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# Tourism Routes for the Diversification of Rural Livelihoods: A Methodological Approach

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## Abstract

Tourism routes are the configuration of resources and services into an experience. They are structured based on the characteristics of the local setting but also considering the tourists' expectations motivations and interests. The objective of this manuscript is to present a methodological approach for the configuration and evaluation of tourism routes, using the municipality of Tenancingo, Mexico as a case study. The methodology followed consisted of three phases: 1) the identification and classification of resources; 2) the qualitative evaluation of the resources; and 3) the use of a route evaluation index to determine the suitability. The study concluded that the methodology allowed for the evaluation of different configurations, and the identification of the tourism route with the most potential, according to its characteristics.

**Keywords:** tourism routes, diversification, methodology, evaluation, Mexico

## 1. Introduction

Tourism has been considered a means to revitalise rural areas. It is a strategic choice because rather than a complete transformation of the rural setting and its livelihoods, it requires smaller changes to the already existing activities. Tourism can thus become a complementary activity, both in terms of resource allocation and additional income. At the same time, rural tourism initiatives require innovation and stakeholder collaboration. In the measure that these conditions are attained an impact on the quality of local people can be achieved [1–5]. Tourism routes in rural areas are examples of the tourism activity that can meet such conditions.

Tourism routes are a way to diversify the offer of a place that includes movement and an itinerary. Through the configuration and structuring of resources and services, they can constitute an experience that takes into account the motivations interests expectations and perceptions of visitors. For the local population, routes can mean the diversification of their livelihoods, particularly when they are structured in a way that seeks to maximise the potential benefits for the local community [5–10].

This manuscript offers a methodological approach that, by means of three phases, seeks to identify the configuration of a route with the best potential for success. The three phases are presented as follows: 1) the identification and

classification of resources; 2) the qualitative evaluation of the resources; and 3) the use of a route evaluation index to determine their suitability. The result of each phase is the starting point of the next one. Finally, the possible configurations of a route are evaluated based on the characteristics of the resources, their location, and the structure of the route. It is proposed that this methodology can be especially useful for those areas with incipient tourism activity but natural and cultural resources that attract interest and can be improved on their weaknesses.

## **2. Tourism routes for the diversification of rural livelihoods**

### **2.1 Rural tourism and diversification**

The rural space is a setting for a range of recreational and tourist activities. This requires rigorous planning and management, participation of the local population, respect for the environment, and the generation of economic, social and cultural benefits for the population. The tourist activities that take place in this setting should be in line with the activities of the local community. Contact with the local population and involvement in their daily activities are desirable elements [1–3, 5–6].

Rural tourism is a diversification strategy for many rural communities because of its perceived benefits. Some benefits are additional income, employment opportunities, and promotion of rural and cultural heritage. It also highlights the role that women and young ones play in the business, usually a family business in which women play a leading role. The commercialisation of cultural heritage is considered a benefit of rural tourism. Through it significance is given to the communal culture, including its history, traditions, and gastronomy. Ultimately, because of its natural setting, rural tourism encourages the promotion of environmental heritage [7, 8].

Tourism routes are experiences that can be particularly relevant for rural tourism. Direct contact with the producer adds value to the local products and give a personal touch. Through routes the tourism offer is expanded with new products, activities, and destinations [9].

### **2.2 Characterisation of tourism routes**

Ward-Perkins, et al. [10] define tourism routes as “an itinerary known and determined...that bring together resources into a single experience”. Tourism routes expand the offer of a destination. Creation of activities and services necessary for visitor satisfaction are essential for attracting new markets. Tourism routes are a way of taking advantage of local resources without causing drastic changes to the surroundings. The design of a tourism route generates income and local development through the implementation of new services and activities [11].

Briedenhann and Wickens [12] state that tourism routes must meet some specific characteristics in order to be viable. They require at least one established theme, a central location for lodging, food and beverages, complementary activities, and access routes that allow the visit. These elements must meet the needs of both tourists and residents. Barrera [13] adds to these elements transportation, marketing, and, if possible, the denomination of origin of a product. For Sosa Sosa [14] routes designed around food can add value to traditional cuisine. Most importantly, routes should be structured with consideration for the motivations, priorities and interests of visitors [10].

In rural tourism, the tourism route presents the basic product but offered in an organised and elaborate way. It includes attractions, activities, facilities and tourist

services. At the same time, it is susceptible to commercialisation, either in full or in part [15, 16]. Elements to consider when designing a route are location, area, access roads, internal traffic flow, description of resources, weather, and complementary activities, like natural and cultural attractions.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology used in this study considers the identification of resources and attractions of the municipality of Tenancingo, State of Mexico [17, 18]. It consists of three phases: 1) the identification and classification of resources [19, 20]; 2) the qualitative evaluation of the resources [20, 21]; and 3) the use of a route evaluation index to determine the suitability of their location and structure [22].

#### **3.1 Identification and classification of resources**

In this phase, data were collected in an evaluation form. The following criteria were considered: name of the resource; availability (public or private), accessibility (from “good” to “cannot be accessed”), type of resource and recognition (local to international), description (how it is made, materials), interest of the visit (its importance for the community and visitor), activities, temporality (if it is available all year round), and travel time from the downtown area. Upon completion of the identification, the potential for tourism activities was determined.

The categorisation of resources was carried out through the use of category tables, types, sub-types and information for each resource [20]. Data was obtained through visits to the resource for their identification and/or verification in situ. This allowed the evaluation of accessibility and tourist facilities. The obtained information was of sufficient quality for further qualitative evaluation.

#### **3.2 Qualitative evaluation of resources**

The qualitative evaluation consisted of ranking each of the resources according to established criteria. The criteria were particularity, publications, state of conservation, flow of tourists and potential demand [20]. Following this methodology, each criterion was assigned a value based on the characteristics. The summed values gave an overall value for the resource. The ranking allows a greater understanding of the site and its characteristics to attract visitors.

Next, the methodology proposed by Zamorano Casal [21] was followed, which used three matrices. These matrices are functionality, aesthetic interpretation, and integration. These were used to plan, categorise, and rank resources.

The functionality matrix takes different aspects into consideration: mobility, travel time, the width of the path, type of surface, signage, comfort, and safety. This matrix is focused on accessibility and travel safety to the destination or site. It highlights the alternative opportunities to visit the resource and how enjoyable the trip is for the visitor.

The aesthetic interpretation matrix focuses on factors and elements regarding the provided service. It helps to identify interpretative opportunities per resource, considering the scenery and the overall environment.

The integration matrix unites all the isolated elements of the categories of tourism, the recreational activities of each resource, which results in a comprehensive experience. Complementary ideas can be presented for the resources, aimed at improving the overall experience of the route.

3.3 Design and evaluation of the route

During this phase several different configurations of the route were designed. Their evaluation was conducted taking into account the physical and abstract resources, to which values were assigned. For monuments a value of 30 points was assigned, a value of 20 to gastronomic resources and a value of 10 to agricultural products. Based on the evaluation of the different route designs the most preferable configuration was determined. The evaluation was done following the formula by González Ávila [22]:

$$IERAC = \frac{1}{TR} \sum_{x=1}^{TR} [(Rx) * Wx] \tag{1}$$

Where:

IERAC = Agri-Cultural Route Evaluation Index

Rx = Hierarchy (x = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.....n)

Wx = Importance of the resource (x = 1, 2, 3, 4,..n)

TR = Total of evaluated resources (Rx = 1,2, 3...n).

The use of this methodology allowed for the evaluation of different configurations, and the identification of the tourism route with the most potential according to its characteristics. Additionally, an important byproduct of the combination of these methodologies is the ability of being able to draw up a tourism route for improvement purposes to potentialise a destination or place, and generate strategies to attract a market.

4. Results

4.1 Identification of resources

Inventories and monographs were consulted, and interviews conducted to identify the resources in the municipality of Tenancingo. Once listed, each resource was visited to see first hand the characteristics and resource conditions. For this, an evaluation form with the aforementioned criteria was used.

Greater weight was given to the resource availability, accessibility, interest, temporality and travel time. Because not everyone has the same interests and physical condition, the distance can discourage potential tourists from visiting. Resources that are on private properties and require special permission have limited access. Poor accessibility inhibits the visit of some resources. Additionally, to avoid long transfers, the distance between resources was taken into account.

Based on the results from the evaluation forms, the resources with the lowest scores were discarded. From the 54 identified resources, the 20 most viable were selected, based on their state of conservation and their representation of municipality (see **Table 1**).

Mincetur’s methodology [20] was followed to determine resource potential by identifying their category and hierarchy within the group of resources. The hierarchy was determined following pre-established criteria. An inventory form was used to compile information on the resources. Data included were the name of the resource, location, state of conservation, locality, means of transport, observations, services and activities.



Cristo Rey Monument (C)	San Francisco de Asis Parish (C)
San Clemente Cathedral (C)	Burnt milk sweets (F)
Woven chair (F)	Pan de Tecomatlán (traditional bread baked in stone or brick oven) (F)
Wickerwork (F)	San Simonito waterfall (N)
Obispo (pork sausage typical of the region) (F)	Tecomatlán chapel (C)
Pepeto (typical dish prepared with pork and seasonal vegetables from the cornfield) (F)	Los delfines water park (C)
Wooden furniture (F)	Santo Desierto del Carmen Convent/Park (C/N)
Rebozo (typical handwoven garment, similar to a shawl) (F)	Pulque (fermented alcoholic beverage) (F)
Fruits and herbs liqueurs (F)	Balconies (natural resources with panoramic views) (N)
Flower market (C)	Gorditas (thick corn tortilla stuffed with different ingredients) (F)

*Source: Authors.*

**Table 1.**  
*Identified and selected resources by category.*

In the municipality of Tenancingo, most of the resources are related to folklore, i.e. art and gastronomy. Important gastronomic expressions are ‘gorditas’, which are made of corn dough and stuffed with broad beans, pork crackling, beans or mixed. They are typically cooked on a hotplate heated over a wood fire, which gives them a unique flavour. These are normally enjoyed with a green or red sauce, accompanied with a fermented agave drink called ‘pulque’.

Within the categorisation, cultural manifestations mainly refer to buildings and monuments of great relevance. In the area, the building of the highest relevance is the San Clemente Cathedral, which is visited mainly during its annual festival. On the other hand, the natural sites category showed little participation in the proposed resources, mainly due to distance, pollution and safety. The Santo Desierto del Carmen convent, although a cultural resource, it is also a National Park with state decree (see **Table 1**, F for Folklore; C for Cultural; and N for Natural resource).

**4.2 Identified potential**

Once the resources were categorised, they were ranked. The ranking allowed the identification of the relative importance of the resources within the southern region of the state, as well as their potential to attract visitors. This was done with the use of the aforementioned forms. The obtained value on the form was multiplied by the weight according to the type of resource, resulting in a subtotal value. When obtaining the subtotal of each of the criteria, the sum was made and a total was obtained that corresponded to pre-established values of the equivalence Table T. Based on the results, the resources are ranked in four categories, with 4 having the highest potential.

Following this ranking procedure resulted in one resource in category 4, eighteen resources in category 3, and one resource in category 2. The resource in category 4 is of interest at an international level. The resources in category three have potential, while the resource in category two is seasonal. Most resources require improvement before they can be optimally used.

The matrices by Zamorano Casal [21] allowed for the identification of areas of improvement of the resources. The functionality matrix focuses on the functional part of the service: transfers, distance, signage, comfort and safety. The aesthetic interpretation matrix examined the interpretative opportunities and landscape aspects, as well as the secondary recreational opportunities of each resource. Finally, the integration matrix integrated all the separate elements in modalities or types of tourism: ecotourism, ethno-tourism or adventure tourism, in addition to the recreational opportunities of each resource, resulting in a comprehensive experience.

The distance depends on the type of route, whether it is a day or night excursion, interpretative, and means of transportation (bicycle, horseback). The slope, the vegetation, and the width of the path were also considered to determine how many people could pass without difficulties, signs and comfort. For the transfer time, the centre of the town is taken as the starting point, this being normally the Kiosk of each town. In the case of Santo Desierto, the local taxi base is taken as the starting point. Each of the aspects was evaluated according to the established criteria.

The functionality matrix served to identify the weaknesses of each resource in its current state, and its accessibility. Signs to the site, basic services near the site (bathrooms, food, transportation, etc.), and safety were identified as primary needs. As a partial solution, the implementation of neighbourhood or police patrols near the resource is suggested. Some specific proposals for improvement, based on the matrix are:

Cristo Rey, which can be visited on foot or by vehicle, is located 40 minutes from the centre of the municipality. Reaching the resource involves a heavy climb if visited on foot. It is possible to walk undisturbed with a group of ten or more people. Panoramic views can be appreciated while climbing. However it lacks warning signs. Security may be an issue at certain visiting hours. So caution is necessary.

Santo Desierto can be reached on foot or by car. Travel is usually done on foot during pilgrimages. The travel time is approximately two hours. Along the way steep slopes are encountered, but panoramic views in certain places are also part of the hike. Parts of the road are paved, but some are not. It has some basic services, such as first aid, telephone, food, and transportation. However the signs are not adequate. They are missing, faded, or poorly located.

The Salto de San Simonito presents a spiral path. The resource is accessed on foot from the town. The dirt path is narrow but gives some panoramic views. There are no services at the resource. Security is lacking due to its isolated location.

Besides the identification of key improvements, the participation of local and municipal bodies is necessary to carry them out. For example, with suitable organisation, the signage to reach the resource can be placed in strategic places, as well as improvement of the access roads.

The aesthetic interpretation examines the landscape of the resource, such as flora, fauna, architecture, history, etc. besides the scenic attractions on the way to the different resources, the matrix identifies secondary recreational opportunities of each resource: meditation, landscaping, swimming, camping, hiking, horseback riding, and handcraft or other workshops.

From this matrix, the differentiation of the experience can be designed. The purpose is to provide greater satisfaction to the visitor and give a unique touch. The perceived opportunities would depend on aspects such as the space available around the resource, interpretive opportunities, whether formal (focusing on historical data of the place, legends, tradition, processes, workshop, etc.) or informal (interesting facts, visible details, social changes, among others). Scenic resources are directly related to interpretive opportunities, taking into account the elevation (and what can be seen), space (the aesthetics of the surroundings), availability of space (determining the space to move), design details (safety, comfort and transfer).

The opportunities offered by some of the resources to complement the visit, according to the matrix:

For the Cathedral Basilica of San Clemente, the architecture, history of the cathedral, and its patron feast are interpretive opportunities. The Cathedral is located in a slightly elevated place with a panoramic view on the centre of the municipality. It has opened (the garden) and closed (interior of the cathedral) spaces. It has stairs, restrooms, a place to park and security. In this resource it is possible to carry out activities such as meditation, prayer, and weddings, without disturbing the ongoing activities.

In the case of chair weaving, visits to craftsmen could include the narration and observation of the fabrication process, the people that are involved, the types of chairs that are made, and the time they take. The gastronomy of the municipality can be a complementary resource. Legends about the culture of the municipality provide interpretative activities that can be carried out indoors or outdoors.

“The balconies” are a natural resource that provides panoramic views of neighbouring communities and the Santo Desierto del Carmen. There, legends of each balcony can be told, as well as the process of making pulque from the maguey agave. Possible activities for this area are hiking, walking, meditation, camping and interpretation of the flora.

Part of the purpose of the aesthetic interpretation matrix is the identification of new activities that enhance the visit to the resource. This will generate a greater influx from the adequate development of the proposed activities (craft workshops, walks, hiking, view of landscapes, interpretation of legends, historical accounts, camping, food tasting and appreciation of architecture, to name a few). Some of the interpretation opportunities will help the guide, such as resource leaflets, information sheets, guide speech and itinerary; adding to the knowledge of the site by the guide. The way in which knowledge is transmitted will depend on the group.

The integration matrix consolidates all the isolated elements of ecotourism, ethno-tourism, adventure and animation, in addition to the recreational opportunities of each resource, resulting in a comprehensive experience. This matrix allows taking the results of the two previous matrices and organising them according to the type of activity or tourism. For example, hiking belongs to ecotourism, gastronomy belongs to ethno-tourism, and so on. Activities are assigned according to one of the four aforementioned types (ecotourism, ethno-tourism, adventure, animation), thus allowing an overall vision of its potential.

According to Zamorano Casal [21], a panorama is the complete vision that one has of a set of elements, units or some type of object, and all the parts that comprise it. This allows the elaboration of the matrix and visualisation of its potential. By combining the matrices, the options for improving the resource are presented in terms of access (security, signage, the width of the road, transport, services, basic, etc.) and complementary activities (workshops, legends, tasting, historical explanation of the resource, camping, food tasting and appreciation of architecture, among others). On the other hand, it is necessary to integrate the above into a single product or experience.

### **4.3 Design and evaluation of routes**

The configuration of the routes was based on the grouping of resources following the categorisation by Mincetur; and considerations of location and diversity of resources [20]. The resources were identified according to their potential use. Six routes were proposed accordingly: Natural prayer, Disperse in the centre, the edge of Tenancingo, Artisans Route, Gastronomy Route, and Monuments Route. Using the ranking and hierarchy of the resources, the formula is applied to each of the proposed routes. The results allowed the identification of the routes with the best potential.



Dispersed in the centre	Wx	Rx	T	
Obispo	0.5	10	5	
Rebozo	1	30	30	
Flower market	0.5	10	5	
Fruits and herbs liqueurs	0.5	10	5	45
Services and infrastructure				33
Value of the route				78

Source: Authors.

**Table 2.**  
Highest evaluated route.

The evaluation of the routes was conducted following the methodology by González Ávila [22]. A value of 30 points was assigned to folklore since it is the largest group of resources that the municipality offers. Cultural manifestations were assigned 20 points because of the importance they have within the municipality and the various temporary activities that take place in connection with these resources. The 10 points assigned to natural sites are based on the number of resources in the municipality and their accessibility. Additionally, some of these resources are not well recognised within the municipality. The other 40 points were distributed between infrastructure and education for tourism, equipment (hospitals, parks and general services), general infrastructure (electricity and water) and tourism services (restaurants and transportation), having a maximum value of 10 points each.

The results of the evaluation of the routes ranged from 56.75 to 78. The routes with the highest potential according to their evaluation were Dispersed in the Centre and Artisans Routes. These routes allow the best use of resources and positively impact the communities that are located along the route. The possibility of implementation of the two routes is medium. On a scale of 0 to 100 the feasibility of implementation gave a total of 78 points for the first route, and 68 for the second (see **Table 2**). This means that its realisation will require a joint effort on the part of all those involved. Likewise, its implementation would serve as a starting point to publicise the other resources that the municipality has, giving impulse to the other routes that have a lower possibility of attracting tourism at this moment. The commercial activities of Tenancingo, which attracts people from neighbouring municipalities on market days (Thursdays and Sundays), can also be used to advantage. All of this will allow the promotion of these routes to a larger market.

The successful implementation of routes in the municipality of Tenancingo is most feasible by beginning work with the route that obtained the highest score (78 points Dispersed in the centre). Starting with another route is not likely to result in benefits on the medium or long term. Additionally, it is necessary to consider that the resources should be addressed with reference to the identified weaknesses, which will allow them to be improved in terms of their aesthetics, security and service in general.

5. Conclusions

The methodology proposed allowed the evaluation of tourism routes, based on the available resources and their conditions. Through different configurations and their subsequent evaluation, it was possible to identify the route with the highest potential for success. Further, through the use of this methodology, it was possible

to identify weaknesses of resources as well as opportunities. This methodology can be especially useful for those areas with incipient tourism activity but natural and cultural resources that attract interest and can be improved.

As discussed at the outset, routes can be a source of improvement and income for the areas where they are developed. That is why they are presented as an opportunity for the development of the Tenancingo municipality as part of the tourism sector. However, the municipality presents several factors that prevent the development of the routes effectively, such as site maintenance, contamination, and security. These factors are under the control of the municipal government. By taking care of these aspects, with the cooperation of the inhabitants, it is possible to develop the route for better use of the resources. An adequate organisation is required on the part of those involved, in order to generate greater benefits.

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