facebook allows them to showcase all the collaborations they take part in, as well as the articles and user-generated posts in which they have been mentioned. What has been observed is that they tend to promote their services/activities according to the seasonality. In fact, in summer they posted more about their accommodations, whereas in December visits and tasting experiences were promoted as a suggested Christmas present.

Overall, the communication strategy is clear and perfectly conveys the core value of Villa Cavalletti, as well as the aspects of their territory that intend on valorizing: the benefits of nature to people's well-being, the enogastronomy and the territory's culture.

Sustainability

Sustainability is explicitly mentioned throughout the website, as it represents Villa Cavalletti's core value, alongside the relationship with the Castelli Romani territory. In particular:

- Firstly, Villa Cavalletti is a Tuscolan villa that was renovated using the principles of green building and sustainability. The rooms are furnished with recovered and restored pieces which have been then harmonized with more modern furnishings. They are also finished with materials with Ecolabel certification, which means that only ecological

products free of toxic substances were used. Moreover, the building is powered by renewable sources which considerably decreases the ecological footprint of the Villa. In addition, local craftsmanship – such as mosaic typical of the Byzantine tradition present in Grottaferrata – was used to convey the close link to the territory and its cultural and historical heritage, thus allowing the guests to have a fully immersive experience.

- Secondly, Villa Cavalletti carries out organic production without using any chemical as their primary goal consists in “*offering quality and healthy products while respecting the environment.*”
- Finally, Villa Cavalletti provides specialized e-mountain bikes for rental so that their guests can move easily and, above all, sustainably. This is a valuable service, not only because it is more convenient for guests to rent them in the same place they are staying in (without having to look for renting places elsewhere), but it is also a great way to incentivize the adoption of sustainable practices to visitors, thus making them more conscious about their choices.

Experientiality

Villa Cavalletti’s experiential value relies on three focal points: wellness, culture and gastronomy. This can be observed in the way they promote themselves on their social media, as shown in Fig. 30.

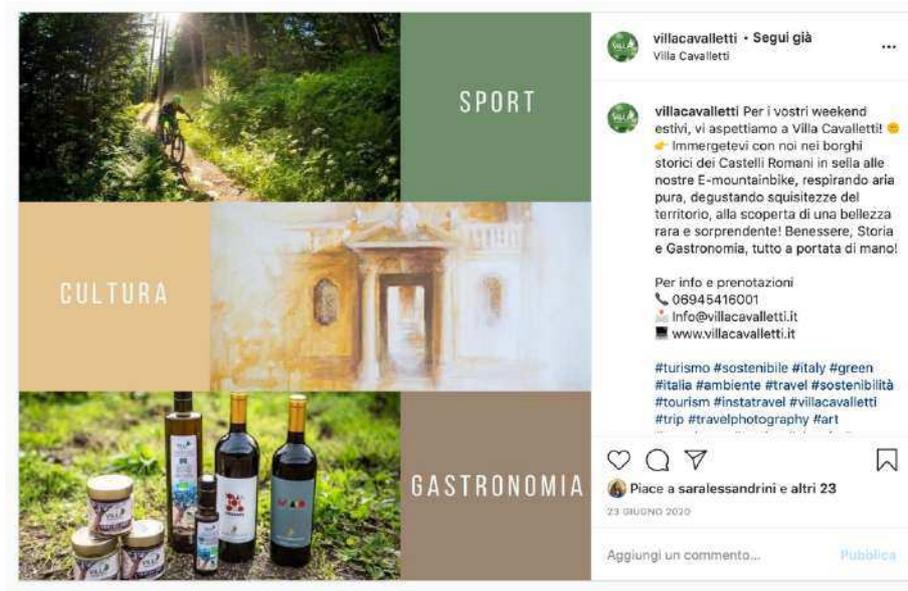


Figure 30: Villa Cavalletti's post on Instagram

Their unique strategy consists in integrating those three main activities, keeping the strong relationship with the territory as the focus. The result is a highly immersive experience that effectively leverages all the dimensions of the tourist experience, thus becoming significantly engaging for visitors.

In particular, according to Villa Cavalletti, enogastronomy is a vehicle to tell the territory's story and make the visitors grow an attachment to it – and thus, stimulating the adoption of sustainable practices which are beneficial for its protection and preservation. Nature is, in fact, the element on which all the activities are founded and allows visitors to satisfy their esthetic and escapist needs, as well as being able to arouse emotions in them. The escapist dimension is highlighted when they promote themselves as a “*regenerating destination*” in which visitors will enjoy “*a holiday of unexpected emotions*” in a highly “*evocative and unforgettable landscape*”. The integration of escapist and esthetic elements in the way they talk about themselves can be observed on the homepage of their website (Fig. 31). It is also interesting how they use a storytelling style to describe their territory which is very engaging and conveys a real attachment to their territory.

“Sui colli, ad Albano, a Castelgandolfo, a Frascati, dove la scorsa settimana trascorsi tre giorni, l'aria è costantemente pura e limpida. Là si può studiare una natura differente”.

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Viaggio in Italia -

Dove il tempo si ferma, dove le esperienze sono collegate però con dei confini invisibili che creano un distacco tra le diverse realtà, dove vivere la tranquillità del ricordo. Un luogo fermo, di silenzio e riflessione, di tranquillità, vicini alla capitale ma allo stesso tempo lontani dal rumore cittadino. Lontano dai pensieri che ancorano le persone al suolo: si trova nell'esatto punto di partenza di molti tour alla scoperta delle bellezze della Regione Lazio, vi aspettiamo per una permanenza nel verde e nella storia!

Una bellezza unica in un'area naturale protetta. Un paesaggio suggestivo e indimenticabile, amato da sempre, suggellato nelle tele dei grandi paesaggisti come Corot, Turner, Vernet, Schinkel stupiti dalla bellezza della natura, dalla pace degli scorci, rapiti dall'armonica unione di arte, architettura e natura. Vigneti storici, oliveti e alberi secolari, in un'estensione di 15.000 ettari nel Parco dei Castelli Romani sulle orme del preistorico Vulcano Laziale, è possibile scoprire percorsi nel bosco, borghi storici di incredibile splendore, siti archeologici e due laghi da non perdere: Nemi e Albano!

Figure 31: Villa Cavalletti's website

Villa Cavalletti offers highly integrated experiences that allow visitors to fully immerse themselves in the territory. For instance, that can be observed in one of their proposed activities: the guided tour called “*Donne, Dee, Medichesse e Streghe (Women, goddesses, doctors, witches)*”. The tour takes visitors on the ancient Via Sacra which leads to the temple of Jupiter while a guide educates them on the myths and legends of female gods and witches of the Castelli Romani. The esthetic and educational dimensions are the ones that first come to mind when reading about the initiative, but it is clear that they are perfectly integrated with the other two dimensions. In fact, the path is located in the wild and allows tourists to enjoy an amazing view

of the surrounding landscapes, away from the bustling city, thus allowing them to relish in its quietness and beauty. At the same time, it provides a highly entertaining learning experiences for visitors who can learn more about the territory's history. This is a great way to pass on the historical and cultural heritage of the Castelli Romani and thus, represents a virtuous example of a valorization of a territory that leverages on all the experiential dimensions and is significantly beneficial for its visitors.

Proactivity

Villa Cavalletti's target consists of young couples and young families with children, mostly from foreign countries (in particular, Northern Europe). In addition to that, a consistent part of their customers has always been adults working in the area as Villa Cavalletti is located near research centres, the Tor Vergata University and the Polyclinic.

During the lockdown, customers were exclusively workers of the area. Even after the lockdown, they noticed that a considerable number of guests were workers who had to stay there for a long period of time. What emerged during the interview is that a new trend had been observed. In fact, a lot of people who had to work in Rome – who used to stay overnight in the capital before the pandemic as it was more convenient – preferred staying at Villa Cavalletti by night in order to enjoy the beauty and peace of nature. This also happened in October and November when a lot of accommodation facilities were open in Rome – thus making it clear that staying in the countryside was actually a conscious choice.

They were able to stay open during the lockdown because they could safely provide accommodations to their guests since they had fully furnished apartments available and well-equipped rooms. As for the latter, they created a specific tool on their website to give guests the possibility to get meals made by historical local restaurants delivered directly to their rooms, which was a very convenient, but also safe option, for their guests. This was also a way to support local businesses which were facing very difficult situations. This collaborative streak can also be observed in their decision to take part in the “*Associazione Ospitalità Castelli Romani*” which was created by the holder of Villa Cavalletti – Tiziana Torelli – with other operators of the territory as a response to the crisis caused by the virus. In fact, during a webinar organized by the Tor Vergata University, she noted that the crisis made it necessary to rethink

tourism together because “*collaborations and synergy lead to greater strength in the sector*” which is reason why she decided to create the association.

Their cooperativity is accompanied by their admirable solidarity. In fact, in April they activated an initiative with the hashtag #coronavinciamonoi which consisted in selling their own sustainably made masks. This initiative was born with the specific intent to set in motion the Italian artisans and to raise funds to purchase protective devices for local health facilities, to distribute more and more basic necessities to the growing number of families, to purchase additional ventilators and to support vaccine research. They have also collaborated with other local businesses in order to produce protective caps for the intensive care and Covid-19 healthcare staff of the Tor Vergata Polyclinic. Those initiatives prove the attachment and the love they have for their territory.

During lockdown, they posted a video on their social media accounts to showcase the bike tour in Villa Cavalletti’s park. That was a way to stay connected with their audience and show them the beauty of their park and the activities that would be available after the lockdown. One initiative that was introduced in this period was the home delivery service of their products which was promoted on their social media accounts.

After the lockdown, they decided to focus their value proposition on the importance of “*pure air, unspoiled nature and beauty to be reborn*”, integrated with their core value of valorizing their territory. Therefore, activities such yoga classes in the garden and wine tastings in the vineyard were promoted on their social media account, stressing the outdoors factor and how therapeutic it is, especially in these times. Moreover, they were very clear in giving information about the measures put in place to ensure a Covid-free environment – thus avoiding any misunderstandings. They also offered a serological test service – in collaboration with the Grottaferrata analysis center – which could be useful for guests staying for longer periods.

In November, they offered an initiative called “*Un bosco nel piatto (the woods in the plate)*” which consisted in an educational visit of the Villa’s spontaneous autumnal edible grasses in the meadows, at the end of which a tasting of those herbs was provided. This is another example of a highly integrated experience that Villa Cavalletti is able to provide.

In December, some conventions with local businesses were put in place, such as specific discounts in small local shops, always with the intent of supporting the local community.

Moreover, they promoted their visits with tastings experiences as a suggestion for a Christmas gift, highlighting the experiential value of those types of activities (Fig. 32).



Figure 32: Villa Cavalletti's Instagram Posts

Villa Cavalletti has proven to be extremely proactive and strategic in the sense that all the new initiatives are perfectly aligned with their core value and with the customers' growing needs. This trend seems to be a prerogative for 2021 as well. In fact, during the interview the intent of further expanding their activities has emerged. They are currently working on a "Nordic walking circuit" inside their property in order to ensure their visitors' safeness and its feasibility, given the governmental measures put in place.

Moreover, since they noticed that customers tended to prefer making reservations on Booking.com, they came up with the idea of creating a local booking platform with all the other organizations of the Ospitalità Castelli Romani Association. This is another instance in which Villa Cavalletti demonstrates to be highly receptive when it comes to customers' changing preferences and is willing to act on them. Another example of their receptiveness is that they are planning to also position themselves as a "work destination in the countryside" as a result of their growing number of guests being workers. The idea would be to integrate work and the tourism experience, which is quite innovative, but also in-steps with the times given the rise of smart working.

Finally, in 2021 they are thinking of starting to draw up yearly Sustainability Reports which is once again quite innovative for an organization like theirs, but perfectly in line with what they are already doing.