

Editorial

Rural tourism experiences. Land, sense and experience-scapes in quest of new tourist spaces and sustainable community development

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The special issue on “Rural tourism experiences” is one outcome of the International Conference on Rural Tourism entitled “*Re-inventing rural tourism and the rural tourism experience - Conserving, innovating and co-creating for sustainability*” that took place in early September 2013 at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. The conference was a milestone at the end of a 3-years research project undertaken in 3 Portuguese villages (Favaios, Janeiro de Cima and Linhares da Beira), with the collaboration of 15 researches from 7 distinct Portuguese institutions, 4 research assistants and 5 master students at the University of Aveiro, and one international consultant (Bernard Lane), who critically discussed with us and confronted findings with those from diverse studies in other contexts and parts of the world.

The relatively broad interest and active participation in this “home-made”, specifically themed event, not integrated in any large-scale association, network or professional organization of continuously held and internationally acknowledged conferences in the tourism or rural development field, confirms the existence of a dynamic research community addressing rural tourism issues from very distinct perspectives, and analyzing them in quite distinct contexts. After a process of double (sometimes triple) blind reviewing, we were very pleased about the final result, with 168 authors

contributing to 80 accepted presentations. At the Conference, 85 authors contributed to the debate with 62 paper and 17 poster presentations, reporting research from 23 countries (book of abstracts available from- http://cms.ua.pt/orte/sites/default/files/book_abstracts_27ago.pdf). Discussions at the conference, together with very interesting keynote presentations (by Bernard Lane, Keith Halfacree, Richard Sharpley, Nancy McGehee, Hio Jung, Apolónia Rodrigues and Elisabeth Kastenholz), were most inspiring and some of the papers were selected for special issues of three journals (Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Regionais and Pasos - Journal of Tourism and Cultural Heritage). A *Cambridge Scholars Publishing* book with some of the conference contributions, directed at an international audience, is still in preparation.

This special issue elaborated for PASOS is based on a selection of papers with a main focus on social, anthropologic and cultural themes, and a particular emphasis on community and sustainability implications of new experience- based tourism production (or rather co-creation) in rural territories, in a context of transformation of the rural space, presenting additionally particular cases from diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

Indeed, studies looking at distinct themes, from diverse scientific perspectives, reveal dis-

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tinct realities in Portugal, Poland, Italy, Australia, Jamaica and Brasil. All authors were invited to present improved and extended versions of their conference papers with a particular reviewing process, undertaken by the co-editors of this issue, aiming at the best possible quality of each paper and a consistent and well integrated combination of contributions rounding up a complex, diverse and challenging field of research, reflection and contesting views. We also asked one of the keynote speakers, Keith Halfacree, to add his view on the changing rural world and its representations as a global point of departure for our discussion and finish this special issue with three book reviews on topics related to the tourist experience and corresponding challenges to rural territories.

As far as the full articles of this special issue are concerned, a thematic division is possible with a focus on: a) the context of rural tourism development, from the perspective of the rural areas' transformations, its main activities and resources, as well as their communities' and stakeholders' strategies and initiatives to find alternative and complementary roads of development; b) the market-based perspective, understanding rural tourists' motivations and new opportunities suggested by experience marketing, particularly in the context of co-creation, sensorial marketing and post-modern consumption patterns and trends.

An understanding of the two perspectives and their matching should be paramount for developing new, competitive and sustainable development strategies for rural territories and communities, integrating rural tourism experiences that would benefit all stakeholders involved.

As a starting point of our reflections, we must recognize that rural areas across the world have undergone significant changes during the last decades, especially the more remote ones and particularly as a consequence of the changes observed in agriculture. Many rural areas have lost their long-lasting identification (in territorial and in social terms) with agriculture in the process or, at the very least, the previously characteristic relationships and articulations between agriculture and rural societies and economies have substantially changed. Many of these changes have given rise to a "consumable rural", as pointed out as well by Halfacree in his paper in this special issue. The rural space, now open for all sorts of consumptions, is increasingly represented as an idyllic place in which foreigners and inhabitants have an opportunity to interact and to create a number of shared and integrated experiences based on the local traditions and resources. As again Halfacree explains, in consequence of these changes, rural leisure users can become a relevant part of rural

territories' history and reconfiguration processes, instead of being reduced to the role of (as until now it seemed to be the case) *outsiders*.

In fact, for some decades now following the agriculture crisis, academic and political discourses on the rural have emphasized the contribution of tourism to promote local development in rural communities. But usually the point of view is merely based on the debates around the economic impacts of tourism and the way they affect residents' views on tourism activities and tourists. A more recent debate is focused on the relevance of integrating and involving all the stakeholders in the co-creation of tourism experiences and in the promotion of sustainable local development, using local, both material and symbolic, resources. Taylor, Daye, Kneafsey and Barrett offer, in their paper on this issue, a perspective on the ways in which local inhabitants of the Maroon enclave of Charles Town and of the German district of Seaford Town, in Jamaica, are developing intangible and tangible cultural tourism products based on their cultural roots, exemplifying therefore the active involvement of locals in the creation of rewarding tourism experiences and emphasizing the major role of cultural resources in the production of sustainable places.

In the same sense, but focusing on local agricultural resources and products – namely in the context of wine production – Marques and Santos provide in their paper a good example of the designing of tourist routes (in the case, wine routes) yielding local development. The case of Vale dos Vinhedos, in Brasil, analyzed by the authors, shows the relevance of creating synergies between different actors and activities around the wine production process. These synergies may contribute not only to provide unique visiting experiences for the tourists but, and perhaps more importantly, to improve local economy and to reinforce local identity, therefore promoting sustainable local development in the regional and local contexts.

The paper presented by Horan, Goulding and Tozzi provides, as well, some reflections on the role of material and immaterial local resources as local communities' major tourist attractions, taking as case studies two small settlements in the Siena Province, Italy and two small settlements in Victoria, Australia. Despite of diverse dynamics and resources, all the cases seem to illustrate the relevance of using local economic, social and environmental attributes and features in the development of rather distinct tourism products. The authors argue that in each of the four settlements vibrant and successful industries were created leveraged on each area's resources and assets which, combined with other characteristics

of the territories, have created a 'major draw card for tourists', to use the authors' own expression.

The relevance of combining activities, together with the need to create synergies and networks among the diverse stakeholders, following the current multifunctional conception (essentially from an institutional point of view) and character (essentially from a territorial perspective), of rural territories, is nowadays increasingly recognized and well expressed in the different functions specifically agricultural businesses are assuming in diverse rural contexts. Wojciechowska debates, in her paper, the experience of agritourism (a common materialization of the multifunctional character of agriculture and of rural contexts) in Poland, although the Polish agritourism industry is marked by specific characteristics, related to the recent history of the country as well as to the particularities of its development. The author shows that the agritourism phenomenon in Poland resulted, in a first stage, mainly from exogenous factors and processes, while nowadays the relevance of the linkages with local resources and identities is gradually being recognized and implemented aiming at sustainable development of rural communities and at the creation of rewarding experiences for all involved.

Also Klein and Souza present a study on the complementarity of tourism with agriculture, focusing on the importance of – until now scarcely studied – pedagogical farms, in south Brasil. The liaisons between agriculture, tourism and education contribute both to the development of learning skills of young children and to the valorization of local knowledge and know-how, therefore enhancing the local farmers' and other rural residents' self-esteem, pride and identity. Pedagogical rural tourism is based on a holistic perspective which encompasses social and economic complementarity and diversification as well as the valorization of local cultural and natural heritage. In the same sense, the multifunctional character of agriculture and rural areas may be strengthened.

As for the market-based perspective, the study presented by Kastenholz and Santos shows that the demand of mainly Brazilian rural tourists, as perceived by owners of rural, mainly agro-tourist, accommodation units in Rio Grande do Sul (a Southern state of Brazil, where rural tourism is relatively more developed), reveal a pattern of mostly short-break, domestic family visits motivated by a general search of escape from the busy and stressful city life, in search of a kind of *rural idyll*, also found in many other studies, but showing an increasing trend towards more diversified and active holidays, in a longitudinal perspective, where rural accommodation owners

have learnt to cater with particular, not only rural asset-based (such as swimming pools), offerings to specific and diversified market needs through diverse and more involving experiences.

Agapito stresses the relevance of the sensorial dimension of these rural tourism experiences, as clearly identified in the tourism literature and particularly applicable to the stimulus-rich rural destination context, where nature elements, particular manifestations of (material and immaterial) culture, gastronomy and the social living context provide many resources for designing and communicating unique sensation-rich experience opportunities, which may increase the destination's appeal, while also permitting more involving, satisfactory and memorable experiences, eventually leading to destination loyalty.

Involving and memorable experiences should also result from co-creative learning opportunities, based on unique place resources, desired by post-modern tourists, as Gomes suggests in her article. Also intangible unique place resources may play an important role, as is analyzed in an exploratory approach for two archeological sites in Portugal (the Coa Valley Archeological Park and the Aljubarrota Battle Camp), where apparently stakeholders still consider material heritage as most relevant and where distinct views on heritage usage in the tourism context are observable. The author proposes a heritage valuation model which responds to the challenge of Integrated Rural Tourism *"to mobilise and empower ... stakeholders (through integration, communication and free information flow) in order to create valuable resources (enactment), which may positively affect rural community lives, as well as contribute to wealth creation through the development of more appealing tourist products."*

The topic of rescue archeology heritage valuation was also explored by Dias-Sardinha, Ross and Loureiro for the Alqueva dam case. Destination stakeholders reveal a limited understanding of the potential of archeological heritage as an ingredient of innovative tourism products, although some admit the possibility of developing archeology-based complementary tourism offerings, providing educational and eventually aesthetic experiences and presenting a potential for differentiating the destination. According to the authors, *"the development of tourism products and experiences based on archaeological knowledge should provide an experience of personal transformation by means of learning and/or stimulation of the senses of tourists."* This would help strategically manage the Alqueva tourism destination *"in light of the new trends of creative tourism and experience economy"* and may thus contribute to make a better use of endogenous resources, some of which are intangible,

need to be “rescued” or interpreted and enacted in a way making their value and meaning recognizable to both tourists and local stakeholders, including local communities.

Co-creation of rural-cultural tourist experiences is also the topic of the paper presented by Carvalho, Lima and Kastenholz reveals, in a specific village context (Janeiro de Cima) in the interior of the Portuguese central region. The authors show that there is scope for the development of co-creative cultural tourist experiences, based on the existing, material and immaterial, endogenous resources. Based on interview data from diverse stakeholders involved (local economic and development agents, residents and visitors), the large potential of presenting opportunities for new, appealing and engaging tourism experiences becomes clear, where local residents may play a role as “cultural brokers” between the newcomer and the community culture and where local resources and traditions may be better set into value, possibly enhancing not only the quality of the tourist experience, but also the sense of local identity and pride as well as the preservation of traditional and creation of new (or renewed) economic activities, if put into practice in a carefully designed, integrative and participatory way.

As previously mentioned, this special issue also includes three book reviews on topics related to the rural tourism experience and corresponding challenges to rural territories. The first book, analyzed by Dora Agapito, integrates a set of contributions on the general problematic of the “tourist experience”, its nature, determinants, analysis and implications for destination planning and management (Sharpley, R., & Stone, P. (Eds.) (2011). *Tourist experience: Contemporary perspectives*. Oxon, UK: Routledge). This book appears to be particularly appropriate as a background reading for a thorough understanding of what is at stake when analyzing tourist experiences, even though in this book with a focus on the tourist.

The second book, reviewed by Gunjan Saxena, presents a set of contributions revealing the link between agriculture, food and rural tourism (Sidali, K. L., Spiller, A. and Schulze, B. (2011) *Food, Agriculture and Tourism: Linking Local Gastronomy and Rural Tourism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Springer). It shows, through several contributions and case-study examples how these central, traditional resources in rural territories may be linked to the tourist experience in these areas.

Last, but not least, the third book, reviewed by Arthur Christóvão, is written in Portuguese and presents the results of the above-mentioned 3 years research project undertaken in three Portuguese villages (Kastenholz, E., Eusébio, C., Figueiredo,

E., Carneiro, MJ e J.Lima (Coordinators), 2014, *Reinventar o turismo rural em Portugal – cocriação de experiências turísticas sustentáveis*, Aveiro: UA Editora (ISBN: 978-972-789-395-9). This book tries to present an integrated approach on the rural tourism experience, looking at it from the perspective of local actors, communities and visitors alike, as well as taking into account local resources and their usage in a sustainability yielding rural tourism development in the villages under study.

We understand that the selection of these contributions sheds some light on and raises relevant questions regarding very complex development and sustainability concerns focusing on rural tourism experiences as a tool for rural development. No final answer is given to the question if and in how far rural tourism actually leads to sustainable development nor do we present any guideline or recipe for achieving success or sustainability in the process of rural tourism development. We actually believe, also based on the present cases and so many more we know from the literature, that there are far too many variables at stake to make any such prevision or give any generally applicable indications of how to act to achieve success in sustainable rural tourism development. Still, some cases of success and important critical factors possibly enhancing it, as well as challenges possibly jeopardizing it, are discussed, by different authors referring to distinct contexts and presenting distinct perspectives of the “rural tourism experience” or better “experiences”. We hope that these contributions may be a reference or inspiration to other researchers interested in these complex topics of rural tourism and sustainable rural development, helping to identify relevant concepts, dimensions and variables of interest, as well as interesting methods of analysis and examples of action.

<i>Recibido:</i>	<i>not applicable</i>
<i>Reenviado:</i>	<i>not applicable</i>
<i>Aceptado:</i>	<i>16/03/2014</i>
<i>Sometido a evaluación por pares anónimos</i>	