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The paradoxical path towards the memorable guest experience – An investigation of the authentic guest experience at the Lake Avernus in Campi Flegrei

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Abstract
This paper examines the design of hospitality and tourism experiences staged for international tourists in the emerging Italian destination Campi Flegrei on the Bay of Naples. In particular, this case focuses on the paradox that Campi Flegrei (CF) hospitality providers around the Lake Avernus face when designing experiences for tourists. Hence, this research consists of a close investigation of a specific context and the touchpoints and cues that influence the experience design of selected stakeholders in CF. The research is explanatory (the case) and exploratory (in perspective) and is supported by qualitative primary data collected with private stakeholders that are involved in staging experiences for international tourists that have visited CF and have been on a tour on the investigated path. The authors’ contribution is to highlight the role of private stakeholders in the conceptualisation of the guest experience in the context of a non-DMO governed destination.

Keywords: Visitor experience; customer journey; experiential touchpoints; Campi Flegrei; stakeholders’ role; non-DMO governed destination

Track 3 - Organisational level. Generic areas, such as management/leadership, CSR and CSV, finance, business model innovation and vertical channel integration or diversification. Hospitality in non-traditional hospitality contexts

Focus of Paper Industry/Applied

Kind of submission: Paper

Introduction
Tourism is seen at the forefront of staging experience (Sternberg, 1997). As tourism is often considered an important producer of experiences (Binkhorst and den Dekker, 2009), there is a desire among researchers and practitioners to treat tourism as an experience production system (EPS) (Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2008). In the EPS, values and meanings can be designed and evoked through various contextual elements within tourism related services and experiences (Diller, Shedroff, and Rhea, 2008). Visiting, seeing, learning, enjoying and living a different life in a different environment are seen as the most important components of the tourism experience (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003). It is generally agreed that tourism experiences are socially and culturally produced (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). As an emerging destination and lacking a DMO to govern tourism activities, CF is characterised by a ‘service handicap’ that is visible through a number
of disservices such as poor signposting, poor infrastructures and unqualified receptive services (Risitano, 2006). Such non-organizational related touchpoints and cues may influence the tourist experience and the design of the customer journey by relevant stakeholders in a hospitality and tourism context. Lacking a DMO, some of the tasks that are traditionally covered by a DMO are being handled by individual enterprises and bottom-up initiated networks (Morrison, 2013). Due to the absence of a DMO and of other factors that are meant to accompany the guest through the experience path, the role of the service and experience providers is crucial into turning the experience of guests into a positive one. The destination of CF is a supervolcano situated in the Campania region. CF is a geological region that constitutes a 15 km diameter large caldera. The area is home to over twenty volcanoes, the vast majority of which is inactive today. Volcanic activity is, hence, particularly visible only in the Solfatara volcano, which is one of the major tourist attractions of the destination. Besides volcanic activity, what makes CF an area with high tourism potential is the high concentration of archaeological ruins due to the central role that the area played during the Roman empire; the Roman colonies of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli), Misenum (modern Miseno) and Baiae (modern Baia) were respectively the Roman Empire’s main trade port; base of the naval fleet and holiday resort of the Roman aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Roman amphitheatre, thermal bath complexes and cisterns are among the remains of the area’s glorious past and important elements of CF’s destination product (Morrison, 2013). Lake Avernus is a crater lake which is iconic for the landscape, history and mythology of Campi Flegrei. The toxic volcanic exhalations from the crater gave the lake the reputation of lake ‘without birds’ from which its name “Avernus” (from the Greek aornos - no birds). In ancient Rome, the lake was thought to be the entrance to the Hades. The Roman writer Virgil narrates of Aeneas’ descending to the underworld in the sixth book of his work Aeneid. At Lake Avernus one finds individual enterprises such as the wine producer and restaurant Cantine dell’Averno, the didactic garden Il Giardino dell’Orco, restaurants, cafes, and nightclubs. Also a number of bottom up developed cooperations (Ryan, Mottiar and Quinn, 2012) are found at Lake Avernus, such as the archaeological chef Ruggiero Peluso and his former student Pippo Carnevale; both are restaurateurs, who prepare food from ancient roman recipes which they then stage through gastronomic storytelling experiences for guests at Il Giardino dell’Orco. Cantine dell’Averno offers events on the lakeside and at the vineyard in cooperation with the cultural association Flegreando and the theatrical group Collettivo Lunazione. Also, during the annual archaeological and gastronomic festival of Campi Flegrei, Malazè, several events are organized as a cooperation between stakeholders at Lake Avernus. One of the events organized by Cantine dell’Averno, Collettivo Lunazione and Flegreando is In Vino Itineras, an itinerant theatre show which takes place along Lake Avernus and ends at the restaurant at Cantine dell’Averno. This event and the path that guests go through to access it form the case for this investigation. Thus, the authors take the point of departure in the following research question: How can hospitality and tourism stakeholders positively influence the customer journey in a non-DMO governed destination characterised by unfavourable infrastructural touchpoints without disrupting the authentic tourist experience?

**Literature review**

The concept of tourism experience has to be elaborated into meta-concept, representing the value propositions of tourism destinations, and operational concept that allows for the orchestration of design elements within tourism destinations to allow for and facilitate desired experiences (Tussyadiah, 2014). The organisation facilitates the experience by setting the scene, applying conceptual tools to develop and cultivate the experience staged (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The term experience design refers to the development of experience-centric services. Since experiences are constructed by the guests based on a series of interactions and encounters designed by the provider, experiences cannot be fully controlled by organisations (Hume et al., 2006; Jantzen et al., 2012). However, the organisation can provide the prerequisites that enable guests to obtain the desired experiences (Gupta & Vajic, 2000). From a tourism perspective an organisation can be perceived as the individual enterprise, formalized or informalized cooperations, or the destination management organisations (DMO). Creative organisations and tourist organisations co-produce and take advantage of each other’s knowledge, competence and strength (Mossberg, 2007) Both organisation-controlled and other factors influence customers’ service experience (Grewal et al., 2009; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) and guests’ current experiences are influenced by previous experiences and anticipated experiences (Helkkula et al., 2012). The guest experience depends on the concepts of servicescape or atmospherics (Bitner, 1992; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004). The guest experience is also influenced by the environmental characteristics of the business’ physical
setting and service. Servicescape is of greater importance in determining guests’ quality evaluations of a hedonic experience compared with a utilitarian service (Reimer and Kuehn, 2005). Any experience – as defined by Pine & Gilmore (1999) has to be supported by a number of basic services (Madsen, 2015) and presented as one of four generic resources: time, skills, goods and services required for the production of tourism experiences (Andersson and Tommy, 2007). Although these services are provided by various decentralized companies within a destination, a holistic destination management is crucial for a sustainable tourism success. Hence, destinations need to be equated with business organisations following the major managerial functions, at best coordinated by DMOs (Stickdorn & Anita Zehrer, 2009). Negative destination experiences, such as critical service will lead to a negative attitude toward the destination (Haemoon, Fiore, and Jeoung, 2007). Despite focusing on the supply side it has to be taken into account that a guest experience is an interaction between an organization and a guest as perceived through a guest’s conscious and subconscious mind. It is a mix of the organisation’s rational performance, the senses stimulated, and emotions evoked and intuitively measured against the guest’s expectations across all moments of contact. The experience seen as a process (before, during and after), also described as the customer journey (Boswijk et al., 2012), is considered to start before the actual transaction and ends after the transaction is completed. Thus, in tourism, touchpoints exist in all stages of the tourism value chain. Recent studies point out that each stage of the travel experience is comprised of a series of events which occur through interaction with physical, social, and virtual environmental stimuli (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Since the perceived quality of tourism products relies on a complex structure of local providers, a holistic view on tourism products as tourism destinations gains importance (Buhalis 2000, Weaver and Oppermann, 2000). The journey consists of numerous touchpoints between the customer and the organization. (Boswijk et al., 2012). The touchpoints can be human, static and interactive encounters that mix together to create such impressions. If an organisation fails to satisfy a guest upon even one moment of truth, it will completely eliminate the customer's memory of good service (Trivedi, 2011). The touchpoints need to be carefully designed and managed and each touchpoint has the potential for innovation (Voss and Zomerdijk, 2007). The design of experience-centric services also involves managing cues along the customer journey (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). Cues can occur at any time and any point during the delivery of the service or experience, including the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010; Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Berry et al., 2006). Furthermore, the five senses are considered crucial to the design of experiences. The way the organisation appeals to the senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and somato-sensory - and the strength of the sense appeal impacts the perceived quality of the experience and the senses can be a direct route to the guests’ emotions (Kim & Fesenmeier, 2015; Roberts, 2004). The more effectively an experience engages the senses, the more memorable it will be (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Haeckel et al., 2003). Guests also gain basic information on basic service attributes about e.g. the physical environment required to obtain an experience through the customer journey through their senses.

Method

The purpose of this research is to explain and explore the design of experiences on the supply side along with an investigation of the awareness of hospitality stakeholders in relation to the conceptualisation of the guest experience. The investigation is specific in its scope and aims at ‘photographing’ the guest experience design in the context of Lake Avernus in the Italian destination CF. Thus, the specific context of this investigation is the path that tourists cross when they want to reach Lake Avernus from the nearby train station. In particular, the context is given by the execution of a cultural, theatrical and gastronomic event on the lakeside which involves three different stakeholders that cooperate for the event. The investigation of the event path is based on a background of observations conducted during four tours organized and executed by the authors (table 1).
Table 1: Overview of the tours where the unstructured observations have been conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Type of visit</th>
<th>Observer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 2016</td>
<td>Study-trip with international students of the University College of Northern Denmark</td>
<td>Both authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Study-trip with Danish students of Italian classes</td>
<td>Author Luigi D'Ambrosio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Football trip to Campi Flegrei and Naples with Danish tourists</td>
<td>Author Jan Halberg Madsen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2016</td>
<td>Study-trip with a delegation of the Danish tourism network organization Dansk Turismefremme in occasion of the archeological and gastronomic festival Malazè</td>
<td>Both authors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the paper relies on the understanding of experiences as a construction that results from the encounter between hospitality providers and guests and in spite of recognising the active role that guests play in shaping the experience, the authors have investigated the supply side. In order to fulfil this goals primary data have been collected through written interviews with selected stakeholders that are actively involved in designing the guest experience which is the object of this investigation, namely, the tourist path from the train station to the historical Mirabella vineyard. The path that guests cross is illustrated and described in figure 1:

![Figure 1: Illustration of the path where the event In Vino Itineras took place](image-url)
The Lucrino train station is not well-maintained and not provided with informative signs about the Lake Avernus.

At the roundabout you access the road that leads to Lake Avernus. There is no clear signage about the lake.

The guests walk on the three-lined road that leads to the lake. Lake Avernus is in sight at this stage.

At the crossroad there is no indication to Lake Avernus.

The guests encounter Collettivo Lunazione. The theatrical show begins.

The guests encounter wine producer and restaurant Cantine dell’Averno for lunch. The theatrical show is over at this stage.

The guests enter the historical Mirabella vineyard. The theatrical show continues in the vineyard.

The guests arrive to Lake Avernus and are welcomed by Flegreando. The guided tour begins.

The guests enter the Roundabout that leads to Lake Avernus. There is no clear signage about the lake.

At the crossroad there is no indication to Lake Avernus.
As the above illustration shows, the investigated path begins at the Lucrino train station (bottom arrow). Several touchpoints have been deemed to be crucial during the path and have been highlighted on the map. The description of the path is based on unstructured observations conducted by the authors during four trips of International tourists (with a majority of Danes) in 2016, as illustrated in table 1. During our observation it emerged that the path from the station to Lake Avernus is ‘tourist unfriendly’ as it presents challenges for guests who are unfamiliar with the area. These challenges have led the authors to conduct the current investigation about the paradox that hospitality providers around Lake Avernus face in their interaction with tourists: a ‘tourist-unfriendly’ path that culminates with a positively surprising experience.

The stakeholders involved in the organization of the event are presented in table 2. The stakeholders representing the supply side from different perspectives and roles that are involved in this investigation are the wine producer and restaurant Cantine dell’Averno, the cultural association Flegreando, the theatrical group Collettivo Lunazione and the archeological and gastronomic festival Malazè. The stakeholders and respondents are briefly described in the following table:

Table 2: Description of stakeholders’ profile and role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Role in the execution of the event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cantine dell’Averno</td>
<td>Wine producer and restaurant on the lakeside. It is located on the historical Mirabella vineyard.</td>
<td>Setting the stage in the vineyard and preparing and serving a locally produced lunch/dinner for the guests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flegreando</td>
<td>Cultural association whose purpose is to encourage the knowledge of Campi Flegrei among locals and tourists through guided tours and events.</td>
<td>Guiding guests around Lake Avernus and introducing them to the history, mythology and volcanic activity of Lake Avernus and Campi Flegrei.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collettivo Lunazione</td>
<td>Theatrical group that performs itinerant shows in historical and natural sites.</td>
<td>Performing the itinerant theatrical show In Vino Itineras.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malazè</td>
<td>Annual archaeological and gastronomic event that has the purpose of taking visitors to discover Campi Flegrei through events divided in the themes nature, taste, archaeology and myth.</td>
<td>The Malazè network and has been promoting and encouraging bottom-up in initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation and synergy among Campi Flegrei stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis

The analysis section of this paper is built around the following themes that the authors have investigated through their data collection: customer journey; the role of stakeholders in relation to the conceptualization of the guest experience; external factors and destination touchpoints; and finally the guest experience paradox encountered by the stakeholders.

Customer journey

All our respondents agree on perceiving the experience as a process (Boswijk et al., 2012 and Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), beginning before encountering the local organisers and the actual transaction at Lake
Avernus and ends after the transaction is completed. Our respondents agree that the guest experience begins before the actual encounter with the stakeholders at Lake Avernus. However, the respondents do not perceive the customer journey in the same way. Three out of four suggest the experience to begin during the information seeking process (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005) when the tourist is preparing, planning and investigating what to experience at the destination, whereas Gambardella suggests the experience to begin when arriving at the Lucrino train station. According to Gambardella, the guest’s arrival at the station marks the beginning of the experience, whereas for Mattera and Mirabella “The experience begins already when he (the guest) leaves the place where he has spent the night”. The pre-experience stage is also mentioned in respect to the tourists’ preparation and expectation. “We believe that the experience of the tourist, in the broad sense, begins already when he gets to know about the event in which he will participate” as stated by Collettivo Lunazione - a representant of a coproducing creative organization (Mossberg, 2007). These statements also support the notion that experiences are socially and culturally constructed (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Also the notion of perceived quality of tourism products relying on a complex structure of local providers from a holistic view on tourism products as tourism destinations (Buhalis, 2000, Weaver and Oppermann, 2000) is acknowledged by the respondents.

The role of stakeholders in a non-DMO governed destination

The respondents regard to some extent their roles in various ways related to their position in the experience production system (Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2008, and Diller, Shedroff, and Rhea, 2008). As the following quote shows, Gambardella retains the role of private stakeholders to be fundamental in a non-DMO governed destination:

“My role is that of welcoming the traveller and make him at ease right away after the somewhat traumatic experience of the arrival at Lucrino station. To find someone who welcomes him and who speaks English generally represents a good point of departure. Our role is to make him tune in the experience that he is about to live and the place he is in” (Gambardella)

Collettivo Lunazione describes direct and indirect roles and perceives themselves having a direct role when: “The performance staged by the actors delineates a highly emotional experience”. Collettivo Lunazione also sees themselves as co-producing with the director and the organisers. (Mossberg, 2007). Mirabella – Cantine dell’Averno – pays attention to conservation and protection of the landscape not only in respect to the agricultural preservation but also regarding the landscape as a key driver of the esthetic experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Haemoon, Fiore, and Jeoung, 2007).

External factors and destination touchpoints

Our respondents recognize several infrastructural weaknesses that characterize CF in general and Lake Avernus in the specific. These are the lack of efficient public transportation, maintenance of the streets, accessibility to sites, and informative signs. Although there is general agreement that these flaws have a negative influence on the tourist experience, two of our respondents point out the importance of attitude of the guest. As to the creation of the experience it is noticed that some effort from the guests is required. The respondents see themselves as facilitators of potential experiences (Gupta & Vajic, 2000) that the guests themselves have to embrace. According to Mattera the type and quality of the tourist are important: he must be curious, non-prejudicial, cultured, interested in history, and a gastronomy lover. I think that the right recipe, especially for international tourists depend on how much one is willing to learn and give when interacting with foreign cultures."

When it comes to the content of the experience much attention is paid to storytelling and authenticity of the destination. “Our role can easily be compared to Cicero or Virgil that takes you by the hand to explore and discover the corners of this territory, narrating stories of men and women of Campi Flegrei that still manage
to convey a sense of authenticity.” (Mattera). Mirabella’s goal is to offer an experience that can enrich the guest from a cultural and recreational perspective making the guest know the territory in its authenticity.

“I find it obvious that the fact that all of this is missing [informative signs, tourist info-pont] impacts negatively on the tourists’ perception of this place. To find the ‘desert’ in a place that should excel for its potential influences negatively the experience of the brave tourist that, despite all, chooses to come Campi Flegrei” (Mattera).

As the above quotation points out, the stakeholders’ understanding of the guest experience path and the importance of the cues and formal signs guiding to Lake Avernus upon arrival at the Lucrino station are somewhat diverse. Mirabella does not see the absence of signs as a supporting service to obtain an experience as an obstacle in respect to finding the route to the lake. “The tourists reach the lake anyway and many of them are equipped with mobile phones”. Oppositely the three other respondents acknowledge the importance of informative signs. “These are all critical points that our local administration and entrepreneurs have never really solved. I find it obvious that tourists should find informative signs and, why not, also a tourist information near one of the biggest tourist attractions of Campi Flegrei” (Mattera). Gambardella explains that “the experience consists of all the aspects and touchpoints that the tourist encounters” and he perceives the difficulties of reaching the Lake Avernus influencing the quality of the experience but he also sees the landscape of the Lake Avernus as an important strength. Mattera expresses that the lack of informative signs negatively impacts on the tourists perception of the place; “To find the ‘desert’ in a place that should excel for its potential influences negatively the experience of the brave tourist that, despite all, chooses to come to Campi Flegrei”.

The guest experience paradox

Although it is recognized by all stakeholders that the abovementioned infrastructural weaknesses have a negative impact on the guest experience and the guests’ perception of the destination, there is awareness that drastic changes in the destination might not be the right path to follow. This is Mattera’s opinion: “I don’t think that everything must be perfect; paradoxically, I think that we must keep some element of unpredictability, which I think people who come here even expect to find.” (Mattera). According to Mirabella, the necessary changes that are needed in order to improve the quality guest experience (e.g. informative signs and more efficient public transportation) should not disrupt the authenticity of the experiences that the destination in general can offer to their visitors. In Mirabella’s opinion the destination does not have the capacity and the characteristics to become ‘too tourisyc’; he suggests the development of sustainable tourism aimed at a visitor “who knows what he wants” (Mirabella). This strikes a chord with what has been mentioned earlier; the stakeholders lay stress on the importance of the guests’ attitude and interest in exploring the destination. Also, this is in line with their perception of their role as local guides to let the tourist discover the authentic secrets of the territory through narration and storytelling.

Conclusion

In this paper the authors have investigated the role of private stakeholders in the conceptualisation of the guest experience in the context of a non-DMO governed destination. Taking the point of departure in primary data, our investigation has focused on an analysis of the customer journey, the role of private stakeholders in a non-DMO governed destination, the external factors and destination touchpoints that influence the quality of the guest experience, and finally the guest experience paradox. The conclusion on the conducted research is illustrated through the following figure:

Figure 2: Illustration of findings
Non-DMO governed destination as CF and in the specific case of Lake Avernus are characterised by the presence of a service handicap. Local private hospitality stakeholders have to deal with a number of infrastructural disservices that influence the customer journey. The influence of non-organizational factors on the guest experience is an important finding, as our analysis shows that our respondents believe that the guest experience begins way before the guest encounters the relevant stakeholders. Hence, the role of local private stakeholders is crucial in counterbalancing potential negative experiences that weak infrastructural touchpoints have provoked. At the same time, the role of the guest is determinant too. The guest has to be willing to adapt to the destination’s conditions; he must be “curious, non-prejudicial, cultured, interested in history, and a gastronomy lover” (Mattera). Finally, our research has led to the conclusion that local stakeholders are presented with a paradox. Although infrastructural adjustments are needed in order to improve the quality of the guest experience, these changes should not jeopardize the authentic guest experience that guests can be offered in CF and Lake Avernus. The experience is sweeter and more rewarding due to the pre-experience’s guests’ conditions and the service handicap.

Moreover, our analysis has produced findings that lead to a number of hypotheses, which the authors would like to present as relevant perspectives to take into consideration for further research on the topic. The first element that emerges from our investigation is connected with the concept of flow during the guest experience. Based on our findings, the first hypothesis that we present is that “the guest is in a disharmonic flow during the customer journey due to lack of control and knowledge”. In a non-DMO governed destination as Campi Flegrei, the absence of top down orientation impacts the customer journey negatively, as supporting service components along the customer journey are missing; the lack of signs and cues call for guests’ abilities and motivation to find their way to the event site at Lake Avernus. Another hypothesis that we pose relates to the concepts storytelling and authenticity. These concepts were not considered for this investigation. However, as a reaction to the absence of a top-down controlled tourism organization, our respondents point out how important it is for private stakeholders to take the guest by the hand and accompany him through the hidden narrations of the territory. Hence, “storytelling is a way to let the guest discover the authenticity of the destination”.


Moreover, for further research the authors suggest to investigate the topic from the perspective of theories related to the experience economy. In particular, the authors suggest considering Pine and Gilmore’s Four Realms of an Experience theory (1999) that consists of four dimensions (4Es): entertainment, education, esthetic, and escapism). This theory is deemed to be relevant as it can benefit destination managers in identifying which components of the 4Es are missing or whose potential is not fully utilized. Thus, this may benefit the local stakeholders in more accurately to adjust their market strategies, incubate the entrepreneurial enterprises that are needed, seek resources for missing elements, and encourage development along the 4Es.

References


