

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural tourism: A case study from Portugal

Luís Silva

Centre for Research in Anthropology, New University of Lisbon (CRIA NOVA FCSH),
Portugal,

luís.silva98@gmail.com

in: *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*,
2022, 33 (1): 157-159,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2021.1875015>

– please, cite published version –

Introduction

Rural tourism describes a range of tourism activities which take place in the countryside. Rural tourism has been growing since the 1970s-1980s in many parts of the world, both in terms of demand and of supply, due to the rise of a lifestyle-led and leisure-oriented society and the widespread mobilization of tourism as a strategy for rural development and revitalisation (Walmsley, 2003).

Recent scholarly literature has stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive effect on rural tourism due to the increase of tourists seeking for a safe/low-risk destination in scarcely populated areas (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Vaishar & Šťastná, 2020).

This paper questions that idea, by examining the impact of COVID-19 on accommodation, one of the key elements of rural tourism, differentiating visitors and residents in leisure times, from tourists in the countryside. The examination is centred on one of the most well-known tourist accommodation products in rural Portugal, *TER* – Tourism in Rural Areas. Created in 1986, this is a set of small-scale and family-based tourism businesses offering accommodation in a household environment as well as additional facilities permitting outdoor activities in rural areas, which includes agritourism.

Methods

This paper draws upon two sources of empirical material. First, there is material from an online survey conducted by the author with *TER* managers ($n = 365$) from late July to mid-October 2020. The survey was structured on the respondents' perceptions of and attitudes towards the pandemic and its impact on the business. Second, the paper is based on statistics produced by Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) and the World Tourism Organization.

Results

Considering the statistical sources, the pandemic has had a negative impact on *TER*. Table 1 shows the extent of this impact. As can be seen, the number of guests in *TER* units decreased 38.4% in the first nine months of 2020 compared to 2019, whereas the number of overnight stays decreased 35.6%, total revenue fell 33.1% and the revenue from accommodation decreased 31.7%. Losses were more pronounced during and immediately after the lockdown declared in Portugal from March 18 to May 2, but persisted in the summer, despite some recovery. In July 2020, there were 1,433 *TER* units in operation (INE, personal communication, October 10, 2020), down from the 1,687 in July 2019 (INE, 2020).

Table 1. *TER*: demand and revenue

Month	No. of guests 2019*	No. of guests 2020**	No. of overnight stays 2019*	No. of overnight stays 2020**	Total revenue 2019**	Total revenue 2020**	Revenue from accommodation 2019**	Revenue from accommodation 2020**
January	28,312	33,089	52,456	58,741	3,319	3,654	2,442	2,729
February	35,083	47,312	62,459	85,084	3,713	4,960	2,702	3,757
March	57,710	17,372	95,262	37,742	5,787	2,352	4,291	1,740
April	79,888	1,191	157,489	7,357	9,027	295	6,961	265
May	84,516	8,646	162,829	20,077	9,886	987	7,673	854
June	104,596	49,904	213,184	106,394	12,520	6,005	10,112	5,051
July	116,599	90,414	275,881	211,131	16,085	12,906	13,488	10,804
August	166,438	142,080	401,182	346,086	23,238	21,973	19,985	18,882
September	111,707	90,218	228,104	189,515	14,740	12,661	11,764	10,219

Source: INE (<https://www.ine.pt>)

* Persons; ** Thousands of Euros; # Provisional figures

Accordingly, based on the survey, the pandemic has adversely affected most *TER* businesses (90.7%), both in terms of demand and of revenue. In part, this is a consequence of the increase in expenses with frequent cleaning and disinfection of houses and tourist entertainment facilities, and personal protective equipment. It is also a consequence of the closure of several units due to pandemic circumstances (16.4%), 12.9% of which during two, three or more months and 3.6% of which until the pandemic is over and confidence is restored.

More than this, however, the mobility restrictions (e.g., travel bans, border closures) adopted by European and non-European countries to flatten the curve of infections decreased substantially the demand for these units from international tourists, who accounted for more than 50% of the overnight stays in *TER* over the past three decades (Silva & Prista, 2016).¹ And such decrease was not offset by domestic tourists in most cases.²

By contrast, 3.3% of *TER* units suffered no impact and 6.0% had a positive impact as a result of an increased domestic demand; most of these are self-contained accommodations situated in the North, Centre and Alentejo regions.

Conclusion

This paper showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant adverse impact on most *TER* businesses and, by extension, on rural tourism in Portugal. This research finding runs contrary to the findings of studies conducted in France and Czechia, where the pandemic has increased the levels of consumption through rural tourism/accommodation (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Vaishar & Šťastná, 2020). These conflicting results reinforce the idea that the impact of COVID-19 on tourism is going to be uneven in space (and time) (Hall et al., 2020).

Given that *TER* units were chosen as the study object in this paper, its results do not fully reflect the impact of the pandemic on rural tourism in Portugal. Other types of rural tourist accommodations and businesses were not considered. The same is true for the effects of the second wave of the pandemic that emerged in early Autumn in Portugal and other countries, leading to renewed restrictions on mobility and businesses.

Despite such limitations, this paper enriches our understanding of a subject on which there is scarce empirical investigation. Future research could examine the effect of Covid-19 on distinct rural tourist accommodations and/or other rural tourism businesses in different countries over time, and the factors that influence the choice of destination/accommodation in rural areas by tourists in pandemic times.

Funding

This work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia [CEECIND/01814/2017, UIDB/04038/2020].

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