EMPOWERING SMALL RURAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH HERITAGE TOURISM

At the end of the XX century many small rural communities in Europe were at a high risk of becoming abandoned, because of the migration towards urban areas in search of a job. However, in other cases some entrepreneurial villagers developed new activities in order to help their communities survive. On the other hand, all over the world, cultural heritage sites reflect human creation and human experiences. Tourism and cultural sectors have thus become the promoters of cultural heritage (as a branch of tourism oriented towards the cultural heritage of the location where tourism is occurring), and help spread traditional values and knowledge widely. Moreover, thanks to low-cost travelling, smaller villages and formerly unknown places can benefit greatly; and the XXI century tourist can experience the past.

Many Spanish archaeological sites are found in small villages which were deprived of funds for their preservation and development. However, there are cases in which the new generations led a crusade against this oblivion such as a tiny village (Garray), which owns one of the most famous archaeological sites in the country (Numantia). In the late 1990s a small group of young villagers decided to start performing historic recreations of the Roman-Numantian wars in order to attract people. It was such a success that they decided to create a non-for-profit association to empower the community’s economy by attracting visitors to the village. Consequently, in ten years the village population doubled and there was a significant rise in SMEs that provided employment for local inhabitants but also, for outsiders in search of a job that eventually, decided to remain.

In Flanders, Belgium, Westhoek, the rural region around Ypres, has been in constant development since the prehistory. Its outward appearance is mainly due to natural phenomena like water, clay... But also, the First World War has converted it into the number one Flemish war landscape. Its inhabitants have developed a particular and complex view on the war, generation after generation. But 2013, the preparatory year for the commemoration activities for the Great War 2014-18 at international, national, and local levels, was
key in a dramatic tourism increase in this part of Flanders. Whereas in 2006 the total number of tourists was 327,000 this figure went up drastically to 789,500 in 2014, the starting year of the commemoration. 2017 is expected to reach a new record, since many international commemoration ceremonies were organised by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, the UK, Germany and France.

Governments and tourist stakeholders should not ignore that small communities are the real heart of a country, as they keep the authentic traditions and customs of a country’s culture. Moreover, traditional tourist destinations suffer more and more from too high an influx of tourists, with a number of problems rising for the local residents. So we see a new phenomenon, in which a range of actors such as site managers, local authorities, tour operators, transportation companies, information managers at different levels, help guide the tourist towards new and authentic places.