



Victor Borg during the 4th MELKART Workshop of Mare Nostrum "Artisanal fishing in the Mediterranean as parameter of tourism economy", in Tunis, 8 October 2012.

Mediterranean Artisanal Fishing & Tourism

By

Victor Paul Borg

Mare Nostrum is identifying fishing tourism as the new frontier of outdoorsy rural tourism in the Mediterranean. It offers guests the chance to experience the wonderful world of artisanal fishing, a type of fishing that takes place in near-shore waters by community fishermen who hail from coastal fishing villages. Such community fishermen are typically born in fishing families and inherit the family's fishery business as it passes down the generations. They usually fish alone or in small crews, they catch small quantities of fishes by traditional and sustainable methods (they make some traps and nets themselves), and they



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go out fishing in small rustic boats of less than 12 metres long. It's a type of fishing that is charming and attractive, and so are the fishermen themselves – the fishermen are outlandish and much given to superstition. Their yarns of adventures of sea keep guests rapt, and they have a peculiar manner of referring to the sea as if the sea behaves whimsically, like a sentient being.

Mare Nostrum has adopted the concept of artisanal fishing tourism in the Mediterranean because the time has come for the development of this type of tourism. As an active network of Mediterranean city ports, Mare Nostrum is in an excellent position to promote and foster this innovative idea – artisanal fishing tourism – in several city ports contemporaneously. It is an activity that fits within tourists' increasing preference for interactive and learning holidays that allow them to experience the destination more intimately. The practice of immersive experiences in the area of traditional cooking, farming, hiking, bird-watching, crafts, and other activities is already established – fishing experiences can be another similar activity. In fact, fishing villages are already an attraction for tourists, and creating better interactivity with fishermen, by fishing tourism, is the next logical step.

The idea would be for tourists to experience fishing in its authentic traditional manifestations. Authentic traditional fishing needs no embellishments: the guests simply join the fishermen on his boat during a normal fishing trip. Such fishing trips normally last a couple of hours in the morning, or afternoon, and the guests would consist of a couple or a small private group (only a few guests at a time can fit in the small boats of artisanal fishermen). Guests could have the option of choosing from different types of fishing trips, and also be given other customizable choices. Guests may also opt to traditionally cook and eat the fishes they would have caught during the fishing trip itself – the cooking and eating can either take place in the home of the fisherman or in a local restaurant by arrangement, depending on the guests' preferences.

The fishermen are likely to be receptive to the idea of fishing tourism because artisanal fishermen are struggling with diminishing income – and paying guests can give



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them economic reprieve. In the past 15 years, overfishing and destructive fishing by industrial fishing outfits has decimated fish stocks in the Mediterranean: artisanal fishermen now have to work harder and go further to catch less fish, and consequently rake in less money. Many artisanal fishermen are giving up, and fishing communities are dying out – young people in fishing villages now prefer to move to the cities for work, thus breaking the bonds that sustain artisanal fishermen from one generation to the next. Such malaise is pervasive in fishing communities in the Mediterranean, and the steady demise of traditional fishing will lead to cultural impoverishment – an entire way of life is under threat.

In the face of such adversity, fishing tourism is an opportunity for the fishermen to gain a second complementary stream of income from paying guests. Fishermen will remain fishermen, and continue to fish: the point of fishing tourism is not to replace fishing, but to give fishermen the chance to take paying guests fishing and thus gain an extra stream of income, bolstering the faltering economic situation of artisanal fishermen. Equally importantly, the attention of guests would also serve to instill psychological fortitude and pride among fishermen, reversing the perception that fishing is menial and lowly work.

It's also a type of tourism that serves to inject a new dynamic in coastal fishing villages. Although fishing tourism isn't for everyone, and it can only ever be a niche tourism product, such niche economics are significant in small fishing villages, which would benefit multifariously – tourists also need places to stay, restaurants to eat in, bars or cafes to drink in, and fishing villages can provide these and other ancillary services.

All of this sounds like a boon, but there are initial practical hurdles. For starters, fishermen and their communities lack the skills to develop fishing tourism on their own. They don't know how to set up websites, and create and market enticing programmes. Most fishermen lack the aptitude and language skills to deal directly with clients. This means that some sort of intermediary is needed – an entity that could develop and run fishing experiences for guests. This can be a private tour operator or company, or NGO, or just a



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capable individual. To get things moving, a public agency and NGO may need to get involved initially to foster the concept.

Governments may have to become involved, either directly or indirectly. Once the EU's Common Fisheries Policy is reformed (in early 2013), funding for such projects as fishing tourism is likely to become available. Involvement by public bodies or NGOs is justified as strategic rural development and environmental amelioration: by fostering fishing tourism, the public will reap multifarious benefits that include the safeguarding of fishing traditions and coastal communities, the diversification of a country's tourism product, and the positive promotion of artisanal fishing as sustainable fishing. In other words, fishing tourism is something larger than the sum of its parts – the coupling of fishing and tourism – it is something that will enrich the Mediterranean and create new harmonies between the people and this ancient sea. It's for these reasons that Mare Nostrum feels compelled to promote and assist the development of artisanal fishing tourism.

Ends

Victor Paul Borg is a writer, photographer, and travel consultant who specializes in environmental issues and natural/cultural tourism (more info at www.victorborg.com).