

## Chapter 33

# Rediscovering the Rural as a Tourist Destination in Pandemic Times: The Case of Portugal

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the global tourism sector in an unprecedented manner. After the relaxation of lockdown measures, there was an expectation about the chosen tourist environments and how rural tourism would be positioned. This chapter starts from a theoretical framework on rural tourism in Portugal and analyses how this segment has been impacted by COVID-19 from a quantitative perspective and the choices of summer season environments by Portuguese tourists through a questionnaire survey applied to almost 700 Portuguese tourists. The results show that demand increased and that rural environments strengthened their position relative to pre-COVID-19 planning. This was mainly motivated by the notion of safety conveyed thanks to low population density which leads to the perception that rural areas offer a lower risk of transmission. This information provides a relevant support tool for rural territories, since they now have an opportunity to be creative, to re-invent themselves, and to promote a more sustainable tourism.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2020, the pandemic of COVID-19 had an enormous impact on a wide variety of different industries. As Gössling, Scott and Hall (2020: 1) remark, “Unprecedented global travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders are causing the most severe disruption of the global economy since World War II”. Tourism was

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one sector that suffered almost immediate impacts, exposing its vulnerable character, and the glow felt around the world at the beginning of the year, with threats to beat records, quickly faded under COVID-19 and the measures taken to control it.

According to World Tourism Organization, “international tourist arrivals declined 70% in the first eight months of 2020 over the same period of last year, amid global travel restrictions including many borders fully closed, to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. (...) The decline in January-August 2020 represents 700 million fewer international tourist arrivals compared to the same period in 2019, and translates into a loss of US\$ 730 billion in export revenues from international tourism, more than eight times the loss in 2009 under the impact of the global economic crisis” (UNWTO, 2021). Between February and May, Portugal recorded a drop of about 98% in international arrivals to national airports (INE, 2020a) and 91% in guests in tourist accommodation (INE, 2021a).

On the positive side, there are important signs of significant pent-up demand which is reflected in the surge of bookings when conditions allow for it, as well as in the growth of the domestic markets. Indeed, in the northern hemisphere and in the European Union in particular, there was some resumption of tourist activity in the summer season, where July and August stand out as the two busiest months of the year (UNWTO, 2021).

With the relaxation or suppression of lockdown measures in many European countries (including Portugal) in May 2020, after two months of suspended tourist activity there was a need to establish rules and carrying capacity for the most diverse tourist attractions, to enable a safe tourist practice. There was an expectation of how it would be reorganized to satisfy the desire for leisure, the need for open air, and to reassure in terms of assumptions regarding safety and what the demand trends would be in this atypical context. Last June, the OECD (2020a) predicted that destinations most dependent on international markets and urban destinations would probably be the most affected by this crisis. However, it was the more remote and rural destinations and natural areas which tended to be more attractive to visitors, at least in the short term. They thus became more popular, according to Zhu and Deng (2020), because of the advantages they offer, especially a less dense tourist flow, which they have proven through the preferences expressed by a large number of Chinese tourists. Also, Vaishar and Šťastná (2020: 2) reported that “in the 2020 summer season rural destinations for domestic tourists experienced increased interest in accommodation and other tourist services”. Similarly, the UNWTO on World Tourism Day (commemorated each year on 27 September) points out that “Tourism in rural areas offers important opportunities for recovery, making supporting rural communities facing the economic and social impacts of the pandemic is [sic] critical” (UNWTO, 2020a). In Portugal, tourism in rural areas, including housing tourism, was the category with the most striking recovery, with the number of guests rising more than 600% in May (INE, 2021a). Never before had tourism and rural development been so important as then (UNWTO, 2020a).

It is in the context of the impacts and consequences of COVID-19 on the choices of tourist destinations in 2020 that research on rural destinations is justified, so the main concerns of the chapter now proposed are: to undertake a conceptual and evolutionary overview of rural tourism in Portugal, discussing how the pandemic affected rural tourism in Portugal as a basis for the choices of domestic tourists in the summer season 2020; to analyse the motivations that have led to tourism demand and its evolution in relation to 2019; to explain the qualities of the destinations that justified these tourist choices; to understand if the COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for the development of rural tourism (Vaishar and Šťastná, 2020); and also to identify new guidelines (and their investments in infrastructure, marketing, territorial

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