

Article

# Hiking Tourism in Spain: Origins, Issues and Transformations

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**Abstract:** In Spain, hiking is an activity that involves following paths, which may or may not be signposted, on foot, for sporting and cultural purposes. In the country as a whole, although with important regional variations, hiking has traditionally been linked to mountaineering and rambling clubs. However, at the beginning of the 1990s this activity became much more widely popular, reaching beyond the more limited sphere within which the pioneers of hiking in Spain had acted. Hiking stopped being just a sporting and cultural activity and also became a form of tourism and leisure, coinciding with the emergence and consolidation of what have become known as alternative forms of tourism. In this context of change, hiking tourism has gradually evolved over the years into a strategic option for development in many territories. This article presents the most important aspects of this transformation: the changes in the territorial model for the management of the paths on which the creation of hiking tourism products is based; the fact that in the design of routes more consideration is being given to the differential characteristics of tourist demand for hiking; the adaptation of the accommodation, restaurant facilities and the main specific services associated with it; and the emergence and engagement of new stakeholders in the processes of planning, distribution and communication of this activity.

**Keywords:** hiking tourism; routes and trails; managing hiking paths; rural development

## 1. Introduction

In Spain, hiking (*senderismo*) is generally defined as an activity that involves following paths, which may or may not be signposted, on foot, for sporting and cultural purposes. In the country as a whole, although with important regional variations, hiking was traditionally linked to mountaineering and rambling (*excursionismo*) clubs. However, at the beginning of the 1990s it became much more widely popular, reaching far beyond the relatively limited sphere within which the pioneers of hiking in Spain had acted [1]. Hiking stopped being just a sporting and cultural activity (enjoyed by minority and to some extent elitist groups) and also became a form of tourism and leisure, coinciding with the emergence and consolidation of what have become known as alternative forms of tourism [2–4].

The subject of this article is hiking tourism in Spain, a tourist and leisure activity conducted on foot along signposted, preferably historical, paths, that run through natural/rural countryside. This open-air, outdoor activity is amongst the most demanded by the tourists and day-trippers who visit mountain areas and protected natural spaces [5–7], as happens in other countries [8–13]. Hiking as a travel experience is not just about the journey from start to finish. It is not limited to a single point or space and instead takes place in motion across the territory [14–16]. This is why the spatial and geographic dimension of the travel experience goes far beyond most other kinds of tourism in which the journey is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

One of the objectives of hiking tourism is to bring tourists closer to nature and to enable them to find out more about the area through which they are walking by discovering diverse heritage and ethnographic features, situated on or near the paths or tracks [8,17]. It also seeks to improve the health

of the hikers and their search for physical wellbeing via an activity with no negative side effects [18,19] and encourages interpersonal relationships and intra-personal knowledge [20,21]. In short, the aim is not just walking for the sake of walking, but walking in order to satisfy a series of needs and urges of varying degrees of importance for different people, which evolve over time as a result of a wide range of social, economic, environmental and personal factors [22].

Hiking tourism promotes a slow consumption of territory (an active form of slow tourism) through adapted routes, which are equipped in their immediate vicinity with heritage resources and specialized tourist services and facilities. However as various authors point out, the brief history of this form of tourism has shown that it is not enough to develop hiking holiday ideas based solely on the provision of high-quality facilities and services or involving the creation of routes through attractive, picturesque landscapes [23,24], it is also necessary to concentrate on the design and creation of memorable experiences within a dynamic setting [25–27].

In Spain, traditional rambling clubs and modern-day hiking continue to coexist, although the latter is now more popular (10% vs. 90%, according to the Spanish Federation of Climbing and Mountain Sports). The creation of hiking routes aimed at the general public has developed enormously in recent years, with significant growth in the number of kilometers of paths equipped for this purpose (at the beginning of the 1990s there were about 6000 km of signposted paths in Spain, whereas today there are over 80,000 km). There are hiking paths in mountain, inland and coastal regions, although the mountain routes are perhaps the best known in the national and international tourism market. The Pyrenees, la Serra de Tramuntana on the island of Mallorca, the island of La Palma in the Canaries, Sierra Nevada and the Picos de Europa are all important destinations for hikers in Spain, although they remain far behind the classical hiking destinations in the countries that are best known for this activity (Austria, Switzerland or France) [28–30].

Hiking tourism in Spain has been through two quite different phases of development since it first appeared in the early 1990s as a leisure and recreation activity. The first stage up until around 2005 was characterized by (a) the direct transformation of the traditional rambling offering into a hiking tourism offering, (b) the proliferation of new hiking tourism routes, and (c) the creation of the first hiking tourism products, although these were still relatively few and far between and there was little product differentiation. Hiking tourism holidays bring together all the basic elements required for people to enjoy a tourism experience (tourism resources, facilities and services), and they also contain the elements that enable them to be marketed and sold as a product (management, image and exchange value). It is important to distinguish here between hiking tourism products and the hiking tourism offering (the routes on offer in a particular area), which lacks this second group of elements. This is why hiking tourism products are conceived as an alternative to other tourism products with a more dominant position in the market, while the improvement in an area's hiking tourism offering in the form of new, better equipped and signposted paths is seen as a diversifying action that is complementary to leisure activities that are already performed in the area and is therefore an effective way of dynamizing its competitiveness as a tourist destination [2,31–33].

The second phase of hiking tourism in Spain, which began around 2005 and continues today, is characterized by promoting this kind of tourism as a strategic option for the socioeconomic development of rural areas, which promotes the conservation of the environment, and enhances territorial identity and culture and public-private cooperation, by involving both tourism companies and other stakeholders who have traditionally remained outside this sector [34–36]. As a result, in this second phase the aim has been to create hiking tourism products that are firmly based in the local territory as opposed to a mere proliferation of hiking routes. The local authorities in the areas through which these routes pass become managers of the infrastructures required for hiking (public footpaths) and of many of the heritage features that may be of interest to tourists; different management bodies (in the form of associations or consortia, among others) take charge of the planning, management, sale and marketing of the hiking routes created as products, so providing a cohesive structure for the

different stakeholders involved (civil society, companies, public authorities) and for the application of measures to encourage its development.

During this process of development, there have been four main factors that have enabled the transformation described above. The first refers to the territorial model of management of the paths on which the creation of the hiking tourism offering and/or products is based. The second is related to the increasing consideration in the design of routes of the differential characteristics of the demand for hiking tourism. The third involves the improvements in accommodation, restaurants and the main associated services specific to this activity (guides, transport of luggage etc.). The fourth and last factor is the appearance and engagement of new stakeholders in the processes of creation, planning, distribution and communication of hiking tourism products. These aspects, which have shaped the development of hiking in Spain since it first appeared as a leisure and recreation activity, are the main subject of this article.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to identify the factors that led to the development of hiking in Spain and its gradual establishment as a leisure and recreational activity that can bring about development in the territory. Identifying these factors can help other areas which are implementing this form of tourism to design lines of action that can strengthen and enhance these factors. This may allow them to develop and manage this activity more effectively so enhancing its long-term competitiveness and sustainability. All of this is highly important in what is a favorable global context for the development of this kind of tourism, either as the main activity or as a complementary activity in regions and/or destinations that specialize in other forms of tourism. The growth in the market requires a planned intervention that can strengthen the factors identified in this study, adapting them to the particular needs of the different geographical spaces involved.

Godtman et al. (2017) [37] point out that in many contemporary societies, traditional paths have been converted into infrastructures of great importance for tourism, leisure and recreation. These paths are being used for a variety of tourism activities that require different means of transport (bicycles, donkeys and horses, carts, quad-bikes, etc.), but the most popular way of travelling these paths is on foot. This helps explain why hiking is the most widely studied of these different activities in international scientific research on the leisure and recreational activities carried out on paths situated in natural, rural environments.

According to Godtman et al. (2017) [37], this interest in research on hiking tourism in international scientific literature began in around 1970. This is manifested not only in the increase in the number of published articles but also in a broadening of the geographic field of study and the particular aspects being analyzed. There have been for example frequent studies about hiking in countries such as North America, Europe (central and northern) and Oceania (above all Australia and New Zealand), in accordance with the importance of these destinations in the hiking tourism market, at both a national and international scale. In the European context, the Mediterranean countries (including Spain, the country covered in this article) have not received much attention. This paper aspires to fill this gap by broadening the knowledge in this field.

Some of the most frequently researched aspects are those related with the role played by hiking in the sustainable development and dynamization of rural territories [18], the environmental impact of the use of hiking paths on for example the terrain, the vegetation or the fauna [38,39], the conflicts that may arise between hiking and other activities as a consequence of the use of paths which are typically multifunctional [40,41], the behavior of hikers or the reasons why tourists choose hiking as a vacation activity [42–45]. Other interesting themes include the management of hiking paths [46–49] and theoretical and conceptual reflections regarding the different types of paths [50,51]. There are relatively few studies on the gradual development of hiking as a leisure and recreational activity that can promote development in the territory [1,2,11] and almost none at all that analyze the factors

behind this process. This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by broadening knowledge in this particular area.

In order to identify these factors, we used description as a geographical method that takes into account the processes that are taking place within the territory, assembling and triangulating different elements and information within time and space, which a priori seem heterogeneous. The following sources of information were used for this purpose:

(a) Scientific literature. A detailed reading of the available bibliography enabled us to build an initial framework regarding the state of the question we were analyzing, and to identify the key aspects in the development and management of hiking tourism in Spain;

(b) Documentation of a technical nature provided by the Observatory of Natural Paths and Non-Motorized Itineraries, a body that belongs to the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing and Food. This provides, for different moments in time, basic information and inventories of the main routes and networks of paths for non-motorized mobility in Spain;

(c) Search Engine offered by the FEDME (Spanish Federation of Mountain and Climbing Sports) to help find GR (long-distance), PR (short-distance) and SL (local) paths. This tool enables users to search for officially approved paths all over Spain, offering maps of the routes and information about their technical characteristics and about interesting features along the way (heritage features, facilities and services). Those consulting this search engine can firstly obtain an overall vision of officially approved paths all over the country and secondly access detailed information about each individual path;

(d) Official websites for the Protected Natural Spaces in Spain. These websites offer information about programmes for signposting, promotion and maintenance of the hiking itineraries and/or networks available in these areas;

(e) Official websites for the promotion of tourism in the different Spanish regions and in the country as a whole. These websites offer information about the main hiking tourism products offered in each particular territory. It is important to make clear that the model of state established in the Spanish Constitution of 1978 devolved the powers for the planning and promotion of tourism to the regional governments, autonomous cities and local entities (provinces, town councils, subregions, etc.). Given this situation, and in view of the impossibility of covering all the thousands of local entities in Spain, we chose to explore this question at a regional level, consulting the relevant websites for Spain's 17 regional governments (known as Autonomous Communities), plus two other websites promoting tourism in Spain as a whole;

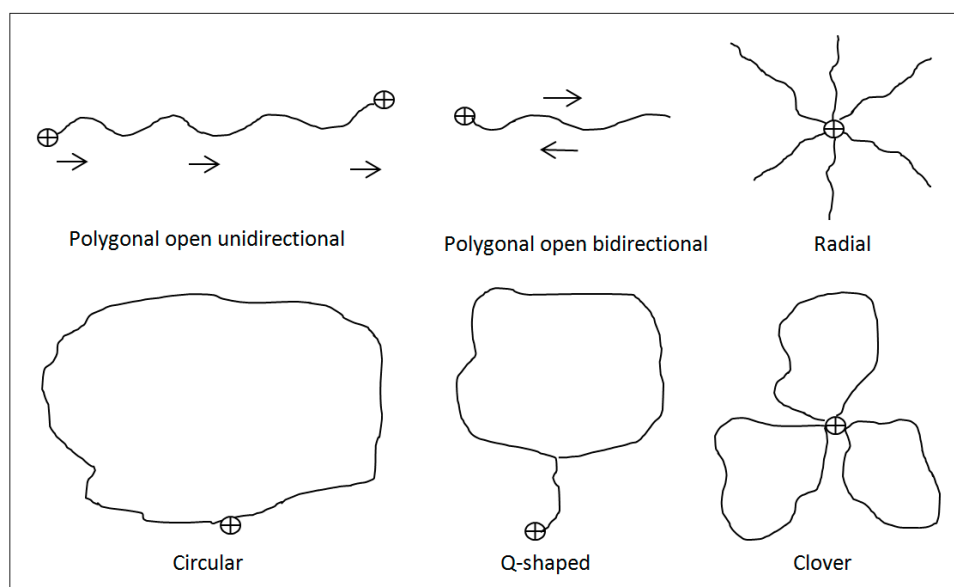
(f) Websites offering hiking tourism products. Having identified the main hiking tourism products on the regional and state-wide tourism promotion websites, we then visited the specific websites for each product. These offer detailed information about all the different elements that make up the tourism product in question (tourism resources, the facilities and services on offer, management, brand image and positioning in the market) as well as information about the history and creation of the projects.

### 3. Results

There are four main factors that led to the development of hiking in Spain and its gradual emergence as a leisure and recreational activity that can bring about development in the territory. The first and most important factor is the territorial model of management of hiking paths on which the creation of the hiking tourism offering and/or products is based. The second factor is that the differential characteristics of the demand for this product must be taken into account in the layout and design of hiking routes. The third involves the adaptation of tourism facilities and services to hikers' specific requirements and the fourth and final factor is the appearance and involvement of new actors in the processes of creation, planning, distribution and communication of hiking tourism products.

### 3.1. From the Creation of Tourism Products Based on Prioritized Itineraries to the Proposal of Networks for Walking

In Spain, the fact that rambling was a precursor of hiking tourism helps explain why from the beginning of the 1990s until well into the first decade of the 21st-century the routes intended for hiking tourism were mainly conceived as proposals for prioritized itineraries. These prioritized itineraries were based on the French model for signposting hiking routes, which was also used by Spanish rambling associations [52]. This model is based on the marking of specific excursion proposals [53]. In Spain, the French model has given rise to the classification of excursion paths used by the FEDME (Spanish Federation of Climbing and Mountain Sports), which distinguishes between long distance paths (GR, over 50 km), short distance paths (PR, between 10 and 50 km) and local paths (SL, less than 10 km). In this way, during the first phase, the hiking tourism products and offering were based on specific, individualized, visible, linear ways, which were physically evident on the ground, and in the past had been used for transport or travel, e.g., disused roads or railway lines [54]. These ways were linked to interesting heritage resources and tourism facilities and services in their immediate vicinity. In this way proposals for itineraries with different forms (Figure 1) and lengths began to appear on the tourism stage. The medium- and long-distance routes (over several days) were reserved for tourism products, while those over shorter distances became part of the tourism offering of hiking routes in each particular destination.



**Figure 1.** The different conceptions of hiking paths: most common shapes of existing routes.

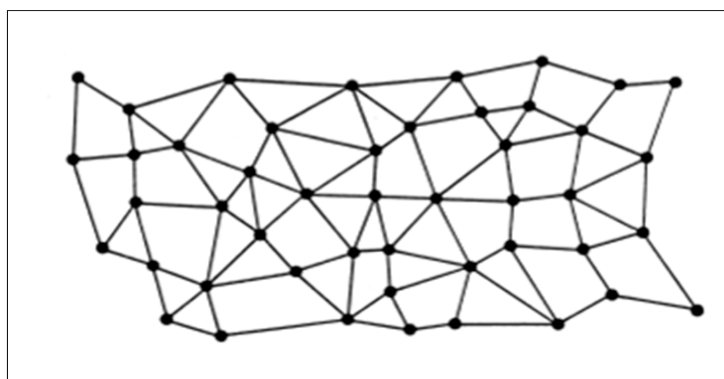
The medium- and long-distance itineraries are normally of *mixed topology*, in other words their interest lies in the enjoyment of the route itself but also in visiting particular points or stations along the way that house heritage resources of great interest and/or tourism facilities and services. The short routes are however mostly of *non-nodal topology*, in other words the main focus of interest is enjoying the route itself, and the points or stations (if there are any) are only found at the start and/or finish. In routes with *nodal topologies*, the main interest lies in the specific places to be visited along the route, rather than in the route itself. As part of the pleasure of hiking lies in enjoying the route itself, routes with nodal topology are very rare.

The conception of hiking tourism products and offering based on prioritized itineraries has remained strong over time, notably increasing in number from around 2005 when the second phase of hiking tourism began. The model it used based on itineraries and signposting enabled quick and easy identification of the proposed route, so making the travel experience easier for the tourist. It is also easier to create a theme around long and medium distance routes that makes them more attractive for

the general public, so making it easier to package and market them as a tourism product. Examples of this type of product include the *Camí dels Bons Homes*, a trans-Pyrenees tourist itinerary that runs for about 200 km between the Sanctuary of Queralt (Catalonia-Spain) and the Castle of Montsegur (Ariège-France), and commemorates the exile of the Cathars from Occitania during the 13th century; or the *Camino del Cid*, a cultural tourism itinerary that crosses Spain from northwest to southeast along the literary and historical trail of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, better known as El Cid, the famous 11th century knight who was the hero of the great mediaeval epic poem “Cantar de mio Cid.” Another example is the *Camí de Cavalls*, a circular route around the island of Menorca, which follows an ancient track along the coast created during the 14th century for defensive purposes, to keep watch for possible invaders from the sea.

In addition, in this second phase, most of the short routes still fall within the category of leisure tourism offering, especially in destinations in which there are other dominant tourism alternatives, although there are notable exceptions. One example is the *Caminito del Rey*, a walkway measuring just 7.7 km long which traverses the gorge known as the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes in the province of Malaga (Costa del Sol) and which has become an important tourist attraction in this region, with over 300,000 visitors a year since it was restored in 2015. Other examples on similar lines include the *Ruta del Cares* in the Picos de Europa and the *Ruta por el Bosque de Oma* in Vizcaya (Basque Country).

However, in the second phase of hiking tourism in Spain a new phenomenon has emerged, in the form of hiking tourism products (and offering) based on the concept of a network, in the sense of a group of interconnected paths which are conceived and managed in an integrated way (Figure 2). These kinds of routes are based on the Swiss model for laying out hiking routes. As Campillo and López-Monné point out, “this model establishes functional networks for non-motorized transit via the signposting of complete and coherent territorial networks of paths (which cover the whole territory), based on the recovery of the original function of the historic network of public footpaths” [53] (p. 53). This model is still fairly rare in Spain although in recent years there has been a significant increase in its use. These networks of paths, which also include heritage resources in their immediate vicinity and a range of specialized tourism services and facilities, offer the tourist a functional interconnected mesh on which they can walk. In order for town councils to be able to exercise the administrative powers that the law confers on them in questions of rural mobility and roads, it is essential that they have a detailed knowledge of the paths running through their municipal area and of the ownership thereof (public or private). In Spain, up until 2005, the lack of municipal inventories of historic and traditional ways imposed considerable limits on the creation of networks of paths for walkers. In recent years the more widespread use of these inventories, which give town councils a complete picture of the road and path network in their towns and villages, is allowing them to introduce a new model for path management based on the preparation of territorial networks of paths for non-motorized mobility. In network-based products, the impact on sustainable local development is not limited to a narrow strip bordering the main prioritized route, and instead covers a much wider area of territory. However, the complexity of managing a network of paths and keeping it operative and functional is proving a big challenge for the development and consolidation of this kind of product. One important initiative in this direction is *Itinerànnia*, a network of tracks covering 2500 km which runs from the mountains (western Pyrenees) down to the sea (Costa Brava), through the Catalan regions of el Ripollès, la Garrotxa and el Alt Empordà, and has been growing year by year in terms of the number of hikers and in terms of turnover since its creation in 2008. Other examples on similar lines, this time as hiking tourism offering are the hiking networks in Protected Natural Areas such as the Parc Natural del Alt Pirineu or the Parc Natural de la Zona Volcànica de la Garrotxa, among others.



**Figure 2.** Interconnected network of paths.

### 3.2. From Segmentation to Hypersegmentation of the Demand for Hiking Tourism Products

The hiking tourism products and hiking tourism offering that appeared at the beginning of the 1990s in Spain were aimed at a single, homogeneous market segment. There were few hiking tourism products on the market and there was little difference between them. In essence, the sector was offering generic hiking routes that could include both natural and cultural tourism resources, but which lacked a specific common theme that would give them more cohesion. These routes had mixed or nodal topologies, with either a regional or local range, and followed paths that were normally easy to walk and technically very similar. This meant that they could appeal to any tourist interested in hiking.

As the years have gone by, the growth in tourism in general, and in hiking tourism in particular, has led to an intensification of the competition. The need to improve the competitiveness of hiking tourism products has led to the segmentation of the market into much more specific, homogeneous subgroups (niches) [54]. The objective of this hypersegmentation has been to adapt better to the needs of the different profiles of the consumers of this kind of tourism products [20,42,55–57]. In this way, the differential characteristics of the demand for hiking tourism have become increasingly important in the layout and design of hiking routes. Since 2005, hiking tourism products have been aimed at tourists from different geographical areas, different sociodemographic profiles (families with children, people over 50, couples without children, women, singles, etc.), different religious confessions, various personal interests (users who view “the path as the destination,” users interested in natural heritage or cultural heritage, users who are interested in meeting people and making friends, users who like to “collect routes,” users concerned about their health and physical wellbeing etc.) or with very specific social dependence characteristics (disabled people, schoolchildren, senior citizens, etc.), to cite just a few examples. In Spain today there is a wide range of hiking routes, with or without themes; of non-nodal or mixed topology; with different degrees of difficulty, covering different spatial areas and above all designed and created in a different way to satisfy all the different profiles of demand that coexist within the hiking tourism market today.

Examples of routes aimed at these different niches of the hiking market include *Ichinitas*, *Carros de Foc*, *Perseguits i salvats*, *Rutas de la transhumancia* or the *Senderos del Río Bayones*, among others. *La Ruta de las Ichinitas*, (the Route of the Ichnites) in the province of Soria, is a tourism product that offers three itineraries through an open-air exhibition space about dinosaurs and their footprints (known as ichnites). These itineraries (which are between 5 and 20 km long) include a visitor centre, an educational leisure park and 15 dinosaur tracks with panels offering information presented in an attractive, didactic way so as to allow the route to be enjoyed by children [58]. *Carros de Foc* is a hiking route aimed at “route collectors” (who are given a pass which is stamped on arrival at the different mountain refuges along the way). It is a high-mountain circular itinerary aimed at lovers of outdoor sports and mountain traverses, which runs, over several stages, through the National Park of Aigües Tortes i Estany de Sant Maurici in the Pyrenees mountains in western Catalonia. *Perseguits i salvats* (Persecuted and saved) consists of four signposted routes across the Pyrenees in Lleida used by Jewish

people to escape from persecution during the Holocaust. This route is 150 km long and is aimed above all at Israeli visitors, a priority market for Spain given their high spending power. In Catalonia, the creation of hiking routes aimed at this segment of the population helps explain why in 2013 there were only 82,000 visitors from this country, while in 2017 this figure had multiplied to over 190,000. *Rutas de la transhumancia* (Transhumance routes) involves a series of hiking routes along sheep droving paths, which for centuries were used for moving livestock across the country in search of pastures. Today they are covered on foot by tourists together with the shepherds and their flocks (above all sheep). As well as hiking, the tourists also discover more about the life of a shepherd and participate in different shepherding activities. This hiking concept has a high ethnographic and experiential content in which an important part of the attraction is the opportunity to enjoy a shared experience with other people. Lastly, the *Senderos del Río Bayones* (Cantabria), in which there is a hiking route adapted for blind people. This is an accessible route with suitable services and facilities (e.g., touch panels with drawings in relief and information in braille) to enable unsighted people to discover nature through their senses. In this way, it seeks to appeal to an important potential market in Spain and Europe which, in spite of numerous initiatives in recent years, is still relatively unattended.

### 3.3. Transformation of the Main Facilities and Services for Hiking Tourism

In Spain there has been a dramatic improvement since the 1990s in the infrastructure, facilities and services that enable people to engage in hiking tourism. Accommodation, restaurants, guide and escort services and information devices among others have been completely transformed in response to an increasingly demanding consumer.

During the first phase of hiking tourism in Spain, the accommodation structures used by hiking tourists were those previously used by ramblers and early mountain trekkers (*excursionismo*). The facilities on offer consisted above all in support accommodation in the form of hostels, mountain refuges and free camping areas that offered group rather than individual accommodation, in very basic conditions of comfort and hygiene, and at a very low price. At that time the accommodation was conceived above all as a place to rest and shelter. As we entered the 21st-century this support accommodation proved out of step with the rapidly developing tourism market: not sufficiently comfortable, a lack of privacy, enormous variety in the standards of the establishments and very rare or non-existent, extra services. This is why, today, we are witnessing: (a) the renovation and modernization of the support accommodation aimed originally at ramblers, restoring and refitting part of the infrastructure in use, and (b) the integration of existing rural hotels and restaurants into hiking routes, on occasions even creating quality marks or specific accreditations for those establishments that specialize in this type of clientele [59] (Figure 3). As well as a place to rest and shelter, these hotels are also a place for socialization, information and above all enjoyment, which means that features providing authenticity, quality and comfort together with a range of extra services are becoming important differential elements in the products on offer. Today, the hotels that specialize in this segment of the market offer facilities and schedules adapted to meet the needs of hikers, specific services (such as tourist information or advice, rental of kit, transport of luggage, guide services, food in route, among others) and in numerous cases, additional services (a spa, alternative excursions, courses in photography, painting or yoga, etc.).





**Figure 3.** Quality mark (benvinguts) used to distinguish hotels/hostels that welcome hikers and cyclists.

Source: M.B. Gómez-Martín.

Something similar has happened in the restaurant sector. In the first phase of hiking tourism, it was generally linked to basic restaurant facilities (simple cuisine with fairly standardized products) provided above all in the support accommodation along the way. In the second phase of development, restaurants have become a differential element in hiking tourism experiences, acquiring a new look. These are often high-quality restaurants which also offer authenticity in the form of local products and typical gastronomy, adapted to the dietary requirements of hikers. In this new phase gastronomy was conceived as a form of consumption of the territory (culture and traditions), which added quality to the tourism experience [60]. This philosophy is evident in many of the alternatives on the market today, and there are even specific products along these lines. These offer “foot and food” routes aimed at small groups, in which walking is combined with the discovery and enjoyment of local gastronomy. Other ideas on similar lines include the numerous wine routes which cross winegrowing areas belonging to the different Appellations of Origin (the best-known include D.O. Ribera del Duero, D.O. Rioja, D.O. Priorat, etc.), which combine hiking through vineyard landscapes with visits to wineries for tasting and other wine-related activities.

The people who accompany or guide the hikers on organized hiking holidays provide a very specific service. During the first phase of hiking tourism, this type of service was not widely used in Spain and was only engaged when the hiking trip involved various different stages. In these cases, the guide’s duties involved offering information about the region and its heritage and guiding the group along the path. In the second phase, the guide continued to provide these services, while also acting as a holiday rep, attending to the needs of his/her “guests”.

Finally, information is a distinctive aspect of this kind of tourism. By its very nature, hiking requires an additional input of information compared to other forms of tourism, and it must be available at all times. Although some information has always been available, in recent years it has been greatly increased and improved, partly due to the appearance and consolidation of Information and Communication Technologies. In addition to the traditional guidebook for hikers and climbers, today there are also roadbooks, tracks to be followed using GPS (Global Positioning System), online maps, social networks, etc. It is also important to make clear that the signposting of the routes is an important part of the information system. As López Monné and Campillo [52] make clear, rambling associations began marking the tracks in Spain but the conversion of hiking into a popular leisure activity led different public authorities and sometimes even private companies to embark on a massive process of signposting of the routes. Unfortunately, this was not always systematic or standardized

and sometimes led to confusion amongst walkers. In this second phase of development of hiking tourism, this question was addressed in a serious process of reflection, in which initiatives aimed at harmonizing and standardizing signposting criteria were put forward.

#### 3.4. From Early Rambling Associations to Today's Collaboration and Cooperation Networks

Ever since hiking first appeared as a new form of leisure and recreation at the beginning of the 1990s, there has been an increase in the number and diversity of the agents involved in this activity [1,53]. There has been a huge shift from the initial small number of stakeholders (represented basically by mountaineering and rambling associations), who voluntarily carried out the work of preparing and signposting the paths and managed the support accommodation, to the position today in which there is a wide, diverse array of different stakeholders. These new agents are involved in different ways in the processes of sectorial and territorial planning and in the design, management, distribution and promotion of hiking tourism products. They come from both the public (national, regional and local administrations; local and sub-regional tourism promotion bodies; managers of protected natural spaces; hiking courses and schools, among others) and private sectors (hiking companies; travel agencies and tourism intermediaries; hotels; restaurants; transport; hiking consultants, nonprofessional associations such as hiking clubs etc.). The success of hiking tourism products depends increasingly on collaboration and cooperation between the public administration, private companies and civil society (tourists, hikers and local population). The continuous updating and dynamization of these collaboration networks is essential to ensure that once the product has been successfully launched and consolidated, these processes can be maintained so as to guarantee that the tourist destination—as a complex, integrating reality—continues to benefit from the sustainable local development objectives associated with hiking.

One example of the cooperation we are referring to here is the *Taula de Camins* (Round Table on Paths) of the l'Alt Pirineu i Aran (Catalonia), a working group made up of 23 public stakeholders and 12 private and third sector stakeholders, which acts as a consultative and participative body of the IDAPA (Institute for the Development and Promotion of the Alt Pirineu i Aran) on all issues relating to paths and hiking. The main objective of the *Taula de Camins* is to act as a pressure group or lobby to ensure that the hiking paths are recognized as a key infrastructure in the Pyrenees and are maintained and promoted, so that a range of non-motorized tourism activities can be created and consolidated, including those associated with hiking. The *Taula de Camins* has been effective in boosting hiking-related activities in the l'Alt Pirineu i Aran, bringing people together and coordinating their actions and efforts so as to make the Pyrenees an important hiking destination in the international market. This committee has enabled the development of specific hiking products in this area, which in turn have their own committees in charge of promoting, managing and dynamizing them, in much the same way as a Regulatory Board or a Tourism Association (examples include the *Associació Marques de Pastor* which runs the *Cinqué Llac* route, the *Associació turística de Muntanyes de Llibertat*, the *Associació turística de La Porta del Cel*, or the *Consell Regulador del Camí de l'Últim Càtar*, among others).

#### 4. Conclusions

The evolution of the system for managing hiking paths is a fundamental aspect of the consolidation of hiking tourism as a strategy for the socioeconomic development of rural areas of Spain. Over the last 30 years there has been enormous progress from a purely linear, isolated conception of the itineraries proposed for walking to an increased densification and extension thereof, which has led to the appearance and progressive consolidation of the concept of networks of hiking paths. The integrated vision linking the different individualized routes and the appearance of hiking networks has enabled a new zonal conception of this activity, which could have greater repercussions for sustainable local development.

This enhanced territorial dimension of the proposals has encouraged the creation of specific tourism products that require the involvement of a wide range of different actors (different tiers of

public administration, private companies and civil society), who must work together to coordinate their efforts to ensure the success of the routes that have been developed. During this process, the differential characteristics of the demand for hiking tourism have become more and more important in the layout and design of successful hiking products. The creation of differentiated routes, aimed at different niches in the market, enhances the hiker's experience and enjoyment by adapting the physical characteristics of the route (offering for example less steep paths for older people and wider ones for children), the heritage resources it includes, the increasingly specific facilities and services on offer and the advertising and promotion strategies used to reach the target audience. The current maturity of this activity is evident from the important number of hiking tourism products now available on the Spanish tourism market, while in the past there was just a selection of tracks. These products, in which hiking is the main activity rather than just a complementary aspect, are bringing important benefits in terms of the economic, cultural and social revitalization of often remote or declining rural areas and help to develop a stronger, better structured territorial fabric.

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