

## HORIZONTAL HOTELS AND SIMILAR ACCOMMODATION – CLASSIFICATION AND FRANCHISING AS AN OPTION FOR THEIR INTERNATIONAL VISIBILITY

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**Abstract.** *While accommodation networks are an older concept, the idea of widespread hotels (Italian Albergo / hotel diffuso) appeared in the 90s in Italy when abandoned buildings after an earthquake in Friuli were renovated and managed as tourism accommodations. Up to today, in Italy, there are 76 registered facilities of various dispersed accommodation. This paper clarifies and denominates these types of accommodation including accommodation networks and horizontal hotels (integrated and widespread hotels) and tackles the issue of their prevalence. Namely, widespread hotels and the less complex integrated hotels have almost not come to life beyond national borders. Such hotels are in line with sustainable development and are extremely interesting for today's consumers. The authors believe that the expansion of the concept of horizontal hotels lacks a strong international brand. An analysis of the dispersed accommodation according to spatial and pooling complexity dimensions is provided, where a gap on the offer side is identified. This paper deals with the current state and possibilities of development of horizontal hotels through pooling in international chains in order to popularize them. An insight of horizontal hotels in Europe is also provided.*

**Keywords:** *widespread hotels; integrated hotels; horizontal hotels; hotel chains; pooling; association; entrepreneurial opportunity.*

### **Introduction**

Horizontal hotels represent an interesting concept that is harmony with sustainable tourism development. Considering they are a combination of hotel services and home comfort, they are appealing to tourists. The paper deals with dispersed accommodation, mostly horizontal hotels. The very little contribution has been found within the theoretical and empirical field devoted to dispersed accommodation, particularly widespread and integrated. This is where the novelty and originality of

this paper can be recognized. Its contribution is twofold. Firstly, authors' contribution is recognized in providing theoretical systematization of dispersed accommodation. Secondly, authors provide a model of the potential popularization of accommodation of such kind. In the first part, the historical development of widespread hotels is highlighted and its advantages are put into focus. The authors conclude by giving an overview of dispersed accommodation based on spatial and joining complexity criteria, where a gap on the offer side is identified. The aim of the paper is to raise the popularity of integrated and widespread hotels beyond national borders.

## Literature review

### ***The National Association of Widespread Hotels and their classification***

The National Association of Widespread Hotels ("Associazione nazionale alberghi diffusi") is an umbrella organization of widespread hotels on the national level in Italy, but it also has one international member: the widespread hotel Hacienda Zorita in London. The organization acts as a marketing association/consortium. Currently, in 2015 when the research was conducted, it counts 76 members.

The "Associazione nazionale alberghi diffusi" classifies their members as follows:

- Widespread hotels or *alberghi diffusi doc*
- Diffusive hospitality (subcategories: *borgo albergo*, *residence diffuso* and *villaggio albergo*)
- Widespread hotels in villages
- Widespread hotels in the world.

*Widespread hotels or alberghi diffusi* will be further explained later on since they are the most complex form of horizontal hotels.

*Borgo albergo* implies an inhabited village and a network of rooms and houses, even far apart, made available to tourists, thanks to the centralized booking, but usually in the absence of hotel services, unified management, and public areas. A *residence diffuso* or widespread residence is a non-hotel accommodation, offering houses scattered in an area sometimes very large, characterized by a central reservation, but not by a hotel management, nor a unitary management of hotel services. A *villaggio-albergo* is an accommodation realized thanks to the recovery, restoration, and enhancement for tourism purposes of an uninhabited village managed in a unified form, which offers rooms and services located in different buildings close to each other at times, and may propose hotel services.

Widespread hotels in villages or *Albergo diffuso di campagna* has the same characteristics as an *albergo diffuso doc*, but is located in rural context with a historical and architectural value. The same applies to widespread hotels in the world.

The term "*albergo diffuso*" was coined in 1982 in the pilot project Comeglians, dealing with the reconstruction of houses and abandoned villages after the earthquake in Friuli Venezia Giulia, precisely in Carnia in 1976 where Professor Giancarlo D'Allara was a consultant (Quaderno tecnico di BIC Lazio, 2007).

During the '80s in a few Italian regions were opened some accommodation networks, primarily product, not market oriented since they were not unified in terms of quality nor theme. The collaboration was based on the physical vicinity of holiday houses, apartments and rooms, not on the similarity of the offer or their quality. They are considered the antecedents of widespread hotels. A few partial widespread hotel initiatives started during the 90s of last century.

The first definition of a widespread hotel was written in the project "Tourism" of the local administration of the municipality of San Leo (Emilia Romagna) in Montefeltro in 1989 (Albergo diffuso, undated). An *albergo diffuso* was described as a uniform accommodation unit that addresses tourist demand interested in staying in a valuable urban context in contact with residents, availing, however, the use hotel services.

The first widespread hotel in the fully literal sense of the word, was the one opened in Bosa (Sardegna) later on, in 1996, named "Corte Fiorita" (Albergo diffuso, undated). Its main characteristics were described for the first time in the development plan of the region Montana Marghine Planargia. This document was also used as the base of the legal framework of widespread hotels as separate accommodation entities in Sardinia, the first Italian region to regulate the legal prerequisites of widespread hotels in 1998 (Quaderno tecnico di BIC Lazio, 2007).

The concept of widespread hotel evolved into an innovative, demand-oriented model of hospitality. A widespread hotel offers guests the possibility to experience life in small villages in contact with residents but without having to give up hotel services. It is a fusion that integrates the best of a hotel and a home.

A widespread hotel is a hotel that is commonly not built, instead, puts into function existing buildings. The characteristics of a widespread hotel are more properties situated in a historic center, walking distance from central facilities of approx. 300m, common areas for guests and hotel services (reception, assistance, restaurant, cleaning and maintenance) run by a unified management and the cohabitation of residents and tourists.

Some of the advantages of widespread hotels include a good response to today's tourist demand, promotion of cultural heritage, reduction of seasonality, supporting entrepreneurship and sustainable development. One of the main disadvantages is the initial cost that is considerably higher due to the spatial dispersion of buildings compared to one-building hotels. An *albergo diffuso* brings several positive socio-economic impacts. Friendly towards residents, guests, preservation of the environment, local products, tradition, architecture, and culture, it is consistent with sustainable tourism development principles.

An *Albergo diffuso* supremely combines the "*feeling at home*" and the "*feeling in a hotel*" model, illustrated in table 1.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Albergo diffuso (<http://www.albergodiffuso.com/>)**

ALBERGO DIFFUSO	
<b>Feeling at home</b>	<b>Feeling in a hotel</b>
Courtesy and Kindness	Provision of professional services
Authenticity	Efficiency
Non-standardized rooms	Easy booking
Local and warm furniture	Variety of tariffs, according to the different rooms
Attention to the details	Comfort
Link with the territory	Wide range of services
Contacts with local residents	Contact with other guests
Informal environment	Privacy

A widespread hotel is also a development model of villages: it animates and revitalizes them, generates networks and supply chains and slows down migration to urban areas (D'Allara, 2001). It revitalizes historical villages that may potentially risk abandonment.

During the 90s, the idea aroused a great interest among public, private sector and media in Italy (Quaderno tecnico di BIC Lazio, 2007) and further to the point the widespread hotel model was the winner of “Global Award 2010” at WTM in London.

**Building hotel chains**

Except through direct ownership, hotels can form a chain through a franchise contract, management contract and a lease or consortium contract (Moon, 2011). These are some of the growth strategies hotel can choose whilst attempting to achieve competitive advantage.

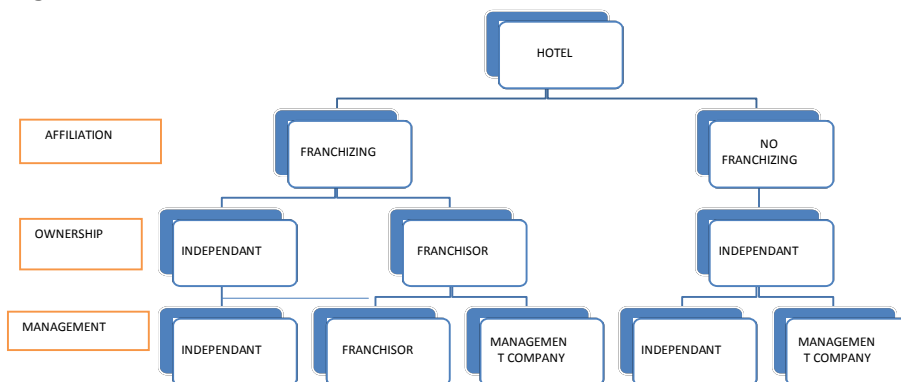
Franchising is a form of subcontract where an organization authorizes another organization for the use of their brand and for selling their goods or services, including single or all business functions. This contract is called Franchise Agreement. An owner of a franchise is called a franchisor, and a recipient is called a franchisee. The franchising fees can be categorized in: (Payne, L. and Perret, 2014) initial fees which depend on the number of rooms and range from 200-1000 €; continuing fees such as royalty fee which ranges from 2,5 – 5% of rooms revenue, advertising and marketing contribution fee which ranges from 2 – 4% of rooms revenue, reservation fee which ranges from 1-5% of room revenue, loyalty fee which ranges from 2-5% of the revenue generated by the programme member and other „all in one“ fees. Franchisee benefits from, operating under the name and reputation (brand image) of the Franchisor and using its knowledge, skills, experience etc. One of the largest franchisors is Wyndham (USA) (Ziedman, 2011), the hotels of which are present in the UK. Franchising is the fastest growing business expansion strategy that has ever been created (Dimitar, undated). The results of the study conducted by Moon (2011) showed that franchised lodging firms have higher profitability and intangible value than non - franchised firms, and indiscriminate expansion and low financial leverage can lead to poor financial performance. Compared to an independent business, the franchise option has three clear advantages for the franchisees (Diaz-Bernardo, 2009): 1) using an established brand name that attracts customers, 2) working with a proven business format to

reduce the chances of failure, and 3) receiving initial and on-going training by the franchisor on how to run the business.

The management company is an organization contracted by an owner of a hotel to manage professionally the hotel in the name and for the account of the hotel. For provision of its services, the management company receives compensation in the form of management fees i.e. basic fee (income percentage), simulative fee (gross profit percentage), marketing fee (percentage of the accommodation income), and booking fee (fee for the turnover through a reservation system) (Byrne, Braun & Butler, 2012). New Managerial contracts stand out as a trend. Owners are no longer concerned only with the security provided by such contracts, but are rather well informed about the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach and are familiar with a hotel's operations. New contract clauses include innovative concepts, e.g. percentage of the original stock (10-15%), guarantees for successful operation (if a set profit is not met, the management compensates the difference), joint business deals, combinations of hotel lease and percentage from operations and so on (Barge, 1993).

A hotel consortium is a marketing association of hotels where individual hotels keep their proprietary independence and gain primarily marketing and sales support through the economics of scale (e. g. favorable entry to GDS for members) (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). They have been designed for independent hotels primarily, however, more and more hotel chains do join consortiums. Consortiums are becoming more complex and are using increasingly more sophisticated marketing support, which is hardly affordable to small and independent hotels (Byrne, Braun & Butler, 2012). Examples of hotel consortiums include leading hotels of the world, Special hotels of the world. Design hotels, etc. For example, The Leading hotels of the world is a company that offers online hotel booking services to luxury travelers, publishes a directory of its member hotels. It also provides sales, marketing, promotional, advertising and public relations support, distribution, and special program services for member hotels and their guests through a network of sales and reservations offices worldwide (Bloomberg, 2014).

The structure of the hotel industry according to affiliation, ownership and management are summarized below.



**Figure 1. Structure of the hotel industry (Čizmar,**  
[http://web.efzg.hr/dok/TUR/avlahov/01\\_3A\\_struktura%20hotelske%20industrije.pdf](http://web.efzg.hr/dok/TUR/avlahov/01_3A_struktura%20hotelske%20industrije.pdf))

There are many advantages and disadvantages of joining a hotel chain, yet 75% of the one hundred biggest hotels are controlled by the top ten hotel chains (Das & Groote, 2008). The authors agree the most relevant advantages include miscellaneous savings (in investment, marketing, supply), centralized management and control, an advertisement for a hotel's destination, heftier foreign investments, better occupancy, better guest structure and higher profitability. Disadvantages of joining a hotel chain include difficulties in communication within a large system, complex and cost-increasing control, overworked staff, disregard for the environment and local people an unfavorable working climate.

An *albergo diffuso* can have are different types of ownership: a single, private owner; the municipality as the owner or an association or cooperatives as owners. As regarding the relationship between management and ownership, in Italy, 51% of widespread hotels have a single management (no matter of the number of owners involved), in 25% of cases ownership and management overlap and in 3% of cases more owners represent also the management (Quaderno tecnico di BIC Lazio, 2007). In the case of more owners, stipulating allotment contracts with them is an option of single management. Cooperatives could be a good management model due to its multi-stakeholder nature and it is possibilities of the provision of welfare services. The greatest benefits of cooperatives are manifested in allowing people to work together to create sustainable enterprises that generate jobs and prosperity and provide answers to poverty and short-term business practices (International Co-operative Alliance, 2014). Widespread and integrated hotels present an interesting entrepreneurial solution for the business' cooperating with the others in order to achieve greater competitiveness on the market. Involving different business subject from the local community, as the hotel service must be delivered, encourages local entrepreneurial activity.

**Horizontal hotels and similar accommodation – research and classification**

The table below shows the number of properties per category according to the National association of widespread hotels in 2016. The empirical research was performed by observation in May 2016, 2-6. As presented in Table 2, the biggest concentration of units is in *hotel diffusi doc* (72).

**Table 2. Number of facilities per category (adapted from <http://www.alberghidiffusi.it/>)**

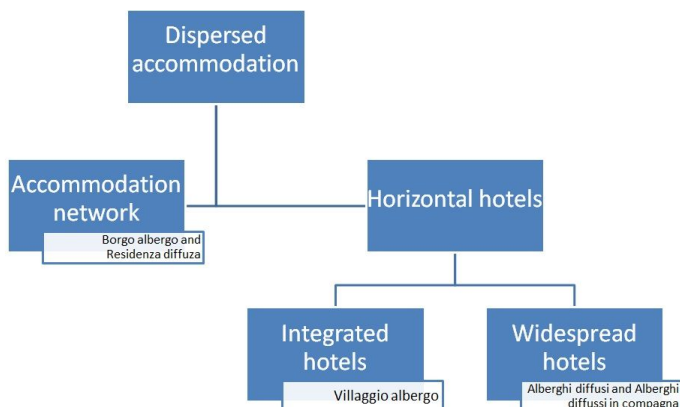
Category	Number of facilities in Italy
Hotel diffusi doc	72
Alberghi diffusi di campagna	6
Ospitalita diffusa (Borgo albergo, Residenza diffusa, Villaggio albergo)	8
Alberghi diffusi in the world	1
TOTAL	87

To repeat, *Hotel diffuso doc* offers a hotel service (reception, breakfast, cleaning, etc.) 24/7, has a guest space for common services and a single management. This type of hotel must integrate territory and its culture because host community is present. That is the reason why the environment is authentic. The distance between the units and the common areas must be reasonable. *Ospitalità diffusa* is related and very similar to *alberghi diffusi*. *Borgo albergo* is a result of valorization of an inhabited village and a

net of rooms, houses that can also be in distant locations. It is available to tourist through a centralized booking, but without hotel services, single management, and local community. *Residenza diffusa* offers houses sometimes located very far from each other. It has a centralized booking, but it does not have hotel services and single management. *Villaggio albergo* is realized thanks to recovery, restoration and enhancement for tourism purposes of an abandoned village, managed in a unified form. It offers rooms, services located in different but near buildings and it has hotel service.

The authors find these classifications too similar, overlapping and not enough clearly defined, therefore propose a new nomenclature and according to definitions (shown in Figure 2).

Three main types of dispersed accommodation can be identified: accommodation networks, integrated hotels, and widespread hotels. Accommodation networks are merely a collection of various accommodations in one location driven by a joint promotion and/or distribution and do not necessarily respect the “*within walking distance*” principle. Horizontal hotels are an umbrella term for integrated hotels and widespread. They refer to spatially dispersed hotel businesses. An integrated hotel is a less complex form of accommodation, which implies the existence of hotel services no matter of the local community or reasonable walking distance. While the concept widespread hotels or *albergo diffuso* remains unmodified.



**Figure 2. New framework for the classification of horizontal hotels and similar accommodation models**

While *alberghi diffusi doc* and *alberghi diffusi in campagna* are obviously widespread hotels, *villaggio albergo* is a type of integrated hotel (which doesn't have to be composed of renovated buildings) while *Borgo albergo* and *Residenza diffusa* are accommodation networks, as they don't offer a hotel service, but they only share marketing and distribution.

To sum up, the National association of widespread hotels has no common term for all the proposed accommodation types that have proliferated on the basis of accommodation networks and widespread hotels, therefore the syntagma “dispersed accommodation” is introduced. Furthermore, the name of the umbrella association has overgrown itself.

Within the European legalization, Croatia has made a step forward to the recognition of such accommodation introducing in its legislative two categories: widespread hotels and integrated hotels. Namely, in 2014, the Croatian Ministry of tourism makes it possible to categorize widespread and integrated hotels. Both accommodation facilities provide the same services: accommodation, breakfast and other catering services and common facilities: reception desk, common toilet, lounge... Moreover, integrated and widespread hotels include minimally three properties. The main difference between them is that widespread hotel is mostly located in old, traditional, historical, and rural – urban structures and are furnished in the traditional way while integrated hotels are made of units that are previously categorized. The introduction of these accommodation facilities aims at fostering private sector accommodation. As this is a new program in Croatia up to now, there are a few integrated hotels (e.g. Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Šibenik) and a few widespread hotels in development (Poreč, Split, Završje, to name a few) along with the first, Ražnjevića Dvori in Polača Village.

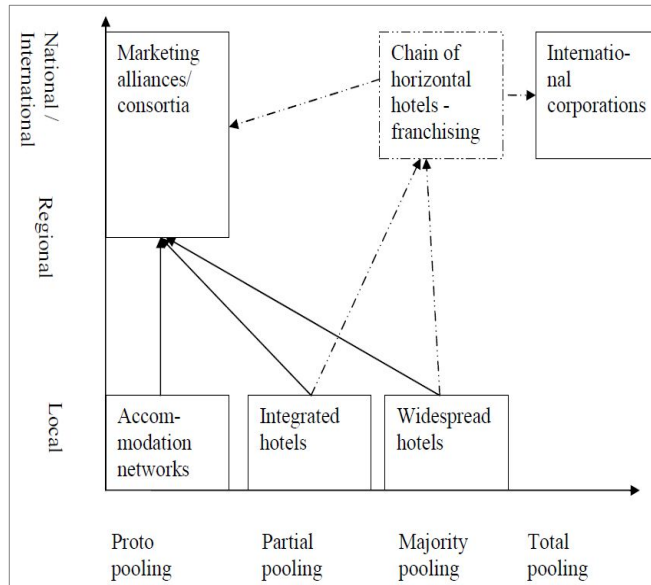
### **Integration of horizontal hotels in international hotel chains through franchising**

The analysis of horizontal hotels (widespread and integrated hotels) showed that the current only organization of horizontal hotels (Associazione Nazionale Alberghi Diffuse) is not sufficient for the global popularity of the concept (our analyses showed, these hotels are mainly present in Italy), as it acts as an association of various dispersed facilities and classifies them only as different types of accommodation neglecting their quality (hotel stars and brand standards). Furthermore, the presentation of similar accommodations creates an even greater confusion with the term “widespread hotel” that has yet to be popularized and is misunderstood with similar terms. The authors suggest the solution lays in the standardization of operations and visibility that international hotel chains provide. Minimal standards of hotel services are what may be the standardized e.g. frequency of quick cleaning / maintaining, type of serving in hotel restaurant etc. Considering the diverse structure of ownership and management of horizontal hotels, integration through franchising is advocated. It would provide a uniform quality of services, however, simultaneously; special attention has to be paid to authenticity and local specificity, which makes franchising a challenging task.

Widespread hotels and integrated hotels are in most cases examples of pooling per se which operate at the local level. Gradation according to the spatial component is illustrated on the y-axis, while the x-axis gives an overview of the complexity of pooling:

- proto level of pooling – the common functions that are associated are marketing and sales (accommodation networks, marketing alliances or consortia)
- partial pooling – association of more than marketing and sales functions e.g. integrated hotels
- majority pooling – most functions are common e.g. franchises and widespread hotels
- total pooling (takeovers, mergers) – can be horizontal, vertical and diagonal.





**Figure 3. Current state and pooling opportunities of horizontal hotels in order to popularize them**

Figure 1 shows the current connection of accommodation networks, integrated and widespread hotels - and their associations in marketing alliances / consortia (Associazione Nazionale Alberghi Diffusi). It is evident that in the market there are no chains of horizontal hotels that represent a new entrepreneurial opportunity (dashed in figure 3). This could be of potential interest to existing horizontal hotels facilities, international hotel chains, and corporations. Widespread hotels and integrated hotels respectively, in order to be recognized internationally, necessitate a flagship hotel that would set the base of the future hotel chain of integrated and widespread hotels. Given that the reason of association of accommodation networks is only their location, it makes no sense to pool this type of accommodation into chains.

Thus, horizontal hotels may be associated with hotel chains of horizontal hotels and those chains can be re-enrolled in prestigious, adequate collections of hotels (marketing alliances / consortia). It is also possible that the chain of horizontal hotels becomes part of an international corporation.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes in the clarification of similar terms related to horizontal hotels and provides also a classification of dispersed accommodation. The authors have introduced the notation of dispersed accommodation and redefined the term horizontal hotels. The main benefits of such forms of accommodation have a great potential for fostering socio-economic activity and, some forms also, of revitalizing almost abandoned villages.

Furthermore, horizontal hotels were also classified according to their spatial dimension and complexity of integration. Widespread hotels are examples of

associations in tourism at the lowest level in the spatial context. However, in terms of organization, they are far more advanced than accommodation networks and integrated hotels. The combination of those two dimensions revealed there were no chains of just horizontal hotels, which represents a gap on the offer side.

The results of the conducted empirical research revealed that there are only 87 dispersed accommodations according to the National Association of Widespread hotels, currently, the only organization in Europe that acts as the representative of all dispersed accommodation as a marketing consortium. Most hotels are situated in Italy, demonstrating that the first step towards the expansion of this accommodation model lays in the legislative in order to recognize the different kinds of facilities, which is visible from the Croatian case. A step forward would be the inclusion of horizontal hotels in hotel chains. Since horizontal hotels (namely, widespread hotels and integrated hotels) as opposite to accommodation networks, provide also unified hospitality services, they can be affiliated with hotel chains, by franchising, in order to be more visible internationally.

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