

2013

## Via Francigena Mountain Itineraries: the Case of Piacenza Valleys

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### Recommended Citation

Cerutti, Stefania and Dioli, Ilaria (2013) "Via Francigena Mountain Itineraries: the Case of Piacenza Valleys," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7KH8P>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol1/iss1/8>

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## Via Francigena Mountain Itineraries: the case of Piacenza Valleys

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Religious tourism has experienced a strong growth in recent years. It represents a complex and articulate phenomenon, in which the reasons and proposals related to the devotional and personal sphere are combined with a series of innovative opportunities that help reach a depth knowledge of a territory. The religious motive often means that pilgrims travel along specific routes to visit a number of shrines or even to complete lengthy itineraries. Increasingly, purely religious motives are becoming mixed with more secular forms of religious tourism, which often centre around specific religious sites. In this perspective, faith itineraries can be interpreted as drivers for territorial development able to evaluate the resources, the peculiarities and the identity of each place. This justifies and motivates the increase of several important initiatives which aim to make a significant contribution to the enhancement of cultural heritage and local development. Many of them are related to the most famous European cultural routes. As regard the Via Francigena, various projects are being hatched, highlighting some 'minor' ways of pilgrimage: this is what is currently happening in Piacenza Valleys, in the north of Italy, the case study of the research presented in this paper.

**Key Words:** religious tourism, local development, cultural heritage, faith itineraries, Via Francigena.

### **Introduction: objectives and methodology**

Religious tourism assumes significance and multiple meanings in today's society; the religious journey is, in fact, connected to economic, organizational and cultural aspects also present in other phenomena of human mobility. Hence, the focus is on the religious phenomenon as a geographical, anthropological and social issue, the cultural and artistic dimension that religion has produced and produces, travel arrangements and hospitality and the characteristics of mobility to the places of pilgrimage. In the wide and varied current forms of mobility, cultural and religious routes assume a consistent and indicative importance.

This paper will focus precisely on these cultural routes, and in particular on faith itineraries, considering them as a lever for local tourism development. Starting with a brief methodological introduction, it will present an overview on the phenomenon of pilgrimages and some considerations about cultural and religious heritage. Then, this work will go through an analysis of the multiple steps needed to create a cultural-religious

itinerary, presenting an on-going project related to the traditional Via Francigena and its minor routes: 'Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys'. The aims are to provide a concrete example of good practice for the enhancement of religious heritage through tourism supply and an empirical insight into the creation of a thematic route, as an active network of local resources and stakeholders.

The methodology adopted is based on a descriptive approach in the fields of human and tourism geography, with an emphasis on the concepts of territory and landscape, system and local development, networks using a deductive reasoning. For further details, see: Turri (1998, 2006); Dematteis and Governa (2005); Raffestin (2005); Pichierra (2005); Lozato-Giotart (2008); Lazzeretti and Petrillo (2011).

It is important to note how every cultural and religious route project is configured as a process of cultural building, based on the so-called 'virtuous circle' resource/project/territory (Lajarge and Roux, 2007), three elements closely interrelated with each other

(Berti, 2013). The territories exist through the projects that are developed in line with the resources available and through the involvement of many subjects and local communities (Berti, 2012). Similarly, the project can generate new value for the territory and contribute to predict possible development scenarios. For this reason, pilgrimage routes and religious itineraries have become to all intent and purposes a 'tourism product' to which authorities and private operators devote their full attention.

### **Pilgrimage and Religious Tourism: framework studies and current status**

Since time immemorial, pilgrimage has been considered a key component of the manifestation of faith. It not only represents an opportunity for an encounter between humans and the divine but also a phenomenon of overcoming geographical boundaries and distances, a chance of meeting peoples: meet others, from different places, but united by faith and shared symbols, which makes live the intensely community and ecclesiological aspect of religion.

The traditional pilgrims have been joined by travellers who have no tradition of religious observance, who undertake the journey for reasons that have nothing to do with faith. Sometimes their motives arise from a desire to learn and to use their free time in an intelligent and cultured way, it may be understood as cultural and religious tourism, as an opportunity to discover, touch and experience the daily life, history, nature and values of other peoples. The journey thus becomes a form of travel that matches closely with other types of tourism (cultural, green, active, etc.), in harmony with the environmental context and attentive to the specific regional qualities (Recultivatur, 2013).

Some scholars have been said that pilgrimage and tourism are closely related (MacCannell, 1976; Leed, 1991; Griffin, Raj, 2012). One of the key distinguishing factors of pilgrimage is that it is formed out of the desire for some form of change and the belief that this can be found at the pilgrimage site (Turner, 1972). Tourism, by contrast, occupies a functionally and socially different position. At its simplest, we may think of tourism as 'sightseeing'. Where pilgrimage can appear to be explicitly religious, tourism can appear to be explicitly secular. Therefore, pilgrimage and tourism, despite operating on different planes of meaning, can have some significant areas of overlap. We can see that there may be tourists having similar experiences to pilgrims, and pilgrims who really may be indistinguishable from tourists. Turner and Turner (1978) remind us that 'a tourist is half a

pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist'.

It is not by chance, that pilgrimage and religious tourism are widely considered as the oldest form of travel (Kaelber, 2011). It is possible to find many definitions of this kind of tourism in various publications, and although slightly varying, they are more or less similar (Zammit, 2012). It has been said to be focusing on visiting religious sites, monuments or destinations (Smith, Macleod, Hart Robertson, 2010), although participants can be motivated either in part or exclusively for religious purposes.

Sharpley (2012), suggests that there are probably four distinct reasons and motives why people visit religious sites:

- *Spiritual / religious purposes*, including individual contemplation / prayer or participation in formal services or ceremonies;
- *Heritage and cultural purposes*, such as interested in architecture or religious culture;
- *Special interest*, for example musical concerts and photography;
- *Planned or impulsive visit 'because it's there'*, that is visiting religious sites as iconic tourist markers.

Each motivation cannot ignore the fact that resources and experiences of religious tourism are framed in a specific local context and landscape, which can itself be a fundamental pull factor especially when it comes to places of unique and particular value.

The study of intersections between religion, tourism and pilgrimage (Raj and Morpeth, 2007) has recently become an area of interest to tourist scholars, geographers and researchers from a variety of different disciplines (e.g. Badone and Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Timothy and Olsen, 2006). At the same time, over the last few years pilgrimage and religious tourism have shown a steady increase. According to the WTO's data, religious travel generates revenues of around €3.3 billion a year and 330 million travelers (UNWTO, 2006). In Italy, religious tourism accounts for 1,5% of the total tourist flow, of which 2% is international demand and 1,1% Italian customers, for a total of 5.6 million tourists (of which 3.3 million are foreign visitors and the remaining 2.3 million tourists are related to the Italian market). There are some critical points, of which the most important is the absence of reliable national and international statistical data, that makes it difficult to estimate the size of the religious tourism market and to measure its flows<sup>[1]</sup>. The majority of data comes from direct surveys

conducted at the most relevant religious sites and routes (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Santiago, Assisi).

If, on the one hand, it is possible to map and take a census of the cultural heritage linked to faith, it remains difficult, on the other hand, to assess the contribution and impact generated by this pilgrimage and religious tourism on the local development of a territory. However, the availability of accurate data related to individual cultural resource - often from individual research and EU projects, mainly related to cultural routes - allows us to draw some useful considerations in an analytical perspective. In fact, despite the lack of availability and measurability of data, there is no doubt that religious tourism can bring substantial economic effects to local communities as well as social, environmental and cultural benefits<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **Cultural and Religious Heritage: the importance of the European faith itineraries**

The heritage places and resources linked to religious practices are numerous and greatly diversified. This heritage comprises individual or groups of buildings, sites as well as vast and complex areas such as holy cities, sacred landscapes (including those formed by ancient place naming) and pilgrimage routes. It is impossible to disregard the importance of objects, archives and documents as well as, of course, the rites, rituals, traditions and other forms of intangible cultural heritage which contribute to the reality and meaning of these sacred places, reflecting the religious practices they are associated with (International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS 2005). All of these heritage resources may to all intents and purposes be considered as 'one of the oldest and most important generators of tourism' (Richards, 1996). Thus, this paper will focus on cultural routes – and in particular on faith itineraries – considering them as a keystone for tourism: they enrich the travellers' experience thanks to a wide variety of attractions along a thematic heritage route.

The itineraries can become places in which, and through which, it's possible to drive a territorial development in line with the peculiarities and identity of each place.

The concept of heritage routes

*is shown to be a rich and fertile one, offering a privileged framework in which mutual understanding, a plural approach to history and a culture of peace can all operate. It is based on encounters and dialogue, cultural*

*exchanges and cross-fertilization* (WHC-UNESCO, 1994).

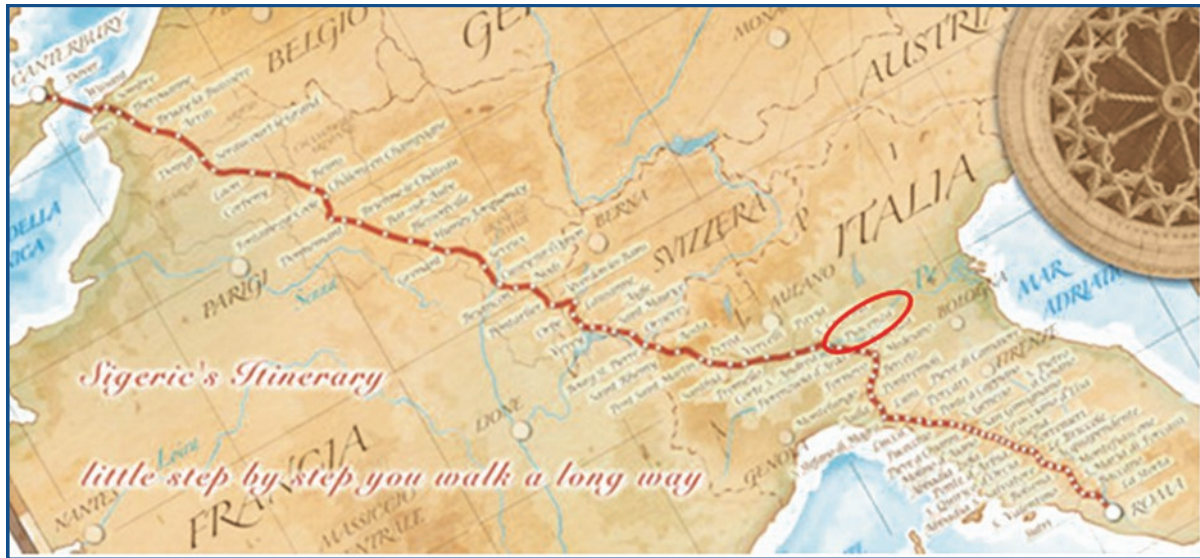
The defining elements for cultural routes stated by ICOMOS and ICCR (International Committee on Cultural Routes) are:

- *context* - natural setting;
- *content* - tangible elements that bear witness to its cultural heritage and provide a physical confirmation of its existence;
- *cross-cultural significance* - value as a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts and gives the route its meaning;
- *dynamic character*.

The religious routes network can be compared to a river system with small streams and brooks joining together to the main river. Significant examples include the Way of St James and the Via Francigena, which both include the proposal of an 'inter-cultural' and 'inter-generational' journey that is presented as a 'complex cultural item' (Rizzo, and Trono, 2012). Along these ways pilgrims and travellers cross different landscapes, cities, villages, monuments and meet people and other cultures. The former example, is the result of a long evolutionary process that has benefited from the participation of the entire community and has generated interest of a religious, spiritual, socio-economic and political nature. The second case represents a highly important step, and not just in cultural terms. Its roots lie in a thousand-year history that has shaped modern Europe and it seeks today to open the doors to European routes in the Mediterranean countries (Bruschi, 2012).

- 1 These difficulties are related to several factors, including:
  - many religious sites are only locally known and visited mainly on a daily journey by hikers;
  - it's hard to distinguish the share of 'religious tourism' from the more general 'cultural tourism';
  - the activities of religious institutions are often not statistically counted.
- 2 All these effects can be classified as tangible or intangible. Intangible are for example infrastructural effects, competence effects, cooperation and image effects. They influence economic framework condition over the long term, but cannot directly be measured from a monetary point of view. Tangible effects, like sales, income or employment effects immediately contribute to wealth and employment in a region, because they generate significant streams of earnings and employment opportunities (Hans, 2012).



**Figure 1 – The historical route of the Via Francigena**

Source: <http://1fmagnaghi.weebly.com/asse-linguistico-inglese-the-via-francigena-from-canterbury-to-parma.html>

This paper will examine a tourism development project about the Via Francigena in Italy. The Via Francigena is one of the most important among the 29 cultural routes that have been recognized since 1987 by the Council of Europe. The Way takes travellers along one of the most historic and longest pilgrimage paths:

- It begins in Canterbury and makes its way to Dover.
- A ferry takes the walker to Calais, where the land journey resumes.
- Across France to Switzerland;
- Down to Lake Lemman and along the Rhone Valley,
- Up to the Alps and down to Aosta in Italy.
- Along the Italian peninsula, before arriving in Rome.

It follows the precise historical itinerary which Archbishop Sigericus walked and described in a document on his return from Rome to his dioceses in

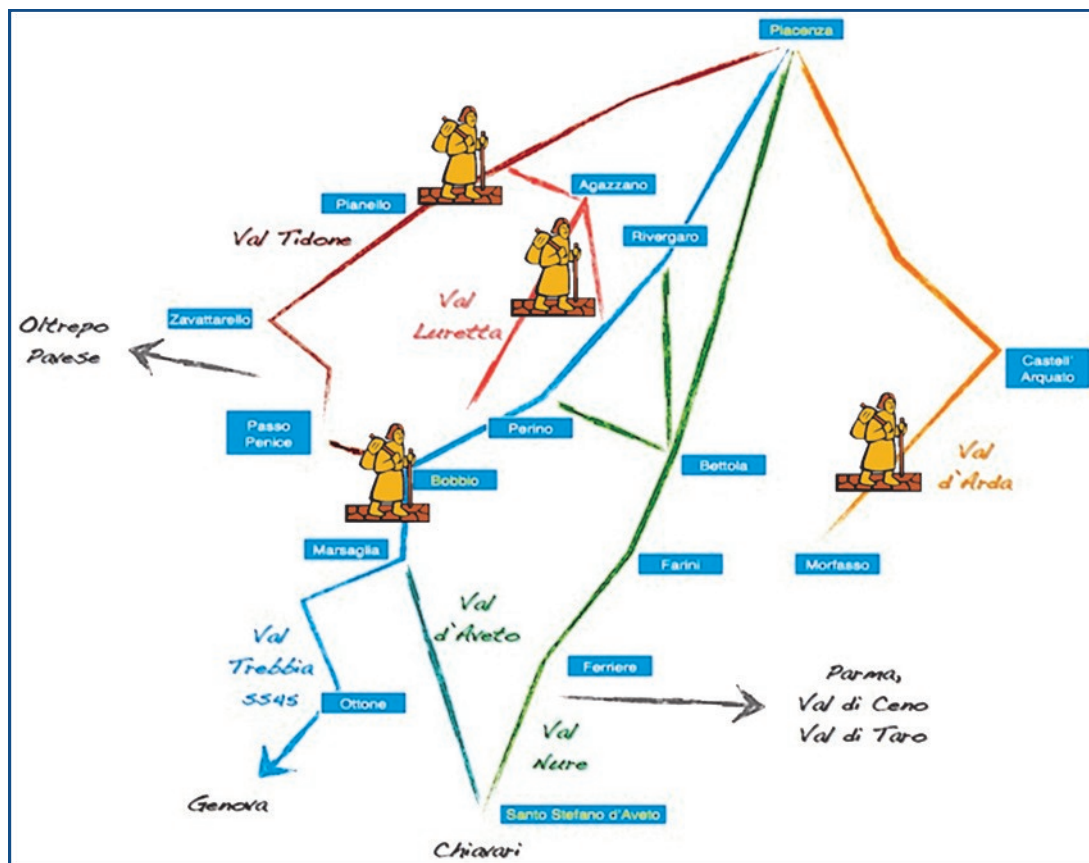
990. Today some pilgrims follow in Sigeric's ancient footsteps and travel on foot, on horseback or by bicycle on the Via Francigena. While Via Francigena has the same great potential as the Way of St James, there are far fewer pilgrims on this route than on the route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, mainly due to the lack of infrastructure and suitable support facilities<sup>[3]</sup>. In summary, it includes a thousand years of history, two thousand kilometres across Europe, scattered with unique cultural and environmental excellence. The Via Francigena in many ways is and remains today, an elusive, barely discovered, almost secret trail.

### **The 'Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys': a tourism development project for mountain itineraries**

The 'Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys' is an on-going project that aims to develop an alternative local tourism offer through the creation of a new cultural route in a small area in the north of Italy<sup>[4]</sup>.

Starting from the European course of the Via Francigena, the project proposes to connect to the paths that, detach from the Piacenza stretch of Sigeric's way, longitudinally cross the entire territory of the province of Piacenza to connect with the Ligurian coast or with the already known 'Abbot's way' (From Bobbio to Pontremoli), in turn connecting with the Parma stretch of the official path of Via Francigena.

3 There isn't the same level of official records kept as you see in Santiago Spain, but in 2008 an estimated 500 people arrived in Rome. More interesting was that only 1,000 people for the entire decade prior to 2008 had arrived in Rome. Further, in 2010, some estimate that the number of pilgrims arriving in Rome has risen to nearly 1,000 people. And others estimate that maybe another 1,000 walked some section of the Via Francigena but did not arrive in Rome; an increase of 100-200% in just two short years ([http://littlegreentracs.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2011/05/camino-de-santiago-and-the-via-francigena-a-few-years-later.html](http://littlegreentracs.typepad.com/my_weblog/2011/05/camino-de-santiago-and-the-via-francigena-a-few-years-later.html)).

**Figure 2: Mountains itineraries along the Piacenza Valley**

This project allows for the implementation of a tourism development strategy, agreed at a local level and built on the conversion of these routes from medieval paths to tourist resource. The intention is indeed to reach the definition and proposal of an entirely walkable mountain itinerary and to enhance its historical, religious, cultural, environmental and social richness.

In order to provide a clear cognitive and analytical framework about the project, the next paragraphs will present its distinctive elements related to:

- area and territorial network;
- aims and objectives of the project;
- action plan: review and next steps.

#### *Area and territorial network*

Since ancient times Piacenza played a strategic role along the main communication routes in its area. The Via Emilia, traced and built between 191 and 187 BC, ended in Piacenza and in 148 BC it was connected to Via Postumia, the road that ran from the Ligurian Sea to the Adriatic Sea up to Aquileia. During the Dark Ages, Via Emilia between Piacenza and Parma became the Via Francigena, also known as Strada Romea, one of the most important roads that crossed the Apennines between the plain and Tuscany. This led to an increase in the number of travelers and pilgrims in the Trebbia Valley and towards Bobbio and its Abbey, which in the Middle ages was an important cultural centre.

The project 'Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys' aims to develop and promote the 'minor' cultural and religious routes closely connected to the historical path of the Via Francigena (Figure 1).

The project is based on a formal agreement between 22 municipalities of the Piacenza district, the Province Administration, the Piacenza-Bobbio Diocese, the European Association of Vie Francigene, the Confederation of local Industries, the local Trade Associations and the Farmers Alliance; it is supported

4 Ilaria Dioli, member of the Laboratory of Local Economy of the Catholic Sacred Heart University in Piacenza, is involved in the working group of the project as an expert trainer. The cooperation between the two authors in the study and description of this project comes from a positive and constructive previous experience, regarding the drafting of the Cultural Strategic Plan of the Province of Verbano Cusio Ossola, Piedmont (Italy) 'A landscape of colours'.

**Table 1 – Piacenza Valleys Involved in the Project and the Related Routes.**

<b>Tidone – Luretta Valley</b>	Route of Imperial Feuds Route of Fortresses and Strongholds Route of Parish Churches
<b>Trebbia Valley</b>	Via Guelfa (River Trebbia left bank) Caminus Janue I (River Trebbia left bank) Caminus Janue II (River Trebbia right bank)
<b>Arda Valley</b>	Route of the Monasteries I Route of the Monasteries II

by Regione Emilia Romagna and its leading municipality is Castel San Giovanni. The working group consists of a team of experts, teachers and private operators that support the public institutions involved.

In particular, the work involves thematic routes, mapped and identified along three valleys, as illustrated in Table 1 and schematically represented in Figure 2). Building an integrated tourism offer related to these ‘minor’ routes means, in the first place, to create and maintain a positive network made by both public and private bodies. In this perspective, the involved geographical area could be interpreted as a territorial system based on cultural and physical relationships between subjects, resources and places. For this reason, ‘Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys’ represents an important project of territorial development that could help to enhance the historical heritage components imprinted in landscapes and local communities.

### ***Aims and objectives of the project***

The core of the project is the tourist enhancement of the territorial system of Piacenza. Its purpose is, in fact, to propose a series of interventions in the territory that, on the basis of environmental and historical emergencies, identifies forms of compatible development that are able to support and increase the fruition of these places, with the cooperation of all actors that live in this territory and interact with it.

This proposal is directed mainly at travellers / tourists / pilgrims, Italians and foreigners who wish to visit places that are still poorly understood, but with a rich cultural, historical, scenic and gastronomic heritage. The definition of the routes will be designed so that

visitors can customize their way through the aggregation or utilise a fraction of the fixed route-stage, depending on specific needs.

The detailed objectives of the project are as follows:

- enhancement of the territory of Piacenza, from the border with the Tuscany Region to the Po river;
- economic development of the territory with the active and direct involvement of tour operators, through the organization of tourist packages and promotional and marketing initiatives;
- Preparation of the groundwork for the creation of a structured and well organized tourist offer in anticipation of EXPO 2015;
- de-seasonalization and consolidation of tourist flows with an extension of their stay;
- processing, in collaboration with the European Association Vie Francigene, of the proposal for an expansion of the official route of the Via Francigena, for approval purposes by the European Union.

In order to achieve the stated objectives, this project sets out a program of coordinated and gradual actions of feasibility, postponing the detailed design at subsequent moments related to the availability of the resources needed.

### ***Action plan: review and next steps***

The project is divided into three distinct phases of activity:

- territorial analysis;
- creation of the operative network;
- construction of the tourist offer and promo-marketing.

From February 2013, the working group of the project is pursuing initiatives relating to the first two phases, with the aim of covering the entire process by the end of 2014.

The first action concerns analysis of the territory, mapping tangible and intangible heritage directly and indirectly related to Via Francigena, such as beautiful parish churches and mills scattered all over the three valleys. This census has been geo-referenced by establishing its spatial location and correct position in terms of the coordinate mapping system. The use of a Geographic Information System (GIS) and other



cartographic methods are essential not only to have a common referencing system but also to create useful mobile applications (IOS and Android smart-phones). All documents, historical references and past projects are gathered and archived as useful material to be compared and completed.

The second phase consists of networking most of the hospitality operators for a real and proactive involvement in the process. This participation process may strength local identity and awareness in order to make the whole offer accessible both from logistic and cognitive points of view. The second phase is being developed through the activation of a course, which includes specific lessons on some basic topics related to the project, addressed to tourism operators (B&B, hotels, restaurants, inns, etc.) and led by academics, professionals and experts. The subjects include: welcoming strategies, new media tools, the technology applied to tourism, Via Francigena and local history, place marketing and EXPO 2015 policies. This course intends to transmit some content and be the first step for creating a network among local actors (tourism operators, SMEs, tourism offices, etc.) to prepare a common ground, plan and share decisions. The project intends to increase and improve the accommodation facilities in order to extend flows and overnight stays, attracting both Italian and foreign markets. This intervention may trigger and give some results such as: improving quality, promoting research, creating value, providing a proper welcoming education, encouraging culture especially among children, young people, the disabled, and the elderly, ensuring higher standard levels.

The third action refers to the creation, communication and promotion of holiday packages which could include all services and information to enjoy a fulfilled vacation and journey along the route and within the destination itself. Today, more than ever, it is important to build a well-organized system of attractions and tailored services for the cultural and religious tourist in order to meet needs and expectations and to achieve the expected high level of satisfaction. A specific website has to be created as a tool for easy interaction and information recovery in order to offer the best service to the widest potential audience. Along with the specific religious targets, it may be interesting to extend the promotion of these routes to educational tours for children and schools, for elder and disabled people. In fact, religious tourism commonly refers both to individual or collective travel for pilgrimage or simple leisure purposes.

An important appointment to be ready for is EXPO 2015, which will be held in Milan in 2015. The city of Milan is less than one hour from Piacenza, the Val Tidone is one of the main doors which connects Milan to Piacenza. The expected worldwide EXPO visitors could be interested in discovering some of Via Francigena's alternative paths with all its territory - especially if genuine 'local fayre', home cooking and local wine were on offer while visiting the wonderful artistic and historical sites and places of natural beauty. EXPO 2015 focuses on sustainable development issues and this universal event will display tradition, creativity and innovation bringing together many themes related to identity, cultural tradition and local peculiarities. The current project shares some of the basic EXPO 2015 points on sustainable development, such as fostering healthier lifestyles and improving food quality by enhancing the value of cultural heritage as expressed in culinary traditions. Awareness of the benefits that can be derived from the EXPO 2015 have encouraged the promoters of the project to make the mountain itineraries of Via Francigena visible at various international events, including Lubec in Lucca (17-19 October 2013) and the General Assembly of the European Association of Vie Francigene in Foggia (19 October 2013), in which 'Via Francigena in Piacenza Valleys' was presented as a pilot project of the Region of Emilia Romagna. On this last occasion, regional leaders have outlined initiatives conducted to date and the results achieved.

## Conclusions

Cultural and religious itineraries have an important value because they encapsulate an extraordinary tangible and intangible heritage in terms of multicultural exchange, dialogue and identity. Along these Ways, travellers cross different landscapes, cities, villages, monuments, meet people and experience other cultures. It is clear how these crossroads can realize many benefits from the tourist and religious flows, by offering their architecture, history, traditions, cultural and religious heritage as a unique experience. Thanks to the reappraisal of cultural and religious routes, our whole heritage becomes a resource and at the same time an engine for the local development of tourism.

The analysis of cultural routes as a tool for development and enhancement of the territory falls within the scope of more recent interest by the scientific community, in line with evolution of the concept of cultural heritage expressed at the national and international level within bodies such as ICOMOS, WCH-UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the



European Commission (Richards, 2007; McKercher, and Cros, 2002; ICOMOS, 2005; WTTC, 2011; Routes Touristiques, 2012; Lombardi and Trisciuglio, 2013). Over the last few years, attention towards the cultural routes has grown also in our country (Beltramo, 2013), as demonstrated by the birth of the National Institute of Cultural Routes and by substantial investments, both in financial terms and in public policy, carried out in particular on the Via Francigena (Rizzi, Onorato, 2011; Berti, 2012). The Italian regions crossed by the Via (among these emerge in particular the actions of Tuscany, Lazio and Emilia Romagna) have started several projects in their territories aimed at the promotion of alternative routes. In this context, the case study 'Via Francigena Mountain Itineraries' represents a concrete example of the re-evaluation and promotion of a territory.

To date, some activities have already been carried out (design of the paths, mapping of the heritage, creation of the network) and hopefully, the other planned steps should be completed within the next year.

This project is being developing through an horizontal integration between the territorial components (environment, landscape, heritage, socio-economic systems, etc.) and the local actors involved (institutional or not), in order to generate a process of enhancement of cultural heritage (knowledge, protection, conservation, management and use). According to the growing number of cultural tourists and the increasing importance of the religious heritage, these kind of projects meet a significant demand and invigorate links between suppliers and consumers. In fact, the most recent forms of cultural tourism highlight the effective contact and relationship with the local culture and community in order to emphasize a holistic approach focusing on authenticity, experience and traditions. In this perspective, the project 'Via Francigena Mountain Itineraries' can, therefore, be interpreted as an important lever for local tourism development.

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### Author Contribution

This paper is the result of the combined efforts of the authors. S. Cerutti wrote sections 1, 2, 3 and 5. Section 4 (subject's attitude to pilgrimages, with information on their experiences) is attributed to I. Dioli. The last part which was written by both authors, seeks to reconstruct the organisation and type of pilgrimage in progress.