

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

Born as a support for the ascents to the surrounding peaks, today the mountain refuges welcome Italian and international tourists throughout the territory of the Alps and the Apennines.

In the course of thirty years, observing the reality of the refuges, one gets the impression that a lot has changed: it seems clear that following a quantitative and qualitative change in the demander services, the managers of the refuges have promptly adapted their offer. Thus, from an "essential" environment, the refuge seems to have become a comfortable place to take a break during a multi-day trek or to spend a comfortable weekend. Nowadays the huts have become more and more elective destinations for a varied audience of mountain visitors.

The interest in mountaineering has given way, in whole or in part, to the quality of the food proposal or to the search for the well-being that is obtained from a walk in the mountains; to the proposal of a safe playground for climbing enthusiasts or mountain (e-)bikers to whom ad hoc services are dedicated. Refuges are proposed as centers of cultural activities, aimed at facilitating the discovery of the territory, or of school tourism or places to experiment with wellness techniques.

The content of the "refuge manager" profession has had to be enriched with new skills to respond to the heterogeneity of demand. Among them, the presence of shelters on social networks leads us to believe that an important role is assigned to communication, a winning factor to conquer new market shares and to build customer loyalty.

The impetus given by the containment measures of the CoViD-19 pandemic to the so-called proximity tourism, has led to the presumption that the mountain can be a privileged destination and the refuges could become a destination for short-range tourism.

These question marks have become research questions: Has the role of the refuge changed and how did the visitors? What effect will the rules for the containment of CoViD-19 have in the opinion of the managers? Will the limitations on reception lead to an uncontrollable invasion of mountain tourists?

To answer the research questions, a survey was carried out by means of a questionnaire which was joined by 127 refuge managers, distributed in the Italian territory of the Alps. The work presents the results achieved and aims to extend the survey to neighboring countries.