



# TURISMO E CULTURA

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**LIVING, SHARING AND MARKETING  
THE OVERALL RURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCE –  
A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION AND FIRST RESULTS FROM  
A RESEARCH PROJECT IN 3 PORTUGUESE VILLAGES**

## **1. Introduction**

This communication focuses on the “overall rural tourism experience”, suggested as a particular and rather complex phenomenon that deserves special attention from researchers in tourism, in an approach that would at best be interdisciplinary in nature. This is the aim of a three years research project, funded by FCT<sup>1</sup> (PTDC/CS-GEO/104894/2008), in which the phenomenon, its nature, dimensions, determinants and consequences, as well as possible way to plan and manage it sustainably, are studied from the perspectives of marketing, in particular consumer behavior research, sociology and social psychology, economics, anthropology, geography, general management and planning. This is done, based on extensive field work in 3 case study villages in North and Central Portugal: Janeiro de Cima (Fundão), Linhares da Beira (Celorico da Beira) and Favaio (Alijó).

I will here first present some conceptual aspects that help understand the “overall rural tourism experience”, based on a selection of literature

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that has been reviewed extensively in the context of the project. I will privilege in this communication the perspective of experience or experiential marketing – however trying to incorporate dimensions of the before mentioned disciplines that need to be integrated to produce relevant inputs for a sustainable rural tourism marketing strategy. I will then briefly present the project in further detail and in the third part of the presentation show some first results from two of the villages analysed, where field work is most advanced: Janeiro de Cima and Linhares da Beira. These results are work in progress and refer to the qualitative data collection, focusing here on the interviews directed at tourists visiting the villages. Finally, some experience and destination marketing implications are suggested.

## **2. The overall rural tourism experience and its potential role for sustainable development**

Although any kind of tourism taking place in the rural space may be called “rural tourism” (OECD, 1994), ‘rural features’ of the territory and the community which host the tourists, should be recognized as playing a fundamental role in any tourism experience designated as ‘rural’. According to Lane (1994), rural tourism should ideally be: located in rural areas; functionally rural (based on the rural world’s special features, such as open space, natural resources and traditional practices); rural in scale (small scale) and traditional in character, organically and slowly growing and controlled by local people. If the last condition is fulfilled, the term ‘*rural community tourism*’ (Keane, 1992) seems appropriate, where tourism development takes place in an integrated, participatory and coordinated manner at the local level. Based on similar assumptions, Saxena et al. (2007) suggest the term “*integrated rural tourism*”, where tourism development occurs in an integrated and coordinated manner, yielding maximum benefits for long-term development, that is yielding sustainable destination development.

Even if frequently of small scale and not as impressive as other, more massified tourism phenomena, the economic significance of rural tourism

for the development of single rural areas may be outstanding, due to *potentially high multiplier effects* (Walmsley, 2003, Sharpley, 2005), given that the entire *rural lifestyle* is of interest (Kastenholz, 2005); its diverse manifestations may be commodified as “products”, consumed by the typically urban-tourist looking for signs of lost identities in a standardized world, signs of “authenticity”, in the context of interactions and tensions between the global and the local, images of the past and demands of the present (Figueiredo, 2004, Silva, 2007, McCarthy, 2008, Pereiro and Conde, 2005).

Additionally, tourism may *increase the areas’ attractiveness* in the eyes of the local community, enhancing their pride and self-esteem (Kastenholz, 2004, Rodrigues et al., 2007) and strengthening their **sense of identity** (Pereiro and Conde, 2005). Particularly if developed endogenously, integrating natural and cultural heritage and the entire socio-economic network of the territory and creating relevant links to the market, rural tourism may contribute to heritage preservation, sustainable development and, last but not least, the retention of residents in poorly developed rural areas (Lane, 1994, Gannon, 1994, Kastenholz, 2004, Lane, 2009, OECD, 1994, Crouch and Ritchie, 1999, Page and Getz, 1997). However the lack of significant contributions to development, frequently contrasting large sums of investment, in many cases increased scepticism about this potential (Walmsley, 2003, Gannon, 1994, Cavaco, 1999, Cristóvão, 2002, Ribeiro and Marques, 2002) and calls for a deeper analysis of the dynamics of rural tourism and particularly of the *conditions for and drivers of a more sustainable rural tourism development*.

According to Sharpley (2002), the potential of rural tourism as a development tool depends on the quality and “critical mass” of a *region’s attractions, services and facilities*. *But the way these core resources are managed and integrated into an overall appealing and distinct rural tourism experience* to build not only a comparative, but an effectively competitive advantage (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999), seems most important, as well as the way this global product is promoted and made available to the most interested (and interesting) market segments (Kastenholz, 2004, Sparrer, 2005, Cai, 2002).

These *markets*' choices are increasingly determined by 'lifestyle-led consumption-oriented' leisure behaviour, that may be well accommodated in rural territories, commodified as symbolic settings for a post-modern 'lifestyle-oriented tourism industry' (Walmsley, 2003), which is sometimes conceptualized as the (re-)discovery of some "rural idyll", in a search for "authenticity", frequently associated to the rural space, and perceived in contrast to the globalized and standardized living space of most urban dwellers (Figueiredo, 2004, Silva, 2007, McCarthy, 2008). Literature suggests that some expectations of this rural tourist experience include a nostalgic and idealized concept of a "rural way of life", reflecting some romantic idea of "the good old days", purity and simplicity and a perfect integration of Man in his intact natural environment (Clary, 1993). However, there is not just one type of post-modern tourist travelling to the rural areas; in fact, empirical evidence reveals a diversity of motivations within the rural tourist market (Frochot, 2005, Kastenholtz et al., 1999, Molera and Albaladejo, 2007), naturally resulting in distinct rural tourism experiences. Clemenson and Lane (1997) speak, in this context, of a series of niche markets within a larger niche market (e.g. eco-tourism, nature-based tourism, agro-tourism, food & wine tourism), presenting new opportunities to creative and innovative entrepreneurs, frequently driven rather by lifestyle motives than by common economic goals (Lane, 2009).

In any case, from the point of view of both the market and the destination, a *significant role of "rural features"* of the space/ community, in which the tourism experience takes place, should be a primary condition of any tourism that is called "rural" (Cavaco, 1995, Calatrava and Avilés, 1993, Kastenholtz, 2010), while simultaneously the socio-psychological particularities of the experience need to be understood to manage it to the benefits of all involved in creating it (Kastenholtz, 2010).

From the *destination marketing* perspective, the "*overall rural tourism experience*" needs to be understood as the *key attractor and satisfier* of the experience tourists seek at a rural destination (Kastenholtz et al., in press). Generally, the tourist experience is recognized as most complex, with commonly recognized dimensions being the emotional (Otto and Ritchie, 1996), the cognitive and symbolically shaped destination image – landscape,

infrastructures, attractions (Gopalan and Narayan, 2010), the “sensescape” (Dann and Jacobsen, 2003) and the social dimension – specifically interactions between tourists and hosts (Tucker, 2003). Similarly, Schmitt (1999) suggests 5 experience modes for any consumption experience, namely the before mentioned “sense”, “feel” and “think”, further adding the modes “act” and “relate”, with the latter not only referring to host-tourist interaction, but to cultural and social meanings of consumption, its implications on a person’s identity formation and relatedness to others. Pine & Gilmore’s (1998) most influential model of conceptualizing the consumer experience considering two main dimensions, customer participation (active versus passive) and connection (immersion versus absorption), can also be well applied in the tourism context (Williams, 2006).

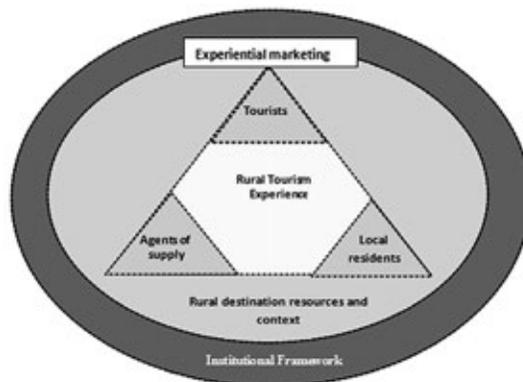
Combinations of these dimensions would determine the experience to be of a rather entertaining (passive absorption, like watching a show), esthetic (passive immersion, like admiring impressive nature views, feeling part of nature), educational (active absorption, like learning experiences) or escapist (active immersion, like immersing in a new reality), nature. The benefits of the tourism experience are thus not restricted to functional or utilitarian values, but include social, emotional, hedonic and symbolic dimensions, mediated by the senses (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, Knutson and Beck, 2004).

Since the *rural community* plays a central role in sharing, conditioning and facilitating these experiences, the community’s attitude towards tourism and willingness/ capacity of getting involved is also most important. Sometimes the service providers are understood as the direct link, representatives or “cultural brokers” (Cohen, 1988) regarding the local community and its culture. This makes them particularly relevant stakeholders shaping the tourist experience (Kastenholz and Sparrer, 2009), while generally a “welcoming atmosphere” is sought in most tourist experiences, with rural tourism not being an exception (Kastenholz, 2002).

In short, the rural tourist experience must be understood as a global destination experience lived by visitors of rural territories regarding a large number and diversity of resources, attractions, services, people and environments, which are not all designed for tourist use in the first place,

but all impact on the experience and are potentially sought by tourists. Specific features, such as hospitality, traditions and particular physical destination features are the main ingredients of this experience lived and co-created by tourists, agents of tourism supply and the local community (Kastenholz et al., in press). Their careful integration into an “overall rural tourism experience providing system”, stimulating the diverse dimensions of the tourist experience sought through experiential marketing, should be considered the key factor of success for both an appealing and competitive tourism product and sustainable rural tourism development at the destination (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1 – Model of the Rural Tourist Experience



### 3. The research project

It is in this context that the here presented research project seeks to analyse, in a holistic and inter-disciplinary manner, the rural tourism experience offered by three Portuguese villages that are shaped by distinct geographical, cultural, social, political and economic conditions. This experience is analysed, in terms of tourists, the community and the tourism destination context, specifically its main tourism resources and social, economic and political conditions. The project shall identify conflicts

of interest and/ or gaps of perception/ interpretation and understanding, as well as gaps between the real and potential rural tourism experience. Based on this integrated analysis and the researchers' knowledge of destination planning, management and marketing theory and practice, ways to overcome these conflicts and gaps shall be suggested, in an attempt to contribute to sustainable destination development.

The analysis is undertaken at the rural community/ village level. The first focus is on tourists visiting these rural communities seeking to identify central experiential aspects of a rural holiday, the tourists' behaviours, motivations, perceptions, emotions and attitudes, considering additionally the pre- and post-experience phases.

Secondly, since the rural community plays a central role in sharing, conditioning and facilitating these experiences, destination stakeholders (agents of tourism supply, those responsible for tourism planning and resource management, local community) are addressed to identify their vision of, and contribution to, the rural tourism experience. Particular attention is given to existing and potential networks of supply facilitating and promoting an integrated rural tourism experience.

Thirdly, the rural tourism experience potential is dependent on the destination's (material and non-material) resources and heritage, also in a wider territorial – even cross-border- context, and destination stakeholders' capacity for integrating them into an overall tourism experience. For this purpose, an analysis of the social, economic and political context, as well as of existing primary resources motivating visitation (e.g. nature attractions or cultural heritage) and secondary resources (tourist infrastructures making the visit feasible, such as accommodation, routes, signs etc) is also undertaken.

Analyses shall, first, help understand the overall rural tourism experience more profoundly, the relevance of a "multi-attraction" or even "multi-destination setting" and the type of attractions, environments, basic infrastructures and facilities, tourist services and recreational activities sought, not to forget the relevance of sensory, social (interaction with hosts, local community and other tourists), and symbolic components of the experience (the meanings of the experience in a deeper identity

and cultural context), with a particular concern about the role of “rural dimensions” of the experience.

Second, it shall permit the understanding of the destination’s potential of providing or enhancing this overall and multi-faceted experience through intelligent and adaptable destination networks, integrating relevant stakeholders and endogenous resources, thereby creating competitive advantages.

Results will be further discussed in the context of integrated destination planning and societal marketing yielding sustainable destination development (Kastenholz, 2006), in line with what Saxena et al. (2007) conceptualized as “Integrated Rural Tourism”.

This project seeks to overcome a predominantly fragmented perspective regarding rural tourism, with studies typically focusing either on the tourist market (concerned with tourist satisfaction) or on the community/ destination (concerned with local and regional development) by analysing, in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner, the overall rural tourism experience, in which both guests and hosts interact, simultaneously interacting with the complex place-setting, as a point of departure for defining integrative, sustainable destination development strategies. It thereby brings together the demands of the market with the needs of the host communities and environment. The focus is the village/ community level, however considering a broader environment of tourist attraction typically associated to the development of tourism products/ destinations. Three villages were chosen for this approach, all of them having benefitted from public investment in heritage preservation and the enhancement of tourism attractiveness, namely: Janeiro de Cima, belonging to the network of Xist Villages, Linhares da Beira, integrated in the network of Portugal’s Historical Villages and Favaios, a wine-producing village in the Douro region.

The project integrates 12 researchers from diverse Portuguese higher education institutions (mainly the UA, but also UTAD and e-geo/ UNL) and is accompanied by an internationally recognized specialist on rural tourism, Bernard Lane, one of the “fathers” of the conceptualization of rural tourism by the OECD, most experienced consultant for rural tou-

rism development worldwide and co-editor of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism. Researchers are specialized in the fields of tourism economics, marketing, management and planning, in geography, anthropology, sociology and rural development, sustaining an interdisciplinary approach and an enhanced capacity of integrating results from diverse perspectives.

At the moment, the conceptualization phase is largely completed (however requiring continuous actualization), qualitative desk and field work on the rural tourism experience has been undertaken in two of the three villages, permitting an overview of some first results from these phases. The qualitative results helped additionally identify most relevant issues to be integrated in the survey approach to be directed at the three main stakeholder groups: tourists, population and agents of supply. The tourist survey is being tested at the moment and shall be implemented during one year, to account for the seasonality impact.

#### **4. Some first qualitative results**

This communication presents some first qualitative results regarding the nature of the tourist experience in the rural context, analysing concretely the point of view of tourists who visited two of the three villages chosen as case study objects for the mentioned research project. The focus is here on the on-site experience. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 individuals who were visiting Linhares da Beira and Janeiro de Cima, between January and June 2011, yielding a deeper understanding of the experience lived by the tourists in the villages.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and subject to content analysis in an attempt to identify the main issues of the respondents' discourse. This content analysis involved the categorization and systematization of discourses, based on the key points raised by respondents, aided by the program *WEB-QDA*, version 0.9. The categorization and identification of patterns was subject to further validation by a group of researchers knowledgeable about the phenomenon, in a triangulation approach using different researchers to interpret a phenomenon (Denzin,

1978). Additionally, a comparative analysis was carried out, examining apart from global patterns, consistencies and contradictions between different observations and the interrelations between the discourse and the literature review (McCracken, 1988), yielding a later comparison of the views of tourists with those of other stakeholder groups analysed in this project.

#### **4.1. The context of the Tourist Experience – a brief characterization of the villages**

Linhares da Beira and Janeiro de Cima are two small villages with around 350 inhabitants in the interior Central Region of Portugal (Figure 2). They share many demographic, social and economic features with other rural settlements of the country's interior, namely depopulation due to migratory flows to other countries (e.g. France, Germany, the US), to the country's metropolitan areas (Lisbon, Porto) or the more developed coast line, also associated to population aging. This is basically due to the transformation of the rural space in Portugal, with agriculture losing its attractiveness, alternative employments being scarce and insufficient or inefficient public investments countering this evolution, with some public decisions even deteriorating the situation (e.g. through the closing of schools, health facilities and other public services).

*Linhares da Beira* is located close to the mountain area and Natural Park Serra da Estrela, is also known as the Portuguese capital of paragliding (Costa and Chalip, 2005) and integrated in a series of pedestrian and BTT trails (some around historical themes). Most importantly, *Linhares da Beira* integrates the network of *Historical Villages of Portugal* (1994), being an old medieval village, inhabited since the Roman times. One of the main tourism attractions of *Linhares* is its castle, constructed at a strategic geographical position for the country's defence – at a line of penetration for those moving from the Spanish Castile to Coimbra and Lisbon. The village offers seven official lodging units, including a campsite and a small boutique hotel, as well as two restaurants, a bar, a handicraft shop and a tourism

information office. The number of visitors are above 10 000 visitors a year, which is remarkable for a village of the size of Linhares, although numbers were well above 20.000 visitors between 2002 and 2004, revealing some decrease of attractiveness in the past years. Most visitors are excursionists staying for just a few hours to visit the castle and its surroundings. The domestic market clearly stands out (representing more than 89% of the total market), although the share of international tourists increased from 8%, in 2005, to 11% in 2009 (AHP, 2010, CMCB, 2005).

FIGURE 2 – Location of the case study villages



Source: <http://www.infopedia.pt/MapaEstatistico>

Janeiro de Cima integrates the *Schist Villages Network* (2004). It is located by the river Zêzere and disposes of a river park which is very popular in summer. The village offers two official rural tourism units, a restaurant, a tea room, one bar, a weaving museum with a handicraft shop and a small regular shop. There are no statistics of tourists or visitors to the village.

## 4.2. The tourist experience in the two villages

In total 33 tourists were interviewed in the two villages, more precisely 16 regular tourists (staying overnight in one of the villages), 8 in both villages, 15 excursionists (all in Linhares), and 2 residential tourists, one in each village, making a total of 24 interviews in Linhares and 9 in Janeiro. Only 4 international tourists (visiting Linhares) were interviewed. Most visitors (54.5%) were between 35 and 59 years of age, with only 6 being older than 59 years. Porto, Lisbon and the near-by Castelo Branco were the main areas of origin of these tourists and female respondents slightly dominated (54.5%) the sample. The sample was most biased towards the higher educational levels, with 70% revealing a higher education degree. This seems to be a characteristic feature of the rural (OECD, 1994, Kastenholz, 2005) and particular cultural tourist market (Kim et al., 2007), with particularly Linhares attracting tourists where both motivations should coincide. Correspondingly, the dominating professional status of respondents was specialized intellectual or scientific professional activities.

Respondents refer local features and *markers* as the main motivations for visiting the villages – history and historical monuments in Linhares and the schist buildings in Janeiro de Cima, as well as the brands these villages are associated with. But they also mention general curiosity and interest in getting to know new, different landscapes, cultures and ways of life, when travelling to rural areas: “*What I always hope [to find] when I travel somewhere is to find places that are different from those in which I live, to break the routine*” (T12 Linhares), more specifically places different from urban areas: “*for being places contrasting the life in the urban space, where I spend the rest of the year*” (T3 Janeiro). Correspondingly, tourists refer to push motivations particularly the wish to escape the urban routine. They wish to find, specifically, *proximity to nature, green landscapes, relaxation in a peace and quiet environment, traditional gastronomy, silence, a simple life* and some seek *contact with the local community*. Some also connect nostalgic feelings with their village visit: “*I had my education in the countryside... I know more about cattle than*

*plants, but I did spend so many hours in the countryside, that this coming back is most enjoyable to me...*" (T2 Janeiro).

In fact, the relevance of the motivating theme previously named as "rural idyll" becomes further clear, when asking about perceived differences between urban and rural areas: Tourists describe life in cities as *stressful, agitated*, opposing a more *peaceful, healthy, pure, free and close to nature* rural space. They also do recognize the opportunities given in urban areas (employment, culture, facilities, etc.), but rather emphasize the negative aspects, whilst for the countryside no negative aspects are stressed, apart for some lack of tourism related services. On the other hand, not many tourists in both villages would actually live in a rural area. They like to visit it, stay there transitorily, but still prefer to live in the city because of the perceived better living conditions and job opportunities.

The experience lived in the villages has several dimensions, as mentioned above, with our analysis focusing on emotions, cognitions, senses, the social, relational and "active" components.

Tourists' emotions or affective appraisals were categorized according to the affective mapping system proposed by Russel (1988). All the tourists reveal affective appraisals of the villages and of the rural. Half of them mainly focus on the relaxing category (using descriptors as calm, peace, quiet, tranquility), with most descriptors falling in the low-mid arousal area, but with a positive sign (agreeable, pleasant), while some refer higher levels of arousal (interest, joy, happiness).

As far as *sensorial appraisals* (e.g. smell, sound, taste, touch and visual) are concerned, which were separately elicited, the answers illustrate specific manifestations of the affective appraisals of the experience lived. The tranquility feeling is frequently expressed by the use of the word *silence* to describe rural/ local sounds. Also the *sounds of nature, of the wind* (particularly in Linhares), *the water (river, in the case of Janeiro)* and of the *birds* are frequently associated with the rural environment in the villages. Visitors related the villages to the scents of *wild flowers and plants*. In Janeiro the Cima the smell of *pine trees* is often referred to and in Linhares the scent of the *land* and of the *pure air*. The taste is mainly related to local food products, particularly *cheese* in Linhares; *pumpkin*

*jam* and *chestnuts* in Janeiro de Cima. *Green* is the color more frequently associated with both villages by the large majority of tourists. Also the colors *grey* (Linhares) and *brown* (Janeiro de Cima) are used, corresponding to the most common stones (granite in Linhares and schist in Janeiro de Cima) used in the buildings in each village.

In both villages, the tourists' *cognitive image* of the village tends to refer to architecture and heritage (castle, history, past, medieval, granite, schist, architecture, restored buildings, the stone streets). The *visual* dimension apparently dominates the tourist experience, when considering the number of associations given by the respondents, confirming the relevance of the *tourist gaze* (Urry, 2002). *Visual images* mainly relate to the green landscape and fields, stones, monuments, mountains and the river. Some differences between village images are due to local specificities (e.g. the river and the schist in Janeiro de Cima, the castle and the granite in Linhares), but again *global* symbols mirroring the "rural idyll" strongly appear in the tourists' affective, cognitive and sensorial appraisals of both villages, namely through the important themes *tranquility/relaxation, green, landscape, traditional food and history/past*. Authenticity is also associated to the experience, with particularly the way of life in Janeiro being perceived as a *genuine rural way of life*: "the work of the people here in the small fields and the type of relation they have with this small scale agriculture...this is very characteristic. This is a Portugal still existing here that is not staged, it is perfectly genuine; these are people who have a knowledge that derives from their relation with nature. For example, ... we have seen people working in the fields, aged from 40 to 80 years. There is much work that is not mechanized, it is done manually, in a slow rhythm, but in the end of the day the work is done. ... We have talked to these people. This interaction with the people living in the territory marks. (T2 – Janeiro)

When asked about activities visitors engaged in during their stay, most common answers were "walking/ strolling around the village" to appreciate its buildings, the landscape and to "observe people" and "take photos", "just relaxing", "tasting the local food", "visiting the castle" (in Linhares) and *undertaking excursions in the surroundings*, revealing a

rather passive absorption or immersion in the village context, that is an *entertainment* or *esthetic perspective*, according to Pine & Gilmore's (1998) conceptualization. Pine & Gilmore's (1998) *educational experience mode* is also present, with some being actively interested in *learning something about history, culture* and the *rural way of life*. However, true *escapist modes of experience*, with *active immersion in the village living context* are rather rare, although also existing (interestingly only referred to by Janeiro de Cima tourists and in the context of opportunities of integration in community life).

The *social dimension* of the experience is also relevant, but apparently more regarding the *expectations* of the rural tourist experience than the *experience effectively lived* in the villages. Some tourists refer the welcoming atmosphere of sympathetic village people as most comforting and perceived as genuine and pleasant, particularly in Janeiro (where residents *great visitors spontaneously* and *are open to talk about their lives*), but most contacts tend to be rather brief and superficial (particularly in the case of excursionists visiting Linhares). For some the socialization with friends and family in the travel group or the possibility of meeting friends and making new contacts (not limited to the village population) were also highlighted as positive components of the experience.

## **5. Conclusions and marketing implications**

In sum, although highly exploratory and preliminary, results from qualitative content analysis show a type of rural tourist experience in which the symbolic consumption of the "rural idyll" plays a significant role, as also found by other authors (McCarthy, 2008, Figueiredo, 2004, Silva, 2007). The description of the experience lived in the villages refers to both distinctive endogenous resources (the castle in Linhares and the Schist architecture and the river Zêzere with its river beach in Janeiro) and global symbols of *rurality* (green landscapes, tranquility, general contrast with urban living context) as major motivations to visit and as main attraction factors. *Rurality* is generally represented in a very positive

manner, invoking correspondingly positive feelings and images. These feelings are typically of a low arousal, but pleasant nature, focusing on the *relaxing* effect of the experience.

Even if not explicitly stated, the contrast effect between urban home and the rural destination environment is generally implicit in the description of the affective image of the destination, as also found by Marques (2009) in another rural destination in Portugal.

Experiences tend to be rather passive in nature, leading to more or less immersion, depending on the individual's personal connection with the village and/ or the rural tourist experience. Although the social dimension is frequently referred to as relevant and the wish to communicate with the local population is also mentioned by some as an important motivation, most tourists engage in brief and superficial contacts with the residents, which is natural in the case of Linhares, where visitors typically stay for just a few hours. However, in Janeiro, where tourists tend to stay for longer periods and where residents are described as rather open and friendly, this dimension is more frequently mentioned and even described as permitting memorable escapist experiences, through the immersion in a distinct socio-cultural context.

Visual impressions dominate both the cognitive and the sensory experience, with landscape appreciation clearly standing out, although *all senses* contributed to a generally pleasant rural tourist experience. Cognitive images also reflect the historical (particularly in Linhares) and cultural dimensions of the experience, with some tourists revealing reflections on the type of development and a concern regarding the future of rural areas in Portugal. Still a romanticized view of the village as ideal scenery for relaxing holidays, contrasting with the stressful urban life, is a dominating theme. Still, most generally prefer urban life and its commodities. The pleasant outcomes are mainly associated with a relaxing atmosphere, in a rural and nature-shaped context, but also reflect some degree of surprise, interest and aesthetic pleasure particularly associated with the villages' heritage conservation and restoration, with Linhares' historic relevance and with Janeiro's landscape beauty (including the river and small-scale agriculture), ethnographic interest (weaving) and welcoming local population.

Still, if tourism is chosen as a strategy for sustainable development in the villages, this experience actually lived by the tourists in the villages may clearly be enhanced. The way the rural tourism experiences are provided, staged and conditioned (Mossberg, 2007, Ellis and Rossman, 2008), with signs of the frequently sought but difficult to deliver *authentic rural*, is a challenge for the community, in its search of new development opportunities without jeopardizing local identity (Sharpley, 2005), for the local rural tourism providers, in search of sustainable profits (Lane, 2009), and for the tourists, in search of significant experiences (Chambers, 2009), however diverse the rural tourist market's motivations (Frochot, 2005, Kastenholz et al., 1999, Molera and Albaladejo, 2007).

The overall experience must be understood as an emotionally, sensorially and symbolically rich phenomenon. It's anchoring in a common, appealing, significant and distinctive theme may be a powerful way to combine the pieces of the puzzle (Ellis and Rossman, 2008, Mossberg, 2007). The most relevant, distinctive endogenous resources, such as the villages' history, legends, traditional food production (e.g. bread, cheese, cakes) and landscape and nature elements (e.g. the Natural Park of Serra da Estrela, the river Zêzere) should help provide a unique, appealing and memorable rural tourist experience, while simultaneously enhancing sustainable destination development (Lane, 2009, Saxena et al., 2007, Kastenholz and Figueiredo, 2010).

It seems that more active and immersing dimensions (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) of the rural tourist experience may be developed, by creating more participatory offerings. For extending the experience from the predominant, traditional *tourist gaze*, enriching it, deepening it, making it more enjoyable and surprising, complementary activities may be designed, such as events, recreational, sports or cultural activities, if possible based on endogenous resources, as suggested by the agents of supply. These might be *outdoors activities* that may be provided on a regular basis (e.g. recovering the paragliding school in Linhares, where also a swimming pool for the hot summer might be desirable, or improving the sign-posting of hiking trails in Janeiro), as also suggested by Costa and Chalip (2005). Offerings might involve handicraft courses (e.g. weaving

courses in Janeiro) or gastronomy workshops, all creating more involving and memorable experiences to tourists and eventually making them stay for longer periods of time.

Themes (Mossberg, 2007) that are unique to the villages, raise curiosity, make sense and give sense to the experience (Pan and Ryan, 2009) are as important as an active co-creation process involving the tourist, and, apart from the traditional tourist sector, the cultural sector (Mossberg, 2007, Richards and Wilson, 2006) as well as the population (Saxena et al., 2007, Sharpley, 2005).

A careful design not only of servicescapes (e.g. lodging units, restaurants), but of the entire experiencescape, should be a concern, trying to create appealing, emotion-stimulating sensescapes, with a profusion of smells, tastes, touches, sights, and sounds enriching the theme experienced on site. *Cognitive experiences*, which are apparently an important issue in Linhares' tourism product, might stimulate curiosity and learning, but should be designed in an innovative, involving and participatory way, also engaging the five senses, whenever possible.

Last, but not least, the social dimension needs to be set into value, since a positive and welcoming community should play a most important role in enhancing the rural tourist experience, with community sensitization, information on the tourism phenomenon and its integration in more participatory tourism planning being fundamental for achieving this positive attitude. Indeed, the complexity of the (co-)creation process requires articulation in network constellations, permitting integrated management and product development (Lane, 2009, Gnoth, 2003, Gibson et al., 2005). Both villages are integrated in tourism enhancing networks and should be an opportunity, if well managed, to effectively develop and promote integral and appealing rural tourism products, and beneficial to each village as well as to the entire network.

Finally, material signs of the non-ordinary experience, namely memorabilia, more specifically souvenirs, enhance vivid memories of the experience through time (Hu and Yu, 2007), therefore serving as important experience marketing tools. Sales could be furthered through attractive outlets available to tourists in different places (also lodging units). If

these products (e.g. the cheese, bread, agricultural products, handicraft) are additionally presented as experiences (as partly done in the case of the weaving house in Janeiro), showing their production process in an appealing way, eventually even permitting tourists to participate, they will also add to the overall destination experience.

All these efforts of making the experience in the villages more pleasant, involving, meaningful and diversified, may, in the end, also lead to increased duration of stay of rural tourists and to an attraction of new tourist segments, who may acknowledge the attractiveness of the village not just for a quick *gaze*, another sight collected in a touring experience (particularly the case in Linhares), but as a place to stay for a holiday, to live a pleasant, relaxing, but not boring overall rural tourist experience.

The here presented results show that the countryside is dreamt of as a space opposed to the negative aspects of the urban living context, ideal for a break, for relaxing, being together as a family, getting to know the “ancient” and “traditions”. However, results also suggest that rural tourism destinations should seek alternatives to create a dynamic that attracts/satisfies tourists and keep them at the destination for longer periods of time, in a way that stimulates sustainable development, enhancing its natural, cultural and social values and identity.

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