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Tourism in Rural Areas: Foundation, Quality and Experience

Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro
University of Aveiro
Portugal

1. Introduction

In a post-modern society rural areas and the countryside have grown in both importance and appeal. For this reason, academics and politicians have become interested in understanding the *rural tourism* phenomenon since it was recognized as a development tool of often economically and socially depressed rural areas (e.g., Gilbert, 1989; Blaine & Golan, 1993; Dernoï, 1991; Greffe, 1994; Page & Getz, 1997; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Frochot, 2005). *Rural tourism* is further identified as a potential opportunity to diversify the product portfolio of declining mass tourism destinations (Sharpley, 2002) or to enhance the positioning of these destinations or of countries associated with a comparable image, such as Portugal, with its “sun and beach” tourism in the Algarve.

Simultaneously, in the last two decades there has been an increasing tendency for the urban population to choose rural zones for holiday purposes, coinciding with and possibly stimulated by a trend towards splitting holiday periods along the year and an increase in short distance travel (Yagüe, 2002). This market pressure towards the development of new and diversified *rural tourism* products and experiences leads to business opportunities. Together with the chance to integrate these products within a wider economic, social and cultural local and regional basis, they constitute the foundations of the aforementioned development potential (Kastenholz, 2004).

Like urban or seaside tourism, the appeal of *rural tourism* also lies in the range and quality of attractions and facilities. *Rural tourism* should correspondingly adapt to current market mechanisms, which are becoming extremely competitive and are dominated by powerful communication techniques, in a context of strategically developed marketing action (Moutinho, 1991; Gannon, 1994).

In this vein, the chapter addressed sets out to conceptualize and characterize *rural tourism* in two European Countries (Portugal and Spain), taking into account the principles of quality management and brand quality, as well as tourism experience. The chapter concludes with a proposal for an integrative model of antecedents and outcomes of *rural tourism* experience and quality. The main reason behind the choice of Portugal and Spain lies in the fact that they are pioneers, in particular Portugal, in implementing rural lodging. In fact, the first Manor house or Housing Tourism was launched in 1979 in Covilhã (North Portugal's inland). However, legalization of this type of accommodation only materialized in 1982.

2. Rural tourism conceptualization

The reasons that attract people to the rural area have largely to do with the image of rurality, the traditional, romantic idea of a lifestyle that is both plain and simple, the search for peace and solitude, and the increasing interest in free outdoor activities. Thus, the nostalgia for one's origins, the appeal of the most basic aspects of life and the need to restore the old ties with the nature of rural areas prove to be most appealing, especially for those who lead an urban lifestyle, one which is anonymous, congested, highly organized increasingly complex and inhuman (Krippendorf, 1987).

According to EU (European Union) data, one quarter of the EU population moves to the countryside for a holiday. In this way *rural tourism* has been regarded as a factor of tourism development, the enhancement and rebalancing of rural economic and social development, in a word: promoting the sustainability of rural areas. Since joining the European Economic Community in 1986, Portugal and Spain have benefited from programs providing funds to support the development of *rural tourism*. Among programs with the highest incidence on this issue we highlight LEADER I and II. LEADER I figures in the Committee for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development as an alternative for areas affected by the rural community redevelopment Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The program, developed between 1991 and 1994 signified that a purpose-made local action group would, in an average-sized, previously defined area, develop innovative, integrated programs, approved by the general public. The local group occupies the office of promotion and entertainment, whilst the business area is the ultimate beneficiary of aid. The projects are reviewed by the group itself, which awards and pays aid. Public Administrations play the role of assisting and supervising the program (Mejias, 1995). In June 1994, LEADER II was approved. This program affords Community support in the form of global grants or integrated operational programs to enable the rural actors to undertake changes, in accordance with the following objectives:

- Acquisition of skills through consultation of the interests of the population concerned;
- Rural innovation programs which implement projects that contain three basic features: a contributive innovation to the local context, demonstration effect and transferability (Madariaga, 1999).

Conceptually, *rural tourism* may be regarded as tourism in the countryside, a form that embraces the rural environment as pivotal to the product offered. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1994) defines *rural tourism* as any "tourism taking place in the countryside". In this context, rurality is the "central and unique selling point in the *rural tourism* package" (OECD, 1994, p.15). Lane (1994) suggests that, ideally, *rural tourism* should, apart from being located in rural areas, be functionally rural, small in scale, traditional in character, organically and slowly growing and controlled by the local people.

3. Characterization of rural tourism in Portugal

As an identifying criterion of *rural tourism* in Portugal, it may be said that it is located in a rural area, avails itself of natural factors, social and cultural features specific to each rural area, nature reserves, landscape and the existing values, besides preserving the typical architecture of the site.

In Portugal, *rural tourism* (or TER, which means *tourism in a rural area*) is characterized by an area of scattered and fragmented markets, which include Housing Tourism, Rural Tourism, Agritourism, Country Houses, and Village Tourism. These types or modalities of lodgings share common features: small in size, family-type forms of exploitation, use of existing buildings and structures, situated outside urban centers or in small towns. **Housing Tourism** lodging is made up of manor houses or residences of recognized architectural value, of appropriate size, with a concern for quality furnishings and decor. **Rural Tourism** lodgings are rustic houses typical of the rural area, standing within a settlement or not far away from it. **Agritourism** (farmhouse) shares the particularity of enabling tourists to participate in the farming activities, or complementary forms of animation, enjoyed in the owners' dwelling. **Country Houses** (cottages) are private homes and shelters located in rural areas that provide a hosting service, whether they be used as a dwelling by their owners or not. The fifth type, **Village Tourism**, was recognized in 2001 by the Portuguese General Direction of Tourism, now designated as Turismo de Portugal (TP means Tourism of Portugal). It is characterized by a hosting service provided in a set of at least five private homes within a village and operated in an integrated manner, irrespective of the fact that the home is used as a dwelling by the legitimate owners or not. The Manor house was the first type launched in 1979 in Covilhã (North Portugal's inland). However, legalization of this type of accommodation was only implemented in 1982.

The number of rural lodgings and accommodation capacity has evolved positively. On average, between 1991 and 2002 the number of lodgings grew at an average recorded rate of 23.7% per year. Although the average annual growth in the number of beds was 30.5%, between 1991 and 1994, it should be noted that there was a more marked variation. In the 2002-2005 period the number of lodgings increased by 21.6% and the number of beds by 15%. In the early Nineties half the number of available beds belonged to Housing Tourism. Figure 1, which displays data from TP (Turismo de Portugal), reveals that the number of rural lodgings remains almost constant at the close of the first decade of the 21st Century.

However, over the last two decades the number of beds related to *rural tourism* has enjoyed a sharper rise. In 2002, the figure stood at 38.1% relative to the number of beds of this modality as compared with 31.4% in the previous period of 1991-1997. In 2005, the relative number of beds regarding Rural Tourism remained constant at 38%. But when it comes to Housing Tourism its relative weight fell to 26.3%. In 2005, Agritourism occupied third place with a relative weight of 17.1%, followed by Country Houses (16.2%) and lastly, Village Tourism (2.4%). With the exception of Village Tourism (previously characterized as being a set of private homes and not specifically the setting of an established unit), the larger lodgings fall under Agritourism, with its average of 12 beds per facility. In 2008, the modality of Rural Tourism remained in first place as regards lodging supply.

The North has been and continues to be the region enjoying the highest accommodation capacity (circa 4600 beds). The Centre occupies second place with circa 2500. Third place goes to the Alentejo, with a supply of circa 1800 beds covering the five types. Data from TP also show that more than two fifths of lodgings, both of Housing Tourism (46.7%) and of Rural Tourism (49.7%), are located in the North. Nearly three fifths of the number of Farmhouse businesses (Agritourism) is divided between the North (32.4%) and the Alentejo (30.3%). Bed and Breakfast facilities are primarily located in the North (28.4%) and Centre (25.0%) and, secondly, in the Azores (19.8%) and Madeira (14.7%). But as the number of

beds encompassed by this modality is greater, its relative weight in the Alentejo (19.0%) outstrips the center (17.3%) and the Azores (12.8%). Finally, for the years addressed, the month with the highest occupancy rate was August, followed by July. Tourists were almost all of Portuguese origin, and were followed by the Spanish. It is worth noting that English tourists prefer the North whilst German tourists prefer the South.

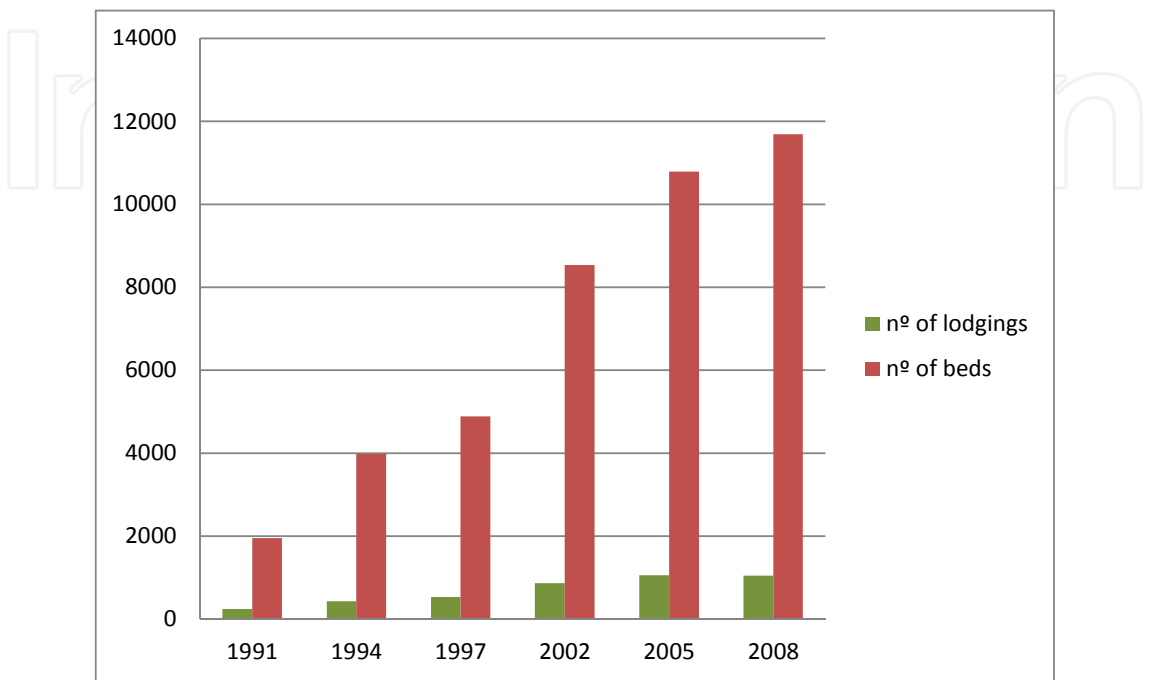


Fig. 1. Evolution of *rural tourism* accommodation capacity in Portugal

4. Characterization of rural tourism in Spain

In Spain the foundations of this form of tourism are to be found in the 80's of the 20th Century, although its principal development occurred over the 90's - and since then has grown every year. *Rural tourism* has a very different geography to mass tourism of hotels and apart-hotels. The mass tourism of sun and beaches are located along the Mediterranean coast, whereas *rural tourism* spreads to the interior of Spain and is particularly focused on the North, especially in the communities of Cantabria and the Pyrenees. The number of beds for all *rural tourism* lodging represents no more than 2% of the total offer of tourist facilities. Nevertheless, for Spain's image, it is of great strategic value, since its tourist offer becomes more diversified and therefore more attractive.

Rural tourism lodgings are defined as establishments or homes ("*viviendas*") for tourist accommodation, with or without other ancillary services, and recorded in the corresponding registry of tourism lodging of each Autonomous Community. These lodgings share certain characteristics: they are located in rural areas; they are buildings boasting the architectural typology of the zone or are integrated in farms that maintain active farming and offer a limited number of beds and bedrooms to accommodate guests and meet certain infrastructural and basic equipment requirements.

In Spain there are currently over 30 forms of rural houses in regulated *rural tourism*, although they may be basically grouped into two types of Rural Houses (Cottages) and a

third type called a Rural Hotel (Soret, 1999). As mentioned by Soret (1999), there are other forms of very specific accommodation, sometimes limited to a single autonomous region. Such are the cases of Rural Camping, Rural Tourism Centers or Rural Youth Hostels. The entrepreneurs are mostly rural residents, whose main occupation has been agriculture, livestock breeding or some other profession different from tourism. Before the 80's, Spain did have a traditional form of tourism in rural areas, characterized by second homes and the use of family homes.

The first planned experience in *rural tourism*, which emerged in the 60's of the 20th Century, was named after the program *Vacaciones en Casas de Labranza* (Vacations in Farmhouses) and were intended as a way of revitalizing certain declining rural areas. This program enabled farmers and ranchers to access economic aid with a view to improving their homes and facilities, although it continued to promote this new offer in the marketplace by developing a guide to all Farmhouses. The program lasted several years before disappearing, a victim of a time when the ideal vacation was sun and beach tourism. During that time many townspeople preserved their own homes or ties with rural families, and the intention of many owners who joined the program was purely to improve houses for their own use.

The first consistent experiences of *rural tourism* in Spain resulted from the use of funds provided by the European Economic Community (nowadays, European Union-EU), whose intention is to diversify economic activities in rural areas (Soret, 1999). Application of EU regulations fell to the Ministry of Agriculture of the Autonomous Communities. Initially the development of tourist activities was highly concentrated in certain autonomous regions, namely: the Basque Country, Cataluña and the Balearic Islands. The offer was limited to Agritourism (Farmhouse tourism), i.e. the offer of agro-pastoral and forestry activities, along with the opportunity for tourists to know more about them.

In the 1989-1993 period, Spain was, after Ireland, the European Union country to receive most funds for the development of *rural tourism* in the less developed regions and whose GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was less than 75% of the EU average. The EU (European Union) program, Leader I, benefitted 53 rural areas, in particular through the creation and rehabilitation of infrastructure for tourism lodging. Subsequently LEADER II and PRODER (a Spanish venture with similar intentions to LEADER) was approved. These programs also include support for *rural tourism*, although the planned investments were lower than in LEADER I. The agrarian administrations in the autonomous communities in Spain play a key role as regards LEADER II, since they have to bear the main functions of advising, monitoring and supervising the Local Action Groups (Mejias, 1995). They also establish the regulations, the incentive to increase offer through economic aid, and stimulate demand through promotional campaigns. Some governments of the autonomous regions bordering on the coast, conventionally regarded as destinations for sun and beach tourism, saw an opportunity in the rural areas to create a different, diverse tourism market, by associating *rural tourism* with an offer of quality. As an example, Andalucía created Tourist Villas. These accommodations, publicly owned and privately managed, are located near rural and natural areas of great value.

The standards set up by the administrations that were developed enabled Country Houses to be legalized. The first type of *rural tourism* lodging emerged in Catalonia in 1983 with the

designation of Residencia Casa-Pagès (Pagès House Residence). Three years later the Aragon Community regulated the mode of Vivenda de Turismo Rural (Villa Rural Tourism). The Basque area was the third region, in the eighties, to follow the footsteps of Catalonia with the Alojamiento turístico-agrícola (Agricultural Tourist Accommodation). This was followed by Navarra (1990), the Balearic Islands and Asturias (1991), Extremadura, Galicia, Murcia and La Rioja (1992), Castilla and León (1993), Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia (1994) and Andalucía (1995).

The growing interest in providing the tourist market segment that embraces the rural interior as an alternative or complement to other destinations led Madariaga (1999) to examine its development from the existing data at international, national (Spain), regional and local level for the year 1994. Fuentes (1995) also conducted an analysis covering 1994 of the key characteristics of demand for *rural tourism* in Spain, through telephone interviews over three months, involving 1466 people living in the different Autonomous Communities. The results of these studies highlight the following:

- The population center with over 100 000 inhabitants and with higher rates of exit to rural areas were Catalonia, C. Valencia, Madrid, and the Basque Country.
- Tourists from Catalonia and Cantabria use the hotel as the host facility, Aragon tourist lodge in Rural Houses, and those of Murcia and Navarre prefer Camping.
- The hill communities (Aragón, Asturias and Catalonia) and those inland (Andalucía, the Balearic Islands, Cantabria, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and Galicia) are the most commonly visited by tourists from rural areas.
- Travel to the rural areas tends to be massive, repetitive and heterogeneous
- 1. Given the high percentage of those who have made at least one trip, without considering the residents of urban centers with less than 100 000 inhabitants, immigrants and foreigners, nor those who travel just for one weekend.
- 2. Since most tourists made two or more trips to rural areas and 25.6% made three or more trips.
- 3. Because behaviors differ depending on the urban centers
- Most tourists belong to the middle and upper social class and have secondary-higher education. Tourists are principally motivated by:
 - The birthplace or the family residence.
 - The calm, relaxing place
 - The interest in sightseeing, touring, performing outdoor exercises and enjoying the festivals.
- July and August are the months *par excellence* when *rural tourism* is practiced, followed by the period of Holy Week (Easter).
- Most tourists are accommodated in the houses of relatives, or friends, or in second homes (homeowners).

Furthermore, data from Spain's National Institute of Statistics (INE) reveal that in 2001 the number of lodgings in *rural tourism* represents a small fraction, i.e. 3.2% (5996) of total lodgings (including hotels, campsites and apartments) and 2% of the total number of "plazas" or beds available. In 2005, there were 9 633 rural lodgings and 83 927 beds (see figure 2).

Over the last two decades, the highest occupancy rate has been July, August, and Holy Week (Easter). The tourists are almost all Spanish, followed by Portuguese and Germans.

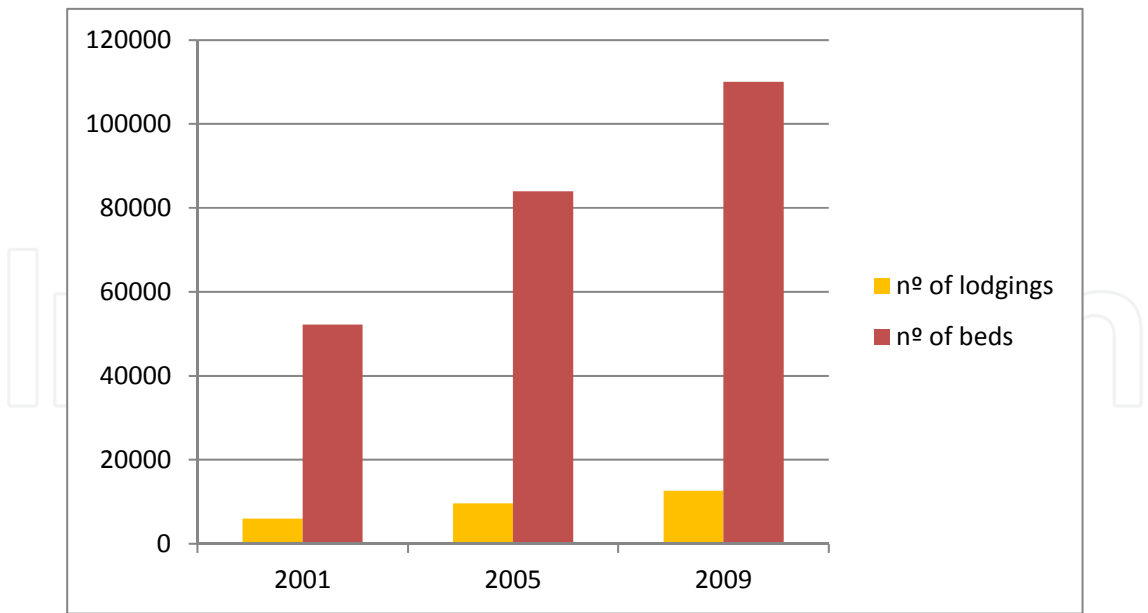


Fig. 2. Evolution of *rural tourism* accommodation capacity in Spain

5. Quality in rural tourism

In the early 90’s of the 20th century, the economic and political crisis, changes in tastes, the increased demand and new trends in demand and diversification serve as a catalyst in terms of concerns for the quality of tourism businesses. They tended to develop a culture of quality in company management and to use quality tools to improve communication internally, as well as with customers in order to identify their needs and bring the company closer to the tastes and interests of demand.

Nevertheless, not all the tourism industry has taken advantage of the effort. This initiative requires the deployment of quality in areas of management and human resources to re-position or restructure their businesses in order to increase productivity, improve efficiency and quality of services whilst other businesses exhibit quality only as a cosmetic improvement or as a panacea for sales. In such cases there are no real, genuine improvements.

The application of quality management in the tourism sector is not without its misgivings and objections, often the result of inertia to change. In this sense, some argue that standardization and certification can be understood as a loss of differentiation and added value of brands. Others argue that this involves an additional burden to the already excessive administrative regulations, in other words, more bureaucracy, beyond the fear of possible interference of public bodies who may not know about the real sector and the constraints of the market.

However, management with no regard for the main principles of total quality¹ can lead to arbitrariness, abuse, neglect and customer dissatisfaction. The main principles of Total Quality Management are: Leadership (create an environment that ensures its success); Training (regular training since quality-employees should receive regular training in quality methods and concepts); Customer Focus; Decision Making (decisions based on measurements); Methodology and Tools; Continuous Improvement); Company Culture (work together to improve quality); and Employee Involvement and Empowerment.

Standardization of quality does not mean that every tourist offer should be undifferentiated and homogeneous. Each tourist product, and even each hotel or rural lodging, should have appropriate requirements and mechanisms to achieve customer satisfaction, in a context of continuous improvement. In an environment of market globalization and deregulation, and of increased tourism offer, the frustration of tourist' expectations, which is resolute and informed, leads to a reduction in demand and a loss of competitiveness. Quality is a guarantee of excellence and adds value to products or tourist destinations.

The success of quality policies in rural destinations requires global intervention, i.e., Integrated Quality Management (IQM) at the destination. Thus, each destination will have to define strategies with its key partners to implement good practices and the continuous development of a tool to monitor and evaluate quality in order to adjust the quality policy to the economic, social and environmental context at the destination. Integrated Quality Management has its reference to the European Model for Total Quality- EFQM Excellence Model (European Foundation of Quality Management), which constitutes the basis on which to evaluate companies. However, its merits are focused primarily on the possibility of allowing companies to practice self-assessment and provide organizations with a benchmarking tool. This latter aspect is particularly important as it offers a global comparison of the company with another winner of the Award of Excellence.

5.1 RURALQUAL scale

Two groups of research have been studying the construct of perceived service quality: the Nordic School and North-American School. The emblematic model of the Nordic School is the Image Model or Perceived Overall Quality (Grönroos, 1990, p. 41), which regards the quality perceived by customers as the result of a comparison of the service image that customers have prior to receiving the service with the image in their mind after experiencing the service. Thus, Grönroos (1990) considers that the quality experienced by a customer is based on two dimensions (technical quality and functional quality), moderated or influenced by the corporate image, which acts as a filter. However, The North-American School (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988) defines service quality as the customer's assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of the service. The Gaps Model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) proposed four possible gaps that could occur in the process to provide the service. Gap 5 is a function of the four initial gaps, which represents the difference between initial expectations and the perceived service experienced by customers:

- GAP 1 - the difference between the customer's expectations and management perceptions of customer expectations;
- GAP 2 - the difference between the firm's quality specifications and management perceptions of customer expectations of the service and its quality;
- GAP 3 - is the difference between the quality of the service delivery and quality specifications;
- GAP 4 - is the difference between the quality of the service delivery and the quality promised in communicating the service.

Moreover, in both models the service quality perceptions result from a comparison between customer expectations and service performance. The service expectations could influence the image, personal needs, friends' word-of-mouth, firm publicity, own past experience, and

so on. We can say that when expectations rise, for the same service delivered, the less the perceived quality will be.

Among all the models developed by academic researchers to measure service quality, the pioneer work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, 1988) can be considered as the most popular framework for assessing service quality. Starting with the definition of service quality as the customer's global vision regarding the excellence or superiority of the service, they develop an instrument to measure service quality, namely SERVQUAL, based on a comparison of the previous expectations of the users of the service and their perceptions in relation to the received service. The authors suggest that the reduction or elimination of that difference, gap 5, depends on an efficient management of the service firms.

As critics of the SERVQUAL scale, Cronin and Taylor (1992; 1994) proposed the SERVPERF scale, based on performance-only (perception of the result) of the service, without keeping in mind the customers' initial expectations. As for the dimensionality of the service quality construct, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) propose the existence of five dimensions in their SERVQUAL scale: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibility. The literature review of the proposed dimensional structures seems to indicate that they differ mainly at aggregation level (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Therefore, some authors mention that service quality is a specific concept of the industry addressed (Babakus and Boller, 1992), suggesting that the number and the nature of the dimensions of service quality are directly related to the service analyzed. In this sense, many researchers have opted to adapt the SERVQUAL scale to the tourist sector or to propose alternative measure scales. In this way, scales for several sectors of business have appeared, such as: LODGSERV for measuring service quality in hotels (Knutson *et al.*, 1990) or LOGQUAL (Getty and Thompson, 1994), or even HOTELQUAL (Falces *et al.*, 1999), DINESERV proposed for restaurants (Stevens *et al.*, 1995), HISTOQUAL for historical houses (Frochot and Hughes, 2000) and ECOSERV measuring the quality perceived by eco-tourists (Khan, 2003).

Following this line of research, Loureiro (2006) proposes a scale of 22 items, designated RURALQUAL, based on the SERVQUAL scale of Parasuraman *et al.* (1985, 1988, 1991) for the rural tourist sector, but asks consumers to evaluate performance-only, as proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1992, p. 58-66). The reason supporting this choice was justified by a review of existing studies which appeared to demonstrate the superiority of perception statements only over other existing measures and particularly over the gap measure. Indeed, Cronin and Taylor (1992) demonstrated that the unweighted performance-based measure of service quality (SERVPERF) contributed most to the variation observed in the global measure of service quality. These results have been supported by several other studies (e.g., Armstrong *et al.*, 1997; Suh *et al.*, 1997; Fick & Ritchie, 1991). The use of the performance-only scale is also justified by the dynamic nature of the customer's expectations and by the increased effort expected of the tourist to complete two questionnaires, one before using the lodging (expectations) and another afterwards (perceptions), which would considerably reduce the number of tourists willing to collaborate in the measure of quality.

Table 1 shows the six dimensions of RURALQUAL (see also Loureiro and Miranda, 2008; Loureiro and Miranda, 2009; Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011). The dimension, called Professionalism, refers to well-presented meals, clean and neat appearance of employees, and their readiness to attend customers in a kind and personalized way. The dimension

Reservation includes items reflecting aspects of reservation of the accommodation. The third dimension, referred to as Tangibility, groups items regarding aspects of cleanliness, comfort and acclimatization of rooms, furniture, and other aspects related to the lodging’s physical environment. Complementary Benefits includes items referring to the decoration, easy parking and access to the lodging. Rural and Cultural Environment covers items reflecting the possibility of immersion in the region’s rural way of life, such as typical gastronomy, fairs, special festivities and other aspects of cultural and recreational interest. Finally, Basic Benefits refers to the natural beauty of the place, the calm setting, the typical architecture, and the employees’ awareness of their duties.

Professionalism	The rural lodging food is well presented and flavoursome.
	The rural lodging employees have a clean, neat appearance.
	The clients are treated cordially and affably.
	A personalised attention is provided to each client.
Reservation	Arrival schedules are established but are quite flexible.
	Room reservation is easy to make.
	The reservations are confirmed in the most convenient way for the client, other information of interest is also forwarded (e.g. access map).
Tangibility	The rural lodging facilities are in good condition
	The rural lodging facilities and rooms have comfortable furniture.
	The rural lodging has a pleasant temperature.
	The rural lodging facilities and rooms are clean.
Complementary Benefits	The decoration uses materials and objects of local tradition.
	Access to the rural lodging is easy.
	The lodging offers easy parking.
Rural and Cultural Environment	The clients are integrated in the region’s rural lifestyle.
	Typical gastronomy of the region is included in the menu.
	Access to cultural, recreational and/or sports activities is facilitated.
	In the surrounding region there are fairs, local festivities, and other forms of cultural interest.
Basic Benefits	The lodging employees are aware of their duties.
	The lodging architecture has the region style.
	The lodging is located in an area of great natural beauty.
	The lodging is located in a calm place.

Table 1. Dimensions and items of RURALQUAL scale

5.2 Brands for quality in tourism

According to AMA (2011), a brand can be defined, as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name”. Following such a perspective, a brand adds value for the consumer and the firm, .reduces the perceived risk to purchase the product (good or service), and has a particularly important role when, in advance, it is difficult to evaluate the performance of the product (De Chematony and McDonaid,, 1994). Moreover, a brand, as a reference point, can facilitate recognition and promote customer loyalty. The brand also

differentiates the products and can even transfer their identity to consumers in order to involve them. With regard to the firm or company, the brand is a competitive advantage with its own system identity and has commercial value (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1992). A strong brand can sell the product at a higher price and can develop a powerful sense of belonging among employees in a firm or company.

In the field of *rural tourism*, the Spanish Tourism Quality Plan (STQ), conceptualized by the Secretary of State for Trade, Tourism and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) proposes the development of a common methodology for all tourism sub-sectors that are involved in the quality improvement of its products. The plan put into action now, envisages the following strategies:

1. Support to build systems that ensure the management and quality improvement of goods and services in different sub-sectors in tourism (quality measurement should refer to the service delivery, facilities and equipment).
2. Support to give rise to a unique brand, the Spanish Tourism Quality brand (the goal is to support recognition of the brand image of Spain as a destination for quality).
3. Support the participation of the Spanish business organizations in the international standardization institutions for quality.



Fig. 3. Brand of the Spanish Tourism Quality

According to Navarro (1999), the design of a unique quality identity for the tourism industry signifies the development of a common methodology to offer a similar level of standards, accreditation procedures and certification, and control. The rural lodging that achieves the required quality level can employ the "Q" of quality.

In Portugal, TURIHAB, a company created in 1983 in Ponte de Lima (the Minho - North of Portugal) by a group of ten owners of rural lodgings, now covers the entire Portuguese territory, with more than 100 rural lodgings, launched a *rural tourism* quality identity. *Solares de Portugal* (Manor Houses). This product, in terms of lodgings, consists of Ancestral Houses (heritage) Farm Houses (Quintas & Herdades) and Rustic Houses. Internationally, TURIHAB promotes rural lodgings and other tourism activities (such as green tours, wine, and handicrafts).

Ancient Houses (heritage) – Manor houses characterized by a classical architecture, built between the 17th and 18th Century, and houses of heritage value associated with certain periods and movements in history. Ancient houses are filled with ancient furniture and paintings and sculptures of famous artists (Housing Tourism).

Farm Houses - (Agritourism) are characterized by the existence of a farm, whose main house could fit into the classical architecture, heritage or rustic character.

Rustic Houses - are located in rural environment, characterized by using local materials, simple architecture and small size, simple but comfortable furnishings (Rural Tourism).



Fig. 4. Brand of quality of lodgings in rural areas

Following the creation of the brand in Portugal, TURIHAB decided to establish a quality brand at European level, Europe of Traditions. In an initial phase it operated with partner groups in the Netherlands, France, Great Britain and Ireland. Europe of Traditions focuses on personal hospitality and the enjoyment of traditions and culture. Later, Europe of Traditions was extended to Germany, Hungary, and Slovenia. Currently, they are establishing a bridge to Brazil through Europe of Traditions- a transatlantic vision.

6. Rural experience

The seminal work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) offers a new approach to the consumer behavior field, by regarding the consumption experience as a phenomenon directed toward the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and fun. Consumers feel, think, do, and act and emotions play a role in choosing a brand, a store, or a product.

The first decade of the 21st Century marks the appearance of different contributions focused on consumer experience (e.g., Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Carù and Cova, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Milligan and Smith, 2002; Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2005; Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Thus, consumer experience is a continuum ranging from experiences that are mainly created by the consumers, to experiences that are developed by companies, passing through experiences that are co-created. In the last situation, companies provide artifacts, contexts, and the right environment to help consumers to create their own experiences (Schmitt, 1999; Carù and Cova, 2003; Carù and Cova, 2007). The consumer molds the artifacts and raw materials to obtain his/her own experience.

In this vein, researchers have been presented with different perspectives of consumer experience with some common dimensions. Schmitt (1999) proposed a model that identifies five experiential facets: sensory experiences (sense); affective experiences (feeling); creative cognitive experiences (thinking); physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyle (acting); and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or a culture (relating). Fornerino et al. (2006) identify five dimensions of experience: sensorial-perceptual, affective and physical-behavioral (i.e., components) and social and cognitive (facets). Later, Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) present six components of consumer

experience: Sensorial (sense-see, hearing, touch, taste and smell can generate pleasure, excitement, satisfaction, sense of beauty); Emotional (moods, feelings, emotions that can generate affection); Cognitive (related to thinking or conscious mental processes); Pragmatic (resulting from a practical act of doing something); Lifestyle (the system of values and beliefs leads to the adoption of a lifestyle and behaviors); Relational (relationship between a consumer with other people or also with his/her ideal self).

Customer experience originates from interactions between a customer and a good/service, a company, or part of its organization (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2005) or even a brand. However, customers can relate with other customers during the consumption experience. Therefore, the evaluation depends on the comparison between a customer's expectations and the stimuli provided by previously mentioned interactions.

As regards the tourism field, Otto and Ritchie (1996, p. 166) state that the tourist experience "can be described as the subjective mental state felt by participants" implying holistic evaluations of affective expressions and representations of experiential, hedonic and symbolic benefits. The *rural tourism* experience can be regarded in the light of this perspective. Rural tourists come to the countryside to escape urban areas and mass tourism. Thus, the rural experience is the subjective and emotional mental state lived by rural tourists in their interaction with people (friends, family, couple, inhabitants, and service providers) rural places, rural resources, facilities, and rural activities and festivals.

7. Integrative model of experience and quality in rural tourism

The process of decision-making and the preparation of *rural tourism* create expectations among potential tourists. The image of *rural tourism* in the tourist's mind prior to each real experience encapsulates the perceptions of *rural tourism* as reflected by the associations (lodging, space, activities, landscape, people, travel, advertising) held in the tourist's memory. So associations are the informational nodes linked to the *rural tourism* mode in memory and contain the meaning of the rural for tourists.

Past experience memories, word-of-mouth, marketing communications (statements, pictures, advertisements posted in destination and lodgings websites; communications in travel agencies, advertisements in newspapers, the radio, TV and so on), and expectations are factors that influence the rural experience. In other words they are precursors of the experience, the pre-experience. In addition, self-expression, attachment to *rural tourism* experience and rural place identity are other constructs that play the role of antecedents of the *rural tourism* experience and perceived quality.

Self-expression represents the tourist's perception of the degree to which the specific *rural tourism* place or destination enhances one's social self and reflects one's inner self. When the tourist searches for information about a locality, place, rural destination, and lodging, he/she tends to select the place with which he/she identifies himself/herself. The tourist should prefer the rural place that plays a significant role in shaping his/her identity. Thus, tourists tend to identify themselves with rural places that reflect their personality, symbolize the kind of person they are inside, and are consistent with the social group they belong or aspire to.

Attachment per se was first studied in parent-child bonds, but has proven to be a robust theoretical framework for looking at romantic love (Hazan and Zeifman, 1999). In consumer

research, consumer-object bonds have also been widely studied (Kleine, Kleine III, and Allen 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Place attachment means an affective bond between people and specific places (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Williams and Patterson, 1999; Williams and Vaske, 2003) through accumulated experiences in the place (e.g., Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, and Ambard, 2004; Smaldone, Harris, Sanyal, and Lind, 2005; Worster and Abrams, 2005; Ednie, Daigle, and Leahy, 2010).

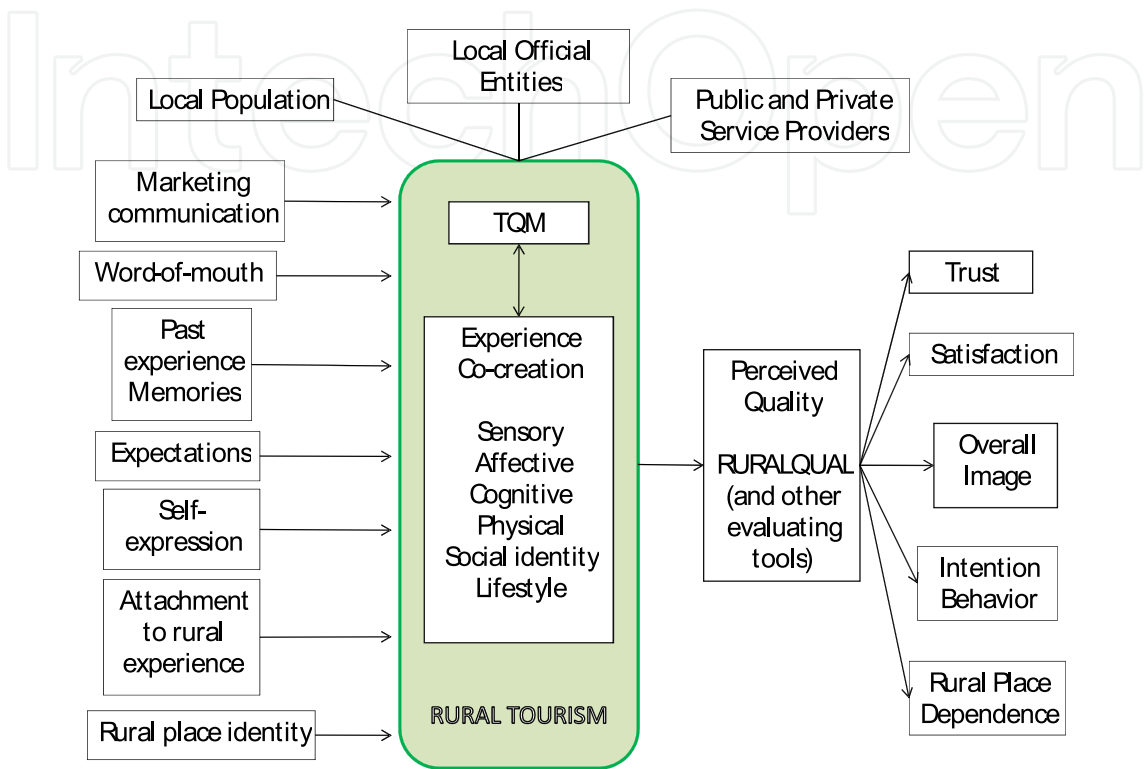


Fig. 5. Antecedents and consequences of rural experience and quality in *rural tourism*

Place attachment can be regarded as having two distinct dimensions: place identity and place dependence (e.g., Williams et al., 1992; Backlund and Williams, 2003). Therefore, place identity refers to a symbolic or affective attachment to a place. Place dependence can be defined “as a person’s assessment of a specific place and the awareness of the facilities and uniqueness and other forms of functionality dependence, and how these can meet the needs and the goals of the tourist” (Hwang, Lee, and Chen, 2005, p.146).

In this vein, attachment to rural experience will be an affective bond or link between the tourist and tourist groups (such as a couple or family), and a *rural tourism* experience. The rural experience involves the rural place, landscape, festivals, rural activities, local population, local official entities, lodgings, restaurants, and other public and private service providers.

Rural tourists who enjoy a good rural experience, perhaps a remarkable one, who favorably evaluate the quality of the place, festivals, rural activities, lodgings, and others facilities will be satisfied. Satisfaction is associated with meeting expectations (through the perception of a “fair service” and the resulting good feeling) (Oliver, 1981). Oliver (1993) demonstrated the existence of significant relationships between positive affective experience (interest and joy) and satisfaction/dissatisfaction responses. Thus, tourist satisfaction can be defined as an

overall emotional and cognitive evaluation or judgment after consumption or experience (Bigné et al., 2001; Loureiro and Miranda, 2008; Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011).

Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) define trust as “confidence in an exchange partners’ reliability and integrity”. Therefore, trust is the belief that a party’s word or promise is reliable and a party will fulfill its obligation in an exchange relationship. So, the partners could, on the one hand, be the tourist and, on the other hand, the local rural population, entities, and service providers. As Loureiro and Miranda (2008) point out: satisfaction exercises a positive effect on trust and both influence tourist loyalty.

Loyalty has been regarded as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred good/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand set purchasing, despite the fact that situational influences and marketing efforts have the potential to cause switching behavior” (Oliver, 1999, p.34). Several previous studies mention that loyalty may be distinguished among behavioural loyalty, attitudinal loyalty and composite loyalty (considering the aforementioned two constructs). Consequently, in consumer research, the term customer loyalty is often measured by indicators like the “intention to continue buying the same product”, “intention to buy more of the same product”, and “repeat purchase” (behavioural measures) or “willingness to recommend the product to others” (attitudinal indicator, reflecting product advocacy). Thereby, in the tourism field, behavioural loyalty can be measured as the future likelihood to come back to the destination (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000; Kozak, 2001; Kozak and Beaman, 2006; Yukse, Yukse, and Bilim, 2010; Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011). Attitudinal loyalty can be regarded as the willingness to recommend the rural place, lodging (Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011), or even the experience to others and thus positive advocacy.

A favorable experience and a positive service evaluation can lead to a positive overall image. Thus, the overall image in the tourist’s mind will be the perceptions about *rural tourism* as reflected by the associations retained in the tourist’s memory after living the experience.

8. Conclusion and implications

In this chapter a literature review was conducted in the field of *rural tourism* regarding characterization of this type of tourism and the presentation of quality, *rural tourism* experience as core concepts. Furthermore, a model showing an overview of the antecedents and consequences of rural experience and quality in *rural tourism* was proposed.

This conceptual model will contribute new knowledge to the area of *rural tourism* research. For academic researchers, such knowledge illustrates that the identification with the rural and its characteristics, marketing communication, word-of-mouth, and *rural tourism* attachment can lead to a favorable evaluation of quality and a positive rural experience. When tourists enjoy a good experience, especially if they perceived the experience to be beyond their expectations, then they will be satisfied and trust in the local *rural tourism* population, entities, and facilities, they will be more inclined to return to the place or will try to find a similar *rural tourism* experience. Thus, the overall image will be positively encoded in their minds.

For rural local official entities, public and private service providers, and even the local population of rural destinations, the anticipated outcomes should offer an insight into the

potential for rural area sustainability to help to provide a good rural experience and offer a good level of service quality.

Future research should test the model on several rural areas in different countries. This comparison between countries should enable one to detect common features, as well as specificities, and refine the model, thus providing a broader insight for both researchers and managers.

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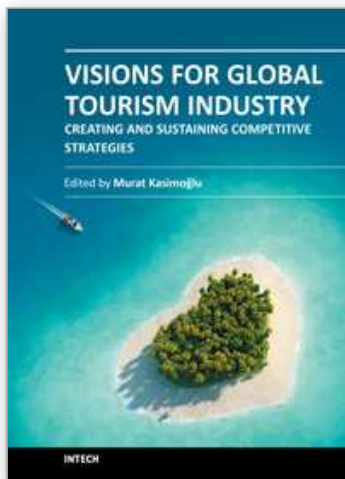
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We have been witnessing huge competition among the organisations in the business world. Companies, NGO's and governments are looking for innovative ways to compete in the global tourism market. In the classical literature of business the main purpose is to make a profit. However, if purpose only focus on the profit it will not to be easy for them to achieve. Nowadays, it is more important for organisations to discover how to create a strong strategy in order to be more competitive in the marketplace. Increasingly, organisations have been using innovative approaches to strengthen their position. Innovative working enables organisations to make their position much more competitive and being much more value-orientated in the global tourism industry. In this book, we are pleased to present many papers from all over the world that discuss the impact of tourism business strategies from innovative perspectives. This book also will help practitioners and academicians to extend their vision in the light of scientific approaches.

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51000 Rijeka, Croatia
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Phone: +86-21-62489820
Fax: +86-21-62489821

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