

LE MAT HOTELS

SECTOR
Employment services, social entrepreneurship, social inclusion

COUNTRY
Italy

LEAD ORGANISATION
Le Mat, a social brand and social franchising system standing for sustainable and inclusive tourism

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LE MAT
Special Places, Special People & Special Values

DESCRIPTION

Le Mat is an organisation that has developed practical knowledge on how to set up and manage "type B" social cooperatives in the tourism sector. Type B social cooperatives contribute to the social and professional integration of disadvantaged people, including people with physical and mental disabilities, people with drug or alcohol addictions, or former prisoners.

Over the years, Le Mat has collected information on good practices that can be applied to help make such initiatives a success. This information is shared through manuals and training tools, with the aim to encourage the creation of bars, hostels and other tourism infrastructure functioning as social cooperatives, both in Italy and other European countries. Le Mat also helps existing structures to revitalise their business by working on the quality of the services provided, their identity, and their branding. This is important since many projects promoting a sustainable form of tourism are not viable in the long-term because of a lack of support and expertise.

The very first initiative developed by Le Mat gives a clear idea of the kind of project they coordinate. The first Le Mat Hotel was the Hotel Tritone in Trieste, opened in 1985. It was launched by a group of young unemployed and excluded people who wanted to start their own activity. They found a poorly-performing hotel, which was a property belonging to a local bank that had been managed for the last forty years by a man who now wished to retire. The manager helped Le Mat to keep his clients and assisted them during

the early days of the initiative. After a few years, the cooperative deemed it necessary to renovate the building, and they received funding from the region and an agreement with the bank for this purpose. The hotel was restored and acquired three stars. In 2015, the bank, still owner of the building until then, decided to sell it and made a first offer to the cooperative at an affordable price. After thirty years of successful management, the cooperative finally became the owner of the hotel. In the last three years some rooms have been used as shelters for asylum-seekers.

In 2005, thanks to the European Union's EQUAL programme, several hotel and tourism experts, the Italian Federation to Surpass Disability, the Ethical Bank and many different cooperatives in Italy and other countries gathered to learn more about the Hotel Tritone initiative. This was the starting point for others to replicate Le Mat's business model.

Le Mat is now a registered and well-known brand that can help organisations wishing to initiate a similar project by facilitating their development. Its revenue comes mainly from payment for services offered to organisations willing to join Le Mat, such as training, consultancy, follow-up, and coaching. Sometimes EU funds, and in particular the European Social Fund, can provide additional support, which is very important as Le Mat clients (the social cooperatives) are rather small and cannot pay significant amounts of money for consultancy work.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

The main rationale underpinning the Le Mat project is that there are many strongly motivated people with the desire to learn something new, assume additional responsibilities and be active in their own recovery, but obstacles remain in including them in the labour market. By supporting the setting up of social cooperatives in the tourism sector, unemployed people and people suffering from marginalisation or stigmatisation are supported in creating their own project and learning how to value each other's work.

This empowerment process is also strongly reflected in the decision-making model of social cooperatives. Le Mat hotels are developed together with all members in a bottom-up approach from the first stages of the planning process. Cooperatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions. Moreover, members contribute equitably to – and democratically control – the capital of their cooperative. This is a powerful tool to ensure respect for diversity, and it is also essential in empowering people.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Le Mat hotels must be cost-effective, meaning that they have to be able to cover all their costs, in addition to investing in maintenance of the buildings and development of new services. If successful, they become completely sustainable and independent from funding sources, while serving their social aim.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

When Le Mat collaborators started their mission, they were first told that former prisoners and people with mental health problems or drug addiction were not able to become entrepreneurs or members of cooperatives because they were judged as unable to make appropriate decisions. The legal framework has now evolved in Italy, and disadvantaged people may set up their own businesses. However, many battles still have to be fought all over Europe for the rights of people to take control of their own destiny.

The Hotel Tritone in Trieste is an excellent example of what Le Mat can achieve. More than forty people learned how to work in the hotel industry; they found employment and consequently no longer rely on public assistance. Thanks to Le Mat's manuals and advice its experience has been widely shared. The 2009 opening of Le Mat Hotel Göteborg in Sweden was an important step in the development of the project beyond Italy.

LOOKING FORWARD

The objective is to continuously expand the Le Mat chain of hotels in order to function more and more as a support platform for new projects. Le Mat is steadily growing, although its development may be deemed to be slow;

however, the project could become sustainable if the number of Le Mat hotels in Europe further increases. Le Mat has already established itself in Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, the United Kingdom and Poland, and would like to raise its visibility and open another hotel in Brussels.



Le Mat’s unique experience in setting up social cooperatives in the tourism sector and in welcoming travelers looking for a different type of holiday is definitely worth sharing. To this end, additional resources would be required in order to send experts to other EU Member States.