THE ENHANCEMENT OF ISLAMIC HERITAGE IN ITALY -THE NEW PARALLEL MARKET FRONTEIR

Karim Benvenuto
TSA Formazione, ANMI – Il Minareto, OBD, BIO: Lecturer in Islamic Tourism and Export in SAARC and ASEAN area, Coordinator of the tourism department for the Salento region movement, Entrepreneur in the tourism and food sector, Consultant for tourism institutions, Editor of “Manuale del Turismo Halal/Muslim Friendly in Italia”
Info@karimbenvenuto.it

Abstract
It is one of the very few Western countries that boasts a millenarian history, in fact the myth of Rome "Caput Mundi" boasts almost 3 thousand years of history. Italy has got another invaluable heritage that it still does not know and does not adequately value, i.e. the evidence of the Islamic presence it has had for centuries, concentrated above all in Southern Italy and in Spain, due to the Arab domination. Sicily, an Italian region that underwent an Arab occupation that began in the 7th century, an impressive Islamic heritage in a Christian land. It is not only Sicily that has got such Islamic evidence, but the Region of Puglia too, which has had two caliphates. The tourist enhancement of the Islamic heritage in Italy would have a significant impact on the choice of tourist destination by Muslim Travelers, who would choose to visit the Italian historical heritage, combined with the Islamic one. Now, in order to make this enhancement effective, the class of Italian tour operators should be, above all, equipped to provide Muslim-friendly services, especially related to food. In truth, something has already moved in Southern Italy, in fact, Salento, part of Puglia Region, has been named the most Muslim-friendly area in Italy, due to the tourist services provided.

Key word: halal tourism, halal food, Italy.
JEL codes: L66, L83

ITALY’S TOURISM AND THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

TOURISTIC ITALY AND MUSLIM FRIENDLY TOURISM

Italy, with its extraordinary millennia-long history, the richness of its culture, the depth of its traditions, and the undisputed prestige of its cuisine, has consistently taken center stage as a prime destination for travelers from every corner of the world, especially from Muslim countries. Italy stands out for the broad range of tourist offerings encapsulated within a single nation. Indeed, what strongly emerges is a cultural heritage of immense proportions, boasting a multi-millennial history, and which is admired globally.

Beyond this historical legacy, which is the strength and primary attraction of the "Bel Paese" (Beautiful Country), Italy offers a variety of beauties in every area of inbound tourism. In fact, the tourism options range from coasts to mountains, hills to plains, and gastronomic routes to sports ones. Besides fashion tourism (in Asian countries, Milan is called Fashion Makkah), spa and wellness tourism, Italy is renowned for a
The enhancement of islamic heritage in Italy - the new parallel market fronteir

form of tourism that many other Western states have only recently embraced: religious/cultural tourism. The Vatican, with the presence of the Pope, attracts millions of tourists every year, including numerous pilgrims eager to visit the "Christian Makkah", generating a significant economic impact for the entire tourism sector.

The aura of Rome as the "Caput Mundi" (Capital of the World) is not solely attributed to cultural and tourist factors tied to the pre-Christian Roman and Renaissance era. Within the Italian peninsula lies a treasure of ancient testimonies of Islamic influence, a heritage that very few Western nations can boast. Spain is the only one with an Islamic cultural legacy surpassing Italy's. Fundamentally, Italy faces a "parallel" tourist market that has so far been underexplored, encompassing a vast tourism and economic potential for the entire tourism chain and its stakeholders: the Italian Islamic cultural market.

ITALIAN ISLAMIC HERITAGE

Italy, particularly Sicily, holds rich Islamic historical evidence that spans architecture, culture, and traditions. Sicily was under Islamic rule for nearly four centuries, starting in 827 with the invasion by the Arab general Asad ibn al-Furat. This era transformed cities like Palermo, Syracuse, and Mazara del Vallo into cultural and commercial hubs, connecting the Islamic world, Europe, and Africa.

Tourists can witness remnants of this era in structures such as Palermo's Zisa and Cuba palaces, both reflecting Arab-Norman architectural styles. Other landmarks include La Martorana, a church that blends Christian and Muslim elements, and defensive structures like Castellammare del Golfo. Beyond architecture, Sicilian place names, culinary traditions, and museums like the Regional Museum of Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo also showcase the Islamic influence.

Apulia (Puglia) has traces of its brief Islamic history, most notably in Bari. The region houses historical sites like the Norman-Swabian Castle, Church of San Sabino, and the first Islamic University of Italy. Salento and Calabria further underscore this Islamic influence with sites such as Villa Sticchi, the church of the martyrs of Otranto, and the remains of Arab settlements in cities like Amantea.

Finally, the Great Mosque of Rome, the largest mosque in Europe, stands as a symbol of Islamic presence in contemporary Italy.

For tourists, especially those of the Muslim faith, these regions and sites offer a unique blend of European and Islamic history.

THE PROSPECTS

This new and promising frontier in the tourism market, largely uncharted so far, could prove to be an extraordinary opportunity to exploit the potential appeal of the beautiful Italian peninsula. According to projections from the Islamic Tourism Centre Italy - Italy Muslim Friendly, in the next five years, we could witness an influx of over two million Muslim travelers. They typically don't choose Italy due to a lack of Muslim-friendly services and the challenges in obtaining an entry visa. With a broader
approach to granting tourist visas, the tourism sector could generate an estimated average revenue of nearly 9 billion euros. This estimate is based on the crucial condition that Italian tourism operators adapt to accommodate Muslim Travelers, adhering to standards and regulations to ensure a "Muslim Friendly" experience, in addition to the aforementioned visa openness by the Italian Government.

It's important to note that Muslim tourists already visit Italy but often require stricter quality standards ensuring not only "halal" food compliance but the integrity of the entire tourism offering and services. This requirement is pivotal in influencing the choice of the final tourist destination, especially for families from SAARC and ASEAN regions. Moreover, it's significant to consider the rise in the percentage of Muslim faith tourists within the so-called "classic tourists" group, coming from countries like France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This trend is particularly relevant due to the second and third generations born and raised in these western countries, who, while being full-fledged citizens, maintain a religious faith that follows the principles of the Halal Lifestyle. Consequently, it's crucial that tourist packages structured in the West meet such specific needs.

ITALIAN INITIATIVES FOR MUSLIM FRIENDLY TOURISM

Regrettably, despite Italy's exceptional tourist potential, the country lags in attracting Muslim travelers. However, there are signs of change in the structuring of tourist services. A significant initiative is represented by Amal Italy, the first Italian Innovative Start-Up entirely dedicated to the Islamic world, established in 2023, with an entirely Italian staff. Based in the Calabria region, Amal specializes in training all actors in the halal tourism sector on various levels and sectors. Furthermore, it offers detailed preparation in the Halal Certification field, focused mainly on Halal Auditors. These professionals are educated on the main international regulations concerning halal certification, aiming to ensure mastery of standards such as OIC/SMIIC, MS 1500:2019, SASO 630, and MUIS HC S001.

Furthermore, the "Italy Muslim Friendly" project is gaining more ground, an innovative experimental effort in the incoming tourism sector targeting Muslims, which has earned institutional recognition. The project enjoys the support of prominent institutional partners, including the Calabria Region, the Regional Department of Agriculture, the University of Calabria, the Chambers of Commerce of Catanzaro and Vibo Valentia, as well as various Agricultural Associations. Additionally, the project partners with Federalberghi Puglia, an entity that represents the major hotels in Puglia. This project signifies a substantial step towards establishing an Italian tourism offering capable of warmly and adequately welcoming Muslim travelers, while also promoting cultural openness and mutual enrichment. In Italy, there is an organization dedicated to an aspect of the tourism industry tied to Muslim travelers, which can be described not just as rare but genuinely unique.

We're talking about the Halal Italy Association, an association exclusively catering to Muslim Travelers staying in Bed and Breakfast accommodations (extra-hotel...
The enhancement of Islamic heritage in Italy - the new parallel market frontier

sector). These establishments rigorously adhere to Muslim hospitality standards, ensuring a halal breakfast. But what truly sets this initiative apart is the organization of the Halal home kitchen concept, which translates into in-home hospitality. In practice, the homeowners involved personally prepare traditional dishes for the guests, meticulously following all Halal standards. This not only ensures cooking in accordance with religious rules but also creates an authentic and immersive experience for travelers. In other words, the homeowner gets behind the stove to offer their guests a taste of local Halal culinary culture in an intimate and familial setting. This initiative represents a genuine bridge between hospitality, culture, and faith, offering Muslim Travelers a one-of-a-kind travel experience.

In August 2020, the Puglia Region8 initiated the first government-level project aimed at adjusting and training all tourism sector operators to develop a tourism offer tailored to Muslim Travelers. The premises seemed very promising, as a high-level governmental entity had grasped the enormous potential of this new tourism frontier, which was meant to pave the way for other Italian regions.

However, when real experts in the field are not involved, problems soon arise. Unfortunately, the project met with failure on several fronts. Exposing the mistakes made were the Italian Muslims themselves, through the National Association of Italian Muslims, chaired by Raffaello Villani. They deconstructed the program and the workshops conducted by the "experts, highlighting the gaps and flaws in the project9. This showed how crucial it is to involve genuinely knowledgeable consultants and professionals in such a specific and delicate area as tourism hospitality for Muslim Travelers.

Nevertheless, a positive response also emerged from the private sector. Towards the end of 2019, the first Tour Operator entirely dedicated to incoming tourism from Middle Eastern countries, KS Travel and Business10, was established. This initiative led to the creation of the first two fully "Halal" tourism offers in Italy: the "Puglia Halal Tour"11. This innovative tourism package was structured to meet all the needs of Muslim faith travelers, showcasing the natural beauties and UNESCO sites of the Puglia region. The success of this package was significant, especially in countries such as Jordan, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan. Over 50 groups from these nations were recorded, demonstrating genuine interest and demand for tourism offers respectful of the religious and cultural needs of visitors.

However, despite the initial success, everything was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the virus had a devastating impact on the global tourism sector, stalling travel and activities worldwide. This represented a significant setback for the "Puglia Halal Tour" and for all efforts aimed at promoting the hospitality of Muslim tourists in Italy.

The project called "Sicilia Muslim Friendly Tour"12 originated from a request by a US company based in San Diego. This company was interested in organizing a reward trip for its employees belonging to the Muslim community, aiming to introduce them to the extraordinary beauties related to the Islamic testimonies present in Sicily. Unlike the previous "Puglia Halal Tour", the tour package dedicated to Sicily focuses exclusively on the cultural dimension, emphasizing the Islamic heritage that deeply influenced the Island over numerous centuries. This itinerary also offers the opportunity to enjoy the renowned
Sicilian cuisine in compliance with halal standards, including the inclusion of the two typical dishes of halal gastronomy, the arancina and the cannolo. The uniqueness of this proposal lies in the privileged access to Hammams, ancient Turkish baths, unique of their kind on the Island. Participants can also witness traditional puppet shows and, as the icing on the cake, conclude the experience with a halal meat barbecue on the majestic slopes of Mount Etna. Southern Italy boasts a cultural heritage of significant importance related to the presence of Islam, accompanied by private support initiatives.

In particular, Salento, a province of Puglia, has been awarded the title of the most "Muslim Friendly" province in Italy. In the province of Lecce, the first group of Italian hotels participating in this initiative has been certified, along with a selection of charming B&Bs scattered throughout the area. These establishments are complemented by a series of local restaurants offering typical Salento dishes in compliance with halal standards. The cornerstone of this offer is represented by the first certified five-star hotel in Italy.

**THE MILITARY AS TOURIST AMBASSADORS**

It's also worth highlighting the commitment of the armed forces from Muslim countries, particularly in the areas of pilot training and naval officers. These individuals spend a significant amount of time on national soil, emerging as privileged ambassadors of Italian Islamic tourism offerings. An example of this is Taranto, which hosts five hundred naval units from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These servicemen are often accompanied by their families and occasionally invite relatives and friends. Similarly, the Galatina air training base welcomes hundreds of pilots from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, akin to the "La Maddalena" military base. These individuals, along with their networks of friends and family, can be classified as high-spending tourists and can serve as remarkable ambassadors for luxury Islamic tourism.

The target customers for the Italian tourism market

Italy's tourism industry is facing a new and promising opportunity: the parallel market of Islamic tourism. This market offers a wide range of deals suitable for all types of budgets and different preferences of Muslim travelers. The adoption of international halal certification standards in the hospitality industry has allowed for the integration of organized tourism offers for various traveler types, opening doors to new market segments. Among the different types of Muslim tourists, family tourism has emerged as a leading segment. An increasing number of families choose to visit Italy, attracted by its cultural and historical beauties. Similarly, wedding tourism is on the rise, with many Muslim couples choosing Italy as a location for unforgettable weddings. Couples of Indian subcontinent origin, as well as those from the United States, are particularly keen on celebrating their love in picturesque locations in Southern Italy while maintaining ties to their cultural roots.

Another emerging trend is female tourism from Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Groups of girls travel in mini-groups to explore high-demand commercial areas, with Milan earning the moniker "Fashion Makkah" due to the shopping preferences of young Muslim women from the United Arab Emirates and other parts of the world.
The enhancement of Islamic heritage in Italy - the new parallel market frontier

The new generations of Muslim travelers, like Millennials and Generation Z, are also playing an increasingly significant role in the industry. Thanks to digital connectivity, these young travelers explore destinations through social media and leverage new technologies like Virtual Reality and the metaverse for previews of their desired destinations. However, Italy's intrinsic appeal as a travel destination remains strong, drawing even these youngsters who maintain a connection to their religious and cultural heritage.

Italy has long been a favored destination for luxury tourism, attracting billionaires from all over the world. In particular, in recent decades, sheikhs from Arab countries have visited Southern Italy with their mega yachts, contributing to the local economy and investing in properties and businesses, especially in the hospitality sector. For instance, the Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and his son Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani are known for their visits to the City of Brindisi.

A crucial aspect is the growing importance of second and third generations of Muslims born in Western countries. These young Europeans and North Americans want to explore Italy, spending time immersing themselves in Western culture and religious heritage. The ease of movement within the Schengen Area facilitates their travels, and their familiarity with the available halal services and food in the west makes their travels more comfortable. They often opt for self-organized trips.

THE MARKET

Italy has immense tourism potential for Muslim travelers, and this opportunity doesn't just involve the tourism sector but everything related to it, from services to the Ho.Re.Ca sector. Aligning with international standards in countries like the UK, France, Belgium, the USA, Canada, and Germany, which have already recognized the importance of Muslim tourism, could lead to considerable economic benefits for Italian companies. Ignoring this emerging market could result in double damage, both for the tourism economy and the hospitality sector, furthering an already significant gap between European countries implementing these regulations and Italy, which, despite superior attractiveness potential, lags behind.

The Italian hospitality, catering, and restaurant industry (Ho.Re.Ca) is facing difficulties due to the raw material price crisis and competition from more advanced Western countries. However, a potential solution might come through incoming Islamic tourism, which could breathe new life into this industry. This form of tourism could allow Italy to tap into an otherwise underutilized market segment.

According to the Islamic Tourism Center of Italy, in the next 5 years, the arrival of Muslim tourists could lead to a 15%14 increase in revenue for Ho.Re.Ca businesses that align with Halal standards. Additionally, the cosmetic sector could experience a growth of 7%.15 These figures highlight the potential economic benefits of attracting Muslim visitors and tailoring offerings to their specific needs.

The parallel market of Islamic tourism represents a key opportunity for Italy. Fully exploiting this market requires a deep understanding of the various types of Muslim travelers and the creation of offerings tailored to their needs. International collaborations and adaptations in the hospitality sector can position Italy as a
welcoming destination for all Muslim travelers, bringing considerable economic benefits and promoting greater understanding and cultural diversity. Furthermore, there's a solid foundation for collaboration with Muslims living in Italy. In fact, there are over 1,250 places of worship within the Italian territory, which would be more than happy to meet visiting brethren and to share experiences and cuisine from their countries of origin during an evening in the mosque.

The acquisition of Italian Serie A football teams is having a significant promotional impact. Recently, an Indonesian entrepreneur purchased 30% of US LECCE, a team competing in Serie A. During the introduction of the new owners, the entrepreneur presented one of the most famous Indonesian TikTokers in the world, who created videos showcasing the tourist wonders of Salento, promoting them in Indonesia.

The recent estimate provided by the Islamic Tourism Centre Italy vividly highlights the vast economic potential on the horizon for the Italian tourism sector. We're talking about a whopping nine billion euros - a staggering sum that could even double or triple if we correctly implemented international standards across the entire nation at full capacity. It's vital to avoid gaps or inconsistencies in the tourist offerings, which could jeopardize businesses trying to craft proposals for this burgeoning market. However, it's essential to emphasize that the push to tap into this market shouldn't primarily come from the Italian government. While institutions can and should encourage such development, it's the private businesses in the tourism sector that must recognize the importance of not being left on the sidelines. Italy competes with countries like Spain, which is rich in Islamic heritage, and nations like England, which has made services its forte. France and Belgium, with a substantial presence of Muslim citizens and the newer generations, are becoming increasingly popular destinations for Western Muslims.

CONCLUSIONS

This "new and massive" tourism niche presents a particularly intriguing opportunity for Italy. If we consider that the "Muslim Travellers" market has limited interest in beach holidays, some Italian destinations traditionally focused on the summer season could find this segment a source of income during the winter months, while non-beach areas might enhance their tourist influx. This could provide a breath of fresh air and greater economic stability to many businesses. Beyond well-known historic cities like Rome, Venice, Florence, and Naples, which enjoy year-round tourist influx, Italy has the potential to genuinely "de-seasonalize" tourism in many other areas, thanks to Muslim Travellers. This would be the realization of a dream for many Italian cities with high tourist traffic and could redefine Italy's approach to the sector.

BIBLIOGRAFY

1. Municipality of Palermo, (2022), Department of Tourism. Palermo: institutional website
The enhancement of islamic heritage in Italy - the new parallel market fronteir

6. Regione Calabria, (2021), Internazionalizzazione, al via "Italy Muslim Friendly". Reggio Calabria: official website of the Calabria Region
7. Francesca Leone, Halal Italy Association, Lecce: official website of the association
8. Regione Puglia, Puglia Muslim Friendly, Bari: official website of the Puglia Region