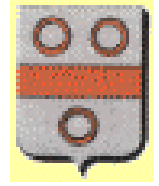




**Contribution
from
Pergine Valdarno**



Impact of tourism on villages and small communities

**The speech of Massimo Palazzeschi,
Mayor of Pergine Valdarno -Italy.**

"The Impact of Tourism in our Small Villages"

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Dear friends of Aldeburgh, dear colleagues from the other European villages,

I am bringing greetings from my Town Hall, Pergine Valdarno, which was the Cultural Village of Europe last year. For us it was an important and unique experience, and I hope that you, your citizens and your young people who visited us felt the same.

This year the Village is in England. I would like to wish you every success and I hope this will be an important year for you as it was for us in Italy.

The theme of the mayor's conference is very stimulating for us, because the impact of tourism in our countryside has been and continues to be very important for us.

About twenty years ago the countryside was still full of abandoned rural houses, which were falling down. Nobody wanted to work in agriculture, to cultivate vineyards or olive groves, because it wasn't economically productive.

The farmers worked extremely hard. They had to face the elements with the risk of losing every thing. The shop keepers paid very little for the produce of the land, and so it wasn't feasible to work the land. In Nineteen eighty five (1985) the Tuscan Region made a law about tourism in the countryside which offered the possibility to all farmers to welcome tourists into their farmhouses, thus creating a tourism connected to the land and the farm products. The possibility to restore ruined buildings, without paying all the taxes, in order to host tourists, was provided.

This saving convinced many people to make investments in old farmhouses, renovating them to create a place for tourists. The money generated by the tourism in these farmhouses combined with the products of the land has allowed many farms to continue working. The countryside has not been abandoned for the city. This has allowed us to keep the Tuscan countrirside alive, and today our landscape is considered to be one of the most beautiful in the world.

Another very important aspect which has been shown in recent years thanks to tourism in the countryside is the success of our typical products -olive oil, but more importantly wine -in particular the red wine of our area. Chianti wine is having a great success in sales across the world. Many farmers have started to cultivate vineyards to produce the famous Tuscan Wine. My Town Hall, together with another four Town Halls in the hills around the Chianti area, has constituted a D.O.C. (Denomination of Controlled Origin). This D.O.C. called "Pietraviva", which means live stone, will increase sales and the value of the land where this wine is produced. This wine is controlled and certified for its ! genuinity. All this process brings an increase in the selling price and advantages to the farmer.

The publicity surrounding a wine producing area, such as Chianti or Montalcino, increases the presence of tourists in farmhouse holidays in the countryside. There are some excursions for tourists in the countryside which allow the possibility to visit farms and wine-cellars where it is possible to sample wine. The number of tourists in the Tuscan countryside in 2001 and 2002 reached new records. It is calculated that in 2002 2 and half million people stayed in farmhouses in Tuscany. In comparison the Region has a population of 3 million.

You can understand from these statistics the importance of the touristic phenomenon, and the reason that the Tuscan Region is developing a new and more modern law for tourism in the countryside. This law hopes to cater for the needs of the farmers and the tourists in the area. In Pergine Valdarno we had 13.000 tourists last year; half of these were Italian. This year we have got ten farmhouses which are authorized to host tourists, and other farmhouses are preparing the necessary documents to be authorized.

Unfortunately the outbreak of war in Iraq has slowed down this phenomenon; however, it remains in constant growth. The new law of the Tuscan Region confirms the strong relationship between farming activity and tourism. It promotes a sustainable development of the countryside and encourages farmers to work to cultivate typical products such as olive oil, wine, fruit and vegetable to give to tourists and to sell as quality products. The presence of many tourists allows new shops, restaurants and services to open in small Tuscan villages such as mine.

It also offers the possibility for many young people to find a new job in the countryside. The presence of man in the countryside is useful today as in the past, because farmers maintain the land. They clean the banks of rivers and streams in order to avoid flooding the villages during storms.

In conclusion the impact of tourism in the countryside is extremely positive and Tuscany is a European example.

Until a few years ago people came to Tuscany to visit Florence and other cities of art. Now in 2003 they come for farmhouse holidays. They still visit the cities of art, but at the end of the day they return to the peace and quiet of the countryside.