

# Sustainable tourism and Albergo Diffuso. A customer experience assessment

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## Abstract

The albergo diffuso (AD) is considered a valid solution to develop the tourist offer in a sustainable way, typically in areas (village, borgo) where the risk of depopulation is high. This is linked to the growing demand by customers for authentic experiences in places outside the traditional tourist circuits, where they can be in close contact with the territory (nature, traditions, food, etc.) and its residents. This paper addresses the issue of the customer experience and presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the tourist's experience of staying in an AD, considering the specific characteristics of this innovative accommodation facility. To this end, an analysis and interpretation of the customer reviews of 10 ADs located in Italy was conducted, which allowed us to focus on the aspects that particularly influenced, positively or negatively, their experience. These aspects were then appropriately classified into 6 categories, including one related to sustainability. In addition, some managerial implications of allowing customers to have memorable experiences in an AD are presented. This is also in order to influence the rate of development of such ADs and to produce value effects on the territories in which they are located.

## Keywords:

Albergo diffuso, customer experience, sustainable tourism, innovative accommodation, qualitative research

## Introduction

In recent years, the theme of sustainable development has strongly entered the debate in academic and operational circles as a solution to improve the potential for tourism growth of an area while respecting the environment and local communities (Carter, Lownam, 1994). This theme recalls the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 “as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and

prosperity”<sup>1</sup>. All businesses, including those operating in the tourism sector, are therefore today invested in the responsibility of achieving their economic growth objectives without overexploiting the resources present in nature and the ecosystem (Piersanti, 2013) in order to minimise the negative impacts of their operations on the environment.

The tourism system, because of its close link with the territory and its residents, is strongly interested in the phenomenon of sustainability and corporate social responsibility and this has led to the development of so-called sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism refer to a type of tourism that is based on the three pillars of sustainability, which recall economic, social and environmental dimensions. In other words, the triple bottom lines or the “three legs of sustainability” (Newport *et al.*, 2003) are increasingly placed at the centre of the strategic and operational design of businesses, also as a result of the increased awareness of individuals regarding the importance of these aspects. These three dimensions are strongly interconnected and a balanced development must find their proper coordination, with a medium- to long-term perspective. This is particularly relevant in the field of tourism, since a short-term view could have negative consequences, especially in terms of resource exploitation, with the risk of modify the territory and compromising the quality of life of residents. This aspect is attracting growing attention and interest from both the competent authorities and operators in the sector and tourists. Considering this last data in the Italian context, between 2011 and 2021 the share of Italians perceiving the environmental impact of tourism as an emergency increased. In 2021, some 53% of respondents said that the environmental impact of tourism is a national issue, rising from 50 percent in 2020 (Source Statista).

Within this scenario there have been changes on the tourism supply side that have also seen the emergence of new solutions oriented towards sustainability. Among them, it is possibile to identify an innovative accomodation formula colled Albergo diffuso. This new accomodation addresses at a customer target in search of authentic experiences in places with rich historical and landscape significance. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of contributions in the literature that have focused on certain characteristic aspects of the AD, such as the basic requirements and its strengths (Confalonieri, 2011; Dall'Ara, 2002), the relationship between the albergo diffuso and local actors for the purposes of the area's competitiveness (Valeri M. 2016), the involvement of customers for the development of more sustainable innovative solutions (Abbate et.al 2017), the monitoring of the effects of ADs on the regeneration and revitalisation process of villages (Villani, Dall'Ara, 2015), the services offered (Orlandini et.al 2012; Vallone, Veglio 2013), the management peculiarities (Gori et.al. 2016), the regulatory aspects (Trombino, 2009), the contribution to the problem of overtourism (Vallone et.al, 2020). The evaluation of the experience of the tourist who decided to stay at such accommodation and how this experience is influenced by sustainability aspects has not yet been considered. This paper therefore aims to explore this aspects.

## **The distinctive characteristics of AD**

The 'Albergo Diffuso' model born in 1982 in Friuli with the aim of utilising appropriately renovated houses and villages using post-earthquake funds (Villani, Dall'Ara, 2015, p.171). However, it is in 1995 that the Albergo diffuso is found for the first time in a Regional Development Plan. This was the Plan of Sardegna and concerned the town of Bosa where in that year a typical restaurant (Borgo Sant'Ignazio) was created which was to constitute the first nucleus of the Corte Fiorita Albergo Diffuso (Dall'Ara, 2002). In this way, it is the entire Borgo that becomes the attraction for the target

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

of tourists seeking a proposal different from conventional tourist schemes. This formula is also considered to be of particular relevance for the recovery of rural villages and historic centres (Gori *et.al*, 2016; Fiori, 2007), in line with sustainability issues. This is intended not only to preserve a valuable and rich historical and cultural heritage but also to ensure that the area in question is not subject to depopulation and the inevitable economic, environmental and landscape degradation. The most important characteristics of an AD are the follows: use of renovated buildings in the village where the rooms, reception and offices are located, the presence of basic services for residents and tourists, the central structure close to and easily accessible from the rooms, the presence of a community with a strong sense of belonging and inclined to activate relations with tourists also aimed at spreading its culture, and, the presence of adequate signposting to make history known and appreciated, art and culture of the locality, organisation of initiatives and events to enhance the locality that allow, among other things, communication and appreciation of the area's traditions and local products/services, ability of the hotel manager to use forms of management that are consistent with the project (Dall'Ara, 2002; [www.alberghidiffusi.it](http://www.alberghidiffusi.it); Confalonieri, 2011). In short, it is a horizontal hotel preferably located in a historical village with rooms located in different but neighbouring buildings (Montebelli S., 2018) and capable of providing a complex of hotel services (reception, cleaning, breakfast, catering, etc.). People interested in staying at an Albergo Diffuso therefore want to stay in a place rich in history that has a lot to tell, they want to have an experience in contact with residents, becoming 'temporary residents', and they do not want to give up the typical services of a traditional hotel. Therefore, the AD is an accommodation facility that sells, in addition to its services, a territory (Dall'Ara, 2010). This is a new, increasingly informed and exigent demand from tourists (Vallone, Veglio 2014), who want to meet their needs in a customised way. This is possible thanks to the elasticity of the proposal of the Albergo Diffuso that allows the individual tourist to be able to "package" the best offer, choosing from the various options proposed also with regard to the services that the accommodation structure is able to provide or, in any case, propose using the collaboration of other companies located in the area with positive effects on the employment rate of. Research has shown that ADs participate in many local and national associations or consortia especially in the area of sustainable tourism policies, local cultural traditions, food and craftsmanship (Gori *et.al*, 2016). ADs also prove to be active in organising events aimed at developing and publicising the area of settlement and all that it offers. In this way, an authentic experience is ensured (Confalonieri, 2011), discovering typical products, art and, in general, the traditions of the place (Camillo *et.al* 2015), which often actively involves the tourist who himself contributes to the generation process of the experience (Shaw, Williams, 2004). What has been said is important in light of the trend observed regarding tourists' interest in eco-friendly tourist accommodations, which, in the Italian context, has risen from 35% in 2011 to 48% in 2021. Moreover, within these structures the most appreciated services are availability of menus with organic or local food, actions aimed at reducing food waste and limiting/avoiding plastic. Meanwhile, 38 percent of interviewees appreciated hotels offering recycling services and 21 percent liked eco-tourism hiking (source Statista). There is therefore a growing awareness of the importance of concrete actions in the field of sustainability in the tourism sector. On the other hand, over the years the tourist offer has undergone significant changes, in line with changes on the demand side, in order to allow the various target customers, also belonging to niche markets, to find ad hoc solutions that best meet their needs (Trunfio *et al.*, 2006; Chenguang Wu *et al.*, 2017). This within a scenario of strong growth of interest in sustainable tourism: between 2011 and 2021, the share of Italians being familiar with the idea of sustainable tourism rose significantly (from 63% to 85%, source Statista).

The experience in an Albergo diffuso therefore intends to satisfy a need in tourism with new characteristics, oriented towards sustainability and attentive to the valorisation of authentic places,

where the socialising element is also present and it is expressed with a series of relationships activated between tourists and between these and the owners/employees and residents. The owners/employees of the Albergo diffuso must therefore possess high relational skills and must have a deep knowledge of the territory, local culture and traditions in order to make them known and appreciated by their customers. This has an impact on customer satisfaction regarding the experience in an Albergo diffuso and consequently the phenomenon of real and virtual word of mouth will be affected which represents a free and very effective form of communication, particularly in the tourism sector.

### **Albergo diffuso and customer experience**

Tourists who choose an Albergo diffuso wish to take advantage of a complex of services in an authentic place “following the rhythms and the traditions of the local community” (Morena *et.al*, 2017). The experience in an AD is characterised by specific aspects closely linked to the characteristics of the accommodation facility. As described above, it is proposed as an alternative to traditional accommodation structures, with a strong orientation towards sustainability and attention to the recovery of traditions and places. It therefore addresses a very specific target and, consequently, each AD should communicate very clearly its structure and the services that the client will receive once on site. In other words, since the AD is a hotel with a specific connotation, it is necessary for the customer to be fully aware of its characteristics at the time of booking in order to have a satisfying, even memorable experience (Pine, Gilmore, 1998), receiving an offer that goes beyond his or her expectations. In this regard, it is advisable to clearly inform tourists in advance in order to prepare them for an authentic experience in structures often located in a medieval Borgo and equipped with rooms that, although well refurbished, could be cramped, damp or uncomfortable (Vallone, Veglio, 2014, p.118). Moreover, again due to the particularity of the location, tourists may be asked to perform certain tasks, such as carrying their luggage to their rooms, passing through uneven and uphill streets. Correct prior information on all these aspects is therefore also desirable in order to make the customer aware of this situation and avoid the occurrence of complaints during the stay, with negative effects on customer satisfaction, word of mouth and, thus, on the company's performance. Moreover, considering this specific accommodation, it is suggested to adopt by AD the logic of experiential marketing (ME), which was born in the 1980s as a counterpoint to the previous theoretical models that exclusively considered rational aspects in purchasing decisions. This new perspective was introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and over the years further developed by various authors (Carù, Cova, 2007; Troilo, 2002). ME is understood as the set of managerial tools used to enrich the purchase and use of goods and/or services with emotional content and meaning (Schmitt, 1999). In the field of tourism services, the theme of experience has become central to the achievement of value objectives (Pencarelli, Forlani, 2007). By leveraging the experience, the tourism enterprise aims to improve its ability to differentiate itself from its competitors and to create opportunities to improve the value perceived by the customer, enhancing its authenticity (Tahar *et.al*, 2018). In ADs, a number of specific solutions are used in this regard, as described above, which must be implemented and managed professionally by company personnel. This is in order to provide an experience that will remain in the memories of customers (Valdani, Guenzi, 1998). In order to understand whether the desired results are being achieved in terms of the quality of service provided, management should equip itself with a system for monitoring the actions taken and make use of service quality assessment models that consider the customer's point of view. Amongst these, the SERVQUAL model constitutes an important reference (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985). It is a multi-dimensional research useful to capture consumer expectations and perceptions of a service along five dimensions that refer to service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and

empathy. The consideration of these dimensions for hospitality and tourism products allows to take into account their multidimensional nature. They are generally made up of a "series of experiences" also produced by external parties/businesses with which the tourist comes into contact to obtain the service (Tahar *et.al*, 2018). This is particularly evident in ADs where some of the surrounding businesses are involved in providing the service (such as the village bar or restaurant) and may therefore influence the overall experience of the tourist.

Nowadays, the online reviews are another important source of information to capture the voice of the customer and their impressions of the experience. The online customer reviews can be treated as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Chatterjee, 2001; Lu and Stephenkova, 2012; Zhang and Cole, 2016) that is considered and extremely important source of information for tourists (Litvin *et al.*, 2008) and for management committed to understanding if and what can be improved in the service provided to improve the customer satisfaction level. Through the reading of reviews, potential customers can acquire information on the quality of the service provided (courtesy and kindness of the staff, quality and variety of the food offered, cleanliness and care of the environment, etc.) and formulate a correct expectation regarding the experience that can be had in that particular accommodation facility. It is for this reason that user-generated content (Au *et.al*, 2014) represents a very useful qualitative research method in the tourism sector (Kongthon *et.al*, 2011).

## Methodology

In order to understand the extent to which the distinctive characteristics of ADs, including those of sustainability, impacted on customer experience, a content analysis was conducted using the reviews left recently (2021-August 2022) by Italian customers on Booking.com in 10 ADs located in Italy. Specifically, below is the list of the ADs considered, specifying the area of location, the number of positive and negative reviews taken into account in the analysis and the booking rating (Table 1).

**Table 1 – The sample, the number of reviews and the booking rating**

<b>ALBERGO DIFFUSO</b>	<b>REGION AND AREA OF ITALY</b>	<b>NUMBER OF POSITIVE REVIEWS</b>	<b>NUMBER OF NEGATIVE REVIEWS</b>	<b>BOOKING RATING (August 2022)</b>
Castello dal Pozzo	Piemonte – North	24	13	8,6
Ela Living	Trentino - North	24	11	8,7
Relais del Maro	Liguria - North	22	11	9,6
Castello del Proceno	Lazio - Centre	37	29	8,9
Le Dame del Borgo	Toscana - Centre	20	7	9,5
Montemaggiore al Metauro	Marche - Centre	25	35	8,7
Torre Nera	Umbria - Centre	98	70	8,8
Sciaci	Sicilia - South	53	27	9,2
Hotel Villa gli Asfodeli	Sardegna – South	30	19	9,1
Cetara	Campania - South	34	20	8,6
	<b>TOTAL NUMBER</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>242</b>	

Source: Our elaboration

From reading the text of the reviews, it was possible to identify positive and negative opinions referring to the services offered by ADs (Lu, Castellanos, Dayal et.al., 2011). On the basis of these results, through the application of an inductive approach, the aforementioned opinions were classified into different categories considering the area to which they referred. Moreover, word frequencies were counted with the Nvivo software to define the subject classes in more detail and produce the word cloud. At this aim, the reviews written in Italian, both positive and negative, were translated into English. The word frequency was counted below, considering words with a minimum of 6 letters and a maximum of 100 words.

## **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of the reviews written by the customers of the sample of 10 ADs listed above made it possible to identify a number of thematic areas, grouped into specific categories, related to the experience that customers felt it was important to highlight because they had a positive or negative impact on their experience. Specifically, the categories identified are follows:

- ✓ tangible aspects and outdoor spaces;
- ✓ service,
- ✓ technology;
- ✓ food
- ✓ price considerations;
- ✓ sustainability

Regarding tangible aspects and outdoor spaces, the comments of most customers converge on certain aspects typical of any accommodation facility, thus not specific to ADs. Consequently, there are reviews that focus on the size of the room and/or bathroom judging them too small, on the lighting considered insufficient, on the absence of a bidet in the bathroom and the malfunctioning of the air conditioning, on the neglect of the park and the outdoor swimming pool, and on the difficult access to the rooms due to the presence of steep slopes not marked at the time of booking. These aspects seem to highlight a lack of real knowledge of the basic characteristics of an AD, at least for some of those who stayed there, and thus indirectly seem to point to problems with the communication policy adopted by the AD. However, there is no lack of positive comments about the tangible elements, the Borgo, the possibility of having authentic experiences in the neighbouring places and interacting with locals who proved to be hospitable and courteous.

Regarding the service category, alongside very positive comments about the welcome, kindness and professionalism of the staff, there are others that highlight problems with the cleanliness of the rooms and the availability of staff after a certain time. Many of the ADs are small, family-run establishments; while this is often a guarantee of a warm welcome, it can mean a lack of a managerial approach and thus, for some customers, can negatively impact the experience. In some cases, moreover, a negative judgement is made on the quality of the service offered by the company of the AD's partner (external to the establishment) where the customers go to eat. In this case, a responsibility emerges, albeit indirectly, of the AD who has decided to enter into a partnership with them.

Problems also emerge regarding the use of electronic payment systems that can slow down the check-in and check-out process. On the technology front, there are also problems with wi-fi which, in several AD, is either not present or malfunctioning. It therefore seems that it is not acceptable for customers to renounce using the Internet both for information purposes (e.g. on a certain destination nearby or

events they can attend) and to spread the experience online. It is evident that in some old villages or in medieval structures it may be objectively difficult to activate a fully functioning wi-fi signal. In such cases, it is advisable to clearly inform customers in advance so that they are aware of this deficiency, which for some, instead of being a critical issue, may even represent a strength. This situation can actually allow to isolate yourself from the outside world and immerse themselves in a dimension of total relax.

Food is an important element in tourism as it can greatly influence customer satisfaction. A reading of the reviews reveals, in this respect, a situation that is not always positive since at times a poor quality and variety of the products offered is reported, as well as a scarce presence, if any, of local products and typical gastronomic recipes. These criticalities are reported since one of the objectives sought by those who choose an AD is to know and appreciate local products and therefore their absence, or the offer of products of non-quality and/or poor variety, is considered a deficiency in the value proposition of the structure. After all, the knowledge of an area also passes through knowledge of typical products, including food ones. Of course, in the case where this deficiency was not found, guests praised the accommodation, complimenting what was offered to them.

Regarding the price category, customers seem to pay more attention to value for money than to the price itself. Thus they express positive or negative judgements considering the value of the service received, paying also attention to the gap between expectation and perception of the service provided.

Finally, the sustainability aspect was considered. ADs, on the other hand, are part of sustainable tourism and, consequently, the target group of tourists who decide to stay in such facilities should focus their attention on the management practices used by companies to be in line with sustainability practices. In this respect, contrary to what we might have assumed, there are only two reviews that refer to sustainability, one positive (attention to environmental impact) and one negative (absence of recycling bins). The theme of sustainability, to date, therefore seems to be a plus of the service provided, which must meet first of all the standards of hotel accommodation, with all the comforts attached.

Below, in Figure 1, there is the result of the words frequency of the reviews examined, positive and negative. These images summarises the various aspects described above. Among the positive aspects, the location, the friendly atmosphere, the beauty of the place, and the breakfast stand out. Among the negative aspects most frequently mentioned are breakfast and restaurant, confirming the importance of the food dimension for tourists who have stayed in an AD. The other aspects mostly concern the service and the structure. In particular, the bathroom seems to be a very important element for customers. It can therefore greatly influence their experience in the AD and various factors, such as the absence of a bidet and/or window, a sink that is too small, the absence of adequate facilities such as a hairdryer or the poor quality of the towels, may tempt customers to write a negative review.

Another word that appears frequently in reviews is 'nothing'. This word was not considered in the word clouds because it was considered 'neutral'. It is likely that it was written by those who belong to the AD's target audience and found what they expected in terms of both the facility and the service in general. On the other hand, the average scores assigned to the ADs by the customers, considering the various types expressed by the bookings, are high (Table 1), demonstrating that they have the skills and capabilities to propose a value proposition to their customers.

**Figure 1 - Word cloud positive and negative reviews**



Source: Our elaboration

## Conclusions and Managerial implication

On the basis of the elements emerged, it seems to reveal a lack of awareness on the part of some customers regarding the distinctive characteristics of an AD. It is considered by them as a traditional hotel and therefore they complained about some typical aspects of these realities, such as staying in a small and poorly lit room with small windows. Or having connection problems or having to walk to reach one's room inside the village. Or hearing the tolling of bells throughout the night, compromising sleep and not appreciating the atmosphere of a medieval borgo. It is therefore likely that some customers chose the AD even though they were not part of the target group for various reasons that would require further investigation.

The results of the quality research suggest that some improvements should be made on the external communication. The specificities of the AD should be appropriately emphasised so that the customer, when he or she takes action to acquire information on the AD, becomes aware of it and takes it into account in order to decide whether or not to make a booking. The aim is, of course, to attract the attention of customers belonging to the target audience and therefore customers eager to have an authentic experience in a place that has specificities compared to a traditional hotel. In addition, a particular attention of customers seems to emerge with regard to technology, especially with regard to WI-FI and the possibility of making payments with digital payment systems. Management should therefore invest in this area, possibly also exploiting the opportunities offered by the PNRR (Piano Nazionale Ripresa e Resilienza) to financially support the necessary investments, compatible with the structural constraints present in the AD. Furthermore, the aspect of external collaborations appears to be of importance. The partners with whom to collaborate must be appropriately selected and/or trained to provide an experience in line with the philosophy and the quality level of the AD. The AD, after all, is configured as an "assembler of experiences", some of which are provided internally, with its own employees, others by external companies with which a collaboration relationship has been set up. It is evident that the customer will judge the experience as a whole, considering the various 'moments of truth' (Gronross, 1990), which can be framed as parts of a more overall experience referring to the entire customer journey. After all, the customer journey has been defined as "the process through which a customer goes through all the stages and touchpoints that make up the customer experience" (Lemon, Verhoef, 2016). Each stage of the process therefore requires an overall



vision and a clear awareness of the corporate identity towards which all external actors involved must align themselves and contribute to its concretisation and affirmation.

The sustainability efforts put in place by ADs do not seem to represent an aspect that has attracted the attention of customers, either positively or negatively. There could be many reasons for this, requiring an ad hoc quantitative analysis, as well as interviews with AD owners in direct and daily contact with customers.

### **Limitations and Future research**

This research is based on the opinions of a sample of Italian customers of 10 hotels in Italy. It would be appropriate to take into account a larger number of ADs in Italy and compare the opinions of customers of different nationalities. In addition, future research should include quantitative analyses to deepen the customer's experience in AD and, above all, to understand how important sustainability aspects are considered by customers. In addition, it might be useful to conduct interviews with a sample of AD managers to also consider their views and understand any difficulties in implementing sustainability measures.

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