

## **From the Exclusive to the Excessive. Lake Garda's Long History of Tourism from the Belle Époque to Overtourism**

*By Maria Paola Pasini\**

*There are destinations that have a long tourism history marked by different transformations and phases and generally with a continuous growth of the tourism phenomenon. In recent years, some of these locations are overwhelmed by overtourism, which focuses on specific places because of their beauty, notoriety, history and reputation. Recently local governances are beginning to implement sustainable strategies to curb flows and mitigate the impacts on the territory of tourism excesses. This is the only opportunity for the destination to continue its life and avoid decline: a new model of sustainable rejuvenation. The paper sets out to analyze some aspects of the long-term history of Lake Garda, one of the most popular destinations in Italy. Starting from a tourism history that has been mainly established since the 19th century with a very "exclusive" form, this contribution aims to focus on the main trends that have seen Garda's attractiveness grow over the decades. It also analyzes the problem of "overtourism" that has affected some lake locations in recent years and the strategies implemented at the local level to contain this phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** *history of tourism, overtourism, sustainability, lake Garda, growth.*

### **Introduction**

Limiting or declining? How an historical touristic destination cope with “overtourism”? Some Italian destinations have a long history that started from ancient times and then found wider development between the 19th and 20th centuries with a growing tourist presence. Today some of them are facing serious problems of tourist overcrowding. What is the current situation especially in the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic crisis? What are the main problems? What solutions are local communities pursuing to contain excessive growth?

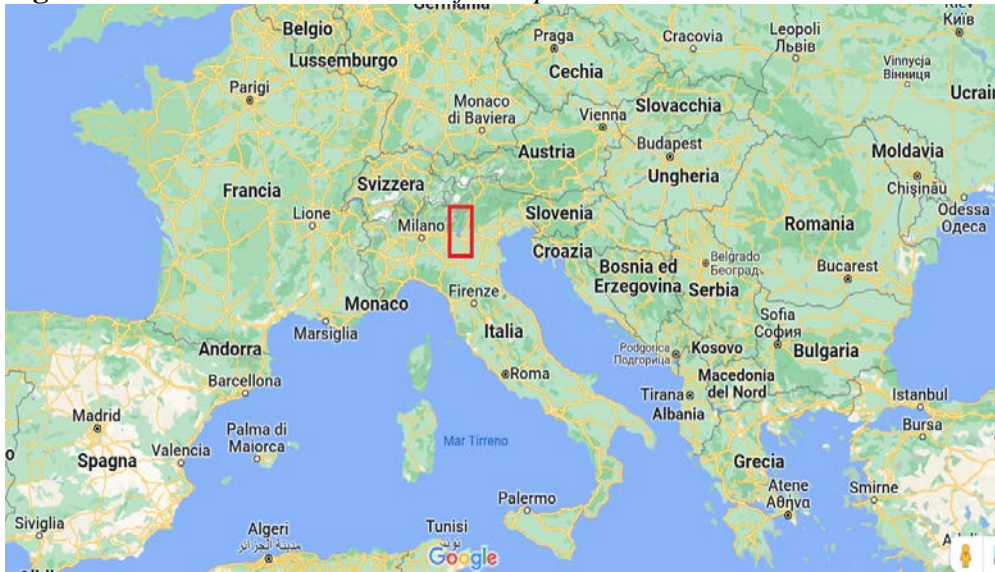
The paper aims to analyze some aspects of the long-term history of Lake Garda, Italy's largest lake (see Figures 1 & 2), from the origins of tourism to phenomenon of overtourism that has occurred in recent years. Lake Garda is actually one of the most popular destinations in Italy and in Europe.

In 2022 it was the first destination searched on the net so with a high demand pressure index ahead of Riviera Romagnola and Salento (Lybra Zucchetti 2022). More than 27 million presences were recorded in 2022 (Bresciatoday.it 2022).

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**Figure 1.** *Lake Garda in the Heart of Europe*



Source: Google Maps.

**Figure 2.** *Satellite image of Lake Garda (2023)*



Source: European program Copernicus.

After illustrating the Lake's long tradition of tourism, the study focuses on the impacts of the massive influx of tourists over the last years, and some economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects. In addition, the study discusses some initiatives and possible proposals advanced by local institutions to control the growing tourist pressure on the territory and its local residents. Municipalities consider improving infrastructure and making the impact of tourism on the area more sustainable, but they are also beginning to talk about "limit" in attendance.

The earliest history of tourism on Lake Garda saw destinations providing very high standards of tourist hospitality for that time with attention to the environment and health. Actually it seems that the orientation is resuming its

historical one with an increasing focus on the quality of services and sustainability of the proposed offer: a sort of return to the past for the future.

### **Overtourism in the World**

Over the past decade, the term “overtourism” has received much attention from the media, administrators, stakeholders, scholars, residents of tourist destinations, and tourists themselves (Capocchi et al. 2019). This is not a new phenomenon. More recently, its linguistic codification can be traced back to Skift, a New York-based company specializing in tourism research and marketing, and its founder Rafat Ali (2018). The neologism refers to the negative impact that popular destinations can experience in the absence of proper and conscious management of the dynamics that fuel tourism. Underestimating the phenomenon from an economic, environmental, social, and cultural point of view can lead to a series of imbalances and negative consequences, even to the decline of the tourism industry itself. The UNWTO (2018) describes the phenomenon as “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way”. Specifically, the occurrence or non-occurrence of overtourism would be closely related to the ability of institutions and stakeholders to manage tourist congestion in certain destinations. A significant factor to be considered and on which a wide-ranging debate is underway (Wall 2020, Postma et al. 2020, Butler 2020) is the concept of “carrying capacity”, understood as the maximum number of people that can simultaneously visit a tourist destination without jeopardizing the system-territory and, at the same time, without compromising visitor satisfaction.

In general, we can define the term “overtourism” as “an excessive presence of tourists that carries negative socio-cultural and environmental consequences for residents, destinations and tourists”. (Volo 2020) or also “a contemporary phenomenon, rapidly evolving and underlined by what is evidently excessive visitation to tourist destinations” (Milano et al. 2019a).

There are different approaches to this topic. In some cases, emphasis is placed on the accessibility of tourist destinations that can be reached via different modes of transportation: canals, roads, railways, ports, and it is impossible to set limits in this regard with respect to “carrying capacity”. Another aspect is related to particularly fragile and delicate tourist destinations, such as some islands, the Greek Chrissi for example, where the excessive presence of people could cause an immediate deterioration of the natural characteristics of the places (Sheyvens and Momsen 2008). In other cases, the most important issue concerns the “contention” of space between residents and tourists, which causes friction and tension (Milano et al. 2019b). The excessive presence of tourists can place a burden on collective services (waterworks, urban waste collection, sewage) causing inconvenience to residents. The need to adjust these services imposes significant costs on the communities which are not always balanced by the adequate and widespread economic benefits derived from local tourism.

After a few years during which the issue of overtourism had remained under the radar, the phenomenon has recently begun to appear in public discourse, with an element of alarm and partly as a form of protest at first, and eventually leading to the creation of a European network of cities against tourism excesses (Montalto Monella 2018). In general, stakeholders, residents, politicians, and tourists themselves have not yet clearly identified priorities for a multifaceted problem that requires appropriate solutions for each individual case (Butler and Dodds 2022). However, this is an urgent problem that, if not solved, could lead to the very downfall of those tourist destinations which are unable to find an alternative model (Benner 2020). It is therefore necessary to encourage strategies to implement concrete actions based on the “sustainability pillars”, leading to “responsible tourism” (Mihalic 2020).

In Italy, on the eve of the pandemic outbreak, the discussion had begun to take shape with the involvement of European institutions and the Italian government. A debate on the phenomenon had been initiated not only in regard to large cities like Venice, Rome, Florence (Ianniello and Cánoves 2021) but also to smaller towns, focusing on deseasonalization as a possible remedy (Riva 2019). The pandemic crisis imposed an inevitable halt to the discussion, which has however resumed again in more recent times (Aragú and Mestanza 2021, Koh 2020).

At Lake Garda, the issue of increasing tourist flows has arisen as well, in particular in after the pandemic Covid-19 period and this has become a real problem.

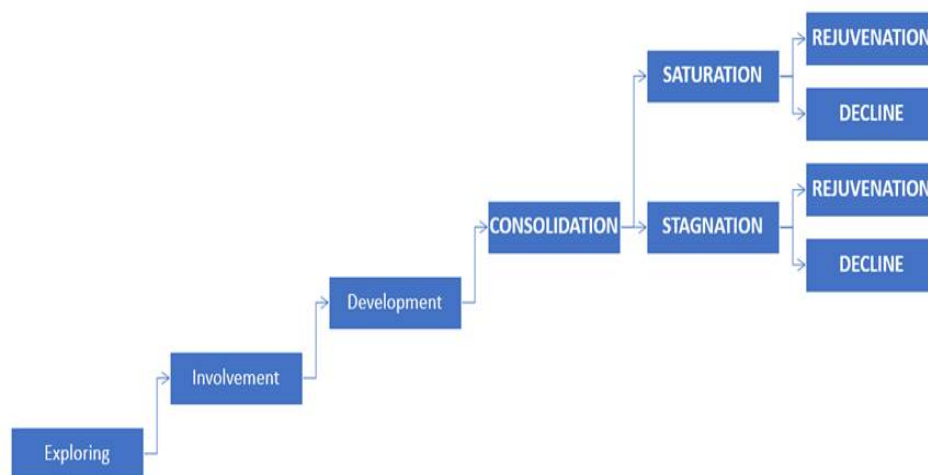
### **Working Method**

Every tourist destination faces several stages during its existence from exploration to maturity (see Figure 3). According to Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle Model (1980), after the maximum expansion with the ‘consolidation’, the stage of ‘stagnation’ is reached. This phase opens the way to two possibilities for the tourist destination: either ultimate decline or a chance for revival through a new development model. But in recent years, sometimes after the ‘consolidation’ phase, and then at the full utilization of the resources without serious imbalances for the territory, a progressive increase in tourist flows can be witnessed. This progressive increase can lead to ‘saturation’ defined as a large overrun of the destination's carrying capacity. We are facing the phenomenon of ‘overtourism’. Thus, in some cases instead of the "stagnation" phase as a progressive reduction in flows, we see an unsustainable increase in tourist attendance. So not a ‘stagnation’ but a ‘saturation’.

A condition that could threaten the survival of a lot of destination. So the contribution investigates the long history of Garda along this path from exploration to saturation till the possibility of rejuvenation. The approach draws part from sociology, which aims to represent situations with a participative observation, an experiential perspective that is very close to reality, while maintaining a certain detachment and relying on available data and documentation. So I draw

from medium and long term data; documents provided by local institutions; articles in Italian and foreign press; direct participations and observations of initiatives; interviews with administrators, local residents and tourists. It is important to have a systemic point of view of the complex touristic phenomenon and not a particular vision. I believe that the synergistic approach, as a mix of different initiatives advanced on Lake Garda, could represent a method to analyze other similar situation of historical touristic destinations. And the possible solutions tested on Lake Garda could be transferred to other contexts as well.

**Figure 3.** *The Saturation in the Tourist Destination Life*



Source: own revisiting on Butler's lifecycle model.

I aim to reinterpret from the inside the history of tourism through the transformations that have characterized it. I start from the stage of exploration up to the moment of the "saturation" which is determined by the "overtourism", an excess of flows. The choice presented to the Garda communities is to decide between the progressive decline (dictated by the excessive pressure that will push tourists to look for new, less congested destinations) and the proposal of a new model, which is the one that is coming forward through the discussion of reducing flows (relieving pressure through initiatives in different areas: mobility, hospitality, environment).

### The "Foreign Industry" at Lake Garda: 150 Years of History

Lake Garda is the largest Italian lake around which an interregional tourism system has been consolidating over time. With its 163 km of coastline, a maximum depth of 346 meters, and an extension of 370 km<sup>2</sup>, it constitutes the largest freshwater reserve in Italy: about 50 km<sup>3</sup>. The water is directly used for irrigation, potable (some coastal municipalities supply their aqueducts by drawing water from the lake), and industrial purposes (for the countryside in the Brescia and Mantua areas and for the operation of some hydroelectric power plants). Lake Garda has 25 coastal municipalities, divided between two regions, Lombardy and



Veneto, and the autonomous province of Trento, with a total of over 188,000 residents. However, the number of inhabitants reaches 315,000 if the 50 municipalities traditionally included in the basin by the Garda Community – an interregional body to which the municipalities of Lake Garda voluntarily adhere – are taken into account.

Tourism at Lake Garda is a long-standing phenomenon of middle-European origin, known as “foreign industry” at the time. It took off in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the northern part of the lake was under Austrian rule, but manifested itself on a large scale along its shores only after World War II. Over time, the tourist industry has taken on a new complexity and has become increasingly important from an economic point of view.

The presence of the lake, the mild climate, and the morphology of the landscape are at the origin of a multipurpose tourism that has gradually taken on different settlement patterns.

The trends observed, albeit in alternating phases, have always been characterized – in the medium and long term – by an increase in tourist flows and growing pressure on the “lake ecosystem” and its infrastructures, particularly over the last twenty years.

Since the 2000s, especially during the summer season, tourism has increased considerably, contributing to economic growth, but also leading to environmental degradation, traffic congestion, and strained services. This has caused some localities in particular to report overtourism phenomena. Regions and local communities have entered into a dialogue on finding potential strategies to “unburden” and transform the tourism development model with two macro-objectives: on the one hand, managing tourism influx, and on the other implementing and adapting services. In this regard, the local government has indicated four strategic guidelines: the adaptation of infrastructures (road network, new railway connections, tramway); the implementation of a variety of sustainability initiatives and practices (cycle route, water treatment system); the improvement of service quality in both the hotel and non-hotel industries; a better integration between the administrative entities of the “Garda region” through the strengthening of the role of the Garda Community. The objective of this body, created in 1955 and now counting on the voluntary membership of 40 municipalities, is to strengthen the connection between the entities through discussion tables on the main works planned and mediation between the various interests in the area.

With the annexation of the Veneto region to Italy in 1866, Alto Garda Trentino became the only riviera of the Habsburg Empire. This circumstance increased the notoriety of the Garda area among the middle-European elites, as new ideas were gaining ground in connection with natural medicine and the search for healing places with a sunny and salubrious atmosphere, following the dictates of German Naturphilosophie (Tonelli 1995, 34-40, Taiani 1996, 127-140, Schlude 2008, Giovannini 1996, Scatamacchia 1999). In northern Garda, the center of Arco stood out for the salubriousness of its climate and the rapid construction of services dedicated to holidaymakers-patients, followed by Riva del Garda (Berrino 2011, 193, Battilani 2009, 323-334, Grazioli 1993, 2003, Orandini 1980, Leonardi

1996, 2007, 2010, Simoni 1992, Tonelli 1995, 137-138, D'Agostino and Cunaccia 2015). A few years later, in 1885, two German doctors, Ludwig Rohden and Carl Königer, explored the Italian territory on the western shore and “discovered” Gardone. This marked the beginning of the takeoff of international tourism in the Medio Lago (Rohden 1885, Königer 1907, Mazza 1997, 161-183, 2013). The first large hotels were born, representing a driving force for the entire area (Aresi 2016).

Gardone was transformed into a “garden-city” with the creation of parks and public spaces for recreation and walking, and the introduction of plant and flower species, typical of the Mediterranean coast, which until then had not been present on the Riviera (Ferro 2008, Monicelli 1995, Terraroli 2017, Treccani 2001). After the Great War (Carera 2002, Capuzzo 2020), other centers experienced significant development (Mocarelli and Tedeschi 2017, Berrino 2017). Thermal spa tourism developed in Sirmione, which became best known from the Fascist era onward (Touring Club Italiano 1936, Tedeschi et al. 2017).

Tourism development on the Veneto shore was more delayed (Simoni 1992, 162-163). Only after World War II did the tourist influx increase substantially as shown in Figure 4 (Pasini 1992).

If one considers the resorts of Riva del Garda, Gardone Riviera and Malcesine with reference to the hotel industry, a considerable leap forward can be observed between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s, with arrivals tripling from 40,000 to around 120,000 and presences more than doubling from around 220,000 to over 500,000. Looking at 16 of the 25 riparian municipalities (which were most touristic in those years) between 1964 and 1982, arrivals rose from 500,000 to over a million, and presences from 3,400,000 to over 7,500,000. In 1988, arrivals were over 1,500,000 versus 9,000,000 presences (Pagetti 1990).

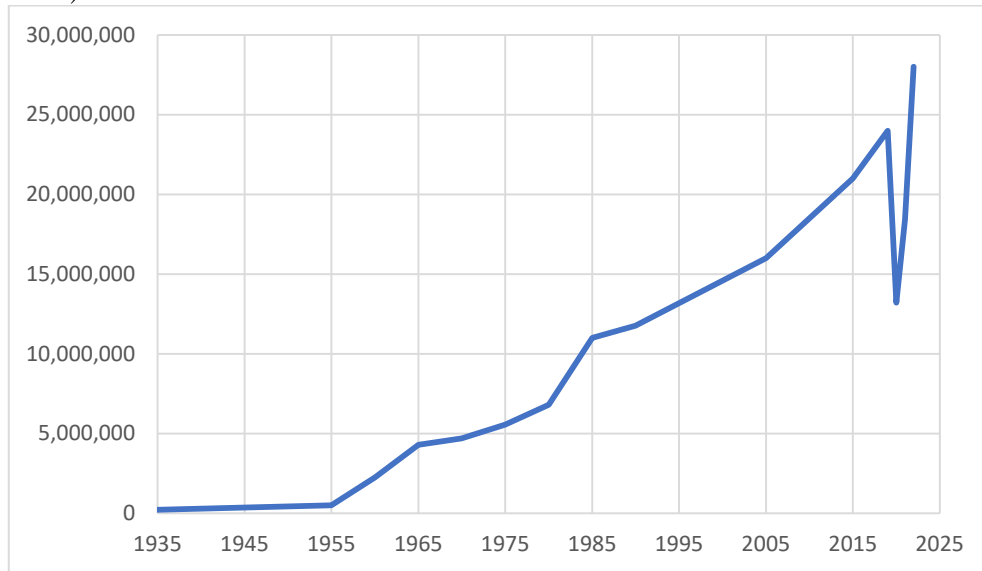
The aggregate data available for Lombardy, Veneto and Trentino show a considerable growth trend in both arrivals and presences, especially in the last twenty years, reaching over 5.5 million arrivals and almost 24 million presences in 2019, an all-time high for Lake Garda.

Despite difficulties with the survey systems, in the post-World War II period, there was a considerable increase in the offer concerning accommodation, which went hand in hand with the onset of mass tourism (see Figure 5). In 1949, 67 hotels had been surveyed on the entire lake, a decrease compared to 10 years earlier due to the war, with a total of 2,653 beds. Twenty years later, the number of hotel establishments rose to 922 with 35,410 beds. In the 1960-1970 decade, the development of the Garda hotel industry was greater than the national one both in terms of the increase in establishments (56% against 20%) and in terms of beds (85% against 50%). Moreover, while up until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tourism had been mainly hotel-based, it began to take on different forms after World War II: namely, campsites and residences. Another phenomenon that emerged strongly was that of the so-called “second homes” (holiday homes), which in some contexts acquired staggering proportions, accounting for 70% of the housing stock (Pasini 2003).

Despite the marked increase in tourist flows, the territory's main infrastructures still follow the historical access routes, without having undergone substantial

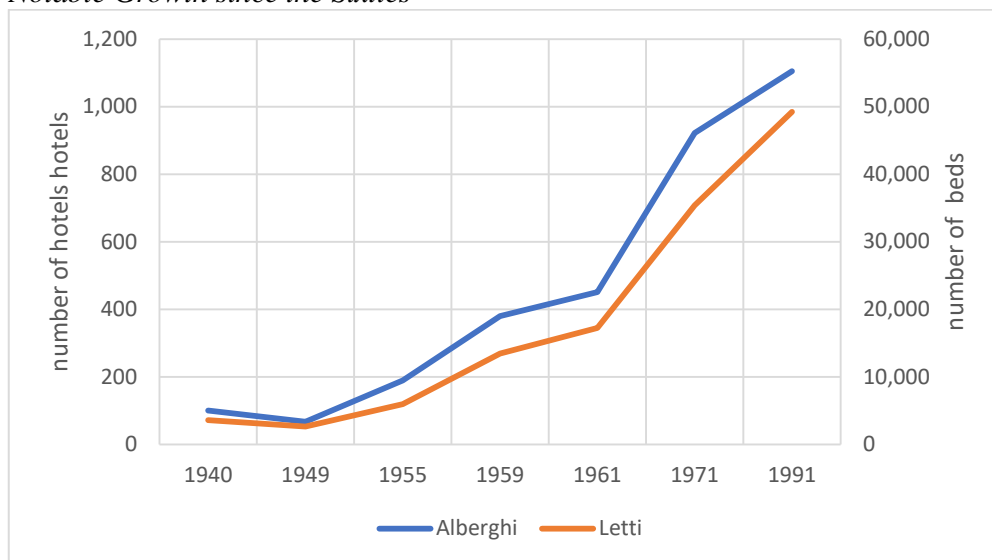
changes. Over time, there has also been a gradual transfer to land of the functions previously performed by and on water with regard to communications and transport (Pasini 2001, 394-396). This is the origin of many actual problems of viability.

**Figure 4.** Representation of the Trends of Tourist Presences at Lake Garda (1935-2022)



Source: Author's elaboration from different sources.

**Figure 5.** Hotels and Bed Availability (1940-1991). Trend Representation with the Notable Growth since the Sixties



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Another important issue concerns water regulation, Lake Garda being the country's main freshwater reserve with about 40% of the national water supply (De Bernardi et al. 2000, Baldoli and Mongiello 2007). The regulation of levels and



flows dates back to 1949 with the construction of a regulating dam at Salionze in the Mantua area. Since then, the Garda has also served as a mixed-use reservoir. Regulation allows greater control over flooding and water storage in times of abundance, as opposed to gradual release in times of shortage. However, it is not easy to meet all the different needs revolving around the lake's waters. The Garda Community is responsible for safeguarding both the quantitative and qualitative water balance in the lake (Onger 2005, 34-44, Chiaudani and Premazzi 1990, Berbenni et al. 1992, Ceresa 1996, De Bernardi et al. 2000). Specific studies have been commissioned over the years in order to monitor water and environmental quality<sup>1</sup>. A debate on water treatment was initiated back in the 1970s. The construction of the wastewater collection system and the treatment plant in the Paradiso locality in Peschiera del Garda (Verona) began in 1977, based on a project designed by Italconsult, a Rome-based company. The first part of the plant went into operation in 1981. The plant was built on an area of 50,000 m<sup>2</sup> on the left bank of the Mincio River in modular form to initially serve 110,000 inhabitants with the possibility of expansion up to 550,000-inhabitant capacity (Consorzio Garda 1, 1990).

### Development and Consolidation

In 2014, the number of presences recorded at Lake Garda reached 20 million and in 2019, before the Covid-19 crisis, they exceeded 23 million, with 5.5 million arrivals. To these, one should also add the so-called “commuter” tourists who do not appear in the statistics, but who visit Garda in a single day to reach the big theme parks or for short-distance trips from the provinces of Brescia, Verona, Mantua, and Trento. These are significant numbers if compared to those of local residents who, as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022, are fewer than 190,000. The demographic trend of the municipalities of Lake Garda, after a consistent growth until the 2000s, has essentially stabilized. The individual municipalities are characterized by a slight upward trend.

The important tourist development of the 25 coastal centers (and some of the hinterland) is also linked to the presence of a considerable number of municipalities with a high “tourist density”, as classified according to law 17<sup>th</sup> July 2000, no. 77, art. 182<sup>2</sup>, which assigns category L1 destinations (municipalities of cultural, historical, artistic, lacustrine, and landscape related interest, or of other interest) the highest importance in the tourist field, second only to some large cities. In Italy, 431 municipalities are part of this category: very relevant for their specific appeal, they are mainly located in the Central-Northern Regions of the country and less so in the South and Islands. The share of days of tourist presence

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<sup>1</sup>Archivio Comunità del Garda (ACG), *Progetto finalizzato alla formulazione di un piano di gestione di controllo volto al contenimento di eventuali fenomeni di eutrofizzazione delle acque del lago di Garda. Rapporto finale*, July 1993.

<sup>2</sup>ISTAT Data available online at <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/247191>

they represent stands at 7.8% of the national total. These L1 municipalities have 17,690 residents on average.

Lake Garda shows a high concentration of L1 classified municipalities compared to the national median. Over a 1,064 km<sup>2</sup> area, which composes 0.35% of the total land area of Italy (301,230 km<sup>2</sup>) there are 14 L1 municipalities, accounting for 3.24% of all Italian L1 municipalities (431).

The 14 L1 Garda municipalities are on average smaller, with about half the number of inhabitants: 8,753. To this must be added the presence of the remaining 11 municipalities that fall in the D category (lake tourism municipalities, also with a high “tourist density”), represented in Italy by 167 municipalities (6.51% at lake Garda). Therefore, the Garda area proves to be extraordinarily appealing, causing it to become invaded by tourists over recent years.

### From Tourism to Overtourism

From the early 2000s to the present day, the figures for presences and arrivals have been growing steadily. From 2005 to 2019, a record year for tourism at Lake Garda, arrivals almost doubled from 3 million to over 5.5 million, while presences rose from around 16 million to almost 24 million. In the last 2022 they reached 27 million.

The tourist offer has adapted to the growing demand. Significant changes emerge from the analysis of the transformation of the accommodation capacity at Lake Garda compared to the data of the last years and in particular from 2016 to 2021, limited to the Brescian shore. Table 1 shows that the number of hotel beds has slightly increased, while the giant leap is recorded in non-hotel accommodation and is linked to the phenomenon of short-term rental of holiday homes (Airbnb, Naturehouse, etc.). In 45 years, from 1960 to 2016, hotel beds increased by 82.62%, while in the five-year period they increased by 7.50%. Non-hotel beds over the same period increased by 125.28% and by 34.47% over the five-year period under review.

**Table 1.** *Beds Availability at Lake Garda (Brescia). Beds Availability Shows the Increase of Hotel and Non-hotel Accommodation*

Beds	1960	2016	2021	2016-2021 %
Hotel	14,227	24,779	26,638	+7.50
Non-hotel	22,732	51,212	68,867	+34.47
Total	36,959	75,991	95,505	+25.67

Source: Data for the Province of Brescia.

Furthermore, other circumstances evince the pressure exerted in recent years on services in the lake system. The increased presence of motor and sailing boats has necessitated the constant presence of a surveillance, control, and rescue service. Since 1999, a Coast Guard unit has been active to ensure the safety of navigation and the suppression of dangerous behavior. In 23 years, the Harbor Guard has grown from one to five vessels deployed on Lake Garda. The number of personnel has increased from 8 to 35. From 1999 to 2006, the Coast Guard was

on duty exclusively during the summer period: from 1<sup>st</sup> June to 30<sup>th</sup> September. Since 2007, patrol boats on the lake are on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (Guardia Costiera 2022).

As far as public navigation is concerned, the service is managed by Navigarda, a governmental body existing since 1957 which has been in charge of public navigation services on Lakes Maggiore, Garda, and Como with a total fleet of 98 vessels. On Lake Garda, the fleet consists of 28 ships, including motorboats, catamarans and hydrofoils connecting 25 ports of call. The service runs from April to October.

Data on public navigation and the number of passengers aboard watercraft also show the increase in tourists over the last twenty years, albeit with a less pronounced trend. It follows that the number of tourists using watercraft is proportionally lower. In 1999, the presences on Lake Garda were calculated at about 14 million tourists against about 2 million tickets sold: one tourist out of 7 sailed; in 2019, 2.5 million tickets were sold against 24 million tourists, which means that only about one tourist out of 11 used the Navigarda vessels.

The German press was the first to sound the alarm about the overcrowding at Lake Garda. The *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the most widely read newspapers in Germany, published an article in 2018 entitled “Lake Garda has reached its limit” and the summary stated: “Full beaches, congested roads, millions of hotel guests and polluted water: Lake Garda is becoming increasingly popular with travelers from all over the world. How long can it last?”. The report signed by Elisa von Britzelmeier, which was widely echoed on social media and in the Italian press (Cassol 2018), started with Sirmione and moved on to Lazise, taking into consideration the entire situation of Lake Garda.

Lake Garda is becoming increasingly popular with tourists, with over 24 million overnight stays per year. Germans have always come, but now Chinese and Russians are also arriving. And those who come stay less than before because of the increased traffic... Cars clog the roads around the lake. Natural areas disappear under the hotels, environmentalists are concerned about water quality. In addition to overnight guests, day trippers arrive, and there is not much room... overtourism, the kind of mass tourism that ultimately destroys a tourist destination. Of course, there are no cruise ships on Lake Garda, and tourists do not flock to one town, but also to many places less vulnerable than Sirmione. Here there are no anti-tourist protests like in Mallorca. Not yet?... While cheap flights take tourists elsewhere, Lake Garda is still typically reached by car: not easily accessible by train, with poorly developed bus lines.... Traffic is also evident in CO2 pollution: and on the water, motorboats are only banned in the upper part of the lake, but after all, there are so many of them that their roar annoys even tourists.... even finding a parking space is not easy around the lake. (Britzelmeier 2018).

The article in the Munich daily newspaper also denounces the failure to control sewage spills into the lake, the overbuilding in some areas, and the proliferation of holiday homes (“second homes”). The author concluded with some irony: “There should be restrictions on the number of tourists, but how? Maybe a huge fence around the entire Lake Garda will do?”. The report is indicative of the new perception about the lake that has been emerging in recent

years. The data confirm a situation that is not comforting. While the road network has remained virtually intact and so has the not very relevant railway network, the number of “official” presences on the lake has tripled in less than forty years, going from 7,500,000 in 1982 to 15,000,000 in 2005 to 24,000,000 in 2019. But the numbers would be far higher: at least double that, 50,000,000, according to some administrators and tour operators (Gamba 2018). In addition, forecasts for 2022 report reaching, if not further exceeding, pre-Covid flows (Borelli 2022).

The most striking case of overtourism at Lake Garda is represented by the town of Sirmione, a peninsula characterized by a particular morphology, a tongue of land that stretches into the Garda basin, with spectacular beaches and archaeological remains, testimony of the presence of the Latin poet Valerius Catullus on the Lake. In addition, Sirmione is a historic spa resort where many hotels were built during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (TCI, 1954). Sirmione is extraordinarily difficult to access because authorized pedestrian and motorized transit can only enter through a single street that is no more than four-meter wide. The characteristics of this town attract millions of visitors every year, most of whom spend only a few hours in the Sirmione area. This causes a serious inconvenience for residents who abandon the historic center, victim of galloping “gentrification”, while there is no shortage of problems for the maintenance of services, as in the case of the serious blackout recorded in mid-August 2021 that blocked the supply of energy and water to homes and hotels (Roman 2021). According to estimates, in 2017, the town of 8,000 inhabitants had 1,360,000 presences, to which commuting tourists should be added, for an estimate of hundreds of thousands more to well exceed 2 million. These data have had a great resonance both in Italy and abroad, and in particular in Germany, from which about 80% of foreign tourists come (Bottura 2018, Obermeier 2018, Binge 2018). Over the years, successive municipal administrations have tried to solve the issue by launching several initiatives: adjusting parking spaces, increasing parking fees, setting up small electric shuttles from the farthest parking lots to the central streets, alternating one-way pedestrian transit, limited access to beaches especially during the Covid-19 emergency (Roman 2020). However, the situation remains essentially unresolved.

### **Sustainability: Work in Progress**

In recent years, many actors have been engaged in the mitigation of the negative effects of overtourism, with the aim of improving the quality of the tourist offer in a more sustainable way, also in accordance with the UN Agenda 2030.

The strategies being studied to stem the phenomena of overtourism and guarantee sustainable tourism on the lake start from the issue of mobility (see Figure 6). One of the symbols of the modernization of the Lake Garda area in terms of tourism was the construction of the two main roads running along the two shores, the eastern and western. The two Gardesana roads were built during the Fascist era. The western Gardesana in particular stood out as an example of daring, spectacular architecture. Even today, the “very Italian artery” offers - between one

tunnel and another - extraordinary scenic views that make it one of the most beautiful roads in Italy (Bolis 1931; Brescia, 1931). However, its functionality, in spite of some sporadic upgrading work, is largely overtaken by the exorbitant increase in road traffic. The situation is also congested on the eastern bank, especially during the summer period (P.M. 2022). On the other hand, because of the very lay of the land there is not much room for improvement, even if some projects (still at the feasibility study stage) are being examined by the operational groups promoted by the Garda Community. These include the working group dedicated to the possible construction of a tunnel that would cross the coastal road at Toscolano Maderno and, through a longer tunnel, enter the Vallesabbia – a valley to the west of the Garda basin – which is less congested by traffic, so as to offer an alternative route to road traffic. The tunnel would have a length of about 7 kilometers and within it a pipeline could also be placed to pump sewage water inland. The proposal launched in recent years by the municipality of Toscolano Maderno is currently under discussion, but no formal steps have been taken in this direction yet<sup>3</sup>.

As it pertains to the lower lake area where the theme parks are located, the construction of a new freeway exit at Castelnuovo (Verona) is being studied, as it could divert traffic directed towards the parks, alleviating a situation that along the A4 highway is untenable, especially at weekends and during the summer. In this case, the work is at the awarding stage for an amount of 67 million euro (Stoppele 2022).

A pre-feasibility study is currently being prepared at the University of Brescia for the construction of a subway from the city to the Tormini junction, a few kilometers from Salò. The route would be about twenty kilometer long and an extension of the city's existing light rail system (Bacca 2022).

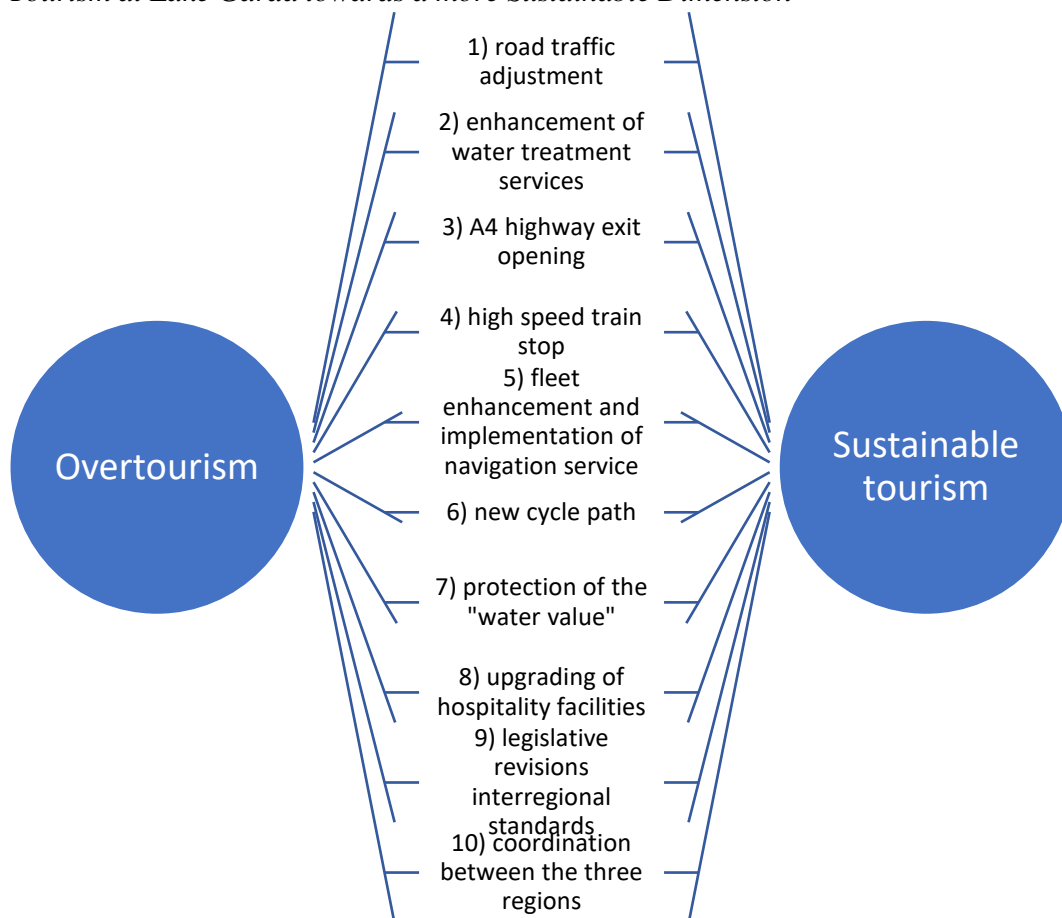
Still on the subject of mobility, special attention is being paid at this stage to cycle tourism, which has been showing great potential for development (Formato 2009, Pavione and Canciani 2015) also with a view to overcoming the difficulties generated by the pandemic crisis (Saldanha et al. 2021). A strategic project, partly already implemented, partly planned, and also financed with funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), is certainly that of the Garda cycle route, included among the 10 cycle routes of national interest<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>ACG, Nuovo collettore di depurazione del Garda sponda occidentale. Nuovo tunnel viario Toscolano Maderno-Collio di Vobarno, Proposta di fattibilità, February 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Law n°. 208 28<sup>th</sup> December 2016, art. 1, p. 640.

**Figure 6.** Proposal and Initiatives. Numerous Activities are in the Works to Orient Tourism at Lake Garda towards a more Sustainable Dimension



The interregional infrastructure, according to the original indications, should cover the entire circumnavigation of Lake Garda for about 164 km owing to an investment of 344 million euro. The project envisages the construction of new cycle path stretches and a series of connecting works to existing ones. Expectations regarding the realization of this work are very high. According to ANCMA data (2022), the phenomenon of cycle tourism and bicycle-related activities is growing strongly in the Eurozone. In 2021, 22 million bikes and e-bikes were sold in Europe. According to ANCMA estimates, cycle tourism accounts for between 6.1% and 15% of the total tourism economy. Confirmation of this trend is provided by Navigarda's data on the transport of bicycles by boats, which has been recorded in recent years and is increasing considerably.

Moreover, investing in the navigation system is regarded by many as the main solution for alleviating the access and transport difficulties on Lake Garda. Some proposals are underway: the further upgrading of the Navigarda fleet, the scheduling of additional boat trips even during the autumn and winter period, therefore serving not only tourist but local commuters as well, and the introduction of new hybrid diesel-electric boats (Francesconi 2022).



The water issue is generally the focus of public interest. Water is in fact a resource for multiple uses: potable (most riparian municipalities use the lake water for their waterworks); tourist-recreational; economic-productive, for irrigation of the countryside for agricultural purposes and the production of electricity. There is no lack of conflict between the different interests and users upstream and downstream. Water management requires constant compromise between the parties involved. Considering that the Sarca-Garda-Mincio basin (the lake with its tributary and its emissary) is shared by different provinces and regions, the issue of water use has to be addressed in an interregional perspective with a shared and agreed vision, while being sensitive to the local needs. It can be difficult to strike the right balance and it is important to minimize global damage (Berbenni et al. 1992, 21-40). Recently, the Garda Community organized a round table to manage the water emergency following the prolonged drought that brought agriculture to its knees.

From the environmental perspective, in the face of the pressure that has become unsustainable on the Peschiera plant, a radical revision and implementation of the wastewater collection and treatment system has been debated since 2015. On the Lombard shore, two new plants should be built in the hinterland of Lake Garda, in the municipalities of Gavardo and Montichiari, which could process the effluents of the middle lake. The proposal is in the hands of the Associazione Temporanea di Scopo (ATS) called Garda Ambiente (Garda Community 2022)<sup>5</sup>. However, the proposal has found widespread opposition from some environmental committees. On the other hand, the renewal of the drainage system on the Veneto shore is at a more advanced stage, with the transition from the planning to the implementation phase.

The Garda Community is also working on several fronts: the revision of the interregional law on navigation, the revision of fishing regulations, various cultural initiatives, and the establishment of a new “Garda Tourism Observatory” in collaboration with Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan<sup>6</sup>. In these areas, the Garda Community is following some guidelines already present in programmatic studies of the 1970s, which already spoke of “coordination of territorial initiatives” and of the “recognition of a strong vocation for tourism in the Garda area and the validity of the principle of taking advantage of the appealing characteristics of territories in planning their development”<sup>7</sup>.

On the hospitality front, a trend is underway – reinforced by significant private investments – towards a qualitative improvement of the offer both with the construction of new high-end hotels and the upgrading of existing ones.

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<sup>5</sup>Comunità del Garda, Official web <https://www.comunitadelgarda.it/primo-piano/garda-ambiente/52-3.html>

<sup>6</sup>ACG, deliberazione del consiglio direttivo della Comunità del Garda, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2022; verbale consiglio di Facoltà di scienze linguistiche Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

<sup>7</sup>ACG, Sintesi del modello di sviluppo economico e sociale. Documento programmatico per la politica urbanistica a cura di Technital e comunità del Garda 10 giugno 1974, p. 3-8. Cf. ACG, Programma di interventi coordinati. Attività economiche. Parte prima conoscitiva. Bozza di lavoro. Settembre 1973 a cura di Technital e Comunità del Garda, September 1973.

Overall, if we examine the situation of hotels on the Brescia side of the lake in the five-year period 2016-2021 (see Table 2), we can notice an increase in the number of facilities (from 416 to 420), with a surge in the number of those in the higher category and corresponding number of beds (from 4 stars upwards) and a decrease in those in the lower category (from 3 stars downwards). Thus, the widespread tendency to improve the quality of the hospitality offer by increasing the number of beds in the highest category can be confirmed (Scarpetta 2022, Piva 2022).

**Table 2. Beds Availability/Hotel Categories (2016-2021)**

Hotel stars	Hospitality activities		Number of beds	
	2016	2021	2016	2021
1	20	15	515	315
2	67	63	1,341	1,243
3	198	195	9,732	9,533
4	85	94	9,514	10,609
5	10	11	1,061	1,303

Source: Author's elaboration of data for the Province of Brescia.

Moreover, round-table discussions on sustainability are in progress, promoting initiatives aimed at extending the tourist season at Lake Garda and enhancing its hinterland. At the moment, the most drastic hypotheses, such as access quotas and entrance fees, which are difficult to apply on a vast area such as the lake, are still unthinkable even for individual resorts.

## Conclusions

For the first time, during its long history, Lake Garda must engage with this serious problem, i.e., to cope with the phenomenon of overtourism, which has come to the fore in recent years. The actions implemented by local communities go in two directions: on the one hand, the upgrading of infrastructures, their adaptation to more efficient parameters of sustainability, and the implementation of new projects to improve the services available; on the other hand, some forces are pushing for a quantitative “decrease” of the tourist phenomenon, directing it towards a “redevelopment” of the offer that raises the level of hospitality, selects presences, but at the same time guarantees satisfactory economic results for operators. The search for a new “balanced” development model that reconciles these demands is the general orientation confirmed by local institutions and stakeholders.

Many of the recent investments have gone in this direction, i.e., the upgrading and enhancement of the hospitality offer. This seems to be the path on which Lake Garda has recently been setting out: in the wake of the recovery, in a sense, of the great middle-European tradition that saw the high quality of the offer as a privileged tourist model. Thus, for Garda we could speak of a sort of “return to the past for the future”, in which the goal is represented by an enhancement of the area's resources (climate, vegetation, landscape, water, etc.) and their “sustainable” use (cycle paths, thermalism, water and wind sports, navigation). All this could be

complemented by the presence of high-end hospitality facilities with high standards (5 and 4-star hotels and glamping), flanked by low-invasive hospitality solutions (holiday farms, B&Bs) that are compatible with the demand for “sustainability” made increasingly pressing by tourists. The balanced presence of these objectives could be a guarantee for the balance of the lake-ecosystem itself and at the same time for the maintenance of the economic assets traditionally represented by tourism at lake Garda.

All these initiatives represent the opportunity to avoid decline and reach rejuvenation of the destination.

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