



# Dreaming of Remoteness, Coping with Emptiness in Post-Lockdown (Under)Tourism Scenarios for the Inner Areas of Southern Italy: a Fieldwork Based Reflection

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## ABSTRACT

### **Dreaming of Remoteness, Coping with Emptiness in Post-Lockdown (Under)Tourism Scenarios for the Inner Areas of Southern Italy: a Fieldwork Based Reflection**

Since the neo-liberal shift of the 1970s in world politics and economics, Italian inner areas have faced a seemingly endless crisis in terms of both economic weakness and social fragility. However, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis and its related travel restrictions could provoke an unexpected U-turn. Under new conditions, the physical and social remoteness of inner areas might attract people in search of places that boast COVID-19 safety measures, such as outdoor experiences and relatively vacant sites, as well as authentic experiences in food, nature and cultural heritage—places outside the standard tourist offer that stand apart from more popular and busier destinations and partake in a sort of “under-tourism”. However, the “imagined remoteness” that drives the public and academic conversation towards the tourist seduction of inner areas has often been idealised and affected by a sort of “Arcadic imagination projection”. Not many people know what it really means to live in a remote area, where social and physical distances are huge and the basic services scarce. Thus, the success of post-lockdown tourism strategies centered on inner areas would depend on the positive matching between the needs of “new” tourism business and the ones of “new” destinations. In this article, we propose a possible interpretation of this challenge, based on the elaboration of data collected during a three-month fieldwork conducted in fourteen small towns of the Basilicata and Calabria regions that reside in Gallipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park and Pollino National Park. Our analysis aims to give a more realistic picture of the notions of emptiness and remoteness by assessing the degree of compatibility and the semantic distance between the expectation of the tourism business and the needs of residents in these inner areas.

## KEYWORDS

Remoteness,  
Inner Tourism,  
Lockdown,  
Social Dispersion,  
Southern Italy

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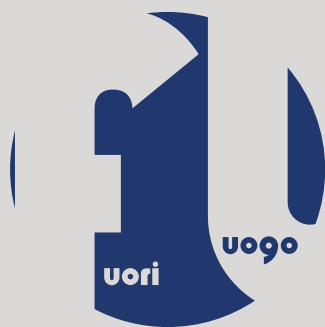
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# Dreaming of Remoteness, Coping with Emptiness in Post-Lockdown (Under)Tourism Scenarios for the Inner Areas of Southern Italy: a Fieldwork Based Reflection<sup>1</sup>

Emilio Cocco<sup>2</sup>, Anna Farrell Mines<sup>3</sup>, Rita Salvatore<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In April of 2020, in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown, Stefano Boeri, a leading architect and professor of urban studies in Milan gave an interview to the Italian newspaper "la Repubblica" (Giovana, 2020). He stated that the future of Italy is not in big cities but instead in the old, depopulated towns of the peninsula. There are a number of good reasons to share Boeri's suggestion: witnessing nature taking back urban areas, with wildlife free to move around the alleys and piazzas; speculating on the correlation between pollution and contagion; the need to perform activities at a physical distance; the fear of the crowd and the uncomfortable lack of freedom for more intrusive law enforcement practices in the name of public health.

In this context, the trend toward development of the tourism sector in "far away" areas is an excellent way to observe future, more comprehensive scenarios. As a matter of fact, the observation of the temporary (often seasonal) change of residential settings and the investigation of movement of people for leisure purposes may provide us with an interesting angle to evaluate the transformations of everyday practices and the adjustments of lifestyle to new institutional and environmental conditions under Covid-19 related risks. In other words, we believe that looking at tourism and tourists is an opportunity to assess the way new social life patterns and trends are experimented on before being extended to the ordinary life "back home".

In the specific situation of the inner areas of Southern Italy, this is also a way to test the ability of local communities to match their needs with the possibilities given by a changed political and cultural setting. We hypothesize that when the needs of the "new" tourism businesses (locally based and eco-friendly SMEs) and the "new" destinations match, post-lockdown tourism strategies centered on inner areas may benefit. From this perspective, cultural mediation and translation of this seductive yet unclear concept of remoteness is crucial before moving on to a post-lockdown development.

Insofar, the reference to "social distancing" has become a sort of mantra to describe the new, lockdown-inspired set of rules for everyday life, from physical distancing indoors to the proliferation of teleworking. However, social and physical distancing are not synonymous. For centuries, these terms went together, when society used to be a localized phenomenon with clear territorial borders dividing insiders and outsiders. In modern times one observes the separation between the social and physical dimension (not to mention the temporal one) given by the development of technology in logistics and communication (Luhmann, 2012). Accordingly, new social forms emerge in a context of progressive differentiation of time, space and materiality, such as the typology of the stranger, who combines nearness and remoteness (Simmel, 1971). Additionally, the "long distance nationalist" (Anderson 1992), thanks to communication technology, believes to belong to an imagined community stretching along time and space as a consequence of the modern time-space compression of the material world induced by globalization (Giddens, 1990).

In the context presented above, where remoteness works as an attractive though ambivalent keyword, we ask ourselves what can inner areas and tourism offer to each other in a mutually beneficial and joint development? In this article, we propose a tentative, preliminary answer to this question based on the elaboration of data collected during three months of fieldwork conducted in spring-summer 2019 in fourteen small towns of the Basilicata and Calabria regions, specifically located within Gallipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park and Pollino National Park. The fieldwork included a preliminary visit, an exploratory two-week phase and a two-week data collection phase in the inner areas across Basilicata and Calabria regions.

The main research task was to understand how the particular environmental, cultural-historical and architectural assets of these towns may be interacting with one another in order to favor sustainable tourism and social innovation within small rural towns and low-density areas; and how young local entrepreneurs combine the pros of running a creative job with the cons of living in a remote place. During the fieldwork, 40 key informants were interviewed including tourist operators, farmers, administrators, association members and other local entrepreneurs. Twenty-two cognitive maps based on the method developed by Kevin Lynch (1964, 1984) were drawn by the informants and collected to analyze the way people make sense of remote and marginal areas through their mobility practices.

Keeping in mind the lively, ongoing public debate on the post-lockdown tourism scenarios, we carried out a new textual analysis of our set of primary data, initially aimed at understanding the way people make sense of place. We have broken down and re-aggregated our original set of codes and sub-codes within 4 new themes: (1) Low density (2) The outdoors (3) Autonomy, and (4) Authenticity (see section 3). These four dimensions together make up what we name as a positive, change-oriented notion of *remoteness*, fraught with potential dynamics of tourism development.

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Dimensions (1) and (3) reflect the “void” side of remoteness, that is to say the positively experienced “absence of” social constrictions, crowds, rules, control, etc. Dimensions (2) and (4) express the “full”, referring to what remoteness brings with it, from a sensorial and cultural perspective: food, tradition, social proximity, human connection and so on.

Against this positive and empowering representation of remoteness, we defined a negative mirroring concept of *emptiness*, made by all the codes that refer to a “lack of” or “shortcomings of” understanding of the sense of place. This could be either a lack of material assets such as services, goods or people, or immaterial items such as ideas, emotions and prospects. The two notions of remoteness and emptiness work as two sides of the same coin by reflecting and mutually referring to each other in people’s understanding of their lifeworlds. However, by acting on one (remoteness) it could be possible to fight against the limits and the shortcomings given by the other (emptiness). In other words, it might be possible to envisage some sort of endogenous development that in the context of the post-lockdown scenario would turn into opportunities the very same conditions that are experienced as limitations.

As a result, with our analysis, we give a more realistic picture of these terms such as low-density, environmental quality, social distancing and downscaling. Particularly, we will assess the degree of compatibility and the semantic distance in the interpretation of the above-mentioned terms between the expectation of the tourism business and the needs of residents in inner areas. The match between the two sides will ultimately determine the feasibility of the scenario.

## 1.1 Theoretical Background and Problem Definition

From the beginning of the establishment of the nation state, Italy has faced the problem of economic and social decline of its inner areas. Parliamentary enquiries and demographic studies conducted throughout the end of the 19th century till mid-20th century consistently highlighted the process of demographic loss, economic weakness and social fragility of these territories (Bevilacqua 2018; Rossi-Doria 2003; Pazzagli, Bonini 2015). However, since the neo-liberal shift of the 1970s, Italian inner areas have faced an even more critical situation characterized by a heavily ageing population, lack of public investment, environmental fragility (including hydrogeological instability and earthquakes) and cultural marginalization (De Rossi 2018, Carrosio 2019). In more recent years, the worsening situation led to the elaboration of recovery and anti-crisis strategies (notably the National Strategy for the Inner Areas) (Barca, Casavola, Lucatelli 2014) that have, however, been clashing with the neo-liberal dogmas of financial discipline and market-led development. The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis could provoke an unexpected U-turn for public health, by creating more space for public authorities and civil societies to maneuver in, thus opening up the opportunity to gain back people and places once left behind (Ulrich-Schad, Duncan 2016) or lost in the modernizing process of unidimensional, market-driven development (Wiskerke, 2009).

For a number of reasons, the situation is quite complicated and rejects standard or easy solutions. Firstly, the institutional reaction to the pandemic crisis opens up a Pandora’s box of the bio-political implication of increased government control over citizens’ private lives in the name of public health. But besides that, even when the fundamental features of democracy are preserved, the impact of the virus over the population is unequal and produces new socio-economic gaps. Both the news and institutional agencies have already reported that economic status and ethnic background (or the combination of the two) is correlated with susceptibility to the virus, and exposure to possible and unpredictable economic deterioration after the fact (UNCTAD 2020). The social distancing aimed at containing the infection has eventually led to a big gap between the ones who could economically afford to move towards less crowded and “infection free” places and those who could not. According to the anthropologist Michael Agier, soon after the lockdown started, about a million and a half people left Paris and its surroundings to go and live in their second homes in the countryside (Battiston, 2020).

This phenomenon was observed also in medieval times with the bubonic plague, where the wealthiest of society escaped to safe havens in the countryside (Gray 2018). Referring to more recent times, isolation, either natural or man-made, became an attractive feature for residential and tourist locations also during the Spanish flu nearly one hundred years ago, when many Americans found their safety in the most rural and remote areas of the USA. Nevertheless, we should note that the Spanish flu still managed to reach areas as remote as Inuit villages of Alaska, bringing about death and devastation (McKinley 2020). In fact, remote places of any country are by definition more fragile. Their size gives way to fewer basic services and their institutions do not have their own resources to cope with large challenges like that of a pandemic. Even if they manage to escape contagion waves at the beginning, remote areas are still at risk of their residents having to travel to bigger cities for services and supplies. They might also need to host metropolitan citizens fleeing in from more infected areas. Thus, the question is how to manage this two-sided connectivity between centers and peripheries in the name of public health, and how to do it responsibly (Morris, 2020).

From this standpoint, a compromise between the right to (or need of) mobility on one side and safety rules on the other is not so easy to make. Besides the difficulties of finding viable agreements between conflicting interests of freedom and economic growth vis-à-vis safety and protection of the weaker, there is a deeper cultural controversy to deal with: the somehow necessary review of some established “Western”, modern and emancipatory values in the name of public health. For instance, to downplay mobility, intensity of interactions and open-air sociality on one hand, and to reappraise immobility, isolation and relational rarefaction when it involves physical presence, on the other.

That said, the post Covid-19 scenario suggests that it is unlikely for remote areas to be left behind when isolating for the sake of public health. On the contrary, the restrictions to mobility and the intensification of IT based activities experienced in lockdown led many to dream of remote rural areas as the perfect place to be. In some cases, people broke rules of confinement to escape to second homes located in inner areas precisely for the hope to protect their health and

escape surveillance on everyday outdoor activities. In other words, remote areas have become attractive for an alternative lifestyle that might better be carried out in post-lockdown times. Both from a public health and a development perspective, it is worth considering the possibility to reinvest in the strategic role of remote areas all over the country. But the question is, how do we do it? If some Keynesian approach is unlikely to be taken, then is it time to imagine some kind of post neo-liberal modernization? In other words, how do we envisage a reflexive and future oriented approach to development that takes into consideration alternative routes without forgetting the need of economic turnout and profit?

Tourism and repopulation in the inner areas can offer some opportunity: by putting at the center of an endogenous, development process the very features that have condemned these areas to a fate of underdevelopment, as already suggested by Franco Cassano (1996) when speaking of subjectivity and autonomy for a "Southern perspective" otherwise culturally subjugated by imported patterns of development. These standard patterns of modernization have left these inner areas behind and in some cases even worsened their condition with abusivism, criminality, pollution and environmental degradation. However, with this paradigm change, the downsides of low population density, geographical distances and even abandonment could be attractive. Thus, the post Covid-19 crisis could be an opportunity to kickstart a development compatible with some basic conditions of the place, starting from the way people make sense of it.

Insofar, the physical and social remoteness of inner areas has worked as an attraction for some creative entrepreneurs willing to pioneer a new lifestyle and to reshape the sense of community in nontraditional ways. Examples of this phenomenon have spread across the Alps: during the last decade many people have decided to move from big cities to small mountain towns either to run lodging business, to practice agritourism or to make artisanal crafts (Corrado, *et al.* 2014; Dematteis, 2017; Teti, 2017; Chiodo *et al.* 2019). These creative choices are opening up new scenarios for tourism entrepreneurship and shaping a renewed guest-visitor relationship because the newcomers are neither traditional settlers nor the usual guests. These identity-making strategies revolve around the search for authentic experiences in food, nature and cultural heritage, outside the standard tourist offer, apart from the stress related to situations of overtourism (S  raphin *et al.* 2020). It is a trend that may lead to a positive view of under-tourism. In other words, it opens the way to a phenomenon that calls attention to those destinations that have received fewer tourists or no tourists at all, like most inner areas (Gowreesunkar, Vo Thanh 2020). These particular tourist experiences of peace and solitude, however, take place in a context of social dispersion, remoteness and isolation. Even if rural peripheral areas have witnessed a slow but constant growing in tourist interest, their status as "left behind places" is still far from over, especially if one considers the growing feeling of alienation experienced all over European peripheries by people living in economic and socially fraying conditions that governments seem unable to reverse (Coyle, Ford 2017; McKay, 2019). In fact, the demographic drain has not yet ended and in the last twenty years or so it has turned into a social disaster of abandonment and social fragility. Depopulation, ageing, and the lack of young active people and new families have led to the rarefaction of both basic social services (such as schools, health care, post offices) and of first goods shops, causing in turn more emigration, a feedback loop worsened by neoliberal policies and reduced public investment that have minimized public welfare.

The post-lockdown situation could boost and give momentum to a reversal process, making it a blueprint for wider post-lockdown tourism strategies. Particularly, the goal is to invest in a diversification of the tourist offer that would also benefit the inner areas through job growth, slowed emigration, and an overall revitalization. This option, which is more a hypothesis than a recipe for success, could be brought center stage as a possibility to change the process of abandonment and decay. However, fantasizing remoteness as the north star for the new, post-lockdown tourism scenario does hide some threats. Two main risks lie in the stages ahead. The first is that the turn toward the inner remote areas, post-lockdown, could simply be unsustainable. A sudden, increased investment as well as a mediatic overemphasis of the inner areas could stress their carrying capacity, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. From this standpoint, the same features that make inner areas so attractive and suitable for a new type of post mass-tourism could be inevitably lost to over-tourism. These areas simply do not have enough resources, skills and means to cope with large numbers and so their assets risk being spoilt. The risk for rural areas to easily turn into over-touristic places has been recently highlighted by Butler (2020) about thinly populated Scottish villages that—similarly to the case studies presented here—are attracting tourists based on natural landscape beauty, traditional culture (including food) and a low level of development. As a new or recent phenomenon, the relatively large number of tourists has caused concern among the residents and local communities simply because they were not expected and because their number has grown at an unpredictable speed.

Secondly, the "imagined remoteness" that drives the public and academic conversation towards the tourist seduction of the inner areas could be misleading for the fact that it is "imagined". Not many people know what it means to live in a remote area, where social and physical distances are huge and the basic services scarce. Also, all around the globe, rural areas have become more and more attractive to an urban and educated segment of the population that is longing for open air, more rural lifestyle and vast space in an often-idealized way. It may happen that, just because of the high level of their ideological perspectives, they do not consider the negative side of remoteness. It has been the case, for example, of the so-called "amenities migrants" (Moss 2006; Moss, Glorioso, 2014). Thus, there might be hidden costs that tourists pay in terms of lack of glamour, joie-de-vivre and social promiscuity in areas where fun and relaxation necessarily take different forms than on the beach resort or on the metropolitan destination. On the other hand, it is true that the Covid-19 lockdown experiment in many countries of the world has given a prompt push to new forms of technology-led social relations in the field of education, consumerism, food habits and health. Reading, visiting a museum, getting a medical check and having a social dinner or aperitif online is now a widespread experience for people of different ages, backgrounds and places. Accordingly, the post-lockdown scenario is faced with opportunities for inner areas that could compensate for the weakness and the flaws of the present time. Aspects such as the traditional lack of social services, the geographical marginality and the lack of social capital could be minimized in a tourist perspective of a socially distanced but IT supported lifestyle.

## 2. Methodological Notes

A three-month fieldwork was conducted in spring-summer 2019 in several small towns of the Basilicata and Calabria regions, in a wide inner area located among Gallipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park and Pollino National Park (see the map in Figure 1). Considering some small rural villages as ecological units of analysis (Pintaldi, 2003), the main research task was to understand how the particular territorial context, in relation with the dimensions of sparsity and remoteness, could have favored the development of a new tourist offer based on the idea of the above-mentioned "under-tourism". The cases are all located in inner areas and have been selected according to the different elements they have already relied on (or they could rely on and have not yet) in terms of either tourist development or, more widely, of territorial requalification. These characteristics are related to both the tourist local assets (natural environment; cultural heritage; food and wine) and to specific projects the villages have developed to enhance local resources (i.e. the attraction of the Volo dell'Angelo in Castelmezzano). The specific elements associated with each village are listed in the following table (see table 1). Despite the differences among all of them, these towns all share the same position of being located in a thinly populated and remote area. The hypothesis, especially reinforced in the post Covid-19 outbreak, is that this latter and shared characterization is actually turning to be the main pull factor, both for tourists and for new residents.

Therefore, we have employed the multiple case studies methodology (Yin, 2017) with the role of exploratory/descriptive tasking. Our objective is far from showing any statistical representativeness but at the same time we look for a theoretical meaningfulness by highlighting new elements of qualitative interest (such as the meaning of remoteness and the sense the social actors involved in these processes attribute to it) that are worth being analyzed in depth.

Table 1 – Elements of interest at the base of case selection

Town	Province	Elements of interest at the base of the selection as case-study	Basilicata region
Castelmezzano	Potenza	Urban structure of village (awarded as one of the "Borghi più belli d'Italia"); tourist attraction of the Volo dell'Angelo; eco-tourist activities;	Basilicata region
Grottole	Matera	Social innovation related to the project of Wonder Grottole	
Rotonda	Potenza	Regional production such as the "red eggplant" and the "white bean"	
San Costantino Albanese	Potenza	Arbëreshë culture*	
San Paolo Albanese	Potenza	Arbëreshë culture and victim of a strong depopulation trend	
Terranova di Pollino	Potenza	Ecotourism activities	
Acquaformosa	Cosenza	Arbëreshë culture; Migrations Festival	
Cerchiara di Calabria	Cosenza	Regional products (artisanal bread)	Calabria region
Civita	Cosenza	Arbëreshë culture; ecotourism activities; landscape (Raganello Gorges); urban structure of the village (awarded as one of the "Borghi più belli d'Italia")	
Laino Borgo	Cosenza	Ecotourism operation on the Lao river	
Morano Calabro	Cosenza	Urban structure of the village (awarded as one of the "Borghi più belli d'Italia") and generally considered as a best practice of urban requalification	
Mormanno	Cosenza	Regional products, especially pulses (the lentils SlowFood presidium and the "poverello" white bean)	
San Basile	Cosenza	The first municipality in Italy to launch a project aiming to repopulate the village by selling the houses at the symbolic price of €3000	
Saracena	Cosenza	Home of a fine Moscato wine (the SlowFood Presidium of Moscato di Saracena)	

\* Some of the towns located in Pollino National Park are inhabited by people belonging to the ethnic and language minority of the Arbëreshë. They speak a 15th century version of the present day Albanian language, mixed with Greek and Slavic words and influenced by the Italian language spoken in the surrounding areas. The Arbëreshë are the descendants of the families that fled certain areas of present day Albania and Greece in multiple migration waves after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan peninsula. Many Arbëreshë villages and towns are scattered throughout Southern Italy, and are often located in the most isolated and peripheral areas.

During the fieldwork, almost 8000 kilometers were driven across the area, field notes were taken based on direct observation, a focus group was conducted among twenty operators to focus on the relation between local food and tourism and about 40 key informants were interviewed including tourist operators (both guides and B&B owners), farmers, administrators, association members and other local entrepreneurs with the aim to explore in depth their experience and sense of living and working in a remote area. The qualitative interviewing has been used as the main tool, employed alongside a cognitive mapping method (Lynch, 1964, 1984), to elicit information from the local social actors and has been taken on the base of an opened and flexible interview outline focused on five different dimensions:

1. Personal experience (in terms of choices and decisions of moving from/staying in/returning to the town under study).
2. Sense of remoteness (in terms of personal/social advantages and disadvantages)
3. Social capital and relations (both within and outside the local community)
4. Hospitality and tourism (in particular relation to the locally available cultural and natural assets such as landscape, historical settlements, wildlife, architectural heritage etc.)
5. Food (in terms of tourist enhancement of regional productions)

Based on our literature review and the preliminary exploratory fieldwork, we chose these different dimensions because they allowed us to take into consideration both some individual aspects (i.e. the reasons behind the personal experiences and choices and the interviewees' sense and attitude towards remoteness) and more social ones, (i.e. the relation between the interviewees and the local communitarian context, also in terms of social organization of the tourist offer). The objective behind this choice was to analyze the sense each interviewee had of their own experience within their particular territorial/social context and the options they take into consideration in order to develop their tourist project.

The main findings of the research have ultimately come out of two different stages which we have taken on simultaneously, using mixed techniques: secondary data analysis (based on official statistical data from ISTAT) and qualitative data analysis of the interviews. The former was used to better understand the basic structure of the population at municipality level and the related impact of the Covid-19 outbreak at the province level. The main tourist indicators at municipality level have also been taken into consideration (tourist capacity and occupancy, tourist function) to assess how the attractiveness of the areas has changed over the time.

The second stage has been carried out according to an interpretive approach (Denzin 2002; David 2010) and involved a code-based analysis (Ryan 2004) realized using the CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) Nvivo. This analysis has been realized on the basis of 18 of the 40 in-depth interviews of "key informants". The main dimension of "remoteness" was worked out of the sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954) which are meant to be interpretive devices (Bowen 2006), that is, as instruments able to provide the researcher with a general sense of reference and guidance while approaching the empirical context of work and the data analysis process. In order to simplify the complex reality and to rationalize the collected qualitative data, the main dimension of remoteness has been delineated into four different themes according to the interpretation of the sense given by people to their lifeworlds: (1) Low Density (2) The Outdoors (3) Autonomy, and (4) Authenticity. Following, the pieces of the interviewees' statements related to one of the four themes have been selected and categorized under a "node" whose name synthesizes the content of the reference (see Section 3). These nodes were then grouped if applicable as "child nodes" under "mother nodes", which indicated analytical categories to be used for the themes during the reporting phase of the research, hereafter to be referred to as "codes".

## 2.1 The area under study: population, tourist offer and the Covid-19 impact

Located in the inner areas of the Apennines, the villages of study are mainly characterized by a rich wilderness and an uncontaminated nature which has been preserved as protected areas. Castelmezzano is one of the most representative and picturesque towns within the Gallipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park, being located at the foot of the Lucanian Dolomites and with the main tourist attraction the Volo dell'Angelo zipline. The towns of Rotonda, San Costantino Albanese, San Paolo Albanese and Terranova di Pollino are located on the Lucanian side of Pollino National Park, whereas Acquaformosa, Cerchiara di Calabria, Civita, Laino Borgo, Morano Calabro, Mormanno, San Basile and Saracena are on the Calabrian side.

All the towns are classified as "inner areas" by SNAI (National Strategy of Inner Areas) (DPS 2013; Barca, Casavola, Lucatelli, 2014). According to a municipality level, some of them are named as "intermediate", which means that the travel time to the nearest service center providing essential basic services can be covered in 20-40 minutes by car; several others are referred to as "peripheral", which means that time travel can be covered in 40-75 minutes, while the rest (all located in Basilicata) are "ultra-peripheral" because that travel time cannot be covered in less than 75 minutes.

As shown in Table 2, both regions have registered a decline in their population (Basilicata -5.1% and Calabria -2.7%). Furthermore, looking at the single municipalities in detail we can see that the decline has been generally and notably higher than the regional rates, with San Paolo Albanese reaching the peak of -37.5% and also the lowest population density (8.2 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>). Compared to the national population density (199.8 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) we can say that some of the villages, especially in Basilicata, (i.e. Terranova di Pollino, San Costantino Albanese and San Paolo Albanese) would appear as almost completely abandoned. The situation is less critical in the Cosenza province where the rates are



a bit higher, even if still very much below the national rate.

Looking at the population structure of the cases, the average age is particularly critical for Rotonda, Castelmezzano, San Paolo Albanese, Terranova di Pollino, Civita and San Basile. In these towns, the average age is 50 or over, at least 6 points over the national average (44) and the regional ones (Basilicata 45 and Calabria 44).

Figure 1 – Map of Case Areas (Galipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park and Pollino National Park)

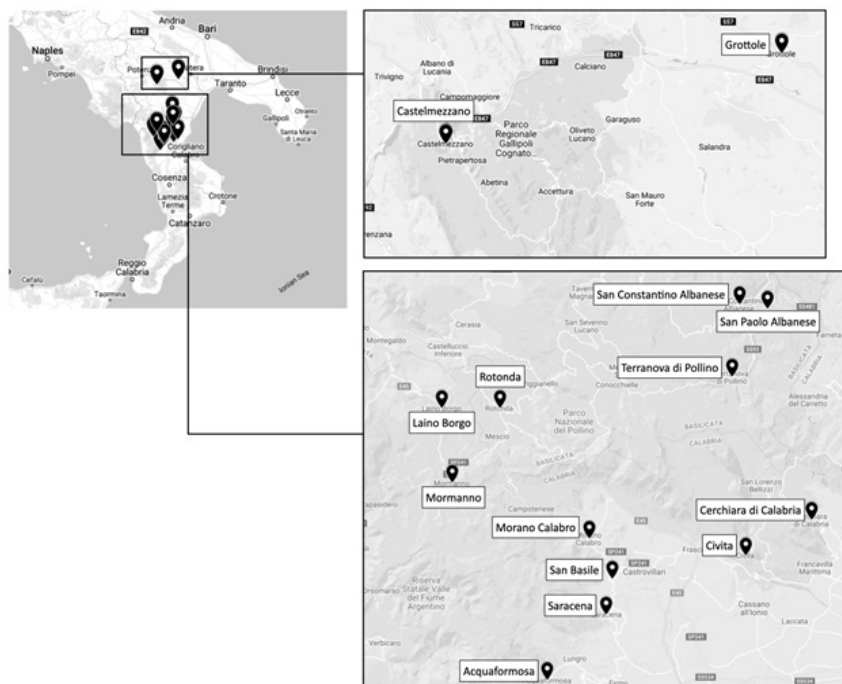


Table 2 – Structure of the population in the area under study (2002-2018)

Municipality	province	NSIA classification	POP_02	POP_13	POP_18	pop. 02-18 %	average age 18	pop. density
Castelmezzano	Potenza	peripheral	970	835	789	-18.7	50	22.7
Grottole	Matera	peripheral	2607	2327	2116	-18.8	45	18.0
Rotonda	Potenza	peripheral	3888	3475	3435	-11.7	56	79.1
San Costantino Albanese	Potenza	ultra-peripheral	884	754	686	-22.4	44	15.4
San Paolo Albanese	Potenza	ultra-peripheral	416	280	260	-37.5	51	8.2
Terranova di Pollino	Potenza	ultra-peripheral	1534	1291	1141	-25.6	51	10.0
<b>Matera prov.</b>			<b>204239</b>	<b>200012</b>	<b>198867</b>	<b>-2.6</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>56.9</b>
<b>Potenza prov.</b>			<b>393529</b>	<b>376182</b>	<b>368251</b>	<b>-6.4</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55.3</b>
<b>Basilicata</b>			<b>597768</b>	<b>576194</b>	<b>567118</b>	<b>-5.1</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55.9</b>
Acquaformosa	Cosenza	peripheral	1295	1158	1108	-14.4	47	48.2
Cerchiara di Calabria	Cosenza	peripheral	2942	2439	2344	-20.3	48	28.4
Civita	Cosenza	peripheral	1125	926	912	-18.9	50	32.2
Laino Borgo	Cosenza	intermediate	2275	1993	1879	-17.4	48	32.6
Morano Calabro	Cosenza	intermediate	4966	4606	4413	-11.1	47	37.4
Mormanno	Cosenza	intermediate	3729	3186	2955	-20.8	49	36.5
San Basile	Cosenza	intermediate	1285	1058	1034	-19.5	51	53.7
Saracena	Cosenza	intermediate	4309	3908	3744	-13.1	48	34.0
<b>Cosenza prov.</b>			<b>733797</b>	<b>714281</b>	<b>708702</b>	<b>-3.4</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>105.2</b>
<b>Calabria</b>			<b>2.011.466</b>	<b>1958238</b>	<b>1956687</b>	<b>-2.7</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>127.9</b>

Data source: ISTAT (National Institute of Statics) (authors' own elaboration)

Despite the fragility of the population structure (due to both ageing and emigration), during recent years, the tourist offer of these places has registered interesting changes and, in some cases, has performed a constant and noteworthy growth. This is particularly clear if we look at the Defert's tourist function index (DFTI) (Defert, 1967) which focuses on researching the relation between the accommodation capacity and the population size within a specific destination by putting into relation the number of beds and residents. Generally speaking, looking at table 3 it seems that while the number of residents has been declining, beds have been growing. This leads us to the hypothesis that tourist attractiveness of these places might be related somehow to their population sparsity. Taking the advantage of new tourists' interest toward rural areas and thinly populated villages, local residents might have decided to give a new tourist function to old, abandoned houses. For instance, Castelmezzano, despite losing almost 20% of its population in the period



2002-2018, has performed an extraordinary growth of its DFT index, going from almost 0 to 21.5, becoming the highest registered among the selected cases. Even if characterized by a more regular achievement, the cases of Terranova di Pollino, Cerchiara di Calabria, Civita, Morano Calabro and Mormanno also see this trend.

Table 3 – Tourist capacity and DFTI in the area under study (2002-2018)

		TOURIST CAPACITY						DFTI		
		2002		2013		2018		2002	2013	2018
Municipality	Province	acc. est	Beds	acc. est.	Beds	acc. est.	Beds			
Castelmezzano	Potenza	2	18	13	138	23	170	1.9	16.5	21.5
Grottole	Potenza	1	16	3	27	7	39	0.6	1.2	1.8
Rotonda		8	220	18	269	22	281	5.7	7.7	8.2
San Costantino Albanese	Potenza	8	171	6	95	6	66	19.3	12.6	9.6
San Paolo Albanese	Potenza	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Terranova di Pollino	Potenza	7	160	12	241	11	197	10.4	18.7	17.3
<b>Basilicata</b>		<b>450</b>	<b>32595</b>	<b>749</b>	<b>39113</b>	<b>1409</b>	<b>36306</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>6.4</b>
Acquaformosa	Cosenza	1	6	3	19	5	37	0.5	1.6	3.3
Cerchiara di Calabria	Cosenza	5	72	10	124	11	113	2.4	5.1	4.8
Civita	Cosenza	3	40	16	90	17	113	3.6	11.6	12.4
Laino Borgo	Cosenza	4	43	9	90	10	90	1.9	4.5	4.8
Morano Calabro	Cosenza	9	173	36	353	37	399	3.5	7.7	9.0
Mormanno	Cosenza	4	40	21	223	24	276	1.1	7.0	9.3
San Basile	Cosenza	0	0	1	86	1	7	0.0	0.7	0.7
Saracena	Cosenza	1	12	8	86	8	87	0.3	2.2	2.3
<b>Calabria</b>		<b>1263</b>	<b>193245</b>	<b>2888</b>	<b>187845</b>	<b>3512</b>	<b>192797</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>9.9</b>

Data source: ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) (authors' own elaboration)

The relation between low density and tourism hospitality has become even more important during the post Covid-19 outbreak. The socio-economic crisis related to the outbreak of the pandemic has seriously questioned all the productive sectors and the touristic one in an even more critical way. The World Tourism organization has stated that the Covid-19 crisis "has impacted travel like no other event in history before" (UNWTO 2020). The Italian National Observatory on Tourism has considered that, because of the pandemic and the travel restrictions, the overall number of visitors (both national and international) will have a decline of 41% compared to 2019 and that in the same period there will be a loss of 154 million nights and of 65 billion euros in expenditure from tourists (ENIT 2020).

This situation could lead to meaningful changes which may determine a transformation in the tourists' choices as well as in the paradigm of tourist local development (Bozzato, Guadagnoli, Prosperi, 2020). For example, according to the Italian tourist professional consultant Massimo Feruzzi, interviewed by the Italian journalist Giovanna Mancini (2020), there could be a «cocooning effect» of the Covid-19 outbreak, that is, a prevailing decision to spend holidays in second homes in proximal places and avoid contact with other people as much as possible. This need to feel safe «at home» could eventually turn into a possible trend performed by tourists preferring «minor destinations» such as small hamlets and naturalistic sites «just round the corner» (Bourdeau, 2020) rather than more popular and busier destinations. This could be related not only to the actual spread of the virus within the different areas of the country, but also to the idea that thinly populated places are somehow safer.

The hypothetical influence of territorial and environmental factors on the spread of the virus in the first phase of the pandemic has been clearly highlighted, confirmed by several scholars (Musolino, Rizzi, 2020) and also referred to as the geographical scattering of the pandemic (De Falco 2020). A quick look at the absolute values on a regional level, ordered according to the lowest number of cases to the highest, shows some relation between population density, percentage of inner areas on the total of municipalities and the spread of the virus. Of course, at this level of analysis we cannot talk about a causality nor refer to any kind of direct correlation, but instead we can take the reading as a stimulus for further detailed studies. It is noteworthy that Basilicata is the region with the lowest number of infections (only 399 total cases as of May 31st, 2020), the lowest density population rate (55.9 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) and the highest percentage of inner areas in the whole territory (96%). Only Valle d'Aosta region has a lower rate in the density index (38.5 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) but a lower percentage also in the presence of municipalities located in inner areas (59.4%). Lombardia, which has been the most affected region in Italy, has also the highest density index rate of 421.6 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and the

lowest percentage of municipalities located in inner areas (33.3%). Calabria is the third least infected region, with 1,158 total cases, a high percentage of inner areas (77.8%) and a density rate lower than the national one (127.9 over 199.8)

Table 4 – Covid-19 total cases in Italian regions (May 31st, 2020)

Region	Covid-19 cases	% inner areas	Density
Basilicata	399	96.2	55.9
Molise	436	96.2	68.5
Calabria	1158	77.8	17.9
Valle d'Aosta	1184	59.5	38.5
Sardegna	1356	84.4	68
Umbria	1431	66.3	104.2
Abruzzo	3244	45.9	121.1
Friuli Venezia Giulia	3273	39.4	153.2
Sicilia	3443	76.4	193.6
Puglia	4494	56.2	206.2
Campania	4802	51.9	424.4
Marche	6730	49.4	162.2
Lazio	7728	72.5	341.2
Liguria	9663	45.1	286.3
Toscana	10104	44.6	162.2
Veneto	19152	57.4	267.4
Emilia-Romagna	27790	42.8	198.7
Piemonte	30637	41.9	171.6
Lombardia	88968	33.4	421.6
Italy	233019	52.6	199.8

Data source: Istat; DPS; <https://github.com/pcm-dpc> (authors' own elaboration)

### 3. Discussion

The following quotations are extracts from the 18 interviews conducted pre Covid-19. In returning to these interviews under different circumstances, keeping in mind the lively, ongoing public debate on the post-lockdown tourism scenarios, great care was taken to avoid removing the meaning of the quotations from their context. As mentioned in section 2, part of the initial research, however, was to understand a) if and how the interviewees experience remoteness, and b) the motivations for why the interviewees chose to live in these inner areas given the hardships one might encounter due to remoteness. Thus, this discussion has elicited several key motivations that can shed light on the status of the case areas as a post Covid-19 refuge for a better quality of life both for new and current inhabitants.

Originally, the results were coded under several mother nodes and child nodes (or codes), including *rural idyll* (a term chosen for its symbolism in the human imagination, especially related to tourism and food, rather than a literal representation for the rural) (Bell, 2006). In unpacking the rural idyll concept, six sub-codes were found to describe more specifically their motivations: *social proximity*, *tranquility*, *fresh air*, *access to nature*, *healthier lifestyle*, and *quality food*. Furthermore, other codes that stood out under the framework of remoteness are *self-realization*, *work opportunity*, *working remotely*, and *cultural heritage* (with emphasis on the Arbëreshë ethno-linguistic minority).

These ten pre-established codes were then reorganized under four overarching themes: (1) Low density, (2) the Outdoors, (3) Autonomy, and (4) Authenticity (see table 5). These themes were developed by the research team to describe the various elements of remoteness that were expressed during the fieldwork and retroactively reorganized through a post Covid-19 lens.

Table 6 contains other codes relevant to the theme of remoteness that were frequently found in the interviews, but do not necessarily exhibit these spaces as desirable places of "refuge". It is important to recognize the drawbacks to living in these inner areas as perceived by the interviewees, who most frequently mentioned *lacking necessities* (25 references) and *lacking leisurely activities* (7 references), to remember the hidden costs that visitors or new residents might pay in choosing to stay in an area motivated by the above-mentioned "imagined remoteness". Secondary data collection informed our understanding of the peripherality of our case area. At the center of SNAI's mission for the internal areas is "quality of life of people: an intensive development, with the increase in well-being and social inclusion of those living in those areas; an extensive development, with the increase in labor demand and the use of territorial capital" (Barca, Casavola, Lucatelli, 2014, p. 6). Indeed, our interviews elicited this sentiment, that quality of life is hampered by various factors including lack of services, but also lack of leisure activities. Life is made more difficult which leads to depopulation, further compounding deficits such as employment and education opportunities. Meaningfully, these points emer-

ged mostly during the making of cognitive maps, when the interviewee graphically illustrated and verbally commented on the negative side of remoteness. That said, the new circumstances related to a post Covid-19 reality might reinforce the need for a more balanced territorial cohesion and reconsider the value of being a distant territory, even though more focused policies. Qualities previously perceived to be lacking might be reframed as positive ones, for the fact that they are lacking. Low population density, for instance, might no longer be perceived as solely negative, and rather the *negative space* could be seen as positive. Notwithstanding, this possible change of paradigm should be part of an even stronger National Strategy aimed at providing people living in these areas with the same services as people living in the big cities. This has already been the aim of SNAI but at this point it would need a further and quicker step forward.

Other themes carry this newfound paradox, as well, such as the third theme: autonomy (section 4.3). Particularly, the limited presence of essential services might be an opportunity to rethink the development of services “from scratch” by aligning it with post Covid-19 necessities (health services) and different forms of recreation (no-contact activities). This is also an opportunity to place the local community at the heart of the process and a way to encourage residents to take control of their own life stories.

Lastly, table 6 also contains the code *unaffected by remoteness*, which refers to nonchalance, indifference or denial in the interviews when asked about how the interviewee experiences remoteness. Such comments include, “when you’re born in a place, you’re used to it” (Tour Operator 01), “We’re only 30 km from Potenza, and the road, it’s convenient” (Restaurant Owner), “good or bad, here we have everything. The post office [...], the bank...” (Tour Operator 03), “and in any case if you need something, there’s the highway. Free. It’s wonderful” (Tour Operator 04), “we’re so connected to this land, so we live well” (Farmer 04 and 05), and “I’m used to it” (Farmer 06). The drawbacks are not so extreme that they cannot be withstood or reversed and might indicate that the threat of remoteness could be mitigated in more than one way.

### 3.1 Low density

This dimension refers to the depopulation trend of our case areas and the ramifications of this trend. While depopulation both feeds and responds to a lack of economic opportunity, services and recreational activities (jobs, schools, hospitals, shopping centers, cinemas etc.), in the analysis of the interviews we shifted our focus to how low density might be a desired quality in a post-Covid world. Looking to small towns to receive an overflow of “virus escapees” means identifying more specific ways low density makes these locations viable, despite the implications of depopulation. The two most relevant sub-codes to this dimension elicited from the interviews are *social proximity* and *tranquility*.

Social proximity was coded for any mention of friendly, warm or more frequent interactions associated with small town culture. Common words in these excerpts include “hospitality” and “welcoming”, and these comments were often made in contrast to the culture of a bigger city (Tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 04, Administrator 03, Agri-tour Operator 01, Student). When asked about the advantages to living in a more remote area, a student who had recently moved back to their hometown in Basilicata said that the advantage is to,

experience the goodness in people, no? There are no filters here. When you pass by someone, it’s always ‘ciao ciao ciao’ [...] Here really, you’re never alone. Here, if you need something...that greeting means that I can count on anyone that I meet. [...] A lot of people who leave, who are born and raised here, if they go to a bigger city, say ‘but I miss speaking with people’. (Student)

In some cases, this social proximity was a pull factor for the interviewee to move to the case area from elsewhere:

When I put my feet down in Calabria, I fell in love with this land. I saw things that people who live here might not consider important, but for me they are fantastic. For example, the relationships between various people, who say hi to you and ask how you are, that are always warm and available. (Tour Operator 04)

Tranquility was also grouped under this theme for its frequent association to rural, more remote areas. Often times the actual word “tranquility” was used when asked about the benefits to living in the case area:

There are advantages. There’s tranquility, plus there isn’t traffic. (Agri-tour Operator 01)

Definitely the fact of tranquility. Every time that I go up to Rome for meetings, I get a headache. Tranquility allows you to also work in a peaceful way. (Administrator 04)

It’s a really small town, so there’s not even the stress of the city. (Tour Operator 04)

You have a tranquil life. If you move to Rome [...] it seems like everyone is run run run, like ants, you don’t know where they’re going. Sometimes I feel the urgency of living that frenetic lifestyle, but only for a few hours. Then I prefer to return to the tranquil lifestyle. (Administrator 07)

Low population density, while definitely a risk factor for the economy, has given way to a more close-knit community, one in which everyone knows and greets each other. This quality could be important for a post Covid-19 world, where members of a community can rely on one another for support and social interaction, while at the same time avoiding the risk of transmission that comes from high density areas.

## 3.2 The outdoors

This theme includes three concepts deconstructed from the above-mentioned *rural idyll*: fresh air, access to nature, and healthier lifestyle (table 5). On the whole, these sub-codes were identified largely as a motivation for interviewees to return or stay in the case area. Fresh air was coded in four different interviews, referenced five times, when interviewees used the word “fresh air” or spoke about the ability to “breathe well” or “better” in the case area (Administrator 04, Tour Operator 04, Administrator 07, Farmer 01). Access to nature, although also an important draw for the interviewees, was more often cited for its prominent role as a pull factor for tourists (which explains the large number of references for this sub-code, see table 5).

Here we draw several citations that include one, two or three of the sub-codes of fresh air, access to nature and healthier lifestyle, to demonstrate how the case area might be considered healthier spaces in a post-Covid world. When asked how one interviewee experienced remoteness, one tour operator responded:

A lot of people haven't left, but maybe they work out of town. So, they work out there, but have chosen to continue living here because the town is beautiful, small, welcoming, and you feel good. (Agri-tour Operator 02)

The elderly here, compared to an elderly person living in the city, maybe have a more pronounced physical strength... because they're used to...they're trained. If you see an old person, they have perfect legs, even without cellulite [laughs]! They walk a lot! (Tour Operator 01)

I live well, because I don't like to be in the city. For me, the city is a unique way to drive you crazy and to highlight our human weaknesses [...] Man is made for being free and surrounded by nature [...] In the mornings, if I live here, I know exactly what will be the first thing I see when I open my eyes. The sun. (Tour Operator 05)

The quality of life is one of the biggest advantages. Because if you want to relax, a moment to unplug, just go out of your home, take a walk, recharge, because you're immersed in green, in nature. You feel great [...] there isn't the chaos of a city. If you're in a city, between traffic and smog, you don't relax and you feel the need to get out of there. Here, you actually have the possibility, even with a simple walk, to relax. And the air that we breathe, it's life. (Tour Operator 04)

The concept of fresh air alone as perceived by the interviewees illuminates the potential benefits of living in the countryside during a pandemic of a respiratory disease. This is added to by comments made about physical activity, relaxing, recharging, and “feeling good”—all important for surviving the mental health burden of living in a pandemic.

## 3.3 Autonomy

Another prominent motivation cited by the interviewees for returning to or staying in their hometown was for work, often explained as a job opportunity that gave them a sense of self. We have grouped this motivation, as well as the ability to work remotely under the theme of autonomy to demonstrate the potential of regionally based economies to fulfill a need that is coming to light during Covid-19 times (Enderwick, Buckley, 2020), that is, the need for independence and self-sufficiency from a complex globalized system.

### *Self-Realization*

One component of autonomy is the ability to self-realize. Connected to the above-mentioned code of low density, these small towns provide an opportunity for members to realize projects with higher impact than they otherwise would in a large city:

«It's a love for the land, for the town, the roots of your own land, and a love for believing in a project of economic-touristic development even in a small town. Let me explain better: it's like a challenge. A challenge because everyone thinks that in a small town, you can't do it [...] At a certain point, one of the reasons I returned was because [in Milan] I found myself in the Piazza del Duomo one Sunday, very sad...you are one number, only one, a drop in the middle of the ocean of people who pass by. You have all the services you need but... I don't know... better to be an integral part of an economic and social project in a small town than to be one number in a city of three million people» (Administrator 01)

«Being a mayor is one of the more gratifying things, even if you do it in such a small place, because whatever you think up, you'll see it become a reality, if you are lucky, consistent, resilient and also supported» (Administrator 02)

«Going around a bit, not just Italy, you see that places like ours are places where people remain to live their own story» (Farmer 02)

«My dream when I was 21 years old was to open a Rafting center [...] Even when I said goodbye to my father, I said I want to have experiences, I want to work on every continent first, and then come back to establish

my center. [...] In the end I had to decide if I would stay in Brazil or in India, but at the end I thought, 'what is the most beautiful place that combines a bit everything that I love?' The place where I was born. So I came back here, and since this place [...] is one of the poorer areas of the south [...] plus a region where the average salary is very low, for me it was to create something, a place where I could share all of my experiences gathered abroad, where I could share a philosophy, a vision, a message [...] And to show the young people around here that if they have a dream and want to cultivate it, they can do it. You don't have to necessarily be the child of rich parents or have rich friends to realize your dream. I fundamentally was able to do it without a single euro» (Tour Operator 05)

## Work Opportunity

While in many cases, work opportunities came from family trades (Agri-tour Operator 01, Agri-tour Operator 02, Farmer 06), the above interviewee (Tour Operator 05) was able to participate in job creation based on endogenous assets, including the natural landscape beauty, wilderness, and access to the river. They go on to say how rafting provided an alternative job option: "young people are paid well [...] up to 140 euro a day, in such a small town, with such a small cost of living, that's a substantial earning" (Tour Operator 05). Tourism on the whole is an important force for job creation in the case studies. Although this sector was and continues to be threatened by the fallout of the pandemic, domestic tourism is not to be discounted as much as the international one, especially in the wake of plummeting international tourism rates. The National Observatory on Tourism has estimated that while the international tourists will have a decline of almost 50% in the nights spent, the domestic visitors will decrease about 30% (ENIT 2020).

Tourism work often requires face to face interaction (barring the growth of no-contact transactions for lodging, food delivery, and excursions) but at the same time, emphasis on rural tourism diverts flows to mass tourist destinations that pose a higher risk for viral spread. As mentioned in the previous section, *the outdoors*, and more specifically access to nature, is a prevalent pull factor for tourists. One such excursion examined is the Volo dell'Angelo, a large experiential tourist attraction that sends participants zip-lining from the mountainous towns of Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa. This attraction and the ripple effect it had on other tourism-based economic activity in these towns offers economic opportunities for the residents (Administrator 01, Administrator 02, Artisan, Agri-tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 01, Restaurant Owner):

«Little by little, thanks to a lot of factors, the Volo became a reality really way bigger in respect to 2007. Today, «we are twenty people between these two towns [...] and we work from May to November, so not only during the summer months. I think this is one of the biggest reasons that pushed me to come back here. I've always counted on it» (Tour Operator 01)

Other pull factors for the tourism sector, further elaborated on in section 3.4, include the Arbëreshë and food cultures present in case areas. Regarding the latter, specific policies and tools have been put in place to encourage young people to acquire land and create a food-based tourism offer, such as state and EU funding for multifunctional agriculture, brands and certifications (e.g. Slow Food, Borghi Più Belli d'Italia<sup>4</sup>), and food festivals (e.g. Sagra della melanzana rossa e dei fagioli bianchi di Rotonda):

«Agriculture has the possibility to access state funding and assistance for improvement, so this is happening. Some young people have established an agriculture operation [...] so you can find this assistance, but also for becoming a fruit and vegetable vendor, without the need for huge marketing strategies [...] The municipality has, for example, some activities for reorganizing land. They've conducted and monitored a census for abandoned land—there is this phenomenon of abandoned land to give to young people. Young people easily find land if they want to» (Administrator 04).

## Working remotely

During quarantine, some have been forced to detach certain activities from their geographical place, thanks to the shift to remote learning, working, and socializing. The outcome has been to see what activities are truly autonomous from geography. In our pre Covid-19 interviews, we were fortunate to hear a couple of instances of such activities:

«I've never thought about leaving! I work out of town, but I always come back here [...] Nowadays, with the internet, computers, you can even work easily from a distance. Then, when your physical presence is needed in a meeting or briefing, you do it without a problem. But [the remote working] helps a lot. I don't have to necessarily reside in Puglia to work in Puglia. I can live in Calabria» (Administrator 04)

«Locals and tourists [...] become clients through the internet. Because they can easily purchase our products online [...] Through e-commerce or through our Facebook page, or through WhatsApp with our online catalog» (Agri-tour Operator 02)

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<sup>4</sup> Among the selected cases, the towns of Castelmezzano, Civita and Morano Calabro have been awarded as "Borghi più belli d'Italia" (The Most Beautiful Hamlets of Italy) within the Club promoted by the Italian small municipalities network; the towns of Mormanno and Saracena have given birth to two SlowFood Presidia (Mormanno Lentils and Saracena Moscato).



As seen here, the interviewees perceived the potential for job growth, with special attention on the tourist sector. What's more, endeavors in food-based tourism are perceived to lead to more opportunities thanks to state resources, and as we will see in the next section, thanks to a strong food culture that stands out for tourists and residents alike. Lastly, with the development of e-commerce and remote working, non-tourism related job opportunities may present themselves in the future for city dwellers looking for a new post-lockdown residency.

### 3.4 Authenticity

Given the reliance on tourism as a source for endogenous development in the case areas, the capacity to stage "authentic" experiences plays a crucial role in attracting and convincing both locals and visitors to share genuine experiences as a way to build the *genius loci*. "Authenticity" has become a popular concept in tourism studies and has been explored from multiple perspectives with reference to ethics, commodification, media environment, culture and lifestyle (MacCannel, 1973, 1976; Cohen 1988; Taylor 2001; Urry, 2002; Lindholm, 2008). Thus, considering the "authenticity" of these towns helps to understand how such development might benefit from enhancing the genuine and lived, experiential realities of these towns: cultural heritage and high-quality food. But in addition to the indisputable value of the ethno-linguistic cultures in fostering an experiential, sustainable tourism, we have also identified the perception by some interviewees that these towns are more apt for receiving individuals seeking to escape the city given that the Arbëreshë were historically refugees themselves.

#### *Cultural Heritage - Arbëreshë, cooperative and welcoming to newcomers*

When speaking about cohesion and cooperation among community members of small, rural places for building the tourism offer, the vast literature on the topic suggests that the ability to mobilize cultural capital and enable social networking makes the difference in terms of successful, sustainable development strategies in a continuously more globalized age (Murdoch 2006; Woods 2007; Van der Ploeg 2009). Accordingly, we asked if a cohesive and cooperative attitude had anything to do with the Arbëreshë culture present in several of the towns of our case area:

«It's extremely connected to Arbëreshë culture, also because the Arbëreshë have brought the famous *ditonie*. The *ditonia* the neighborhood, an Arbëreshë term that literally means neighborhood, the reliance on the neighbor for something you need [...] So Civita is also famous for these many *ditonie* which themselves formed a group and created ... what one family lacked, another one had» (Administrator 04)

As relatively recent immigrants themselves, the Arbëreshë community were more adapted to accepting tourists as outsiders:

«The welcoming nature has always been our characteristic, it has always been our DNA because we are the ones who were welcomed, integrated. As a consequence, whoever comes here, for us, is a guest» (Tour Operator 03)

This was made clearer when speaking to the mayor of the town Acquaformosa, or Firmoza in Arbëreshë. Since 2008, Acquaformosa has been part of a SPRAR project (Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers), deemed to be one of the best implementations by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. When asked if Arbëreshë culture has contributed to finding the support among inhabitants to establish the project, the mayor responded,

«In my opinion, it's in the DNA [...] These were villages that over the course of centuries had the characteristic of hospitality. Whoever came here was a person that couldn't leave without being welcomed into someone's home, drinking a glass of wine...It's literally in our tradition. The more that these villages were sectioned off, the more that [this trait] was visible» (Administrator 03)

#### *Food quality*

High quality food was originally coded as an aspect of the *rural idyll*, motivating both the return of some interviewees to their hometown and the use of food in the tourism offer. The following excerpts demonstrate the residents' emphasis on quality, understanding of food's role in the tourism offer and local identity, and an overall passion for food:

«When I go into the city, I really taste the difference, the quality of food. Definitely. When I was in Veneto, I was never eating local vegetables, for both the cost and the fact that they weren't all that good. Instead, here I've noticed the difference. It's actually real food, the vegetables are, as a matter of fact, true and always seasonal» (Tour Operator 04)

«The *crostole* are what they are, you can't change them, you can't touch [the recipe]. The *crostole* are that way because we are a bit fanatic. We have our ideas and we have to follow them. Many ask me to make them without honey and without oregano. They say 'add powdered sugar'. And I give them a look and think 'you'll kill it like that!' But since they are asking me, I have to do it, I have to make a sale. But you don't add powdered sugar. The *crostole* are eaten with honey. If not, don't eat them!» (Restaurant owner)

When asked how important food is for the identity of Castelmezzano, one Agri-tour operator responded, “from one to ten, it would be nine!” (Agri-tour Operator 01).

«Restaurants heavily rely on gastronomic tourism and today, there isn't gastronomic tourism if there isn't quality» (Administrator 04)

«There's a food culture, a farm to table culture, a culture of wild herbs that you can harvest all year round. In September you can harvest, I don't know, fennel seeds to use for tea, also in [...] cured meats, in salami. In May-June, you can harvest capers, olives, oregano, medicinal herbs to dry and then use in the winter to treat people. I already do this in my Bed & Breakfast» (Tour Operator 02)

With a strong food culture, a tendency towards hospitality in some cases, and thus practice at providing an “authentic” and warm experience to tourists through food, the case areas have demonstrated the foundation for further tourism development that would both fit in a post-lockdown scenario (access to physically distant activities, essential services viable and enjoyable, safe social proximity) and a motivation for choosing these underserved areas as focus for development. Investing in the draw of these places makes sense at a time when tourists will reconsider visiting the overcrowded sun-and-sea destinations and perhaps choose to cocoon in the countryside (Mancini 2020, Bourdeau 2020).

Table 5 – Four dimensions of Remoteness

The Four Dimensions and their sub-codes	Description of code	# Interviews	# References
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## 1. Low Density

Social Proximity	Coded for comments regarding friendly, warm and more frequent interactions that come from living in a small town. Often expressed in terms of “hospitality” and being “welcoming”.	7	11
Tranquility	Coded for any reference to rural areas as places of tranquility, with that specific word used for every reference. Often this descriptor came as a comparison between rural and city life.	6	9

## 2. The Outdoors

Access to nature	Coded for a) when interviewees chose to live/move to the case area because of desired access to nature, b) any expression of the landscape beauty of the case area, or c) any mention of nature as an important asset to tourism development	12	36
Fresh air	Coded for any time “fresh air” was mentioned or the ability to breathe better in the case area.	4	5
Healthier lifestyle	Coded for references to “health”, including nutrition, exercise, and low stress.	6	10

The Four Dimensions and their sub-codes	Description of code	# Interviews	# References
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### 3. Autonomy

Self-realization	Coded for when interviewees commented that, by deciding to live in the case area, they had the opportunity to form their identity, most commonly through their profession, such as starting their own business.	9	11
Work opportunity	Coded for any reference to the presence of work opportunity in the case areas.	7	9
Working remotely	Coded for references to tools that allow for remote work, as well as explicit recounts of this occurring. Remote work refers to internet work, but on one occasion also commuting outside of the case area for work.	3	5

### 4. Authenticity

Cultural heritage (Arbëreshë)	Coded for any references to heritage as a positive and very present aspect to the case areas (primarily Arbëreshë but also other ethnic minorities mentioned).	8	30
Food quality	Coded for any mention of food as a pull factor for both residents and tourists, almost always found with the words "food" and "quality" in the same sentence.	12	22

Table 6 – Other relevant and frequently referenced codes

The Four Dimensions and their sub-codes	Description of code	# Interviews	# References
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### Disadvantages to remoteness

Depopulation	Coded for any mention of people moving away or depopulation more generally.	11	19
Lacking leisurely activities	Coded for any mention of not enough or nonexistent activities for young people, such as a cinema or sports field.	6	7
Lacking necessities	Coded for any mention of nonexistent or lacking goods and services. Most commonly mentioned are schools, roads (potholes) and hospitals.	13	25
Unaffected by remoteness	Coded for any expression of indifference, casualness, or denial when asked about how the interviewee experiences "remoteness".	7	9

## 4. Conclusions

Remoteness is not just a state of mind. It refers to material assets, everyday life practices and a deeply rooted perception of the sense of place. For the people living in the areas covered by our study, remoteness is a double-sided notion. On the one hand, it calls to mind the negative aspects of emptiness, namely the lack of services, institutions and opportunities. On the other, it is a positive feature both in terms of “fulls” (nature and authenticity) and “voids” (low density and freedom). In principle, the opportunities given by the post Covid-19 scenarios allows us to think that emptiness could be fixed and remoteness would emerge as a positive, attractive feature for these areas, enabling them to gain a centrality in the name of under-tourism, down-scaling and social dispersion.

At the beginning of our research back in 2018, we had mostly exploratory and descriptive goals. In particular, we expected to shed light on the way people make sense of place and of their “being in the world” while living in remote inner areas. The combination of an extended literature review and a mixed approach based fieldwork (using interviews, cognitive maps, visual records and ethnographic notes) gave us back some valuable suggestions. Thus, we have been able to point out some interesting correlations between the dimensions of sparsity and remoteness, on one hand, and the ability to mobilize social and cultural capital, with special reference to food mediated territorial identity. Although we are still dealing with a work in progress and we have not been able to draw any final conclusion, we can claim that the notion of remoteness is quite promising for territorial identity and endogenous development strategies, and it is worth studying further. Far from being a simple synonym of marginality and abandonment, the idea of remoteness is a more complex and multifaceted combination of materiality and state of mind for the people living in inner areas. It could work either in positive or negative ways, depending on the ability to turn “voids” and “fulls” into pro-active elements of endogenous development through our identified themes of low density, the outdoors, autonomy and authenticity. From this standpoint we proffer that the newly established post-Covid-19 conditions could act as a trigger for these areas, by favoring the development of a new tourist offer based on the idea of the often mentioned “under-tourism”. We went back to our original categories, derived from the primary qualitative analysis and re-elaborated the semantic contents according to four new themes, which reflected the positive aspects of remoteness in terms of voids and fulls against the negative perceptions of it. As a result, it seems that there is some empirical background to support a remoteness inspired policy action that could promote the development of under-tourism in inner areas of Southern Italy. At least, remoteness could be de-mythified and turned into a clearer social science term and a usable policy tool.

Nonetheless, some questions still need to be answered. What can governments do to grant democratic access to everybody and prevent these areas from being turned into “gated communities”? Is the financial support for domestic holidays enough? Is selling real estate for a symbolic price, like 1 euro, a viable solution? We must pay attention to the double-edged sword of tourism, creating limitations to the growth such that the development does not spoil the very assets it relies on, nor become a public health issue in the face of a pandemic. With that in mind, the development of tourism is an opportunity to fill the emptiness by creating services, opportunities and organization by recurring to post Covid-19 financial support.

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