

## **Reinventing Tourism office through Service Design in the Digital Age: the Case of Saillon in the Swiss Alps**

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### **Abstract**

*The medium mountain tourism offices were created in the 1970s and no longer correspond to the regional development context of today and the future. Based on the case study of the picturesque village of Saillon, well known for its thermal baths, we revisit the grammar of the tourist experience. At a time when mass tourism is being criticized, awareness of climate change is high, we have reworked the fundamentals of welcoming based on ancestral codes of hospitality. In particular, we offer a tourism office of the future, which includes a self-service section open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week using digitisation touch points. The tourist office also functions as a "conductor" and integrates the notion of welcoming network through signage throughout the village to showcase its most beautiful assets. This concept will very soon be implemented in the near future and will become a model that could be generalized for mid-mountain destinations.*

**Keywords:** *Tourism office, digital touchpoint, touristic experience staging.*

### **1. Introduction**

The goal of the research is to identify the problematic aspects of the current tourist office and the possible causes that brought to the drop of visits and to develop some solution proposal to the identified problems to be integrated into the definition of the new tourist office in Saillon.

Saillon is a municipality in the district of Martigny in the canton of Valais in Switzerland. It rises on the right side of the river Rhone. Due to its strategic position the village has a medieval history which is well preserved and still visible today. Classified one of the most beautiful village of Switzerland in 2013, Saillon is not only a medieval village but is especially known for its famous bath and its fertile hills of vineyards that surround the town. The naturalistic wealth of the village is linked to its favourable context and to the numerous resources; these in the past have contributed to identify Saillon as a medieval settlement and a place of agricultural development. The fertility of the land combined with the practices of



local cultivation make this village a popular destination for food and wine. In the surrounding hills, in fact, there are many vineyards and different prestigious wines are produced. The areas that separate the village from the river Rhone are cultivated especially apricots, apples and white asparagus. Its charm has attracted during the history, important characters such as Gustave Courbet and Goethe, who have contributed to enrich the artistic and cultural heritage of Saillon. Another popular figure, Joseph-Samuel Farinet, considered the Robin Hood of the Valais, is dedicated to the local museum of counterfeit coins.

## **2. Methodology and fieldwork**

### **2.1. Methodology**

The methodology has been applied is based on the discipline of Service Design and it combines the approach developed by the School of Management & Tourism of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland Valais; and the typical one of the Design Process. This resulting methodology consists of four stages:

1. Discover: explore and understand the context/ what
2. Define: define the specific problematic elements/ why
3. Develop: focus on the problems and find solutions/How
4. Deliver: test the solution to the launch.

In the first phase there has been made five observation visits in the site; during the second phase has been carried out four interviews to different actors; shadowing of visitors, customer journeys and maps of the visitors flow has been developed. The fact the OT is placed in the half-way position between the two main attractions of Saillon, does not guarantee a better visibility for the visitors of both tourist spots. (A/B) To illustrate such consideration, it is useful to think in terms of contact points between a visitors and the tourist office.

### **2.2. Immersion episodes**

A preliminary observation of the site shows that the major tourist interest is situated in the upper part of the village where visitors can find the Tour Bayart, the Musée de la Fausse Monnaie, the medieval garden and the typical medieval alleys. The tourist office instead, is located in the lower part of the village; that means visitors won't have a spontaneous encounter with the tourist centre during their visit in the medieval village. A walking visitor hence, will have to go down from the old centre in case he need to visit the OT.

#### *2.2.1. External look*



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A second point to reflect on, is how the tourist office looks from outside. (C) Due to its access on a big road and the style of the building in which is located, the OT is not recognisable as such. Its identification from the street is of primary importance.

### 2.2.2. *Mapping the flows of visitors*

In order to access the capabilities of the current position, three has been analysed and mapped the flows experience of visitors arriving in Saillon by car and public transportation (see the maps and the descriptions in the annex)

To make the analysis more realistic the flows has been developed considering the visit of three main attraction of Saillon:

- The bath
- The medieval centre
- The Via Ferrata

From the analysis of the three cases of the visitor flow (visit of the bath, visit of the medieval centre and visit of the Via Ferrata),there are some interesting facts that worth to be highlighted:

- The roundabout that lead to “ Route des Bains de Saillon” is a strategic point not only for people by car who wants to go to the bath but also to the visitors of the centre and the Via Ferrata;
- The directional sign saying “Old Bourg” placed in the roundabout, encourages drivers to take the back street to reach the centre bringing them directly in “Place des Remparts” where they will park. In this way, these visitors have no chance to see the OT;
- The current position of the OT is more functional to people by car who visit the bath or the Via Ferrata and, once recognized the office, decide to stop for some questions. To make this happen, it is important to make the OT recognisable and very attractive from the outside;
- The current position of the OT is not practical for people arriving in Saillon by bus. Visitors would surely use one of those shortcuts (Sentier Sous le Scex/ Sentier Barbentane) to reach the centre; as the OT is not situated along the two shortcuts, they will surely miss to visit it.

Therefore, we can assume that who benefit from the current position of the tourist office, are visitors arriving in Saillon by car.

The OT in fact:

- has parking facilities for visitors;



- its access from the main road make it easy to find for visitors by car.

Tourist by car who intend to visit the OT should be able to stop temporarily with their own vehicle in the outdoor parking, enter the office and then leave. However, this possibility is remote. Why?

To verify such hypothesis it is necessary to have a deep look in the experience of the visitor.

This is important because allow us to understand the real behaviour of users and any relevant problematic aspect of the visit.

At the same time, it makes possible to identify in which moments the visitor is more willing to collect tourist information, hence to get in touch with the tourist office.

### **2.3. A journey in the experience**

Let's imagine people coming to Saillon by car. It's conceivable their first thought is not to know where the tourist office is located, but to leave their vehicle as close as possible to the site of interest. Once parked, they will certainly be more relaxed and ready to welcome any information about the destination. Despite the fact that the OT has a parking lot outside, this is not very attractive for visitors as it is further from the centre than for example, the parking at "Place des Remparts". This fact and the insights coming from the visitors flow, led me to identify the area of Place de Remparts as the ideal location for the tourist office. The potentialities of this location are the following:

- Great attraction of visitors who come to Saillon by different transportation means (bikes, cars, walking). After parking, visitors find at the tourist office just at the entrance of the medieval village; Those using public transport generally stop along the main road, these will be able to find the OT within the city walls by following specific directions.
- It is an access point to the medieval centre and to the many naturalistic paths towards the vineyards. Hence, this position is first of all functional for the operators of the OT who provide information directly on the site.
- "Place des Remparts" is an interesting junction for those who come from an excursion and decide to stay in the village to eat a meal / drink.
- The presence of the typical medieval structures enhances the context by providing a scenic setting for the tourist office.

The new tourism office will have to be recognisable for tourists and attract their interest. It will be equipped with coordinated graphics and signs and other specially designed elements.



### **3. A tourism office grounded on ancestral hospitality values**

The new concept for the tourist office in Saillon merges an innovative solution with the value of hospitality. The 24h open TO does not want to be just a technologic answer the needs of the modern tourist, it aims instead at providing a true feeling of hospitality, in which no visitors is left alone. This solution considers having a regular tourist office always working, very costly from the human and financial perspective in a destination where the tourist visits are for obvious reasons limited.

Leading us to a reflexion on the original concept of hospitality, it is inspired by the ancient way of doing tourism. In Middle Ages, the pilgrim or visitor, knew there was at least one point in the destination where to go to find hospitality, usually in taverns and hostels. As ruled by a tacit deal, the local community was welcoming the newcomers for the time of their staying. In a similar way, a tourist point always accessible for visitors, will guarantee them a physical place where to get the welcome they would like to receive. Receiving tourist in Saillon, means providing them the information they need at any cost, whether it is the address of the closest hotel or the name of the wine produced in the hills nearby. In this way, the tourist office of Saillon will generate a tourism conscious, slow and sensitive to anyone who decide to stop and discover the destination. The role of the OT in this sense will be offering the resources of the local territory (the cultural, natural and community heritage) to its guests. As a consequence, the OT will be promoter of an enhancement of the local heritage: the local resources won't be consumed, but rather reinforced from the interior and preserved. This last concept is the final objective of the research: developing an innovative solution meeting the needs of the modern tourist but ensuring at the same time the authentic taste of hospitality, a feeling that begins with the encounter between a need and a gift.

The new concept is presented in Figure 1.





*Fig. 1 Concept of the new tourism office of Saillon*

#### **4. A projection in the future**

The distribution of tourist information in the context of the destination includes the signalisations, the informative panels, the posts of local events and activities etc.

These are intended more generally, as the set of those elements that contribute to create an active and hospitable atmosphere in the destination. Multiple observations in the site has revealed that the directional signs to old centre and to the OT are few; Moreover, even though the direction of Bayart Tower is well indicated from the medieval centre, an additional sign should be installed at the beginning of the little path to bring to the tower.

##### **4.1. Lack of curiosity in the destination from the main road**

Some visitors by car seeing Saillon along their way, are not stimulated to stop and discover the destination. Even though the old village is visible for its elevated position, some tourists may be more intrigued by seeing specific tourist messages on panels. A solution could be installing some totems or engaging panels in the space along the “Chemin des Ecoliers” and on the walkable paths connecting the main street to the old village. Some escamotages like interactive games and equipped trails would excite curiosity in tourist walking along the “Sentier Sous le Scex or Sentier Barbentane” .

##### **4.2. Hospitality and interactivity**



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Saillon is a small medieval village, characterized by tiny streets and a long history. This place can count on a community of active people able to give life to wonderful initiatives to enhance their village. Visitors during events such as “La Fête Medieval”, are fascinated by the context and its historical background and have the impression of being in another era. They feel welcomed in the medieval destination due to the amount of initiatives and things going on. Such feelings unfortunately, are not similarly perceivable coming to Saillon at any other times. The sense of hospitality is not strongly conveyed to them: there are few tourist signs and messages in the medieval centre and a general low tourist engagement. It often happens that visiting a destination, the tourist is himself in an exploratory mood without a precise idea of which places he wants to see but rather letting himself be inspired by the environment. It is therefore important to collocate elements that arouse excitement in the visitor and make him feel welcomed. Locals can contribute in giving this sense of hospitality to visitors, this could reinforce the local community and create more links between the OT and local partners like bars and shops. A welcoming network is a proposal to diffuse tourist information relying on local activities in the centre. The idea is to identify potential activities where visitors can turn to if they have a tourist question or need. Tourists entering in these restaurants, shops or a local house, will have the chance to interact with locals and satisfy their curiosity, they will consult brochure or get recommendations. These places will be mapped and people will be able to identify them through a precise icon placed outside the building (see Figure 2 and 3 for a simulation of the concept of welcoming network).

1. An example to place identification with the use of an icon outside.
2. The map of the points where visitor can turn to for tourist information/welcoming network
3. A figurative map of the system combining the 24 h open OT and the welcoming network.

## **5. Conclusion and further developments**

The offices of mid-mountain tourism must reinvent themselves or risk disappearing. We have developed an integrated tourism office concept based on the ancestral values of hospitality. We believe that mass tourism destroys more than it creates value. We therefore want a gentle tourism that allows locals and visitors to meet each other. In concrete terms, we propose a tourism office that adopts the role of conductor through the notion of welcoming network. The latter is translated by digital and hybrid touch points (digital and human). We have already proposed a map of this welcoming network for the picturesque village of Saillon. The tourist office is also equipped with a 24/7 part, which operates in self-service from digital touchpoints. This service design will be presented at the beginning of next year at the general assembly of the Commune of Saillon and will then be implemented. The aim is to create a subsequent pilot project to rethink Switzerland's mid-mountain tourist offices.





*Fig. 2 New signs in the vilaae (simulation)*



*Fig. 3 Map including new sign in the village of Saillon (simulation)*