

# Understanding and managing the rural tourism experience – The case of a historical village in Portugal<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

As an industry tourism is often perceived important as a means of development in marginal rural zones, such developments are thought to appeal to a post-modern market seeking ‘unique’ experiences. This paper examines the rural tourism experience offered by a small village in Central Portugal that uses its heritage and traditions to offer such experiences. The case, derived from interviews, analyses the experience of tourists and residents, the interactions between different stakeholders, impacts and marketing implications. It concludes that social, emotional and symbolic dimensions of the experience, associated with rurality, are important determinants of tourist satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism has attracted growing interest from both academics and tourism and planning professionals, due to its potential as a development tool for rural areas and also given the trends in the tourism market. This market shows an increasing interest in the countryside as a leisure space that provides open space for outdoor recreation, contact with nature and culture, socialization opportunities in a distinct environment that is valued for its lack of stress factors typical of urban areas (pollution, congestion, noise, and tight timetables), and a return to the origins and the “authentic”, often associated with a certain nostalgia for the “good old days” (Cavaco, 2003; Figueiredo, 2004; Kastenholz, 2010; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002; Walmsley, 2003). The benefits sought in the market are accordingly recognized as being heterogeneous (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999).

With a diversified base of endogenous resources, various types of experience can be designed in rural areas to attract and satisfy this

heterogeneous market, and diverse types of tourists will experience these resources distinctly in an active co-creation process (Kastenholz, 2010; Mossberg, 2007). This co-creation of tourist experiences is a challenge for the community, for local service providers and for the tourists themselves. However, co-creating experiences that delight tourists, arouse emotions, make sense and appeal to the senses, that stay in the mind and have the potential even to transform participants, may be the best avenue for sustainable market success, potentially benefitting all those involved in the process (Kastenholz & Figueiredo 2010; Mossberg, 2007; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Richards & Wilson, 2005).

In this context, an understanding of how tourism experiences may be supplied and managed in rural destinations, based on both market and destination knowledge, is of paramount importance to help rural communities successfully design and manage rural tourism destinations and, ultimately, to achieve sustainable rural tourism development. This conviction provided the inspiration for the three-year research project entitled “The overall rural tourism experience and sustainable local community development”, which is financed by the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (co-financed by COMPETE, QREN and FEDER), and which began in June 2010. With the objective of defining integrative, sustainable destination development strategies, the project is engaged in a holistic and interdisciplinary analysis of the overall rural tourism experience, in which both guests and hosts interact with each other and with a complex setting. The present study reports on work in progress, with reference to the initial exploratory fieldwork in one of three villages studied—Linhares da Beira.

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This paper first briefly explores the concept of the overall rural tourism experience, then it presents a short characterization of the case study village, and finally it reveals the first results of an exploratory study whose possible implications for destination marketing are also discussed.

## 2. The overall tourist experience in rural areas

The tourism experience in general is seen as extremely complex; its most commonly recognized dimensions are the emotional (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Vitterso, Vorkinn, Vistad, & Vaagland, 2000), the social, particularly regarding specific interactions between tourists and hosts (Tucker, 2003; Morgan & Xu, 2009), and the cognitive, associated with perceptions of destination features, such as landscape, infrastructure, attractions (Gopalan & Narayan, 2010), along with “sensescape” dimensions (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003). The benefits of the tourism experience are thus not restricted to functional or utility values, but include social, emotional, hedonic and symbolic dimensions, mediated by the senses (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Knutson & Beck, 2004).

The rural tourist experience in particular must be understood as the overall experience of a large number and diversity of resources, attractions, services, people and environments offered by a destination, not all principally designed for tourist use, but all of which impact on the experience and are potentially sought out and valued by tourists. For the rural tourism experience the authors assume that specific features, such as hospitality and traditions as well as particular physical destination features (e.g. landscape), constitute the main ingredients of an experience lived and co-created by tourists, tourism suppliers and the local population (Fig. 1).

Rural areas are frequently perceived in contrast to urban areas; the small settlements, small scale buildings, and the amount of open space, only occupied by rural flora and fauna (Lane, 1994), offer the tourist a sense of freedom and opportunities for relaxing, undertaking outdoor activities and being close to nature, corresponding to motivations as revealed by studies of various types of rural tourist (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, 2004; Kastenholz et al., 1999; Molera & Albaladejo, 2007; Park & Yoon, 2009). The built and the human environment, specifically opportunities for a personalized contact between hosts and guests (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009; Tucker, 2003), are also highly valued components of the rural tourism experience. Finally, the traditional, rural way of life, representing the “authentic”, is another fundamental component (Figueiredo, 2004; Sims, 2009), with different tourists valuing

distinct dimensions of this experience (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz et al., 1999; Park & Yoon, 2009).

One major challenge for planning and managing rural tourism development is to satisfy diverse tourist segments seeking different experiences. Understanding individual motivations, expectations, perceptions and meanings associated with this subjective experience (Uriely, 2005) is therefore essential in order to provide high quality experiences.

The tourism experience is, in fact, both co-created and lived by several agents: tourists, the local population and tourism service providers. Tourists assume an active role in defining their experience, starting the process through information-seeking and imagining well before traveling, and activating a network of services available on site at the destination (Gnoth, 2003). Additionally, the nature of tourists' participation during the experience (e.g. active or passive, characterized by absorption or immersion) is fundamental to the way they live and remember it (Knutson & Beck, 2004).

The population and tourism suppliers also have an important influence in shaping the tourist experience. Many of the core resources that determine the competitiveness of destinations (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999), e.g. culture and hospitality, are deeply rooted and embodied in the host community. The opportunity to get to know the local way of life and make contact with residents assumes a special role in the rural tourism experience (Lane, 1994). The role of service providers in shaping the tourism experience is obvious, for example by designing the physical environment of service provision – the servicescape (Knutson & Beck, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009) – and by determining other more intangible service features, such as reliability and responsiveness (Knutson & Beck, 2004).

However, the local community may also play an active role in creating the tourism experience, helping tourists to “discover” and enjoy a more intense experience of these places. Residents may share their knowledge of a region's history, culture and natural heritage, or offer opportunities of closer contact with their way of life (e.g. by receiving tourists in their homes) or with local products (e.g. by promoting, selling or letting them taste these products) (Pina & Delfa, 2005; Sáez, Fuentes-Fuentes, & Lloréns-Montes, 2007). They may thus help build bridges that reduce the distance between the tourists and the destination context, namely by acting as “cultural brokers” (Cohen, 1988), allowing tourists to overcome barriers and gain access to a broader experience of the rural destination (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009).

The multifaceted character of the rural tourism experience calls for an “integrated rural tourism” development (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ibery, 2007), based on the coordination of an area's resources and stakeholders, and on sustainable development principles. In any case, for successful and sustainable rural tourism development and management, the complex rural tourism experience needs first to be understood in all its facets, as we try to do next in a case study example.

## 3. Case study

### 3.1. Methodology

The tourist experience is simultaneously an individual phenomenon, marked by psychological factors, and a social phenomenon, involving interaction between individuals (Jennings & Nickerson, 2006). As a subjective experience, it is only accessible via introspection – the phenomenological approach proposed by Cohen (1979), which suggests qualitative methods as most adequate for analyzing the tourist experience (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005).

The study of the rural tourist experience proposed here involves the analysis of several dimensions, namely: destination resources; the tourist experience lived by tourists, by residents and by agents of tourism supply; and the institutional context that conditions tourism development. Documentary analysis and on-site observation were undertaken to identify and characterize tourism resources. To analyze the tourist experience lived and conditioned by different

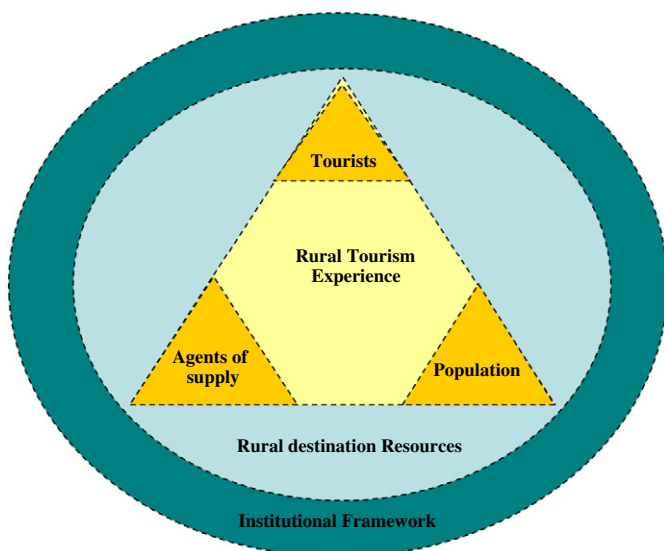


Fig. 1. Model of the rural tourist experience.

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