

GRANULAR

LIVING LABS CROSS VISIT DOSSIER

Italy: Distretto Rurale Val di Cecina



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Distretto Rurale Val di Cecina

ABOUT THE CROSS VISIT

This dossier describes a three-day study visit to the rural district of Val di Cecina, on 17-19 September 2025, focusing on sustainable rural tourism, overtourism management, and the enhancement of protected areas through cultural and environmental initiatives.

The first day takes place in the Berignone Nature Reserve and in Volterra, where a distillery project is presented that connects the forest and the city through artisanal products and urban hiking trails, promoting slow tourism and the spatial redistribution of tourist flows. The second day will be spent visiting Riparbella (murals, Etruscan museum, Scornabecchi garden) and Marina di Cecina, analyzing how projects financed with regional and European funds increase attractiveness but generate problems of tourist concentration, mobility, and ecological pressure, addressed with forest certifications (PEFC), diversification of supply, and measures against coastal erosion. The third day is devoted to collective reflection, identifying threats and opportunities (depopulation, human resources, innovation), and exchanging experiences of rural tourism between territories.

This document highlights as strengths the multi-level interaction, the combination of visits and discussion spaces, and methodological learning for decision-makers, and includes organizational lessons (early planning, translation, accessibility), as well as guidance on audiovisual documentation and satisfaction assessment.

Location
Topic
Rural Tourism
Number of participants
20 participants
Contacts
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Related work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice Abstract • Catalogue

DAY 1: Overview of Activities

The first day offered an immersive experience in the Berignone Forest Nature Reserve, a protected area of more than 2,000 hectares of woodland and rivers (Cecina River), located about 30 km from the center of Volterra. Guided by a local expert, the visit retraced the history of an old distillery, today managed by the Associazione Distillerie di Volterra. Here, forest plants are turned into raw materials for artisanal spirits, which are sold and tasted at Vena di Vino, a restaurant in the heart of the city.

This initiative aims to create a link between rural areas and Volterra's historic center, promoting the local territory through sustainable production and offering visitors a new way to experience the forest: not only as a natural space but also as a cultural and productive resource. The project also works to balance tourism flows in the reserve (spatial balance): while this area receives very few visitors, other parts suffer from overtourism. The distillery initiative helps bring people to less-visited places, reducing the pressure on overcrowded areas.

After a lunch based on local products at Vena di Vino, the afternoon was dedicated to a 14 km urban trekking route connecting Volterra's historic center with the surrounding areas. This walk allowed participants to explore not only artistic and historical sites, but also unique aspects of the city's heritage, such as geothermal energy and the Volterra salt works. The experience combined nature-based and urban tourism, promoting slow tourism, an approach that encourages visitors to discover the territory at a mindful pace.

However, the afternoon also highlighted the issue of overtourism in Volterra. To address this, strategies are being considered to slow down the flow of visitors, for example by promoting walking tours that encourage people to spend more time in the area instead of short visit.

DAY 2: Overview of Activities

The second day began in the municipality of Riparbella, with a tour of the murals (painted by international artists on houses, public spaces and benches), the newly opened Etruscan Museum, and the PAFR Scornabecchi Garden. Both the museum and the murals initiative were supported by regional or European funds, with the aim of increasing the attractiveness of small historic villages such as Riparbella. These projects successfully drew many visitors and actively involved the local community. However, they also created some challenges: concentrated overtourism, overcrowding in the village, and issues related to mobility and visitor flow management. In the early afternoon, the visit continued to the PAFR Scornabecchi Garden with the park forestry technician. Again, the goal is to revitalize a rural protected area and make it more attractive for tourism. The site includes an outdoor school in the forest, a wildlife enclosure (with wild boars and deer), outdoor activities managed by sport associations, and around 50 km of walking and cycling trails through the woods. While these initiatives have significantly enriched the area, they also raised concerns regarding visitor flow management, overtourism, and impacts on the natural ecosystem. One strategy under development is the adoption of PEFC (Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification), that is a voluntary certification ensuring that all forest users comply with rules for sustainable management.

The visit concluded in Marina di Cecina, in the municipality of Cecina, with a bike tour through the Tomboli Nature Reserve (coastal pine forest) with the urban planning manager of the municipality. This area addresses the challenge of a very high concentration of tourists during the summer season (3/4 months), mainly attracted by the sea. To tackle this, the municipality are working to diversify the tourist offers. Another issue is the severe coastal erosion: measures to mitigate this include the use of artificial reefs to slow down the erosion process and the replanting of tree species to restore and protect the coastal ecosystem.

DAY 3: Overview of Activities

On the last morning, the group focused on reviewing the main topics from the visit and sharing personal experiences of rural tourism, looking at both challenges and opportunities.

The session started with the interventions of the administrations of the three municipalities visited (Volterra, Riparbella, Cecina). They gave a short summary of their visit, key issues discussed and eventually strategies implemented in relation to them. Participants were then asked to write their impressions on post-it, noting the elements that struck them most. These notes, finally, were placed on two boards: "Threats" or "Opportunities", depending on whether the element that struck them seemed more a threat or an opportunity.

After collecting all the notes, a list of key works was extracted from the post-it (e.g. depopulation, human resources, need for innovation strategies, etc.). In the second part of the morning, participants shared their own experiences of rural tourism and described strategies implemented in their territories that linked to the key.

This activity led to the exchange of several useful and relevant experiences, as they showed various strategies different from those implemented in the context of Val di Cecina Rural District, but in response to similar issues.

INSIGHTS & LEARNINGS

One of the main positive aspects was the active interaction among participants, who came from different countries and roles. This diversity of participants provides valuable for exchanging reflections and building a network of contacts that encouraged dialogue on tourism topic. Not only was the diversity of the group decisive, but also the number of participants. The number was appropriate for carrying out all the activities. It would have been more difficult to manage a larger group, especially for traveling to places to visit due to mobility constraints.

Another strength was the structure of the programme, which combined outdoor visits with dedicated moments of reflection and discussion. This balance kept the group engaged while also creating the space to process and analyse what had been observed. The final morning session was fundamental, as it allowed participants to engage in a slow and thoughtful discussion of the issues and strategies that had emerged over the previous days.

The structure of the visit also made it possible to present real local challenges together with concrete initiatives supported by regional and European funds: for example, the murals initiative in Riparbella designed to foster the attractiveness of the municipality. At the same time, the structure provided space to reflect on the potential negative impacts of such initiatives, encouraging participants to consider both opportunities and risks.

Some aspects of the visit could have been improved:

First of all, it would have been important to define the programme earlier. This would not only have avoided the pressure of finalizing the agenda so close to the visit date (partly due to the summer holiday period), but it would also have helped participants to organize themselves better. In addition, a preparatory meeting with the group could have been useful to clarify practical matters and to make sure expectations were aligned.

Another point concerns communication: providing Italian/English translation during the visits would have allowed smoother conversations, especially in the exchanges with local stakeholders.

The length of the daily activities is also something to keep in mind. Some days were quite intense, and a good balance between outdoor visits, reflection moments and rest time should help participants to stay more engaged.

Finally, accessibility is important to consider. In our case, most of the activities was outdoor and sometimes involved quite physical effort (short hikes, walks, biking). It would be good to discuss this with participants in advance and, if necessary, plan alternatives so that everyone can enjoy the visit.

USEFULNESS FOR DECISION MARKERS

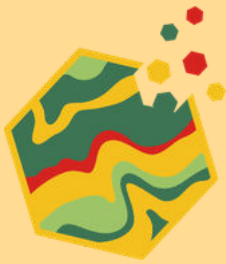
During the visit, decision makers were present in all day-long activities. Their presence was very fundamental, both for presenting issues related to rural tourism and, above all, for participating in discussions with the other participants.

In terms of methodologies, the visits allowed decision makers to learn from the strategies implemented locally in the rural areas of each participant, including solutions developed in response to similar challenges. This created an opportunity to exchange experiences and adapt approaches to their own contexts.

In terms of data, the visits highlighted the importance of reliable information for decision-making. For example, in the case of overtourism, data on visitor flows, environmental impact, etc. were essential to understand the situation and plan effective strategies.

PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS





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GRANULAR is a four-year multi-disciplinary and transnational project. It aims at generating new datasets, tools and methods to better understand rural diversity and to promote place-based rural policies.



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