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CONTRASTING THE ITALIAN ALPS' SEASONALITY
WITH CULTURE. THE CASES OF THE FORTRESSES OF
EXILLES AND BARD*

Introduction. – The touristic capitalization of culture is strategic for growth and development worldwide since it stimulates economic transformation while bolstering and preserving cultural heritage. Heritage tourism offers significant economic opportunities even in turbulent years. In 2024, most of the post-Covid recovery in international tourism was due to cultural travel (WEF, 2024a). Cultural tourism is also a large market (it accounts for 40% of world tourism; UNESCO, 2021), with an estimated potential size of USD 8 billion by 2028 (Technavio, 2024). Even more importantly, the cultural tourism industry produces a considerable multiplier effect on the regional and national economy. In Italy, Assoturismo (2022) has calculated that every euro produced by the cultural tourism sector activates 1.8 euros in other economic sectors.

Thanks to the heterogeneity of the assets it capitalises, cultural tourism drives substantial demand for a wide array of services and goods, which in turn stimulates entrepreneurship, jobs, and prosperity in several social groups and territories (du Cros, McKercher, 2020; Duda, 2016). Nevertheless, local economies must develop robust policies to capitalize on their heritage while preventing the negative impacts of tourism (WEF, 2024b).

Overtourism is a renowned primary risk in tourism capitalization, and the literature provides several studies dealing with this challenge (Dodds, Butler, 2019; Mihalic, 2020). At the same time, most of these studies focus almost exclusively on the negative impacts overtourism produces on the residents of some well-renowned urban destinations (Santos-Rojo, Llopis-Amorós, García-García, 2023) and threatened ecosystems (Saeporsdottir,

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Hall, 2021; Seyhan, 2023). Few studies focus on overtourism in minor destinations and unrecognized rural and natural sites (Butler, 2023; Ghaderi, Hall, Ryan, 2022; Bohac, Drapela, 2022). From our perspective, an explanation of this little academic research on overtourism in rural destinations relies on the everyday conceptualisation of cultural tourism and heritage. Despite UNESCO's attempt to broaden cultural tourism's meaning to include natural sites and related ecosystems - UNESCO defines the «natural, cultural heritage» as a specific type of cultural heritage «which contains natural sites with cultural aspects» (Zygierewicz, 2019, p. 1) -, it remains linked to urban settings and landmarks such as historic buildings and monuments. It does not consider that natural landscapes, even those that appear untouched and virgin, are cultural products, resulting from the transformative action of the human societies (Birks, Kaland, Daglilm, 1988; Naveh, 1995). They are “hybrid systems” (Neef, 1982) containing different gradients of cultural landscapes¹.

Cultural tourism should thus address both urban and rural destinations. Instead, the tourism industry considers the cultural tourist a typical urban tourist interested in easy accessibility, facilities, services, comfort, and social contacts, whereas the rural tourist escapes from the urban chaos, seeking isolation, silence, spirituality, and slowness.

This tendency is a weakness since it prevents the capitalisation of the vast cultural heritage expressed by the totality of the rural and natural areas worldwide (which are 97% of the world's total land area excluding Antarctica and Greenland, according to Liu and others, 2014). Non-urban destinations can thus support a fairer distribution of the flows generated by tourism: from popular, overcrowded destinations to rural sites affected by remoteness and decline. At the same time, reconceptualising the natural landscapes as cultural destinations and transferring urban-style tourism practices to rural sites may also menace the local heritage.

Consistent with these premises, the study focuses on mountain tourism in the Italian Alps to better understand: how the tourism offer of the mountain destination can combine cultural and natural heritage; the opportunities and limits in terms of tourism development and sustainability.

¹ The Natures Futures Framework (NFF) by IPBES recognizes that some people conceive the Nature as a biocultural landscape deeply embedded in societies, traditions and faiths (IPBES, 2019; Brondizio and others, 2019).

In the Alpine mountains, in fact, the opposite challenges of overtourism and under-capitalization add up with the challenge of seasonality (Cannas, 2012; Corluka, 2019), stressing the urgency of a more complex conceptualizing of heritage tourism in these areas (Bausch, Gartner, 2020).

Mountain tourism in the Alps. – Mountain economies are a complex analysis field. First, the definition of the mountain as a geographical category is the object of different interpretations (Funnell, Price, 2003). As a result, the literature provides several possible delimitations of the mountain and its communities (Omizzolo, Streifeneder, 2013). Second, in many countries, the conceptualisation of mountain development suffers from an urban-centric vision of the economy and society, preventing a self-determined mountain agenda (Ferlaino, Rota, Dematteis, 2019).

As the EEA underlines (2010), the social, economic, and environmental importance of Europe's mountains has been recognised since the late 19th century. At the end of the 1990s, the European Union (EU) cohesion policy and the Treaty of Lisbon both focused on promoting mountain development (EEA, 2010). The directives of the European Community (EC) then stimulated Member States to identify homogeneous areas within their mountainous territory to be the object of a new phase of planning and programming (Ferlaino, Rota, 2013).

Italy, for instance, tried many times to revise the criteria to classify its mountain territories. However, mountain delimitation in Italy has remained ambiguous (De Vecchis, 2004; Omizzolo, Streifeneder, 2013; Ferlaino, Rota, Dematteis, 2019; Lucia, Rota, 2022), and other classifications of the national territory added in the meanwhile. Among them, the *National Strategy for Internal Areas* (SNAI) emerges for scale and scope. Aiming at increasing the country's *territorial cohesion* (which has constituted the focal point of EU territorial policies since the 2000s; Debarbieux, Rudaz, 2010) and using accessibility to essential services (health, education, and mobility) to assess territorial development potentials, SNAI categorized the Italian municipalities into “metropolitan” and “inner areas”. In this representation, most of the mountain municipalities of the Alps stay within the “peripheral” and “ultra peripheral” category. In contrast, important mountain cities such as Trento, Bolzano, and Belluno (fig. 1) are considered “metropolitan pole”.

Therefore, SNAI partly capture the exceptionality of the mountain territory that develops extended webs of functional relationships with large cities and metropolitan areas (Dematteis, 2014) and supports the country's economy (Funnel, Price, 2003).

Considering the Alpine Arc, the tourism capitalization of this vast region (1.200 km long and 150-250 km wide, with peaks up to 4.810 meters) traces back to the beginning of the 1900s; and today, it is one of the top travel destinations worldwide. The winter industry, notably, is the primary source of income for several Alpine municipalities and a meaningful source of external image and attractiveness (Tranos, Davoudi, 2014). The inbound ski market is the largest on the planet, capturing up to 40% of global attendance, and it is one of the most equipped, hosting more than 10,000 lifts, 37% of ski resorts, and major players (Pede and others, 2022; Vanat, 2022). Almost 40% of the Alpine municipalities exhibit significant tourism activity (Corradini and others, 2023) and a mix of nature and culture that provides unique attractions to visitors (Bausch, Gartner, 2020).

Nevertheless, the appreciation of the Alps as a tourism destination continued to pass through the stereotyped idea of a green playground endowed with natural landscapes and winter sports (Lucia, Rota, 2023). In Italy, Alpine destinations begun only recently to be appreciated for a larger offer of endowments and activities (FMI, 2017). For instance, Bertolino and Corrado (2022) have reported signals of a re-interpretation of the Alpine culture as “avant-garde” and a new conceptualisation of the mountain identity based on its cultural heritage. As Euromontana observes, the Alps have a vibrant and diversified cultural heritage that «comprises natural, built and archaeological sites, as well as the knowledge and the traditions of a given community including agronomic, forestry and food practices» (*ibidem*, p. 3). Many natural sites in the Alps have cultural aspects too,

since their physical, biological, or geological characteristics have influenced the way of life in mountain communities. At the same time, traditional farming practices such as pastoralism have influenced the natural features of mountains for ages, contributing to the conservation of biodiversity and the maintenance of ecosystem services (*ibidem*).

The cultural and the natural heritage in the mountains are thus intrinsically intertwined and represent a critical asset in tourism capitalisation.

Tourism seasonality in the Italian Alps. – FAO and UNWTO (2023) define mountain tourism as an activity with distinctive characteristics and attributes inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity, and local community. Thus, this definition recognises the primary relationship linking mountain tourism with the destination's natural, social, and cultural heritage.

As in other Alpine countries, mountain tourism in Italy is an important economic sector. Recent data (Tab. 1) show that in 2023, Italian mountain sites accounted for 18,8% of tourist arrivals to specialized tourism destinations and 9,5% of all arrivals. They also show that mountain sites are the second most visited destination (12.690.815 arrivals in 2023) after sea sites (30.246.973), whereas historical, art, and culture cities (9.340.352) and lake sites (8.563.062) come after.

Tab. 1 – *Tourist arrivals in Italy, 2023 (absolute numbers and percentage of total structures*

	Total structures, n	Hotels and similar structures, n (%)			Extra hotel structures, n		
		total	foreign	domestic	total	foreign	domestic
Specialised tourism destinations	67.474.706	44.556.324 (66,0%)	19.063.804 (28,3%)	25.492.520 (37,8%)	22.918.382 (34,0%)	11.989.363 (17,8%)	10.929.019 (16,2%)
<i>Historical cities, cities of art and culture</i>	9.340.352	6.320.571 (67,7%)	2.763.948 (29,6%)	3.556.623 (38,1%)	3.019.781 (32,3%)	1.372.594 (14,7%)	1.647.187 (17,6%)
<i>Mountain sites</i>	12.690.815	9.550.082 (75,3%)	4.169.460 (32,9%)	5.380.622 (42,4%)	3.140.733 (24,7%)	1.472.134 (11,6%)	1.668.599 (13,1%)
<i>Lake sites</i>	8.563.062	4.664.903 (54,5%)	3.101.463 (36,2%)	1.563.440 (18,3%)	3.898.159 (45,5%)	2.932.739 (34,2%)	965.420 (11,3%)
<i>Sea sites</i>	30.246.973	19.318.370 (63,9%)	7.128.170 (23,6%)	12.190.200 (40,3%)	10.928.603 (36,1%)	5.194.779 (17,2%)	5.733.824 (19,0%)
<i>Thermal sites</i>	3.847.451	3.305.374 (85,9%)	1.331.422 (34,6%)	1.973.952 (51,3%)	542.077 (14,1%)	273.212 (7,1%)	268.865 (7,0%)
<i>Hilly and varied sites</i>	2.786.053	1.397.024 (50,1%)	569.341 (20,4%)	827.683 (29,7%)	1.389.029 (49,9%)	743.905 (26,7%)	645.124 (23,2%)
Other capitals and cities	66.162.003	49.119.851 (74,2%)	26.429.305 (39,9%)	22.690.546 (34,3%)	17.042.152 (25,8%)	10.395.583 (15,7%)	6.646.569 (10,0%)
All destinations	133.636.709	93.676.175 (70,0%)	45.493.109 (34,0%)	48.183.066 (36,1%)	39.960.534 (29,9%)	22.384.946 (16,8%)	17.575.588 (13,2%)

Source: I.Stat

Overnight stays also tell a similar story, with mountain destinations accounting for 18,6% of stays to specialized destinations (sea sites account for 52,7%, tourism cities for 12,7%, and lake sites for 8,6%) and 12,2% of total stays. Regarding the territorial origin of tourists, domestic arrivals in 2023 were 7.049.221, i.e., slightly more numerous than foreign ones

(5.641.594, 44,0%), testifying to the progressive internationalization of the Italian mountain tourism industry that led to a balance between domestic and international arrivals (in 2004-2019, it raises of about +10%; Corradini and others, 2023), pushed by a new enriched and varied offer. Conversely, a strong polarisation occurred in the type of establishments, with hotel accommodations accounting for 75% of total stays vs. 25% of extra-hotel.

The Alps are undoubtedly the most important and iconic destinations within the Italian mountains. However, tourism in the Alpine region is not homogeneous; rather, it concentrates on specific areas and periods. At a national scale, Trentino-Alto Adige accounted for almost 80% of the overall tourist attendance in the Italian Alps before the Covid pandemic (*ibidem*). At the urban scale, the demand also converges on a few «tourism districts» (Lella, Rota, 2021) or “hotspots” (Alpine Convention, 2016). In contrast, most of the mountain territory is excluded from the most consistent flows. Moreover, the tourist presence in mountain destinations concentrates on summer and winter holidays and during the weekends.

This fluctuating affluence is a recognised critical issue in Alpine tourism. Generally speaking, seasonality occurs when tourist affluence to a given location registers recurring similar fluctuations in a time series during a particular time of the year. When these variations have a similar regularity and amplitude year after year, they constitute a systematic element within a tourism time series. They can be thus identified as seasonal fluctuations or “seasonality” (Grossi, Mussini, 2021).

In the Italian Alps, tourism seasonality is a structural condition that appeared in the 70s, when they became destinations for mass tourism (Barker, 1982). As explained in Section 2, the appreciation of the mountain in Italy traditionally passes through its offer of sports and outdoor activities, which is highly influenced by weather and climate conditions. Moreover, mountain sites are more remote and less accessible than other specialized destinations such as cultural cities. Thus, overnight stays tend to be longer (Tourism Observatory of Confcommercio with SWG estimated that two-thirds of 12 million Italians chose the mountain as a tourism destination in 2023, staying for a week or a slightly shorter period)² and clustered in the periods of the year when institutionalised holidays are more extended, i.e., summer and the Christmas periods.

² See <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/osservatorio-confiturismo-swg-vacanze>

Mountain seasonality results from a mix of natural factors (due to seasonal temperature and precipitation variability) and human practices imbued with cultural, religious, social, and political significance (Cannas, 2012; Vergori, 2017), impacting core and marginal destinations differently. Curiously, in the Italian Alps, tourism seasonality happens despite the massive presence of second homes owned by Italian landlords who live in a range of proximity. From the perspective of the sustainability of mountain development, second-home holiday habits can be a first step towards a multi-local lifestyle, bringing a more stable attendance at mountain sites. The second home that becomes the primary residence can, in fact, contribute to the maintenance of the local services and the repopulation in several destinations suffering from socio-economic desertification and abandonment (Alpine Convention, 2016). However, in the Alps, second homes are above all assets to be capitalised in the short-term rental market rather than recreational and vacation resources (Domènech and others, 2019). The result is a vast territorial capital of private-owned homes used for short periods of the year.

As Eurostat highlights (2024), seasonal fluctuations in tourism arrivals determine side effects from several perspectives. From the perspective of the environmental impact of the tourism industry, seasonality determines critical peaks in waste generation and water and energy consumption that are particularly challenging in the mountains, where transportation and logistics are problematic.

From an economic point of view, tourism seasonality negatively impacts investments in the sector (since the profitability concentrates on a few periods of the year and the investment time horizon needs to be longer) and the labour market conditions (since fluctuating tourist affluence prevents stable employment).

Seasonality also negatively impacts the perceived quality of the visit. In the most overcrowded periods, mountain tourists experience the adverse effects of overtourism (UNWTO, 2018), such as traffic, congestion, high prices, and lack of services. However, lack of services occurs during low periods, too, because of scarce personnel enrolment and seasonal closures.

Finally, seasonality negatively impacts the residents. During the most overcrowded periods, tensions can arise among the residents and feed their dissatisfaction with investments in tourism, modifying the quality of life and producing gentrification and social polarization (Martín Martín and others, 2020).

The seasonal distribution of tourist flows has thus become a crucial issue in several mountain regions and a frequent object of scientific investigation (Nastassios, Sitouras, 2004; Vergori, 2017). From a practical point of view, quoting Houghton et al. (1995), tourism seasonality tends to manifest in a single-peak (observed predominantly in summer seaside resorts), a double-peak (typical of Alpine destinations), or a non-peak pattern, asking for different solutions to distribute arrivals (for instance, diversifying and extending the offer) and mitigate polarisation (Vergori, 2017).

Anyhow, a central issue with the study of seasonality is the need for granular data on tourists and daily visitors. Still, coping with the challenge of seasonality means more than correcting temporal fluctuations in affluence; instead, it is a paradigm shift that requires in-depth reflection on the objectives, the actors, and the policies to activate in the tourism sector. From such a point of view, the main challenge for mountain tourism is undoubtedly climate change (UNWTO, 2008; Pede and others, 2022; UNWTO, 2023). Augmented temperatures and modified precipitations reduce the duration and the quality of the snow coverage in many Alpine sites (for data and maps, see the website of BeyondSnow project³). As a result, more and more frequently, visits by foreign and domestic tourists and daily visitors concentrate on the same periods and sites (Alpine Convention, 2016; Leonardi, 2022).

In summer, affluence peaks in mountain sites often concur with episodes of extraordinarily hot weather periods (heat waves) and urban heat islands, mainly due to proximity arrivals from the lowland (Steiger, Knowles, Pöll, Rutty, 2022). In Switzerland, for example, Serquet and Rebetez (2011) revealed a significant correlation between summer hot temperatures in lowlands and overnight stays in mountain resorts at higher altitudes. Notably, this phenomenon is interesting from the perspective of proximity tourism's contribution to mitigating polarisation and overtourism. Proximity tourism can help redistribute flows from tourism hotspots to minor rural destinations. However, suppose the affluence of proximity tourists sums with the intense affluence of other types of tourists or concentrates in fragile natural ecosystems. In that case, it turns into a vector of overtourism, even in non-urban and rural contexts. A cautious reconceptualization of mountain tourism beyond the rigid distinction between

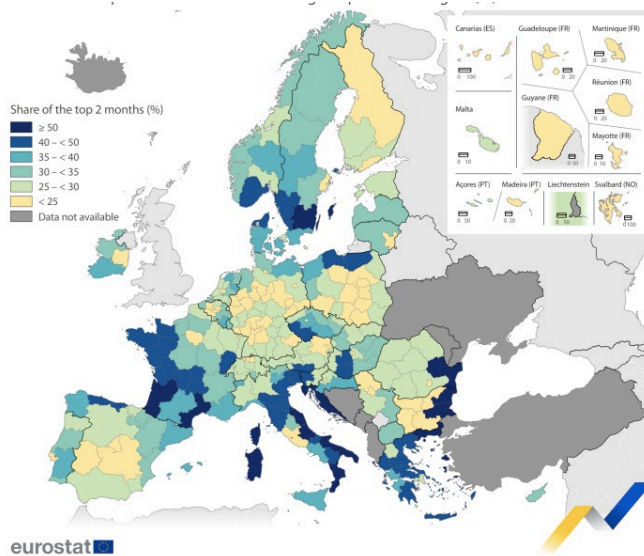
³ Source: <https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/beyondbeyondsnow/>

natural and cultural destinations is thus essential for counterbalancing the fluctuations and polarisation in tourism demand and increasing the sustainability of the tourism industry (CIPRA, 2020; Dematteis, 2022; Dax, Tamme, 2023).

What type of cultural tourism in the Italian Alps? – Existing literature suggests that promoting cultural tourism in mountain sites is a promising way to revitalize marginalised sites while contrasting seasonality and overtourism. Indeed, as explained in the introduction of this paper, the potential demand for cultural tourism is vast. Thus, investing in the capitalization of the Italian Alps's rich cultural heritage can contribute to diversifying the mountain offer, redistributing the tourist flows, and reducing excessive seasonal affluence towards specific destinations, such as natural parks in summer and renowned skiing destinations in winter.

According to Eurostat (fig. 1), seasonal accommodation in the Italian Alpine regions is high in Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, intermediate in Trentino-Alto Adige and Aosta Valley, low in Lombardy and Piedmont.

Fig. 1 – *Seasonality in tourist accommodation by NUTS 2 region, 2022. Share of the top 2 months in total annual nights spent in the region*



Source: Eurostat, 2024

However, also in these regions, there is a problem of hotspot congestion - exacerbated by climate change and the gathering of different types of tourism flows - and a problem of underutilization of the marginal areas (Alpine Convention, 2016; CIPRA, 2020; Corradini and others, 2023).

Compared to the natural endowments, the cultural assets are more diversified and distributed in the Alps (Alpine Convention, 2006). Thus, they can support a more polycentric organisation of the offer. Also, they tend to be more accessible and less affected by weather conditions.

At the same time, policymakers and practitioners must adequately define the mountain's cultural offer. From this perspective, an interesting suggestion is to adopt a broad definition of culture that also includes natural capital (monumental trees, relic habitats, engendered species, etc.) and landscapes (CIPRA, 2020). Still, another good recommendation is to avoid the obstacles that usually limit cultural tourism in rural areas, such as:

- poor information. Most of the cultural assets of the rural areas are ignored not only by external visitors but also by the residents, both influenced by the traditional, stereotyped view that accompanies them;
- difficult accessibility and mobility. It is a particularly critical condition since difficult accessibility obstacles the incoming flows of visitors and inner mobility, reducing the variety (and thus the quality) of the sites tourists can visit during their holiday;
- lack of exceptionalism. In the tourism experience, exceptionalism is linked to serendipity and it means the presence of elements that stimulate unexpected surprise, excitement, and fascination. A serendipity episode is when the visitor accidentally stumbles upon something unexpected while looking for something entirely unrelated (Hom Cary, 2004). Serendipity is frequent in urban settings, where there is a high concentration of individuals, interactions, and activities; on the contrary, it is rare in rural areas (Cary, 2004; Povilanskas, 2011; Chandralal, Valenzuela, 2013);
- undersized or poor quality services. This issue is directly connected to the underutilisation of rural areas as tourism destinations and the scarce demographic density of rural regions, making it difficult to maintain services other than the essential ones in these areas. Services are, however, critical to attract cultural tourists. Still, they have to be of the type that the “serendipitous cultural tourists” (Williams,

2010)⁴ appreciate most, i.e., varied, innovative, unexpected, and experience-based, but also accessible, technological, and tailored.

In this study, the assumptions on the opportunities and risks of cultural tourism in the Italian Alps are verified concerning the experience of the construction, in 2024, of the first Action Plan of the Regional mountain strategy of the Piedmont Region, setting the annual priorities, resources, and operational tools to create new development opportunities in mountain areas. The elaboration of the Action Plan involved various experts, regional administrators, and representatives of the associations involved in mountain development through focus groups. In this process, the Regional Authority focused on three missions of the Mountain Strategy, including mission 1.3, which is explicitly devoted to mountain tourism and seasonality.

Strategies and initiatives to contrast mountain seasonality in Piedmont. – The study aims to verify to what extent the path the Regional Authority of Piedmont chose to support the development and sustainability of the regional mountain tourism sector aligns with the suggestions and warnings we derive from the literature for a more significant investment in cultural tourism. The methods used for this exercise have been:

- qualitative interviews (5) with experts in regional planning and programming, working for the Piedmont Region and involved in constructing the Mountain Strategy, and interviews (4) with senior researchers with a deep knowledge of the Italian Alpine region;
- participant observation in the meetings and the focus group of mission 1.3 that the Regional Socio-Economic Research Institute of Piedmont (IRES Piemonte) organised with the representatives (8 stakeholders in total) of all the regional policies influencing the development of the tourism sector⁵;
- analysis of the Susa Valley (Metropolitan City of Turin) with a focus on the touristic capitalisation of the Fortress of Exilles, compared to

⁴ Considering the type of experience sought (deep or shallow) and the role of culture in the travel/visit decision (high, low, intermediate), Williams (2010) identifies five types of tourists: incidental, causal, sightseeing, purposed and serendipitous.

⁵ Consistent with the indications of the Regional Law on the Mountains (14/2019) and the Regional Strategy for Sustainable Development, the Piedmont Region has adopted the Strategy for the Mountains in June 2023. On December 2023, the first Action Plan of the Strategy has been released. Source: <https://www.regione.piemonte.it/>

that of Bard in the Aosta Valley region. Indeed, these two military structures emerged from the interviews (all the interviews with policy experts and half of the scientific ones mentioned at least once one of these two fortresses) and the focus group as important cultural boxes contributing to tourism deseasonalisation. However, they also show critical differences in management and outcomes. Thus, we added two more interviews with the presidents of the Association *Amici del Forte di Exilles* (that manages the Exilles Fortress under concession) and the *Association for the Studies of Military History and Architecture* of Turin (that manages the Bramafam fortress in Bardonecchia) to go further into the aspects of the governance and funding and derive good advice for improving the tourism capitalisation of the historical and cultural heritage of high-tourism mountain areas.

Concerning the interviews, the experts were selected for their expertise (see Table 2 for details) and the openness to share their opinions. As in similar studies on tourism (Ritchie, Burns, Palmer, 2004), we adopted a semi-structured interview technique, leaving respondents the freedom to comment extensively on general questions concerning seasonality, sustainability, and cultural tourism in the Italian Alps⁶. Therefore, the results of the interviews cannot be synthesised in terms of unequivocal answers but have been used to gain a deeper understanding and a more complex and multifaceted vision of mountain tourism dynamics.

Concerning the participant observation, the meeting with the stakeholders was organised by the Management and Development Group of the Strategy⁷ on November 21st 2023 at the headquarters of the Piedmont

⁶ The questions used in the semi-structured interviews have been: 1. What does it mean to diversify mountain tourism seasonally, and why is it important for regional policy to pursue this objective? 2. What policies are involved in seasonally diversifying mountain tourism in a sustainable way to provide lasting benefits for communities and territories? 3. Regarding the integration of tourism and cultural policies, what are the most urgent actions to implement for effective seasonality diversification? Who is responsible for these actions? Who contributes to their successful implementation? 4. What measures should be introduced to monitor and evaluate the impact or effectiveness of tourism-cultural policies towards seasonality diversification? 5. Are you aware of studies, research, or experiences where methods or “innovative” indicators have been developed for monitoring tourism from a sustainable perspective?

⁷ The Members of the Management and Development Group of the Strategy are: the Regional Sector “Mountain Development”, IRES Piedmont and UNCEM.

Region. The objective was to discuss two main questions: 1. What investments (rationale and features) are currently dedicated to mountain tourism seasonality and sustainability? 2. In which areas should the regional investments focus? What are the main obstacles?

From the focus group, we realised that the Piedmont Region aims at capitalising on the rich natural capital in the Alpine region not only for its tourism and economic potential but also for its social and cultural value (the Mountain Strategy defines it as a “public common”). In such an interpretation, the natural capital resembles a cultural capital, paving the way to a stricter integration of nature and culture in the concept of mountain tourist heritage that we have also identified as an emerging instance in the literature (Bertolino, Corrado, 2017). At the same time, the focus group showed the difficulty in passing from statements to actions. Remarkably, the participants stressed the importance of more data and information on the tourism phenomenon to better define all its multifaceted aspects. Also, the discussion underlined the need to identify best practices and suggestions for action. For instance, an interesting issue was the identification of the iconic military buildings of the region (fortresses) as cultural boxes to be valorised by the local tourism industry. They are, in fact, paramount signs of the historical and cultural heritage of the region and spaces for organising cultural activities and events, such as expositions and fairs, which are a primary strategy to respond to seasonality (Connell, Page, Meyer, 2015).

Concerning the cultural capitalisation of the military fortresses of Exilles and Bard, we used the interviews and the discussion in the focus group to select the most relevant dimensions to be investigated and searched the literature and the web for the needed information, i.e.:

- Historic and territorial features of the local tourism sector. Consistent with the attention the Strategy poses on tourism as a means of prosperity and wellness for the mountain society, during the focus group, it emerged that contextual, territorialised information on present and past trends in tourism (very poorly documented in the Strategy) in the Susa Valley are unavoidable information for reasoning on future strategies of tourism capitalisation;
- Management and governance. To contrast the eradicated tradition of seasonality in Alpine tourism and cope with the challenges it produces in terms of high maintenance costs and inconstant tourist

- flows, mountain tourism attractions and facilities need a strong commitment by the regional authorities, a strong and stable leadership, and a good knowledge of local problems and issues;
- *Territorial policies and tourism* initiatives. As stated in the Strategy, tourism is one of the sectors feeding mountain development most. However, many mountain destinations rarely reach the necessary critical mass. Thus, integrated policies are needed to let the tourism industry flourish also in remote areas and sustain local development. Moreover, to contrast seasonality, sites and facilities must agree on an integrated agenda of events distributed throughout the year;
 - *Networks and Relationships*. Networking among local entities and institutions is essential to integrate and diversify the tourism offer. Additionally, an approach that emphasizes the interconnection between mountainous areas and nearby urban areas - also known as the “metro-mountain” concept - can facilitate cultural exchange and visitor mobility, supporting cultural events and activities that enhance the local and regional heritage. These links between urban and mountain areas help build a more flexible and attractive tourism offer, benefiting both local communities and visitors.
 - *Tourism Marketing and Promotion*. A coordinated marketing strategy is essential to attract tourism flows even during less frequented seasons. Promoting the historical and cultural identity of the region through storytelling and targeted campaigns increases the visibility of local attractions. However, the focus group revealed that social media campaigns are often fragmented, reflecting a lack of coherence among entities and creating challenges in conveying an integrated image of the regional tourism offer.
 - *Local Community Involvement*. The active participation of local communities is crucial for the success of sustainable tourism and for creating a shared sense of belonging. Effective involvement requires close collaboration among communities, local entities, and institutions to address the region’s needs. This approach allows for developing tourism strategies that enhance the cultural and the natural heritage, improve social well-being, and promote fair and sustainable tourism. Community engagement is thus a fundamental resource for long-term tourism solutions.

Tab. 2 – Roles and expertise of the stakeholders involved in the study

Role	Expertise	Type of involvement
Manager of the "Mountain Sector" of the Metropolitan City of Turin and Coordinator of several projects dealing with tourism, food and culture	Long experience in territorial planning and local development policies in the Metropolitan City of Turin	
Official of the Area "Territorial Promotion and Development Projects" of the Metropolitan City of Turin	Long experience in territorial planning and local development policies in the Metropolitan City of Turin	
Senior Researcher and Coordinator of the Research Unit "Sustainability and Territorial Governance" of IRES Piemonte. Coordinator in several regional projects dealing with green education, sustainable development and strategic planning	Long experience in territorial planning and sustainable public strategies in the Piedmont Region and the Metropolitan City of Turin	
Manager of the Sector "Mountain Development" of the Piedmont Region and Coordinator of the Management and Development Group of the Regional Mountain Strategy	Deep knowledge of recent issues in mountain development in the Piedmont region	Interviewed policy expert
Senior Official of the Sector "Sustainable development, biodiversity and natural areas" of the Piedmont Region	Long experience in integrated strategic planning for the protection of natural resources, community building, local development and resilience	
President of the Association <i>AMIGET-ORIED</i> managing the Fortress of Exilles on concession	Expert in cultural box management and the Susa Valley	
President of the Association <i>AMIGET-ORIED</i> Military-History and Architecture of Turin managing the Fortress of Bramafium on concession	Expert in cultural box management and the Susa Valley	
Associate Professor of Technology and Urban Planning at the Polytechnic of Turin. Past President of CIPRA Italy (2014-2020) and co-founder in 2009 of Dislivelli	Deep knowledge of present and past issues of mountain development. Long experience in development planning and sustainable public strategies in the Alpine region.	
Senior Researcher of the Research Unit "Sustainability and Territorial Governance" of IRES Piemonte	Deep knowledge of present and past issues of mountain development. Long experience as data analyst involved in territorial planning projects and sustainable public strategies in the Piedmont Region and the Metropolitan City of Turin.	Interviewed scientific expert
Geographer, Past Vice-president and Manager of the Research Unit "Sustainability and Territorial Governance" of IRES Piemonte	Deep knowledge of present and past issues of mountain development. Long experience in territorial planning and sustainable public strategies in the Alpine region, the Piedmont Region and the Metropolitan City of Turin	
Regional scientist, Spatial Planner and Senior Researcher at the Institute for Regional Development of EURAC Research in Bolzano	Deep knowledge of present and past issues of mountain development. Long experience in territorial planning and sustainable public strategies in the Alpine region.	
President of the Piedmont section of UNCEM, the National Union of mountain Municipalities, Unions and Authorities		
Senior Official of the Directorate "Environment, Energy, and Territory" (Mountain Development Sector) of the Piedmont Region		
Manager of the "Office for Planning of the Metropolitan Hiking Trail Network" of the Metropolitan City of Turin	Stakeholder in relation to regional policies for mountain development and seasonal tourism (focus group topic)	Focus Group Stakeholders
Senior Official of the Directorate "Coordination of Policies and European Funds, Tourism and Sport" of the Province of Cuneo		
President of the Piedmont section of CAI (Italian Alpine Club)		
Manager of the Regional Tourism Observatory of the Piedmont Region		
Official of the Area "Territorial Promotion		

Source: Authors' elaboration

Some primary information on the history of tourism in the Susa Valley provides the contextual information to size the opportunities and the limits of the touristic cultural capitalization of mountain military fortresses. The Susa Valley is a strategic passage between France and Italy, and an important economic region with a long tradition in tourism thanks to its strategic position and the rich natural and cultural heritage (Bertolino, Di Gioia, Durbiano, 2021).

Since the 1920s, it hosts renowned ski resorts and hotspots of tourism intensity (Sestriere and the Via Lattea, Bardonecchia). Then, the Winter Olympic Games took place in 2006, and the local ski industry expanded, acquiring a more international appeal (De Giovanni, 2022).

In recent years, the higher portion of the valley has started suffering from problems with snow coverage. The administrations of the most important local ski resorts thus started diversifying the offer, investing in outdoor sports other than ski and culture. However, as table 3 shows, arrivals have remained seasonal, concerning almost all types of assets.

Tab. 3 – *Tourism assets in Susa Valley: type, localisation, seasonality*

Category	Type	Localisation (High-Low Valley)	Seasonality (W-winter, SU-summer, SP-spring, A-autumn)
History and culture	Holy Art	H-L	all
	Religious art	L	all
	Museums	H	all
	Archeology	L	all
Defence/war infrastructures	Architectures	H	all
	Walls	H	all
Villages	Productive, cultural	H-L	all
Nature	Protected areas, parks	H-L	SP-SU
Sports	Cycling paths	H-L	SP-SU
	Walking paths	H-L	SP-SU
	Climbing	H	SP-SU
	Winter sports	H	W
Gastronomy	Traditional Products	H-L	all

Source: adapted from De Giovanni (2022)

Moreover, seasonality is more intense in international tourism. In 2013-2018, almost 300.000 foreign visitors realised 1.250.000 overnight stays in the region in the winter period, corresponding to 9% of the regional value.

This result, which is consistent with the literature stating that tourism in Alpine regions is still mainly connected to winter sports and wilderness (Ferlaino, Rota, Dematteis, 2019; Corradini and others, 2023), stimulates the regional government to find new solutions. From such a perspective, we developed a comparative analysis between the most iconic cultural box in the Susa Valley, the Exilles Fortress, and another renowned fortress used for culture capitalization in Aosta Valley, i.e., the Bard Fortress. As we will see, these cultural boxes show different management strategies and performances, also related to the type of heritage chosen for capitalization.

The Fortress of Exilles (Susa Valley). – The Fortress of Exilles is one of the oldest monuments in Piedmont and an outstanding example of a military defensive system in the Alps overlooking the Montgenèvre road, an important connecting axis between Piedmont and France. There is no clear information on its origin. The first information of a military building in Exilles dates back to the 7th century, and we know that an articulated construction already existed in 1155. However, the first description of the street castle dates back to 1339. Razed to the ground by the French in 1796, it was rebuilt between 1818 and 1829 by the King of Sardinia. The building also served as a prison between 1681 and 1687. In 1915, the fortress was disarmed, and its armament was transferred to the eastern front of the First World War. Still, it continued to be used as a depot and recruitment center during the Second World War, definitively losing all military functions at the end of the conflict. In recent times, like many large cultural buildings, the fortress passed through many projects of re-functionalization and attempts of touristic capitalization. In the 80s, the Piedmont Region started a long process of structural and functional restyling of the fortress. After a very long period, this first wave of works ended in 2000, and the fortress opened to tourists under the management of Turin's Museo Nazionale della Montagna (Minola, 2010). A second wave of works occurred in 2005-2011, and the fortress reopened to the public in 2015 under the management of Turin's Circolo dei Lettori in collaboration with the Association *Amici del Forte di Exilles*. In 2019, the Piedmont Region acquired the fortress, giving the management to the Municipality of Exilles. Then, the management was once again given to the Association *Amici del Forte di Exilles*. However, the difficulties of funding and committing all the relevant stakeholders of such an iconic, complex and large building led

to occasional openings and low levels of visitors. Still, in the low performance of the Fortress of Exilles as a cultural box, a contribution also comes from the selection of the cultural heritage to promote. Initially, the fortress hosted a museum with a permanent exposition of military habits, which was coherent with the history of the site. Yet, opening times were limited and discontinuous, and the low affluence to the exhibition led to the decision to move it to Turin.

Currently, the Fortress of Exilles celebrates the cultural heritage of the Susa Valley only with its intrinsic historical and symbolic value and the participation in the summer festival *Borgate dal Vivo*. An interesting attempt at a different type of cultural promotion occurred in 2015 with the inauguration of the contemporary land-art work *Terzo Paradiso* realised by Michelangelo Pistoletto: a symbol of peace designed with lavender plants on the vast military slope that hosted many battles in the past. However, as recognised by the Association *Amici del Forte di Exilles*, this artwork is strongly conceptual and symbolic. So, it is difficult for visitors to perceive the connection with the local history and the culture of the place. Moreover, its maintenance is complex and the effectiveness of its image soon degenerates. Without a strong financial and political support that allows to maintain in the fortress a museum and attractive events, a different strategy is necessary to promote the fortress as a cultural box. On the one hand, a solution might be investing in exceptionalism. The Fortress of Exilles is, in fact, a scene of fascinating legends, the most famous being the Iron Mask. This legend, based on historical facts (a letter between the French War Ministry, the Marquis of Louvois, and the governor of Pinerolo and Bastilla prisons, Dauvergne de Saint-Mars) and folklore, tells of a mysterious character imprisoned in the fortress between 1681 and 1687, and it is particularly apt to the serendipitous cultural tourist (Huang et al., 2014). Otherwise, another legend rooted in the history of the Western Alps that can be capitalised (see fig. 2) is Hannibal's crossing the Alps in 218 a.C. and reaching the Susa Valley walking down the Col du Clapier-Savine Coche (2.500 mt), which is not far from Exilles (Migliore, 2022).

However, an interesting opportunity mentioned by one of the scientific expert, could also be to exploit of the nearby presence of historical forests and trails to organise excursions that are cultural and natural in scope. The Gran Bosco di Salbertrand Natural Park, for instance, hosts a mixed forest of silver fir and spruce that provided in the 18th the timber for the most

important military and civil engineering works of the House of Savoy.

Fig. 2 – Iron depiction of a Carthaginian camp on the shores of Lake Savine at 2447 mt. (photo by Pier Mario Migliore)



Source: Migliore, 2022

The Fortress of Bard (Aosta Valley). – The Fortress of Bard is an outstanding historic military building in Aosta Valley, symbolizing the region's rich cultural heritage. The origins of the Bard Fortress date back to the early 11th century, when the House of Savoy recognized the site's ideal defensive position and established a stronghold there. Over the ensuing centuries, the fortress underwent numerous expansions and renovations, reflecting the evolving military technologies and architectural styles of the time (Giacobini, 2007). Besides its original military function, the fortress has witnessed several uses. For instance, it has served over the centuries for control and taxation, playing a crucial role in controlling the passage of goods and people through the valley for the Savoy's House and the succeeding rulers of the region. From the military point of view, the fortress hosted storehouses and barracks to accommodate the garrison stationed there and the supplies to sustain it. For some periods, the fortress was also used as a prison. More recently, it has been transformed into a vibrant cultural hub and a major tourist attraction in the Aosta Valley. The process that led to this transformation started in 1992. In 1996, the Valle d'Aosta Regional Council approved the implementation of a Plan to recover the

structures of the monumental complex, and it was created the public-private association that is still in charge today of the promotion and enhancement of the cultural project of the fortress (Cacoza, 2011; Giacobini, 2007). While preserving its historical significance, the Association *Bard Fortress* - benefitting from strong governance and substantial funding from private bank foundations - organises in the fortress several cultural events, exhibitions, and concerts (in 2023: 14 temporary exhibitions, 49 events and special projects), attracting visitors (323.211 in 2023) from very near and very far. Among the choices explaining the success of the Bard Fortress as a cultural box, most of the interviewed experts underline:

- Build a cultural pole with a vibrant permanent and temporary cultural offer distributed during the different periods of the year;
- Facilitate the reachability and accessibility of the fortress and the village below;
- Develop sound and clear communication and an effective marketing strategy;
- Invest in training and education, also funding projects with schools and research fellowships for studies on the mountain culture;
- Build networks and pursue synergies between sectors and actions.

Concluding remarks. – The article investigates the opportunities for mountain economies and territories to capitalize on culture and the local cultural heritage. Although qualitative and introductory, it stresses the need for a stricter integration of cultural and natural heritage in the offer of mountain destinations to reduce the seasonality of tourist affluence and increase the sustainability of the tourism industry. The literature already provides several examples that suggest the use of cultural assets to redirect tourist flows from congested to marginalised destinations (Connell, Page, Meyer, 2015). Then, the comparative analysis of the fortresses of Exilles and Bard sheds some light on the opportunities and limits of the tourism capitalisation of a specific type of cultural mountain asset: the large military architecture of the Italian Alps. Indeed, these two cases are very different from this point of view. Exilles stands out for its troubled management and the unexpressed potential, which can finally find an opportunity for affirmation in the recent Action Plan of the Mountain Strategy of Piedmont Region. Conversely, the Fortress of Bard stands out for the good results it has already achieved in tourist attraction and deseasonalisation.

From this point of view, Bard is the benchmark Exilles should look at to improve its management as a cultural box. At the same time, however, despite the intentions expressed by the Plan, Exilles fortress counts on a lower level of institutional commitment and support than Bard. For example, in the case of Bard, over a total budget of 4,9 million euros in 2020, 3,4 million euros came from the Aosta Valley Region and 1,5 from two bank foundations (by the way, both headquartered in Piedmont). In the same year, the provisional budget of the Fortress of Exilles estimated 0,9 million euros of contributions and transfers from public authorities over a total budget of 1,2 million euros. In such a situation, alternative solutions of cultural capitalisation the experts interviewed for this study suggested could go in the direction of emphasising the unexpected in the history of the place (legends, myths, folklore) as well as the little-known cultural dimension of the vast natural landscape that surrounds the fortress.

In mountain regions, the capitalization of the local cultural heritage is vital for economic growth, local development, and cohesion (Bertolino, Corrado, 2022). Still, the cases of Exilles and Bard suggest that how the cultural capital is identified, managed, and communicated is vital for success. More specifically, the Fortress of Bard indicates that creating a successful cultural box requires:

- Good accessibility and adequate communication of the initiatives;
- Large investments in outstanding cultural exhibitions and events, primarily attractive to the serendipitous urban cultural tourist;
- Integrating the offer of the cultural box with the offer of natural and cultural hosted in the rest of the region.

At the same time, the literature suggests being cautious in identifying the proximity tourists as the primary target of the mountain tourism market. Despite they can significantly help the marginal mountain and rural destinations to develop and flourish (Lucia, Rota, 2022), if they follow the same trends as the other types of tourists, they also contribute to over-tourism and seasonality (Butler, 2023; Ghaderi, Hall, Ryan, 2022; Bohac, Drapela, 2022).

The paper ends with the recognition of the need for a reconceptualization of mountain tourism as an activity that valorises the specificity of the mountain cultural heritage, which is cultural also when made of natural elements and has a vital target market in the urban serendipitous cultural tourist.

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Contrastare la stagionalità delle Alpi italiane con la cultura. Il caso dei forti di Exilles e Bard. – La capitalizzazione in chiave turistica della cultura e del patrimonio culturale è fondamentale per la crescita economica e lo sviluppo dei luoghi. Allo stesso tempo, però, l’industria del turismo rimane ancorata a una definizione intrinsecamente urbana di patrimonio culturale, da cui sono esclusi i beni e i paesaggi di tipo naturale. Coerentemente con queste premesse, il documento indaga il potenziale di una definizione ampia di turismo culturale (che comprende, oltre agli edifici, alle infrastrutture storiche e agli asset immateriali, anche i beni naturali costitutivi dell’identità della destinazione) come mezzo per contrastare la stagionalità delle destinazioni montane. Nel fare ciò, sono quindi presentati i casi di studio del Piemonte e della Valle di Susa e della valorizzazione in chiave turistica e

culturale del Forte di Exilles e del Forte di Bard (in Valle d'Aosta). Il contributo termina con la discussione di alcune principali indicazioni pratiche e teoriche sulle potenzialità e i limiti del turismo dei grandi contenitori culturali rispetto alle sfide della stagionalità e della sostenibilità.

Keywords. – Turismo montano, Stagionalità, Cultura, Patrimonio, Overtourism

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