

## ***Residents: 12. Average Age: 75. Biggest Challenge: Avoiding Extinction.***



The Swiss village of Corippo, which has only 12 full-time residents.  
Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

By Raphael Minder

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CORIPPO, Switzerland — With Swiss punctuality, the village of Corippo comes to life at 8:15 a.m., when people gather in the church square to get their daily bread.

It is delivered by Eros Mella, a baker who every morning drives the hairpin turns of the scenic Verzasca Valley, in the Italian-speaking region of southern Switzerland.

In the summer months, Mr. Mella's buns and loaves are bought by the locals and a few holidaymakers. But in the snowy winter months, "I drive up here for two or three clients," Mr. Mella said.



Corippo's residents and seasonal tourists lining up for bread brought by Eros Mella, a baker who delivers to the village daily. Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

The village now has only 12 full-time residents — not only Switzerland's smallest population, but also perhaps its oldest, with an average age of 75.

The village's demographic decline is part of a broader problem and debate over how to halt the drop in Europe's [rural population](#) and how to find alternative economic opportunities to farming to keep younger people in villages like these.

The regional authorities think they may have a solution to help preserve Corippo: In July, officials agreed to allow a publicly financed local foundation to turn a handful of the village's 30 abandoned houses into a hotel.



A photograph from 2006 showing almost the entire population of the village.  
Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

The plan borrows from a model used in nearby Italy, known as “albergo diffuso,” or scattered hotel.

Such establishments were first built in the Friuli region of northeastern Italy, to revive villages that had been destroyed by an earthquake in 1976, said Fabio Giacomazzi, an architect, who is the president of the Corippo foundation.

“We’re doing something new for Switzerland, but knowing that it can be done,” he said.

Initially, the hotel is set to have about 25 beds, spread across a cluster of soon-to-be-refurbished houses. The hotel’s public space will pivot around a new reception area situated within the village’s seasonal restaurant, which will be enlarged and revamped. After 2019, more beds will be added, as well as a seminar room that executives could rent for a corporate retreat.



By The New York Times

“We have long been searching for a way to ensure Corippo can survive, and this hotel now offers the best chance of doing that,” said Saverio Foletta, the secretary of the foundation.

But even though Corippo faces an existential threat, the hotel has received a lukewarm response from residents, some of whom criticize the focus on tourists rather than on their own basic needs, like addressing a deficient water supply system.

There are also concerns over whether hotel guests can really help offset Corippo’s unfavorable demographics and stop it from becoming a ghost village. Only one of Corippo’s residents still works, for a forestry company several miles from the village. The others are pensioners who rely on outside help from younger family members. A priest visits to say Mass twice a month.



Saverio Foletta, secretary of the Corippo Foundation, inspecting some of the houses acquired by the group. Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

While never a metropolis, the village was once much larger. In the 19th century, Corippo was home to over 300 people. But as mountain agriculture started to decline, farmers left their cattle and sheep to find work in the cities.

The nonprofit foundation was started in the 1970s — when Corippo had about 50 residents and was added to a list of protected Swiss villages — but it has so far failed to stem the loss of population.

“If we’re talking about sustainable tourism, we should start by asking exactly who will be left here in 10 years to welcome the tourists,” said Alfredo Scilacci, an architect and town planner who lives in Geneva, and who inherited an ancestral family home in Corippo.



A room in one of the long-abandoned homes that will be transformed into sleeping quarters for hotel guests. Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

One of the most crippling blows to Corippo came at the end of the 1950s, when the village school shut down.

“A place without children is a place without life — and I don’t think you get young people to come and live here just by adding a hotel,” said Clementina Bernardasci, 73, who was part of the last generation to attend school in Corippo, before leaving the village to work in a watch factory when she turned 15. Ms. Bernardasci returns regularly but is no longer a full-time resident, and no one in her family envisions living here again.

During a recent weekend, Corippo felt relatively lively and almost youthful, thanks to a group of Boy Scouts who were sleeping in a stable while hiking across the region.



Tourists at the “Maldives of Milan,” a spot on the Verzasca River in Lavertezzo, a few miles upstream from Corippo. Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

Some visitors come from far afield, drawn both by the natural beauty of the area’s mountains and waterfalls, and by a sense of nostalgia.

As he admired the village’s old stone roofs, Vladimir Yeregin, a Russian physicist who was on a family holiday, said, “It’s great to visit a place that takes you back to how life was hundreds of years ago, because that’s difficult to find in Russia now.”

At 67, Silvana Dal Tin is among Corippo’s youngest residents. The hotel could help Corippo, she said, but “only if it brings more than just people who want to take photos.”



Corippo not only has Switzerland's smallest population, but also what is perhaps its oldest, with an average age of 75. Maxime Fossat for The New York Times

Like others in the village, she sounded acutely aware of the possible [downside of mass tourism](#), citing the recent “chaos around the bridge,” a few miles up the valley.

Ms. Dal Tin was referring to an old stone bridge that straddles pristine river pools and was featured last year in a video that went viral. The video, made by an Italian, described the spot as the “[Maldives of Milan](#)” because of its proximity to the main city of northern Italy.

Soon enough, the number of cars driving up the valley had almost doubled, forcing the local authorities to add traffic police because of road jams and parking problems. Many day-trippers from Milan and elsewhere picnic along the river, leaving litter rather than filling local restaurants.

All of that publicity around the bridge has not brought any significant financial benefit to the valley, officials said, but it confirmed, instead, the need to focus on projects like Corippo's hotel.

To profit from tourism, the area needs to make “every effort to transform day tourism into a stay of at least two or three days in our valley,” said Alan Matasci, the president of the Verzasca foundation in charge of the valley's development.

Mr. Matasci forecast that Corippo's hotel would bring overnight visitors without adding to the risk of mass tourism, a phenomenon also unlikely given the village's size and geographic isolation: The narrow road that winds up to Corippo ends in a cul-de-sac on the church square.

"We can't predict or control exactly how tourism develops," Mr. Matasci said. "But we can say that without this hotel, there will probably be nobody living in Corippo in 15 years."

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