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***Theme 3***

***MEMORIES OF RURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCES***

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Rural areas are increasingly sought for leisure and tourism purposes, while rural communities increasingly adapt and cater to these new demands by providing rural tourism products, generally expecting alternative incomes in economically deprived territories (Figueiredo *et al*, 2011; Kastenholtz, 1997; OCDE, 1994; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002; Sharpley & Vass, 2006). However, not all rural areas present the same attractiveness not all tourists are attracted to rural areas, and if so for diverse reasons (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholtz, 2004; Lane, 2009).

In an increasingly competitive tourist destination and business context, the rural tourist experience must be understood as a key asset determining rural destinations' innovation potential and success (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003; Kastenholtz *et al*, 2014b). By providing appealing, distinctive and outstanding experiences, destinations may contribute to enhance tourists' satisfaction and memories and thereby influence their future behavior (Kastenholtz *et al*, 2012; Mossberg, 2007). Thereby also the tourists' "sense of place" regarding the particular destination visited may be enhanced, since people establish meaningful, emotionally loaded relations to places, shaped by and depending on their cultural values, interests and individual experiences connected to these places (Klanicha *et al*, 2006). According to Jepson & Sharpley (2014), sense of place comprises the physical environment, but also the socially constructed meanings of and people's experience of the place.

In rural areas, tourists tend to seek unique and memorable experiences in an “authentic”, natural environment, evoking sensations and permitting physical and mental recovery. This includes both relaxation and engagement in activities linked to the natural and social context, in contrast with their typical urban life (Kastenholz *et al*, 2012; Kastenholz *et al*, 2014b). The emotional and sometimes even spiritual dimension of the rural tourism experience was found as closely related to the before mentioned “sense of place”, particularly its personal meaning and interpretation, very much resulting from sense of immersion in and engagement with nature and landscape (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014)

In this paper we discuss the importance of the tourist experience in rural areas, particularly focusing on the post-experience. Our aim is to understand which aspects and dimensions of the destination experience, both positive and negative, stand out most for individuals who had visited three Portuguese villages (Favaios, Linhares da Beira and Janeiro de Cima). Exploratory results were obtained in the context of a 3-year research project financed by FCT that analyzed, in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner, the rural tourism experience in these villages located in the country’s interior central and northern Regions.

To assess the visitors’ perceptions about their post-experience, informants were sent open-ended questions aimed at a better understanding of the following aspects: travel motivations; physical reminders of the journey; post-trip experience sharing (via social networks); memories associated with the visit (positive and negative; sensorial memories, memories regarding interaction with residents and other travelers); destination loyalty (likelihood to return and recommend); improvement suggestions for a more appealing experience. These questions yielded the identification of unique and distinctive village attributes or central elements of the rural tourism experience. The sample consisted of visitors who had answered a previous survey conducted on the on-site visitor experience in the three villages and provided their email contact for a post-visit survey. A total of 97 visitors were contacted in October and November 2013, but only 22 responses were received, 20 of which considered valid, half of which referred to the visit of Linhares da Beira and half to Janeiro de Cima.

Results show that the visitor experience in the two villages was very positive for respondents. This was not surprising given the generally positive responses obtained via on-site survey (N=847) in the villages (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2014a, b).

Interestingly, memories of the experience focused much on dimensions of the “*rural idyll*” (peace, silence, landscape beauty), which had also been mentioned during the village visit

(Kastenholz *et al.*, 2014a). These dimensions, also corresponding to a strong social representation of the rural as found elsewhere (Figueiredo, 2009) constitute clearly positive memories of the experience lived in the village (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2012). Outstanding cognitive images refer to the village architecture, its heritage and landscape elements (castle, granite/ schist, architecture, restored buildings), confirming the relevance of the aesthetic aspects of the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 2002).

The sensory experience described during the visit (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2014a) was confirmed in the post-experience phase, with these memories related to nature (e.g. sounds of birds and wind in the trees, images of the landscape, smells of vegetation and the fields, but also of local food). Local food products (e.g. cheese, sausages, honey, marmalade) are referred to as an important sensorial experience ingredient (taste and smell), while they are also frequently referred to as items taken home as a souvenir, thereby prolonging the tourist experience (Sidali *et al.*, 2013). These endogenous resources of rural territories must be recognized as important means to promote rural territories’ and community’s identity, enriching and extending the visitor’s experience in time. Thus, local food products seem to play a special role for sustainable rural tourism development, both by enhancing the tourist experience, also through particular social and cultural dimensions associated to their production and consumption (Sidali *et al.* 2013), and through the positive effects of local food production and sales on the local economy (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2014a, b). The “senses are the link to memory and can tap right into emotion” (Lindstrom & Kotler, 2005) increasing the probabilities of tourists to develop a “sense of place” of the rural destination. Results clearly support this idea and indicate that sensorial dimension of the experience is a key element when designing memorable rural experience.

The focus on the tourist experience as the key to the success of a rural destination requires not only a good understanding of the experience lived by the tourist, but also the ability to provide opportunities, i.e. adequate contexts for co-creating experiences based on the most distinctive and interesting local resources and the use of themes and narratives to increase the significance of the experience (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2014a) and even improve the “marketability” (Cumbria Tourism, 2015<sup>1</sup>) of the destination. The articulation of the various experience-elements (resources, implying both private and public agents) also appears to be paramount for the construction of memorable experiences. In this respect, truly sustainable

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cumbriatourism.org/marketing/sense-of-place.aspx](http://www.cumbriatourism.org/marketing/sense-of-place.aspx)

development strategies need to integrate the requirements of the market and the needs of local communities while making the best possible use of local resources and potentialities.

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