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**CEGARRA-LEIVA David**
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1837-8768

Associate Professor,
Technical University of Cartagena
*Calle Real, 3, 30202 Cartagena, Spain*
david.cegarra@upct.es

**LA ROCCA Elvira Tiziana**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5064-0100

Associate Professor,
University of Messina
*Via dei Verdi, 98122, Messina, Italy*
elviratiziana.larocca@unime.it

**SANCHEZ-VIDAL Maria Eugenia**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8952-0851

Full Professor,
Technical University of Cartagena
*Calle Real, 3, 30202 Cartagena, Spain*
meugenia.sanchez@upct.es

**SCHIFILLITI Valeria**
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4630-7799

Assistant Professor,
University of Messina
*Via dei Verdi, 98122, Messina, Italy*
valeria.schifilliti@unime.it

**ГЕГАРРА-ЛЄВА Давид**
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1837-8768

Доцент,
Технічний університет Картахени
*Кальє Реаль, 3, 30202 Картахена, Іспанія*
david.cegarra@upct.es

**ЛА РОККА Ельвіра-Тіціана**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5064-0100

доцент,
Університет Месіни
*Віа дей Верді, 98122, Мессіна, Італія*
elviratiziana.larocca@unime.it

**САНЧЕЦ-ВІДАЛ Марія-Юджинія**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8952-0851

Професор,
Технічний університет Картахени
*Калле Реаль, 3, 30202 Картахена, Іспанія*
meugenia.sanchez@upct.es

**СКІФІЛЛІТІ Валерія**
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4630-7799

Доцент,
Університет Месіни
*Віа дей Верді, 98122, Мессіна, Італія*
valeria.schifilliti@unime.it

# SLOW TOURISM VS OVER-TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF CITTASLOW IN ITALY AND SPAIN

*The rapid growth of global tourism has led to significant challenges, particularly in the form of overtourism, which affects the social, environmental, and cultural organisation of many destinations. As cities struggle to manage overcrowding, pollution, and the loss of local identity, alternative tourism models have gained attention. This research is relevant as it examines the Cittaslow movement, a global initiative focused on sustainability and quality of life, as a potential antidote to overtourism. By focusing on Italy and Spain, two countries heavily impacted by mass tourism, this study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism and regional development. The aim of this research is to evaluate how the implementation of Cittaslow*

# ПОВІЛЬНИЙ ТУРИЗМ *VS* НАДМІРНИЙ ТУРИЗМ: КЕЙС ІТАЛІЇ ТА ІСПАНІЇ

*Швидке зростання світового туризму призвело до значних проблем, зокрема у формі надмірного туризму, який впливає на соціальну, екологічну та культурну організацію багатьох напрямків. Оскільки міста намагаються впоратися з перенаселеністю, забрудненням та втратою місцевої ідентичності, альтернативні моделі туризму привернули увагу. Це дослідження є актуальним, оскільки воно розглядає рух Cittaslow (міжнародний рух "повільних міст", заснований в Італії у 1999 р.), глобальну ініціативу, зосереджену на сталому розвитку та якості життя, як потенційний антидот від надмірного туризму. Зосереджуючись на Італії та Іспанії, двох країнах, які сильно постраждали від масового туризму, це дослідження робить внесок у ширший дискурс щодо сталого туризму та регіонального*

*principles in Italy and Spain contributes to combating the negative effects of overtourism by promoting slow tourism, sustainability, and decentralization of tourist flows. This study is based on the hypothesis that Cittaslow towns offer an effective framework for mitigating overtourism by fostering localized, low-impact tourism practices. Using a comparative case study methodology, the research examines Cittaslow implementation in Italy, the birthplace of the movement, and Spain, a more recent adopter. The analysis focuses on how Cittaslow towns in each country approach decentralization, local identity promotion, and the mitigation of tourist pressure. Findings reveal that Cittaslow towns in both Italy and Spain encourage a change from mass tourism by redirecting flows to smaller, less-visited areas. Italian towns benefit from stronger institutional support and integration with national tourism strategies, while Spanish towns show promise through community-led innovation. Both contexts show early signs of relieving pressure from over touristed centres by promoting low-impact, high-quality travel experiences. Slow tourism, guided by Cittaslow principles, may provide a replicable model for managing tourism sustainably. However, its success may depend on long-term governance support and cultural alignment. These insights contribute to broader debates on post-growth tourism and sustainable regional development.*

*розвитку. Метою цього дослідження є оцінка того, як впровадження принципів руху Cittaslow в Італії та Іспанії сприяє боротьбі з негативними наслідками надмірного туризму шляхом сприяння повільному туризму, сталому розвитку та децентралізації туристичних потоків. Це дослідження базується на гіпотезі, що міста руху Cittaslow пропонують ефективну основу для пом'якшення надмірного туризму шляхом сприяння локалізованим практикам туризму з низьким впливом. Використовуючи методологію порівняльного вивчення конкретних випадків, дослідження розглядає впровадження руху Cittaslow в Італії, батьківщині руху, та Іспанії, країні, яка його прийняла нещодавно. Аналіз зосереджений на тому, як міста у кожній країні підходять до децентралізації, просування місцевої ідентичності та зменшення туристичного тиску. Результати руху Cittaslow показують, що як в Італії, так і в Іспанії міста заохочують відхід від масового туризму, перенаправляючи потоки до менш відвідуваних районів. Італійські міста отримують вигоду від сильнішої інституційної підтримки та інтеграції з національними туристичними стратегіями, тоді як іспанські міста демонструють потенціал завдяки інноваціям, керованим громадами. Обидва контексти демонструють ранні ознаки зменшення тиску з боку перевантажених туристами центрів шляхом сприяння високоякісним туристичним враженням з низьким впливом. Повільний туризм, керований принципами руху Cittaslow, може стати відтворюваною моделлю сталого управління туризмом. Однак його успіх може залежати від довгострокової підтримки управління та культурної гармонізації. Ці висновки сприяють ширшим дослідженням щодо туризму після зростання та сталого регіонального розвитку.*

## Introduction

Overtourism, a condition where destinations experience excessive tourist flows that exceed local carrying capacities, has emerged as a global phenomenon, disrupting social life, degrading environmental quality, and undermining cultural heritage (Milano et al., 2019; Séraphin, 2020). Destinations historically inclined toward mass tourism, especially heritage-rich rural towns, now face challenges such as infrastructure strain, resident displacement, ecological degradation, and authenticity loss; these developments underscore the need for sustainable alternatives (Séraphin et al., 2020; Séraphin et al., 2022). Slow tourism has emerged as a promising alternative, emphasizing quality over quantity, community engagement, environmental

and cultural preservation, experiential, nature-based travel. In this field, connecting these practices to certification programs like Cittaslow could offer a sustainable strategy to mitigate overtourism.

Specifically, Cittaslow certifies towns committed to improving urban quality life through sustainability, and localization (Cittaslow website). This study compares how Cittaslow towns in Italy and Spain leverage slow tourism principles to address overtourism's challenges, answering the following research question: *Could "slow tourism", enabled by the Cittaslow model, work effectively as an alternative to overtourism in small towns? and if so, what are the implications for local communities?*

Although empirical research contributes significantly (Perano et al., 2019), unresolved issues remain: the lack of comparative evaluation between different countries regarding how the Cittaslow framework mitigates overtourism, scarce empirical testing of slow tourism's efficacy as overtourism alternative, and integration of certification-based governance into tourism management literature.

This article seeks to fill these gaps by conducting a comparative investigation across two countries sharing the Cittaslow model, to evaluate the effectiveness of slow tourism as a strategic response to overtourism by analyzing Cittaslow-certified towns in Italy and Spain, offering lessons for sustainable destination management.

We conduct an exploratory analysis using secondary data to investigate how Cittaslow certification influences tourism planning and local participation, comparing outcomes between Italy and Spain.

The paper is structured as follows: section 1 presents the theoretical background on the overtourism phenomenon and its drivers, describing also the slow tourism in responses to mass tourism within broader debates on sustainable alternatives. In addition, it introduces the territorial certifications as a tool for local sustainability and explores Cittaslow's origins, criteria, and theoretical potential in tourism governance. Section 2 illustrates the methodology, with research contexts and sample, contextual comparability, and data sources. Section 3 describes the research design and data collection. Section 4 presents findings and discussions on comparative analysis of qualitative results, underlying cross-country differences. Section 5 summarizes key insights, reflects on theoretical and practical implications for management and policy makers, suggesting future research directions.

## 1. Theoretical background

This theoretical background is structured around four key components: the conceptualization and impacts of overtourism; a comparison between overtourism and slow tourism; recent tourism trends in Italy and Spain with a focus on regional development; and the role of territorial certifications, particularly the Cittaslow movement, as tools for sustainable tourism and local resilience.

Overtourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization as "the impact of tourism on a destination that excessively influences the quality of life of residents and the quality of visitor experiences in a negative way" (UNWTO, 2018). Its causes include the rapid growth of tourism concentrated in a few places, along with the rise of vacation rentals and cruise tourism, leading to pressure that exceeds both social and physical carrying capacity. Environmental degradation, rising housing costs, and tourismphobia are common consequences (Milano, 2018). Public discontent has been expressed through protests against overcrowded tourism in several destinations, reflecting how saturation compromises sustainability and community well-being. As a response to the excesses of mass tourism, slow tourism emerges, focusing on touristic experiences with longer stays and immersion in local culture, enjoying local gastronomy, traditions, and community life, at a slower rhythm (de Luis Blanco, 2011). Unlike mass tourism, slow tourism emphasizes experience quality, reduced impact, and the redistribution of tourist flows across space and time (decentralization and deseasonalization), resulting in more balanced tourism.

### 1.1. Tourism trends in Italy and Spain: regional development and deconcentration

Italy and Spain, two of the world's top tourist destinations, have experienced high levels of tourism concentration in specific hotspots. In Italy, for instance, over 52% of visitors in 2015 focused on a few cities of historical and artistic interest (de Luis Blanco, 2011). Spain presents a similar pattern, with heavy flows in main cities and coastal zones. In response, policies are being implemented to redistribute tourism and achieve more balanced territorial development. Authorities in both countries promote inland tourism to spread demand. Italy has even advocated for "a slower and more diversified tourism" as a strategy to relieve pressure from overcrowded destinations and stimulate new poles in less-exploited areas (de Luis Blanco, 2011). Thus, both nations aim to decentralize tourism, deseasonalize demand, and share benefits, aligning with sustainable regional development goals.

### 1.2. Territorial certifications: Cittaslow as a tool for local sustainability

Territorial certifications are tools that guide destinations toward sustainability and help mitigate overtourism. These certifications set standards in quality of life, environmental management, and cultural heritage. The Cittaslow movement (slow cities), founded in Italy in 1999 (and present in Spain as well), is an international network of small towns committed to enhancing local quality of life, protecting traditions, and fostering human-scale tourism. Joining Cittaslow encourages the implementation of sustainable development measures, and research shows that this

certification supports tourism planning that avoids the excesses of the conventional model (Ince et al., 2020). Alongside Cittaslow, other territorial certifications with similar goals exist (e.g., Blue Flag for beaches, or Green Destinations for destinations), promoting models of responsible tourism. In short, Cittaslow and similar labels offer a framework to reorient destinations toward slower and more sustainable tourism and help mitigate overtourism.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory analysis based on multiple case studies (Yin, 2017) in order to investigate how territorial certifications, such as Cittaslow, influences tourism planning, local participation, exploring patterns and practices in two distinct European contexts of the Mediterranean area: Italy and Spain.

Based on secondary data available, our analysis involves triangulated sources, including institutional official portals of Cittaslow International, as well as municipal websites of Cittaslow-certified towns, reports of local forums, or local news sites, media reports and publications. All sources were systematically organized and subjected to comparative analysis in order to ensure internal consistency and analytical robustness of the results (Flick, 2004). This approach made it possible to identify recurring themes, verify the reliability of the data and resolve any discrepancies in the information, thereby strengthening the credibility and validity of the evidence emerging from the study.

### 2.1. Research context

The analysis focuses on Italy and Spain, countries with long-standing traditions of mass tourism, yet also early adopters of the Cittaslow philosophy. The choice of these two specific countries is justified by their complementary roles. Italy is the birthplace of the Cittaslow network, such as Orvieto in 1999 (Cittaslow Association, n. d.) and it is the leading adopter of this movement, hosting the largest number of certified towns worldwide (87 municipalities). Spain, although later in adoption, has incorporated the model into its tourism diversification strategies in several municipalities with growing interest in sustainable and community-centered tourism. With 10 certified towns, it offers a contrasting but expanding network where certification is mainly driven by municipal leadership and community initiatives. Furthermore, the choice of countries lie in their partially overlapping economic and institutional paths as well as both countries are located in the Mediterranean area, sharing an extensive coastline and having well-established tourism economies closely linked to their historical, urban and cultural heritage. This common geographical identity, combined with divergent models of governance, makes the two contexts particularly suitable for comparative analysis.

## 3. Research design and data collection

Data collection was conducted through a structured three-phase process. First, Cittaslow towns in Italy and Spain were identified using the official Cittaslow International website. Multiple towns from each country were selected to ensure variation in geographical context and local conditions. Second, relevant online materials were gathered for each selected town. These included municipal planning documents, sustainability reports, tourism statistics, and records of participatory initiatives. Information was primarily obtained through official municipal websites and supplemented by local news sources. Third, a cross-country comparative analysis was undertaken. Italian and Spanish cases were systematically compared to explore how Cittaslow certification influences tourism planning, community participation, and the management of sustainability challenges such as carrying capacity and seasonality.

All collected materials were subjected to qualitative analysis, guided by thematic categories aligned with the study's research objectives. These categories included: (1) tourism planning and governance (e.g., existence of strategic plans, integration of Cittaslow principles); (2) local participation (e.g., mechanisms for resident involvement in tourism-related decision-making); and (3) sustainability outcomes (e.g., references to carrying capacity, seasonality management, and quality of life for residents).

The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, innovative governance practices, and key differences between the Italian and Spanish cases.

*Italian context*

Italian Cittaslow towns are typically small municipalities with populations under 50 000 inhabitants. Many are located in hilly or mountainous regions, rather than in major urban centers or along high-traffic tourist routes. A core objective of these towns is the preservation of cultural heritage and local identity. Their main challenge lies in enhancing cultural assets and the distinctiveness of their territories. Urban design often integrates historic centers, preserved architecture, localized infrastructure, and a strong focus on high-quality public spaces such as streets and communal areas.

Examples of Italian Cittaslow towns include: Abbiategrasso, Amalfi, Bra, Città della Pieve, Galeata, Levanto, Orvieto, Positano, Sperlonga, Termoli (the full list is available at: https://www.cittaslow.it/citta).

The guiding principles of the Cittaslow movement include:
• positive slowness, which promotes a slower pace of life to enhance well-being;
• preservation of local culture and traditions, including culinary heritage, festivals, and artisan practices;
• environmental sustainability, supported through green infrastructure and careful resource management;
• community participation and engagement, by involving citizens in decision-making processes to ensure that development and tourism do not undermine local quality of life.

Although these towns share a common framework, there are notable differences in levels of documentation, governance capacity, and resource availability. Some municipalities are more proactive and publicly visible than others. Geographic diversity across the north, center, south, and islands of Italy also produces significant variation in local economic structures, environmental pressures, and tourism dynamics. For instance, issues such as accessibility, tourist demand, and demographic trends vary widely across regions.

*Spanish context*

Spain currently counts 10 certified Cittaslow towns, including: Artà, Balmaseda, Begues, Begur, Benabarre, La Orotava, Lekeitio, Mungia, Pals, and Rubielos de Mora. These municipalities are geographically diverse, encompassing coastal, rural, island, and mountain settings. Despite different regional contexts, all towns are united by their emphasis on local identity, environmental sustainability, slow tourism, and community well-being.

Unlike Italy, where Cittaslow is often supported by higher levels of government, Spanish towns have adopted the model through local leadership and common engagement. Certification in Spain has become a tool for place-based development, often tied to cultural revitalization, sustainable mobility, and decentralization of tourism. For instance:

• Artà (Mallorca) leverages its Cittaslow status to protect natural parks and promote agrotourism, while preserving traditional festivals like Sant Antoni.

• Balmaseda integrates heritage preservation with economic revitalization, focusing on historic architecture, culinary tourism, and community involvement.

• Begur and Pals (Catalonia) balance tourism management with the conservation of medieval centers and coastline biodiversity.

• La Orotava (Tenerife) uses its position on a highly touristic island to offer a slow, culturally immersive alternative to mass tourism.

Most towns promote traditional markets, local gastronomy, low-impact events, and green mobility infrastructures (e.g., pedestrian zones, cycling paths). While outcomes vary, these towns share a strategic use of the Cittaslow label to differentiate themselves from mass tourism hubs and support territorial cohesion and rural vitality.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

This study reveals that the Cittaslow certification framework, organized into seven macro areas (*Table 1*), is implemented in both Italian and Spanish towns to promote sustainable, community-centered, and decentralized tourism practices. The seven macro areas include: i) Energy and environmental policies; ii) Infrastructure; iii) Urban quality; iv) Agricultural, tourism, and artisanal sectors; v) Hospitality, awareness, and education; vi) Social cohesion; vii) Partnerships and governance networks

*Table 1*

Examples of events in the macro areas of Cittaslow

| Macro areas of Cittaslow certification system | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Energy and environmental policies (area 1) | Infrastructure (area 2) | Urban quality (area 3) | Agricultural, tourism, crafts (area 4) | Hospitality, awareness, education (area 5) | Social cohesion (area 6) | Partnerships (area 7) |
| Renewable-energy drives and energy-efficiency campaigns (public building retrofits, incentive campaigns for household insulation and lighting | Soft-mobility weeks & bike-to-work days, launch events for new cycle paths or pedestrian zones | Historic-centre revitali-zation ceremonies and cultural open-house days (restoration unveilings, guided heritage walks | Local food & craft fairs (slow-food festivals, "kilometro zero" markets) | Cittaslow Education programs in schools | Community festivals and inclusion programs | Cooperative promotions with Slow Food, tourism boards, universities (joint conferences, training seminars |
| Waste reduction and circular economy weeks | Public-space improvement inaugurations (new street furniture, signage, lighting designed to reduce light pollution | "Revitalize the Square" projects, community co-design workshops to improve piazzas, parks, public lighting, benches | Agritourism routes and tasting weekends (weekend packages that combine farm visits, tastings and slow-tour experiences) | Visitor-orientation campaigns and slow-tour training for local guides and hospitality staff | Community gardens and after-school programs | Network assemblies, cross-town festivals and exchange visits |
| | | Night-time slow-city festivals promoting low-impact cultural program | Artisan markets and craft residencies (workshops, "meet the maker" events) | | | EU & regional project kickoffs and dissemination events |

*Source*: Cittaslow international (n. d.).

Across both Italy and Spain, cities interpret and implement these macro areas. However, while there are shared values across the network, notable differences exist in the way towns engage with the Cittaslow model as shown by *Table 2*.

Events such as town-level gastronomic festivals play a central role in promoting local food production and aligning with Slow Food values. These events are frequently incorporated into official Cittaslow "Slow Tourism" experiences, including curated weekend itineraries in towns such as Abbiategrasso, Amelia, and Greve in Chianti. Their primary objectives are to extend the duration of tourist stays, disperse visitor flows, and direct tourism-related spending toward local producers.

Comparative overview of Cittaslow implementation
in Italy and Spain

| Dimension | Italy | Spain |
|---|---|---|
| Adoption timeline | Founder of Cittaslow in 1999; early and widespread adoption | Joined later (2010); steady growth of certified towns |
| Number of certified Towns | 87 towns across all regions | 10 towns including Artà, Balmaseda, Begues, Benabarre, La Orotava, etc. |
| Governance model | Top-down and multilevel; often embedded in regional and national tourism strategies | Bottom-up and locally driven; dependent on municipal leadership and civil society |
| Policy integration | Strong integration with rural development, sustainability, and tourism policies | Fragmented across towns; variable integration depending on political commitment |
| Community participation | Formalized participation in many towns; participatory planning and citizen forums | Emphasis on grassroots involvement; local pride and cultural continuity as drivers |
| Macro area focus | Strong performance across most areas; emphasis on Areas 3 (Urban Quality), 4 (Agriculture & Tourism), and 5 (Education & Hospitality) | Focus on Areas 1 (Environmental Policy), 4 (Agri-tourism & Crafts), and 6 (Social Cohesion) |
| Signature activities | Slow Food festivals, restoration unveilings, bike route launches, cultural programming | Local markets, traditional festivals, pedestrianization campaigns, community gardens |
| Tourism strategy | Diversification from major hotspots; supports deseasonalization and longer stays | Emphasis on small-scale, authentic experiences as alternatives to nearby mass tourism centers |
| Environmental practices | Focus on soft mobility, waste reduction, urban greening (Areas 1 & 2) | Emphasis on natural park preservation, coastal biodiversity, and alternative mobility |
| Cultural emphasis | Strong Slow Food influence; culinary and artisan heritage central to tourism offer | Revival of traditional festivals, heritage crafts, and local languages (e.g., Catalan, Basque) |
| Challenges | Regional disparities; sustainability unevenly implemented across towns | Limited visibility of Cittaslow label; inconsistent support and potential symbolic adoption |
| Outcomes and trends | Mature implementation; measurable impacts on quality of life and tourism dispersion | Emerging success in revitalizing rural towns and promoting participatory local governance |

*Source*: authors' elaboration.

Public events such as restoration inaugurations and programming in public spaces are also common, reflecting the network's emphasis on revitalizing shared urban areas to enhance both everyday life for residents and the quality of the tourist experience. These events often take hybrid forms. For instance, a weekend agritourism package (certification Area 4) might be promoted during a soft

mobility campaign (Area 2), feature local guides trained through Cittaslow Education programs (Area 5), and be presented at a regional Cittaslow meeting (Area 7). The network actively supports such cross-cutting initiatives that integrate multiple dimensions of the certification framework.

Italian Cittaslow towns, in particular, exhibit a rich array of cultural and culinary programming, which reflects the influence of the movement's Slow Food origins, especially in Areas 4 and 5. Towns such as Greve in Chianti, Bra, and Orvieto serve as notable reference points in this regard.

In addition, many towns organize periodic pedestrianization weekends and inaugurate cycling routes through participatory community events. These initiatives aim to reduce dependence on car-based tourism and promote alternative forms of mobility. In line with Cittaslow certification criteria, infrastructure improvements related to alternative mobility, cycle paths, and street furniture are actively encouraged. This comparative analysis reinforces that while Italy and Spain both use Cittaslow to reframe tourism through slowness, localization, and quality of life, the governance approaches, focal areas, and implementation outcomes diverge significantly. Italian towns benefit from stronger institutional structures and funding channels, while Spanish towns showcase the power of community-led innovation, especially in areas like environmental policy (Area 1) and social cohesion (Area 6). In both contexts, however, cross-cutting initiatives such as agritourism weekends promoted through bike campaigns and guided by local youth trained in hospitality, illustrate the potential for systemic impact when macro areas are actively integrated. Ultimately, the strength of Cittaslow lies in its ability to provide a flexible but structured model for locally rooted, sustainable tourism development.

Finally, many events are intentionally low-cost and community-driven, such as workshops, local markets, and bicycle parades. This approach aligns with the core philosophy of Cittaslow, which emphasizes citizen-centered improvements in quality of life over large-scale capital projects.

### Conclusions

The present study analyses the impact of tourism certification, in particular the Ctittaslow certification, as a tool against overtourism. It focuses on a comparative case study of the Italian and Spanish towns to identify similarities, divergences, and determinants. This comparison highlights whether Cittaslow certification corresponds with more structured planning processes, enhanced local participation, and improved sustainability outcomes. Italian towns are found to be widely distributed across the peninsula and islands, ranging from historic urban centers such as Orvieto or Greve in Chianti to coastal towns like Positano and Sperlonga. Spanish towns, although fewer, include cases from the Balearic Islands, Basque Country, and Catalonia, where overtourism pressures are particularly strong. Italy demonstrates the value of institutional integration, with towns benefiting from policy continuity and alignment with national strategies. Spain, though more fragmented, reveals the power of local innovation, where community-driven Cittaslow towns promote

meaningful forms of slow tourism rooted in place. In both contexts, Cittaslow supports the decentralization of tourism, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. However, the impact is highly dependent on local capacity, funding, and political will.

This comparative case study shows that the Cittaslow model has potential to reorient tourism toward sustainability in both Italy and Spain, albeit through different governance paths. More importantly, it suggests that Cittaslow can act as a systemic antidote to overtourism, offering not only an alternative vision but a practical governance framework for achieving it.

Cittaslow should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it serves as a flexible governance framework that can be adapted to varying territorial contexts. To scale its impact, greater inter-municipal collaboration and integration with regional tourism planning are needed, especially in Spain. It is worth noting that obtaining Cittaslow status does not automatically address challenges such as overtourism, seasonality, or environmental degradation. The actual impact of certification depends on the implementation of local policies, the level of stakeholder engagement, and broader external conditions.

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