



Innovation in tourism. The Món Sant Benet case

MARTA LACAMBRA

If there is a tourism project in Catalonia fully able to illustrate the concept of transversality, this is Món Sant Benet. This project came up in the heart of Catalonia with a view going far beyond its four walls, thus developing with a clear transversal view overarching tourism, culture, gastronomy and research, but diversity is also apparent within each of these fields. Tourism brings together its cultural and gastronomic side here, including also congress tourism and corporate incentives.

For all these reasons, Món Sant Benet has become one of the most innovative tourist proposals Catalonia has currently to offer. This innovation stems from creative thinking, looking at reality from a different standpoint, from a brilliant perspective, as says the communication campaign slogan Turisme de Catalunya (Catalonia Tourist Information) sends out to its different markets. **PATRICK TORRENT**

Sant Benet monastery

In the year 2000, Caixa Manresa acquired the Sant Benet monastery, a monument deeply rooted in the Bages county that was in a process of progressive decline. It was then privately owned by three families descendant from the painter Ramon Casas: the Rocamora, the Riera and the Codina families. This acquisition was a very significant operation for a savings bank of our size due to both the sum paid and the probable impact on its financial situation of restoring and maintaining the building.

At that moment, a process to define the project started. Apart from the enthusiasm, a high degree of responsibility and short, medium and long-term analysis was necessary. We thought about what we wanted to do with Sant Benet:

► **What** do we want to do?

We wanted to implement an attractive project for Sant Benet so as to have nearly 140,000 visitors per year to

- place on the map this largely unknown part of Catalonia as a new tourist destination,
- activate and improve the local hotel and restaurant industry,
- justify such a relevant investment by Caixa Manresa and
- become visible as a distinct financial institution.

► **How** do we want to do it?

We wanted to implement a project according to the Caixa Manresa values: professionalism, solidarity and ethics. We wanted the resulting project to act as a pole of attraction for a new public but also to help discover everything around it. We wanted to do it with a very detailed analysis of our figures, validated by third parties, in order to ensure the feasibility of the whole site. We wanted the evolution of the whole project to be experienced with collective enthusiasm, both by the

people working in our organisation and by the rest of our community. The site was to be accessible all weekends from the onset of the project, so the whole restoration process would become transparent and known.

► **When** do we want to have it done?

We intended to open the site in autumn 2007.

Based on the answer to the three initial questions – **what, how and when** – the goals were analysed and we checked that they were consistent with the engagement Caixa Manresa has had traditionally with its territory, having previously led projects such as Parc de la Sèquia, the Llobregat Colonies River Park and local projects in the Bages area with the Central Technology Park as its landmark.

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The targets set were difficult and demanding, yet possible and realistic. Together with the whole managing team we agreed that the goals referred to **what** had to go along a great deal of creativity, innovation, singularity and excellence, and those referred to **how** had to imply accuracy, reliability and consistency. We intended to see what existed that is similar to us, to fly high, to try and look for the best possible partners, also to decide what we did not want to be or do – we wanted to trust in young people and not to copy, we wanted to be distinct. Finally, we analysed what our assets and our liabilities were. As a result of this deep analysis, the Social Work commission at our bank approved action for two big facilities: the monastery and the Alicia (ALlmentació i ciència, nutrition and science) Foundation plus the acquisition of eighteen hectares of land surrounding the monastery to protect the site and enable the construction of supplementary facilities to cater for

visitors. The result of this process has by now become reality, having been opened in November 2007: *Món Sant Benet, a world open to senses*, offering three kinds of visits for different audiences.

Visit to the heritage

A thousand-year history of a monastery

This visit revives a thousand years of history on a tour through the heritage sites of the monastery: the Romanesque church with its crypt, the cloister, the Gothic cellar and the Baroque space of Montserrat with the final outburst of light in the Southern gallery. It is made to form an experiential route, a sensorial experience with large-format audiovisuals and original music composed by Francesc Jané.

Visit to the rooms above the cloister

A day in the life of Ramon Casas

We are in the summer of 1924, and it is the day Ramon Casas' family comes to spend the summer in Sant Benet. After two decades of works, they have transformed the monastery into a suggestive place, having brought over furniture from everywhere. We are going to be the privileged visitors of this romantic site full of music, light and pictures.

Visit to the Alícia foundation

The sense of senses

Alicia is a proposal for scientific and gastronomic research led by Ferran Adrià – a unique place in the world. We can visit this research site and experiment with our perceptions in the *Sense of senses* demo workshop. Here we will have a degustation that will make us more aware of ourselves and of the importance cuisine has as a distinctive human feature. Once the site was opened, over 15,000 visitors came between 6 December and 6 February.

Besides, Món Sant Benet offers three different proposals **to live a gastronomic experience**: The Fonda in the La fàbrica (Factory) building, La cuina a la vista (Kitchen at Sight) and the L'angle restaurant of the chef Jordi Cruz in the Hotel Món.

To take away the flavours and tastes of Món Sant Benet, the La fàbrica shop offers a wide range of Catalan food and wines with denomination of origin or quality certificate. To spend some days in an unforgettable setting there is the Hotel Món, all rooms of which have views over the monastery.

Món Sant Benet is born with the aim of becoming a clearly innovative project, offering a world of sensations, a world of emotions.

MARTA LACAMBRA

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A first-class transversal and innovative tourist product

PATRICK TORRENT

What can visitors to Món Sant Benet do?

Apart from activities geared to corporate groups holding meetings, conventions or events as well as from groups interested in gastronomy or science applied to nutrition, private visitors will meet new experiences at Món Sant Benet.

The tourist proposal is based on three differentiated spaces: the medieval monastery, the Art Nouveau space and the Alicia Foundation. Món Sant Benet offers the possibility of combining two or all three spaces according to the visitor's time availability.

The medieval space allows to experience a 12th century atmosphere based on its heritage, but especially thanks to the sensorial recreation of stimuli that carry us virtually a thousand years back in time. This journey is reduced to a hundred years in the Art Nouveau space, in which multimedia technology and the room decoration at the holiday home of the wealthy family of the painter Ramon Casas place us in a creative and colourful setting.

A leap forward brings us to present times, to the Alicia (Nutrition and Science) Foundation, where great Catalan chefs such as Ferran Adrià, advised by scientists like Dr Valentí Fuster, run a research centre devoted to technological research and cui-

sine creativity, but also to teaching nutrition basics to the youth. Visitors can go there, know the goals of the project and look at how work is done in the lab kitchens. Afterwards, a chef will offer a small degustation combining senses with flavours and explain how both affect our nutrition.

To complete the setting of these three spaces, the hotel, restaurants and the beautiful landscape require a whole day for a complete visit to Món Sant Benet. Visiting two spaces only can be done in two or two hours and a half.

What is so innovative about Món Sant Benet?

In the first place, its multiproduct conception is not frequent. It does not happen very often that a tourist and cultural resource is conceived to serve different interests and needs of different visitors. When this occurs, it is often a consequence of the maturation process of the tourist product and of the need to attract increasingly specific market segments. However, it is definitely not usual that projects start from zero with this idea in mind.

The museum offer is as such innovative, with state-of-the-art museological techniques turning the visit to the monastery into a true tourist experience. Also, the restoration process intends to respect the chronological footprint of the different

building stages of the site. This respect for its heritage allows paradoxically to give the main role to people. It allows to explain the thousand years of history that separate us from Romanesque (with Baroque and Art Nouveau in between) focusing on the residents and their experience – from austere and laborious Benedictine life to the relaxed and pleasant bourgeois summers of the Casas family.

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The other clearly innovative proposal is that of gastronomy. The Alicia Foundation is above all a unique scientific and gastronomic research centre. However, it is conceived in an open way to welcome visitors of different ages to try and learn in a distinctive setting, thanks to its creative avant-garde atmosphere but also to the possibility of being together with some of the most relevant players in world cuisine. Our cuisine has already been taking a leading role in our main tourist markets for some years, basically driven by the quality of our chefs, the recognition they have earned at the most renowned gastronomic forums, in the most reputed guides and by cuisine critics from all over who have spread the word of our cuisine's excellence.

However, all this would be in risk of passing by as a one-off fashion trend if it was not underpinned by a true movement giving value to the singularity of our gastronomic culture and doing research to create proposals allowing to maintain our privileged current position in the future. Alicia will work along this second goal, without setting aside the first one, to recover some food products that used to be part of our traditional cuisine but had gone lost with time. All these are concepts that are met with increasing receptivity in target markets and will clearly help us to consolidate the arguments by which our gastronomy



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is already an important part of tourist promotion by both public administration and the private sector.

Also, the view of Món Sant Benet as a congress centre for corporate meetings and business seminars has been focused from a modern creative perspective. Everything has been laid out for creating an unforgettable experience with visitors. These singular experiences are the result of crossing gastronomy at Alicia with history and art of the medieval monastery and the Art Nouveau space. All this stays open to interaction with the visitor, typical of a tourist product conceived and developed for the 21st century and especially geared to congress tourism, one of the most sophisticated and demanding markets.

Business tourism is probably one of the domains best suited for developing so-called creative tourism. It is the main R&D focus within the industry, an area of innovation and experimentation in which talent serves capturing new talent. After

all, conventions, congresses and incentive trips are acts of communication and even seduction. All the creativity and resources are needed to draw the attention of professionals attending there, who are often saturated with flat, undifferentiated proposals. So there is a need to surprise, to create, to be different. Corporations choosing Catalonia as the venue of their conventions or incentive trips will definitely not be indifferent with such a unique proposal that will allow them to surprise their guests thanks to its conceptual solidity and brilliant resolution. The modularity of the product further allows easy adaptation to the programmes for visitors to Món Sant Benet, a convenient advantage increasingly demanded by convention organisers.

For all these reasons, we consider Món Sant Benet to be an innovative initiative, exploring new ways on which the first steps have been made, such as the communication campaign that, with the «timeless phenomena in Central Catalonia» message, presents the special feelings experienced by visitors to the site as just another bit of news in both the press and the internet.

Future tourist model

The promotion of our attractions is aimed at keeping Catalonia's leading position as an overall tourist destination, geared to ensuring the development of a renewed tourist model that allows to place our emphasis on quality, thus avoiding any future price debate. This is what the Strategic Tourism Plan for Catalonia sets out, while it also pleads for enlarging the territorial scope for tourism.

However, such promotion requires a product meeting these expectations. The Strategic Plan also refers to the need of placing more products rooted in their location to foster territorial balance. Besides, it clearly shows the need for development in Central Catalonia, an area that has largely been left aside by tourism for decades.

Private initiative started here a proposal that fully fits into the strategic goal. The Nutrition and Science Foundation (Alícia), partnered by the Caixa Manresa savings bank and the Catalan government, is a clear example of how public-private cooperation can create big research and dissemination projects, but also first-class tourist products. Public and private support of the tourism industry is thus not to be underestimated as it helps setting out the tourist model the industry itself set out when it defined the strategic tourism goals for Catalonia in 2005.

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It is definitely pleasing to see that there are tourist destinations, the leadership of which is acknowledged everywhere, sharing this view of the tourist model with Catalonia. Within the European Union, role models such as Tuscany and Provence-Alps-Côte d'Azur created together with Catalonia the Taskforce for Sustainable and Competitive Tourism. They meet at least twice a year to discuss precisely different aspects related to the tourist model. Their diagnose is the same: environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability of destinations requires their singularisation in order to give value to their identity. Our mature destinations will increasingly depend on their differentiating elements to be competitive. In Catalonia, as in Provence and Tuscany, the paths leading most effectively to this singularisation are culture, gastronomy, history, traditions, legends etc.

Món Sant Benet is an outstanding crossroads of all these paths. And it is so without over-sophistication, without inventing anything from scratch, but simply by taking advantage of our reality and explaining it well. This model is very different from others pushing for mass, created spontaneously and for quick consumption, without any relation to the territory nor any singularising factor. The model targeted by Catalonia intends to

get away from *fast* to *slow* tourism, with a distinctive own flavour and taste, appreciating details, to be enjoyed for all it has to offer, which makes it a unique experience.

Món Sant Benet is a model intending to get away from fast to slow tourism.

For all these reasons, the development of the Món Sant Benet project can be considered a true gift for our tourist model, for all it represents and for its location. There was a clear need for such a successful proposal and courage to come together in Central Catalonia. With Món Sant Benet, this area has now a new resource that is to be-

come a must for tourists and visitors and thus a valuable new reason for attracting people from all over. As the project becomes mature and takes its position on the market, there will for sure not only be corporate and academic groups coming but also an increasing flow of individual visitors interested in culture and gastronomy for which the discovery of this world of feelings will become ineluctable.

So let us welcome and wish a long successful life to Món Sant Benet. At Turisme de Catalunya, we already have included it in the list of our prime cultural, gastronomic and meeting tourist offer and we will feel especially proud to introduce it to media, operators and consumers from all over the world, convinced as we are of its singularity.

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