

Cultural heritage as a new resource for tourism development: the case study of Tornio- Haparanda (Finland/Sweden)

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The enhancement of historical cultural heritage can represent an attraction for visitors looking for the traces left by human events on the territory and landscape of the countries that are developing pioneering and still marginal forms of tourism.

The northern Gulf of Bothnia region was the battlefield of the war between Russia and Sweden (1808-1809), after which the Torne River became the border between the two countries. This particularity determined, over the last two centuries, the development of economic and political activities that left indelible marks on the landscape. The point where the Swedish-Finnish border meets the sea thus became a transit area for the shortest land communication between the two countries. If the Torne River, still at the beginning of the twentieth century, was crossed with small boats due to the technical difficulties of its crossing with stable bridges, the communities - culturally different but economically united by common interests - on both sides of the political border gradually increased trade activities. Here Haparanda and Tornio, border towns linked by a common historical and economic destiny, developed their size and population. In the First World War - when Finland still

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belonged to Russia - the towns became places of contact and exchange not only of goods and financial resources, but also of diplomatic and military staff, spies and smugglers, promoting the economic and infrastructural development of the area.

This historical period is testified at Haparanda by the monumental Stadshotell, former seat of the local municipality and hotel frequented by people employed in these activities. The 1916 international railway station (Fig. 1) also witnessed Lenin's passage, during a long train journey from Zurich to St. Petersburg, which would change the course of history by causing the Bolshevik Revolution. Again, in the Second World War, Swedish armed neutrality (still evidenced by two small fortifications protecting the railway bridge) began again a period of political and economic relations and flows of war refugees. In recent decades, economic activities have developed in the service sector. Tornio and Haparanda overcome the condition of political separation and take advantage of their status as border towns to develop common policies of cooperation and cross-border administration of the territory: shopping centers arise and tourism increases in summer (sports) and winter (observation of the Northern Lights, excursions with reindeer or sledge dogs, mini cruises with icebreaker on the Baltic Sea, visit to the Santa Claus Village at Rovaniemi). The two municipalities have adopted a common brand and share development programs: the political border no longer has economic functions between two countries united in the European Union and in the Schengen area, and increases shopping tourism. Furthermore, it becomes an opportunity to emphasize the singularity of this place, also representing the limit between two time zones: this allows, in the shopping center on the border, the celebration of midnight on December 31st during two distinct times one hour apart. The event is entitled "Happy new twice" and attracts, in addition to the population of the two towns, also tourists on vacation in the twin cities.

This case study analyzes a possible example of tourist enhancement of the border landscape: tourism is generated not only by a particular cultural heritage (traces of contemporary history, documented by buildings, infrastructures, monuments and museums), but also by the particular geographic and political position and by the presence of “non-places” - such as shopping centers - that allows an important economic development of this peripheral region in the European context.

Fig. 1 – Haparanda border railway station.

Source: M.V. Lucarno, 2019



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