



INCOME Tourism

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Interview

Montserrat

The mountain of Montserrat, unique in the world for its distinctive shape and form. It is located less than one hour from Barcelona. Montserrat was declared a Nature Park in 1987 and since 2015 is a World Geopark of UNESCO.



Montserrat comprises the Sanctuary of the Virgin Mary of Montserrat – patron Saint of Catalonia – and the Benedictine Monastery, which for almost 1.000 years has been at the service of pilgrims from all over the world, who come to worship the Black Madonna. The Lady of Montserrat, commonly known as La Moreneta (the dark one), due to the dark color of her face, is a polychrome Romanesque carving of great beauty dating from the 12th century.

Today the religious community is composed of about sixty monks who follow the Rule of Saint Benedict (6th century). Life at the sanctuary of Montserrat moves around two focal points: the collective prayer of monks, choirboys and pilgrims that takes place in the Basilica, and the welcome that the monks have always offered to pilgrims and visitors.

Montserrat is home to one of the oldest boys' choirs in Europe: the Escolania participates in religious services and in the community's prayer in the Basilica. The beauty of their singing is the result of their accurate and intensive musical training, along with the intellectual education that the boys receive from the Benedictine community.

The sensitivity of the Benedictine monks has turned Montserrat into an important cultural center. The Museum of Montserrat was declared Museum of National Interest in 2006 and is formed by several different collections. The Audio-visual Room in Montserrat is a completely renovated space which reflects the monastery's will to respond and offer substance to the thousands of visitors and pilgrims who are interested in learning about Montserrat and its significance.



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LARSA

LARSA is the name of the company that manages the services of the sanctuary: restaurants, hotel, apartments, hostel, souvenir's shops, the museum, the audio-visual room. But also a travel agency – Central de Reserves de Montserrat SAU – with a booking department and a tourist information office.

As partner in the INCOME Tourism project, LARSA will receive students in the context of the **new cooperative learning model** to work at the company. The company is offering a wide range of tourist services. Therefore at LARSA candidates will have the opportunity to develop soft skills in different job positions. Also, the candidates will have the chance to face cross-cultural situations, since visitors to Montserrat come from all over the world.

LARSA, will also participate in other tasks of the INCOME Tourism project such as the identification of the relevant skills that graduates should develop in order to improve their employability, the creation of conditions for these skills to be acquired and put into practice and the discussion and evaluation of the results and the validation of the soft skills teaching model.

LARSA has already participated in another European project in 2016, together with the University of Girona, and is member of some associations and product clusters, which help to develop the tourism industry in Catalonia (Catalan Tourist Board, Barcelona Tourism, Deputation of Barcelona).

Interview Montserrat Flores Garcia

Montse is the digital product Manager and works on the digital content, the corporate image of the company and several studies about the visitors of Montserrat. She is the community manager and also gives support to the management team.

Can you tell us how many people work at LARSA?

“We have an average of 200 employees. 25% of the employees have a university background, about 20% have vocational training and 40% have high school degrees. Around 20% of the employees are foreigners, mainly from Eastern Europe, North Africa and South America.”

To what extent do soft skills enhance service delivery in hospitality and tourism?

“We think that soft skills are very important in the tourism and hospitality industry. Visitors need to feel welcome in their visit to Montserrat, therefore interpersonal skills are highly valued. But also conceptual skills as understanding the interaction with the environment and adaptation of innovation or improvements, can help the employees to develop their job better.”



Are new employees equipped with these skills?

“In general, graduates who come to work here for their first job, have not worked on these skills at the university. They are very prepared in technical themes, but very often we have seen that they don’t have interpersonal skills, for example. They do not always act courteously and respectfully towards their colleagues, or don’t demonstrate empathy in dealing with customers and staff. Also it is very difficult for them to operate effectively and calmly under pressure or in crisis situations... So we try to assess soft skills in the tests of selection and job interviews.”

What about the evaluation of soft skills with the existing staff?

“In our company the staff are evaluated in everyday situations. But every four or five years, staff assessments are documented. Every few years, the company offers some courses based in customer service and quality service, in order to increase the welcoming attitude towards our visitors. Our HR department offers staff all kind of training sessions in hospitality values and interaction with visitors. We also have a “handbook of the workers” with the rules and values of the company.

Do you have students as interns?

“Yes, mainly in high season, around 5 every year. These are students of tourism, history or art, economics, commerce. We also have, especially in high season, many students of several disciplines, working here in the holidays and weekends to pay their study costs.”

Any cooperation with educational institutes on soft skills?

“We have agreements with universities and secondary schools, based on the internship that the students must do in their courses. From the point of view of our company, soft skills are always taken into account. Now, as part of the INCOME Tourism project, this is the first time that students are working specifically on their soft skills in school and at their workplaces.”

Do you already have intern students working conform the cooperative learning model?

“Not yet. Normally, the students follow an educational program that we must follow and evaluate and report, but they are not in cooperative learning systems.

Participating in The INCOME Tourism project is a challenge for us. Even though our company has had students doing practices, or working in high season, this will be the first time that we must involve ourselves in their learning and in direct collaboration with the university. We need to know the rules and evaluation scheme for students, what will be the role of the tutor, how do we integrate the model... Students will come with knowledge and tools and we will try to share our knowledge based on experience, connected, in a framework facilitated by the university.”