

RURAL TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND CULTURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCES –RURAL TOURISM BUSINESS CASE STUDIES IN BAIXO ALENTEJO (PORTUGAL)

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism meets the needs of a growing group of urban consumers who seek to break away from everyday life and gain a reinvigorating, rural and authentic experience that integrates traditions, customs and local identity. Through its peculiar characteristics such as hospitality and its symbolic materials, rural tourism company owners have an opportunity to diversify their activities here.

The offer of interactive and dynamic experiences refers to the singularity of places and the personalization of experiences, which are decisive factors in the affirmation of destinations with rural characteristics and for the differentiation of rural tourism establishments.

The present research presents the first phases of an investigation using a set of semi-structured interviews with the owners of rural settlements (rural tourism), with selection based on their location in the county, their size and the experiential activities they promote and that are disseminated through communication channels. The aspects considered in the collection of data are related to the need to deduce the symbols of hospitality, characterized by history, local culture, gastronomy and tradition, along with other aspects that influence good service.

From the analysis of the results, it was possible to conclude that rural tourism establishments, know well what tourists are looking for in rural space and develop several activities (individual or in partnership) to attend their needs. The managers also reveal distinguished behaviour to give a personalized and high-quality customer service.

Keywords: Culture Tourism, Tourist Experience, Hospitality, Rural Tourism, Small and Medium Enterprises.

JEL Classification: Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

The culture and identity of the place appear as anchors that promote the tourist destination and contribute to achieving quality and authenticity in the innovative tradition. In the context of rural areas, the question of authenticity, hospitality, familiarity and a sense of nostalgia are motivational factors for tourists who come from urban centres (Carvalho, Lima & Kastenholtz, 2014). Rural tourists increasingly value the endogenous resources that characterize rural territories, both in nature and in culture, including traditions, customs and cultural identity (Kastenholtz, 2010).

Added to that, the tourism experience of visitors has been receiving increasing attention in tourism research, due, among other reasons, to the high influence it has, directly or indirectly, on the satisfaction and loyalty of visitors to destinations (Carneiro, Kastenholtz

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& Marques, 2014). In fact, offering a desirable tourist experience is clearly significant for destination's success (Cetin, Kizilirmak & Balik, 2017).

The recent debate is focused on the relevance of integrating and involving all stakeholders in the co-creation of tourism experiences and in the promotion of sustainable local development, using local resources, both material and symbolic (Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2014). The success of creative tourism is closely linked to the tangible and intangible resources of rural destinations, to the degree of involvement of the visitor with the local community and to activities offer that allow the realization of personalized experiences and the construction of unique moments (Carvalho et al., 2014). In a new model of tourism based on an "economy of experience", the tourist plays a central role, in which his motivations and needs are the drivers for experiencing a set of emotions (Cupeto, Figueiredo, Silva, Santos, Figueiredo, Carvalho & Pregoça, 2014).

In addition to the opportunity for tourists of co-creating, Carvalho & Chavez (2018) suggest that one of the greatest attractions of rural tourism is also hospitality, characterized by simplicity and the revitalization of cultural roots of each region, highlighting gastronomy, traditions and way of life. Nowadays, hospitality can be seen as a commercialized product in the rural tourism business, based on quality and service criteria. Many of the studies related to rural tourism accommodation (e.g. Carvalho, 2015) highlight that the attraction of hospitality is based on the rural environment, history and gastronomy, all with characteristic architecture.

So, considering those facts, it is important for rural tourism managers (e.g. agritourism, farming tourism) to try to cater customers' needs with activities that (1) highlight the value contained in legends, myths and even stories of the people of a locality that can be incorporated into the products offered by the enterprise; (2) create rewarding experiences in the region where they are located that make it possible to feel the culture and the peculiarities of the place; (3) add elements that increase the use of the senses, providing sensations that add value and create real and meaningful emotional connection, and can reach an audience willing to pay even more for the product; and (4) implement actions that reduce energy consumption, water and solid waste generation which can attract customers, who these days are more connected to the care of the environment and the planet (SEBRAE, 2015).

But for this type of establishments which are small and medium sized enterprises (SME) and particularly in an interior region like Baixo Alentejo (Alentejo, Portugal) with the typical problems (e.g. desertification, lack of infrastructures), the challenges for business development and innovation are further accentuated by the typical characteristics of rural tourism destinations such as seasonality and low occupancy rates. Many companies are family owned, and do not have enough knowledge and management skills to implement strategic plans in order to reduce the negative effects of seasonality (North & Smallbone, 1996 and Irvine & Anderson, 2004, cited by Oliveira, Correia & Fernandes, 2017).

Some of the questions proposed for this paper are: (1) How can these small-scale rural tourism projects be differentiated? (2) How can they compete with more consolidated groups? (3) How important is the offer of experiences and activities in attracting rural tourism customers to enterprises and for the region as a whole? (4) What kind of tourism experience do these enterprises offer? (5) What impact do these activities have at the micro level and for the region, in terms of business and time of stay?

This article intends to share the conclusions of a study based on cases of rural tourism enterprises in the Baixo Alentejo region which researched commercialization strategies for tourism activities and experiences based on rural and cultural resources with a strong regional identity; innovation and hospitality strategies of the enterprises as factors of differentiation and competitiveness in the tourist offer of the region; and the importance of hospitality

as a means of excellence in relationships among stakeholders and a competitive factor of differentiation in the tourism experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Rural Tourism and Urban Consumers

In this era of globalization and of living in non-places, there are people (tourists) who idealize a place where they can spend their holidays or the weekend, giving this place an identity, with unique attributes of local experience. In a context in which characteristics such as cultural identity and uniqueness are increasingly valued by certain groups of tourists, rural tourism stands out, with its symbols and aspects of hospitality, as an alternative tourist activity which is capable of attracting consumers with a more reflective profile and who are interested in the culture, tradition and way of life of local communities (Brasil & Carvalho, 2016).

Rural tourism is a tourist type that has developed in recent times. This form of tourism develops in rural areas (as opposed to the urban environment); supposes a reduced tourist offer; uses its own resources in the rural territory (natural, heritage and cultural) with a vision of sustainability; contributes to the development of local economies; and, no less importantly, is sought by tourists whose main motivation is contact with the rural environment and escaping mass tourism places (Mediano & Vicente, 2002 cited by Cerro, Mogollón & Alves, 2010).

Rural tourism meets the needs of a growing group of urban consumers who seek to break away from everyday life and gain a reinvigorating, rural and authentic experience (Fernandes, 2016) which integrates traditions, customs and local identity (Carvalho, Ferreira & Figueira, 2016). What are urban consumers looking for in rural tourism? Over the last few years we have witnessed a progressive increase in the demand and frequency of rural areas for the consumption and performance of tourism and leisure activities, mainly by urban populations. This increase is in keeping with the structural changes that have taken place in contemporary societies in general and which result in the understanding of rural areas as consumer (and local) goods and common heritage (Figueiredo 2003: 65, cited by Silva, 2013).

According to a study carried out in Alto Alentejo with the objective of gaining better knowledge of the profile of tourists who search for rural tourism accommodation (Milheiro, Kastenholz & Carneiro, 2017), it can be seen these tourists have an urban background, with an average age of around 44 years and are highly qualified. The main motivations are the search for relaxation in a calm and relaxing environment (rest, harmony, tranquillity, peace), holidays and leisure. Regarding the attributes valued in the choice of destination, the most important are tranquillity and a relaxing environment, landscape and nature, hospitality, and cultural and historical resources.

Rural tourism in a narrow sense must be linked to the characteristics of the rural environment, the rural landscape, lifestyle and rural culture (Tulik, 2003: 43, cited by Filippim, Hoffmann & Feger, 2005). This type of tourism should be associated with cultural values, lifestyle, imaginary and fieldwork practices (Filippim et al., 2005).

It allows interest to be raised in looking for tourist experiences in spaces with typical and unique characteristics and is now considered as a strategic tool in the conservation of the environment and in the preservation of local cultures (Talavera, 2001, cited by Filippim et al., 2005).

2.2 Tourist Experiences in Rural Areas - Cultural Tourism Experiences

The concept of the tourism experience has become the centre of attention for current tourism research and management. While academic studies are progressively examining tourism as a function of memorable experiences (ME), more research must be done to expose the essence of what exactly makes certain experiences special and particularly memorable (Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Tourist experience should be understood as the central aspect of tourism activity, as it determines the search for a destination and tourism product and, consequently, the competitiveness of tourism itself (Mossberg, 2007; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003, cited by Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, Loureiro, Figueiredo & Pereiro, 2014). It is based on the intensity of the experiences gained by an increasingly demanding public, no longer content with the offer of traditional, merely contemplative products. It is through this different modality of tourist offer that tourists, when returning to their place of origin, have much more to speak about and to remember; they take with them practices and experiences of activities shared with the local community (Souza & Cuogo, 2015).

According to Mill and Morrison (1985), cited by Cetin et al. (2017: 33), the definition of tourism experience is based in a list of attractions, facilities, infrastructures, transportation and hospitality as basic pull components of a destination. But this definition is not complete. "According to Huang and Hsu (2009) the nature of participation, emotions and personality also affect the way the experience is lived and remembered in destinations" (Cetin et al., 2017: 33).

To achieve success in a highly competitive tourism marketplace, visitors must be provided with memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2014). Kim (2010), cited by Cetin et al. (2017: 33), "identified involvement, hedonism, happiness, pleasure, relaxation, stimulation, refreshment, social interaction, adventure, personal relevance, novelty, escaping pressure and intellectual cultivation as basic experiential push factors for tourists".

Furthermore, cultural tourism has gone from a nearly exclusive approach of valuing the tangible elements of destiny (such as architectural heritage, museums or monuments) to extolling intangible elements (such as identity, lifestyle, traditions) (Richards & Wilson, 2007b, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014). Tourists seek destinations that are characterized as smaller and less visited places that offer the experience of authentic and local culture (Richards, 2009, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014).

Creative tourism has been also identified as an extension of cultural tourism, in which consumers seek interactive and dynamic experiences, reflecting a new cultural tourist profile (Tan et al., 2013, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014). Thus, creativity plays a vital role as a distinctive element of the tourism experience (Carvalho et al., 2014). Common aspects of the concept of creative tourism include: (1) "creative potential" of the visitor in the community visited, developed according to the local offer and the dynamic attitude of the visitor; (2) "active involvement" with the host community; (3) evolution of unique "experiences" that empower memories, integrating sensations; (4) "co-creation", an active participation of the visitor in the destination, in which he seeks to be a co-producer of his experience, adapting it to his own needs and requirements (Richards, 2011, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014).

Creative tourism boosts the development of unique experiences in which the personal nature of each visitor provides: (1) enjoyment of unique moments, tailored to each and (2) a greater understanding of the meaning of local values, experiences and culture, thus allowing new skills to be acquired (Carvalho et al., 2014).

Through its peculiar characteristics, such as hospitality, and its symbolic materials, rural tourism enterprise owners have the opportunity to diversify their activities (Brasil & Carvalho, 2016). The offer of interactive and dynamic experiences refers to the singularity of

places and personalization of experiences, decisive factors in the affirmation of destinations with rural characteristics (Carvalho, 2013) and for the differentiation of establishments.

Tourism experience, particularly in rural contexts, is complex and not restricted to functional aspects; it includes social, emotional, hedonic, and symbolic dimensions and is mediated by the senses (Kastenholz, et al., 2012, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014). In fact, traditions, culture and local identity are endogenous resources that are part of the rural experience and are sought by increasingly demanding tourists (Carvalho, Ferreira & Figueira, 2016).

Smell and taste are strongly associated, for example, with gastronomy, a very important local identity value for the co-creation of rural cultural experiences, for example in wine tourism activities. The dimensions of sight, touch and hearing allow tourists to be part of the local community in a day-to-day context (Richards, 2011, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014). In rural areas, this is possible by observing residents working on their land, feeling the textures of handicrafts, or by listening to the sounds of nature or other experiences related to traditional activities (e.g. watching/following work with animals in farms) (Kastenholz et al., 2012, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014).

The experience of learning, savouring and observing can be realized through workshops, itineraries and activities related to dance, theatre, painting, photography, literature, music, restoration, history, heritage, architecture, gastronomy or handicrafts (Binkhorst, 2007; Cloke, 2007, cited by Carvalho et al., 2014).

Tourists who value the tourism of experiences look for hospitality, the aesthetic dimension, some entertainment and a differentiated experience. In the search for this, the tourist wants to have more and more experiences in which he is not only a passive spectator in his trip, but also an actor who participates and lives unique moments and can recount what he has experienced. Indeed, the countryside and rural tourism can allow the sustainable tourism experience with activities that go with an idyllic rural image.

Some examples of activities that allow tourists to enjoy the space by having new experiences are: kneading bread, putting it in the oven and tasting it still hot at the end, together with the products of the region, such as sausages, ham, cheese, honey and olives; visits to wine houses and distilleries; and participation in activities like picking arbutus fruit, olives or carob.

These are experiences that provide contact with ancestral ways of life and that value the ancient Mediterranean culture. The fruition of this knowledge and these flavours, as part of intangible heritage, enriches the tourist experience.

So, in order to enrich the experience and to enhance the offer, as well as to stimulate the local economy in rural areas, it is important to bear in mind an “extended offer”, which combines accommodation and complementary and specialized services, guaranteeing a unique and high-value offer for certain segments of customers. For this, it will be necessary to know what tourists’ motivations and expectations are, as well as establishing partnerships with other service providers. These can be as diverse as the restoration of excellence (in terms of typicality, regional gastronomy, display of local culture), the craftsmen who show their work to tourists and allow them to experience it, tourist entertainment companies that provide activities which enable contact with nature, to a more or less radical extent, and so on (Vareiro, 2015).

It is important to add that all these experiences promote tourism sustainability, since there is a rediscovery and interpretation of the rural territory, with alternatives for its development. Thus, resources are valued and can allow the few existing populations to remain in their places of origin and obtain some profitability in preserving their traditions, and it also allows them to maintain balance in their relationship with the past, present and future.

2.3 Rural Tourism Hospitality

Hospitality is a dynamic process far beyond simply hosting, and which involves relations between hosts and guests (Carvalho & Chávez, 2018). The act of hosting and being hospitable has complexity that goes beyond simply receiving the visitor; it is the sharing of experiences that occurs through the approximation of cultures and customs between tourists and the local community (Pimentel, 2012).

We can say that tourist hospitality consists of receiving the tourist in the best possible way, with the provision of structures and services intended as tourist services (Santos, Alves & Cândido, 2016). A “good welcome” is linked directly with the preparation of the tourist destination for receiving the tourist and this preparation of a tourist destination involves the whole sector. The “welcome” is closely related to the quality of goods and services offered and this is equivalent to saying that the quality offered in the tourist destination will directly influence whether the tourist service is good or bad (Dalpiaz, Dagostini, Giacomini & Giustina, 2012).

Considering rural hospitality, particular characteristics can be identified such as: (1) a greater emphasis on personalized rather than commercial hospitality; (2) closer and almost family-like relationships; (3) receiving of people in the residential space for both food and accommodation; less distrust in comparison with urban centres (Carvalho, 2015). So, it is important for managers and heads of marketing of rural tourism business to be interested in knowing the characteristics of their customers, as well as what they look for and expect from their establishments. Realizing this information can help managers plan their business development by offering meaningful and memorable experiences to tourists, as well as developing more sustainable tourism with a positive impact on the environment and quality of life for the local population. By providing them with a better stay, clients are expected to return and recommend visits to family and friends (Vareiro, 2015).

Martins (2016) suggests several differentiated topics in which what the consumer aims for is authenticity; friendliness (the Portuguese are known as welcoming people); inclusion and participation in local activities (e.g. participating in daily tasks such as feeding the animals, collaborating in gardening and/or assisting in the preparation of a meal with the ingredients previously collected in the countryside); and objectives (activity focused mostly on quality). In fact, Martins (2016) claims that rural tourism businesses include tourists in activities surrounding the hotel establishment. The happiness that clients feel in participating in daily tasks, like feeding the animals or helping water the garden is unbelievable. That said, no one expects to get rich just because they offer accommodation in rural tourism. Prices should be appropriate to the quality of the offer and never forget that the secret lies in customer loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of the study, a qualitative and exploratory case study approach was chosen as it is a way of obtaining rich and detailed data that can help to understand the cultural experience of all the stakeholders/actors involved.

The methodology used in this study focused on the bibliographic review of the study variables (e.g. rural tourism, tourism experience, hospitality), content analysis of the commercialized experience products on the websites of three recognized rural tourism enterprises or groups (a “golden triangle”) and 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2019 using a *Google Form*, with managers of rural tourism enterprises in the region. The selection of the SME was based on the national registration of accommodation in Portugal (*vide* Turismo de Portugal), selected by rural tourism enterprises in Baixo Alentejo. The script

of the interview was designed based on a review of the literature and considering dimensions of the survey such as: differentiated factors for competition, namely local tourism resources; expected tourist experiences; cultural and natural experiences offered; hospitality concept. The interviews conducted with the owners or managers of the businesses were subject to a content analysis according to Bardin theory. The categorical content analysis comprises the three steps: (1) Pre analysis, which consists of material selection (corpus) to be analyzed and its meticulous Reading; (2) Encoding, step of transforming of the raw data from corpus, making use of records to be grouped in the future; (3) Categorization, organization phase and classification of the corpus on a set of significant number of units of record (the codes) and (4) Interpretation, which consists of the inferential process (Bardin, 1977, cited by Gondim & Bendassolli, 2014: 193).

Some difficulties in conducting this research can be identified. One of the difficulties was the lack of updated data of the enterprises (some no longer existed; others were closed; others had recently opened). The other difficulty was directly reported by the owners of the enterprises: most of these businesses are family-owned and are also SME in which the owner carries out several roles. It is thus difficult to motivate these owners to participate in this kind of research. But the study has not ended, and there will be other opportunities to explore more results of a large number of respondents.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

One of the questions of this study was related to how these small-scale rural tourism projects can be differentiated and how they can compete with bigger and more consolidated groups. In the Baixo Alentejo region, there is the so called “golden triangle”, which consists of three well distinguished and luxurious rural tourism enterprises with a consolidated position in the national and international tourism market. They are located next to each other, forming a triangle.

One of the rural tourism enterprises is “Herdade dos Grous” which is located in Albernoa (Beja). It has 12 double rooms, 7 junior suites and 5 suites. By analysing the website, we can conclude that its experiences are termed “alternative” and it presents a digital book or catalogue of all the activities it promotes on its website: horse riding; activities specially for children; team building or individual activities; nautical sports; birdwatching; health and fitness; balloon trips (Herdade dos Grous *website*).

The second rural tourism enterprise analysed is “Herdade da Malhadinha – Country House & Spa” also located in Albernoa (Beja). The company has a set of experiences displayed on its website that include themed packages; activities; experiences (programmes); corporate facilities (conference room; organization of events); wine tourism visits. Themed packages can include cooking with a respected chef, learning the art of photography or painting, or intimately discovering the world of wines. Activities include: (1) gastronomy (workshops of traditional cuisine and traditional Alentejo pastry, themed meals, gourmet picnic); (2) romantic (carriage rides, massage, wine therapy); (3) beginner and advanced wine tasting courses and tasting of regional liquors; (4) “winemaker for a day”, gin workshop; (5) adventure and sport (off-roading, paintball, parachute jumping, canoeing in Guadiana river, night orientation); (6) relaxation and contact with nature (guided walking tours, birdwatching, yoga, tea, fishing, etc.); (7) painting, sculpture and photography; (8) creative activities with children; (9) team building activities and horse riding.

The third enterprise is “Vila Galé – Clube de Campo”, located in Santa Vitória (Beja). When we analyse the group’s website, several packages of experiences are marketed and complement the accommodation. Vila Galé Clube de Campo (81 rooms and suites) offers:

(1) “Spa Experience”; “Great experience”; (2) “Wine tourism experiences” – Alentejo wine route (visit the winery Sta Vitória, 5 wines accompanied by typical Alentejo snacks); (3) “Ecotourism experiences” and adventure in the countryside (quad biking, canoeing in the dam of the estate, mountain biking and archery); (4) “Nature explorers” (jeep: homestead tour, birdwatching, cart ride); (5) “Aeronauts (includes balloon flight, canoeing in the company’s dam, mountain biking with GPS, archery).

It is important to say that these activities are usually developed in partnership with entertainment tourism enterprises.

And how can small rural tourism business in Baixo Alentejo compete or differentiate in this sector? According to the 29 respondent’s opinions, the main differentiating and competitive aspects of their enterprises are: (1) customer service and quality; (2) landscape, tranquillity and nature; (3) design, decoration and comfort of the houses; (4) biodiversity and contact with nature; (5) familiarity and simplicity of the relationship between customer and owner. Of lesser importance but also reported, the owners also mentioned: (6) contact with animals; (7) good infrastructures; (8) complementary activities; and (9) experiences with gastronomy and wine.

When we asked about the kind of image they aim to present for their enterprises, distinct from the competition and appealing to customers, the managers mainly emphasized improvement or maintenance of a higher quality customer service and an excellent and family-like relationship with customers. Other factors are reported such as: (1) giving customers more experiences and promoting local products; (2) being known as a biodiversity, nature and sustainable project; (3) providing tranquillity and relaxing peace; (4) developing the concept of memories related to rural tourism houses. For the owners, this can create a “brand” that will motivate costumers to repeat the rural experience.

As was said before in the literature review, this region (as region in the interior) suffers from some difficulties and this can have also constraints on SME business. In the opinion of the interviewees, the main constraints for their enterprises are: (1) accessibility (bad road conditions and location); (2) size of accommodation (need for more rooms); (3) climate and seasonality; (4) difficulties in finding human resources, mainly in the high season; (5) quality Wi-Fi signal.

The managers were also asked about what regional or local resources can be recovered and introduced in the tourism experience, in the region’s enterprises and in their own. According to the answers collected, we can state briefly that they mainly mention aspects such as: (1) nature resources (e.g. water resources – rivers, lagoons and dams; landscape; wild resources – mushrooms and asparagus picking; hunting; birdwatching; bike riding); (2) archaeology and heritage revitalization and exploitation (e.g. Roman ruins; traditional gastronomy and handicrafts – clay); (3) walking routes. The managers also gave suggestions such as: (1) guided visits to old shops; (2) a greater number of restaurants open in the summer season; (3) a weekly market to sell local products. In general, they think that it is important to promote entertainment activities (e.g. related to sports) and preserve and explore tangible and intangible heritage.

Summing up the main activities that, in the manager’s opinion, tourists want to do in the region and in rural tourism houses, the results reveal that they want: (1) to experience local and traditional gastronomy; (2) to rest, to have peace and tranquillity and to spend leisure time; (3) to visit local heritage; (4) to be in contact with nature resources and landscape (e.g. birdwatching); and (5) to try local wines.

But what kind of tourism experiences do these SME offer and how can these activities increase tourists’ length of stay? According to the interviewees, some enterprises offer complementary activities and we can highlight some, such as: (1) birdwatching; (2) local gastronomy in the restaurant facilities or alternative gastronomy (e.g. vegan and vegetarian);

(3) sports activities (e.g. equestrian sport; sport fishing; canoeing); (4) countryside tranquillity and contact with animals; (5) playing traditional games. As was said before about the three golden triangle companies, these SME also have partnerships with entertainment activities enterprises. Other companies provide only information about local activities, and we can highlight: (1) guided visits and walking routes; (2) boat rides; (3) a local cultural agenda (e.g. traditional fairs; cultural visits).

Considering the business impacts of these experiences and activities, the general respondent's opinion is that this is positive because "*it brings value*"; "*it improves occupancy rate in low season*" and "*it improves tourists' perception of the experience*".

Looking at what should be done to improve the quality of the tourism experience in the enterprise and region, the opinions of the interviewees is that it is important: (1) to work on marketing local heritage and natural resources; (2) to promote more authentic and credible experiences; (3) to improve public-private cooperation; (4) to improve partnerships between private enterprises; (5) to reclassify cultural resources and improve management of monuments. The offer can be structured and managed to improve tourism experience, investing in direct and indirect tourism infrastructures; timetables (e.g. extending museum hours); public sector investment in financing agents that commercialize experience activities; investment in accessibility.

Considering the hospitality concept, the managers suggests that this concept needs creativity and it is fundamental for business. It is important for tourists to be relaxed and feel like they are at home; and that the customer service is friendly. As one of the managers said: "*the client is the king*".

The last question the rural tourism companies' managers were asked was what makes a unique and memorable experience. We opted to quote here some of the answers that summarize the respondents' perception about experience and hospitality concepts. The answers are: (1) "*provide what they want as customers*"; (2) "*make them feel very welcome*"; (3) "*good accommodation conditions, good reception by the staff, and if possible, to have complementary activities*"; (4) "*authenticity and personalized service to the customer*"; (5) "*experiences that they have never had and that they will not find (or would find less) in other places*"; (6) "*feel at home*"; (7) "*appeal to the senses and exceed expectations*"; (8) "*recreate past environments*"; (9) "*to give a lot of us*"; (10) "*remember the experience they have had*".

It's understandable that the main goal is to get tourist satisfaction and that customers should return.

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this ongoing research was to understand how tourists experience rural areas and the importance which rural tourism accommodation managers of Baixo Alentejo give to this subject. This understanding is fundamental to improve the adaptation of businesses to the expectations of its market, thus allowing greater satisfaction, and perhaps higher occupancy rates of this type of accommodation, contributing to a more sustainable tourism development in the rural areas of the region.

Considering the results, we can say that, at a lower scale, these rural tourism companies know well what tourists are looking for in rural spaces and they provide several activities (individual or in partnership) to attend to their needs. The managers also reveal differentiated behaviour to give personalized and high-quality customer service.

We also can say that the potentially enriching features of the tourism experience of the Baixo Alentejo region are related to natural resources; archaeology and heritage; local and traditional gastronomy; tranquillity and harmony of the countryside; wine tourism.

It is important to take action to improve the touristic experience related to the existence of tourism agents who are exclusively dedicated to organizing and structuring tourist experiences. But other actions must be taken such as: (1) preserving, restoring and enhancing tourist exploitation of cultural heritage; (2) involving the local community; (3) communicating the offer as a whole (with accommodation, activities and catering together, in integrated packages); (4) providing quality tourism; (5) promoting authenticity and identity that represents local traditions; (6) investing in infrastructures (directly related to tourism, such as museums, but also road and transport structures); (7) extending timetables for monuments; (8) avoiding public bodies themselves developing activities that compete with the private ones.

For the managers, hospitality in their business means making the welcome a differentiating factor; the client should feel at home and have friendly service.

Hospitality can contribute to customer loyalty and return visits, and it is important to create a good and familiar relationship with the customer and give him attention; to provide moments of well-being and to repeat a good, quality experience.

Creativity and innovation in these rural tourism establishments is based on bringing something different; providing memories and seeking to develop a more structured offer of planned activities and programmes in the region to enable tourists to stay longer.

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