

Tourist Experience in Rural Areas in Portugal: The Case of the “Quadrilátero Do Minho”



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Abstract Rural tourism (both physical and emotional experiences) has been increasingly sought after for a multitude of reasons. The personalised encounter between places, people/culture and guests, characteristic of rural accommodation and the village context, can play a central role in the quality of the experience of tourism in these areas.

If so, understanding the profile of the tourist in Portuguese rural areas becomes increasingly relevant from a research perspective. In this study, using an online questionnaire with a sample size of 133, we look at the case of the rural tourism in the “Quadrilátero do Minho” Region.

Findings show that the profile of the tourist in rural areas in Portugal is mostly composed of higher educated (81.2%) women (72.2%), aged 35 through 44 years (32.3%), who are not self-employed (59.4%) and that live in the Northern region (45.1%). With respect to their accommodation profile, the most representative sample of respondents are those who stay with relatives (61.7%) in rural tourism units once a year (64.7%), from 1 to 3 days (68.4%) and spend anywhere from between 50€ and 100€ per day (64.7%). The tourist in rural areas in Portugal appreciates calmness and tranquillity in a low-density populated area and contact with nature, seeking out what is genuine and endogenous to the region. Rural tourism units with a swimming pool, cultural activities and the possibility of participating in experiences stand out as the favourite attributes among the respondents/tourists.

1 Introduction

In this study we focus on the territory known as the “Quadrilátero do Minho.” It consists of a competitive and innovative urban network that seeks to promote and strengthen an already highly industrialised and exports driven region. It comprises

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four municipalities of the Braga district: Barcelos, Braga, Guimarães and Vila Nova de Famalicão. The first two municipalities belong to the NUT III Cávado region while the latter two to the NUT III Ave region.

Considering the growing importance of rural areas in the national, as well as in the international tourism sectors (Kastenholz, 2010; Pato, 2016; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008), rural tourism has become an area of interest. The fact that the tourist phenomenon has offered a wide variety of accommodation and complementary service options only enhance the demand for a holistic experience (Machado et al., 2021).

Tourists consider rural tourism as an escape from the stress of everyday life, a refuge from a massified and popularised environment and an opportunity to witness and feel new, very different emotions and realities (Kastenholz et al., 2012). Kastenholz (2010) states that rural tourism can also contribute to sustainable development of rural areas given that it increases the quality of life of residents and contributes to conserving natural, social and cultural resources. In addition, rural tourism is considered to be a way of culturally strengthening a given territory and preserving and fostering the development of its community, in this way, contributing to an increased civic awareness in environmental and sociocultural treatment (Komppula et al., 2007). Finally, another important factor of rural tourism is the continuance of a connection to the land and the property by those who have invested the requalification of the buildings themselves and by those who have begun to reside in rural areas in the meantime, something highly unlikely if there were no rural tourism (Silva, 2005/2006).

Using an online questionnaire survey applied in 2020, this study seeks to generally profile the typical tourist in Portuguese rural tourism, specifically those in the “Quadrilátero do Minho” region. We aim to identify the contributing factors to the quality of the tourist experience in rural areas. The theoretical foundations of this study focus on tourism in rural areas and on the multidimensional experience of joining the physical tourist experience with its emotional aspect.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Rural Tourism

There is no singular definition of rural tourism because it is a multifaceted concept. It is a type of tourism with various singularities of the rural environment (Nunes, 2012). According to Rodrigues (2013, p. 24), “the rural tourism product is a complex reality where there are numerous demographic and functional variants that contribute to its definition and that result in various types of accommodation and experiences”.

Lane (1994, p. 20) states that “there are 14 factors that promote the growth of rural tourism, these being: (1) increased levels of education, (2) growing interest in heritage, (3) increased leisure time, (4) improved transport and communications,

(5) awareness of health care, (6) improved outdoor clothing, which helps in the activities practised in rural tourism establishments (because most of them are outdoors and require adequate clothing necessary to practice them), (7) the growing interest in specialised menus, (8) environmental issues, (9) authenticity, (10) peace and tranquillity, (11) an ageing albeit more active population, (12) “real” tourism, (13) individualism and (14) rural agencies”.

Of all definitions of rural tourism that the literature provides, which comes closest to the attributes mentioned above is provided by the European Federation of Rural Tourism—EuroGites (2005). This federation defines rural tourism as a sustainable and multifunctional activity that is related to local resources: traditional agriculture, culture, or natural values in open areas or small populations whose tourist activity does not represent the main source of income (EuroGites, 2005). Because of this, rural accommodation establishments should offer a small-scale service with harmonised personalised care, calm and peacefulness and quality standards in accordance with good environmental conservation, human and cultural authenticity.

Widely accepted is the notion that rural tourism is a composite of agricultural products, ecological products, cultural resources and environmental charms. These include multiple functions, namely: economic, social, educational, environmental, recreational and therapeutic activities (Hwang & Lee, 2015). Regional authenticity and endogeneity have become much sought-after aspects in tourism (Figueiredo, 2003; Pereiro & Conde, 2005) creating a great demand for new tourist destinations and novel experiences. Silva (2014) shares the same opinion due to the wide range of consumption opportunities, activities and rewarding experiences that are offered to urban visitors.

Considering rural tourism in Portugal, the dynamics, specificities and origins are similar to other examples of this type of tourism. Rural tourism used to be limited to families of higher income and greater socio-economic privileges during the holidays, but its relevance died down, giving way to more fashionable coastal tourism linked to the sun and the sea. The generalised increase in leisure time, the democratisation of tourism (Fernandes, 2002), and the subsequent technological development of transport and communications were decisive to a greater mobility that gave rise to new flows to the inland (DGADR, 2019). This propensity was exasperated by the consolidation of national road accessibility and environmental concerns (Gomes & Renda, 2016; Villanueva-Álvaro et al., 2017).

Family hospitality, the location in rural regions, natural and/or protected spaces are inherent characteristics of rural tourism that foster a more direct coexistence with nature, people, culture, monuments and traditions. It is a way to diversify national tourism and promote culture and local development (Carson & Carson, 2018; Dinis et al., 2019; Dubois et al., 2017).

Rural tourism can alleviate some economic and social dilemmas associated with the scarcity of economic opportunities and the decline in population that has evolved with the decline of agricultural activity (Doh et al., 2017; Eusébio et al., 2017; van der Ploeg, 2018) and can also be an alternative to family farms’ increasing income (Riva & Bertolini, 2017; Villanueva-Álvaro et al., 2017).

Rural tourism is the result of the reconstruction and a favourable revaluation of existing properties and heritage reconverted into accommodation units. It has also been a result of underused land or labour resources that allow for the preservation of the land and links to ownership (Dubois et al., 2017; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). Small rural units are generally not oriented towards growth and other motivations other than the economic benefits that come with it.

2.2 Multidimensionality in the Perception of the Rural Tourism Experience

A tourism experience refers to events that lead to emotions, which arise from the stay in a given place. These emotions, in turn, contribute to the creation of memories (Dolcos & Cabeza, 2002; Oh et al., 2007). Therefore, full and pleasant sensory stimulation and the creation of memories can result in a positive memorable experience in tourism (Oh et al., 2007). Stimulation or an arousal of sorts is a state of heightened activation (Finn, 2005; Oliver et al., 1997), in regard to the extent an individual feels excited, uplifted and active during the consumption of the experience (Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006; Ruffin et al., 2012). Oliver et al. (1997) and Finn (2005) define stimulation/arousal as a function of surprising levels of consumption. In the context of rural tourism, Loureiro and Kastenholtz (2011) highlight rural tourists' need for an experience that allows for the possibility of arousal that can promote positive effects. Memorable experiences are associated with strong emotions, that, in turn, are correlated with the moment in which they occur (Anderson & Shimizu, 2007; Ballantyne et al., 2011). These memories influence the attachment to a given place, the intention of returning, and the willingness to recommend it to family and friends (Martin, 2010). Vada et al. (2019), using a survey of 430 travelers, found that memorable experiences in tourism significantly influence place attachment; it also found that well-being fully mediates this relationship. Their findings showed that the benefits of well-being in tourism favour its place attachment. Therefore, well-being, as a resource of tourism product, can promote the sustainability of the tourism industry via the development of place attachment and the promotion of loyalty to certain tourism destinations (Ferreira & Ratten, 2017; Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2021).

Rural tourism refers to a number of niche activities integrated into segments such as ecotourism, nature tourism, agriculture, adventure, sports, food and wine and cultural tourism. As such, it results in a complex and multifaceted activities, marked by a continuously increasing diversity (Lane, 2009; Lopes et al., 2018). Rural tourism experiences are in demand for a multitude of reasons (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). The personalised encounter between place, people/culture and guests, as envisaged in the rural accommodation and village context, can play a central role in the quality of the tourism experience in these areas (Kastenholtz et al., 2013). Many times, tourists refer to the rural tourism experience as a positive contrast to the

stress and other negative conditions of everyday urban life, reflected in opposite affective images of home and the rural destination visited (Kastenholz et al., 2012). However, even if the main benefits found to be associated with tourism in rural areas are considered complex and diverse, relatively little is still known as to how the experience of rural tourism is concretely lived and which dimensions can be distinguished and how these relate to emotions derived from their experience, recall and overall satisfaction (Kastenholz et al., 2018).

The rural tourist experience, in particular, should be understood as the overall experience of a large number and diversity of resources, attractions, services, people and environments provided by a destination. Many times, aspects of this package are not always designed for tourism use, nonetheless, its impact on the experience is valued by tourists (Kastenholz et al., 2012).

The tourism experience is lived by several agents: tourists, local people and tourism service providers. Tourists assume an active role in defining their experience, initiating the process by searching for information well in advance and activating a network of services available at the destination place. Furthermore, the nature of their involvement during the experience (e.g. active or passive, characterised by absorption or immersion) is fundamental to the way they live and remember that experience (Knutson & Beck, 2004). Participation and interaction are relevant because preferences for tourist activities in destinations have evolved towards a more participatory behaviour. It is important to recognize active participation and interaction in co-creation experiences, considering that on-site tourism experiences involve parties interconnected in different ways (emotional, cognitive, physical and social) (Campos et al., 2018).

The possible consequences of a multidimensional experience range from arousal, memorization, quality (perception) to satisfaction (Oh et al., 2007). Marques (2007) highlights the role of arousal as a motivational force in the tourism process. This is because a positive expectation of arousal is associated with the motivation to seek experiences that imply a certain degree of sensory, intellectual or social stimulation. Gnoth et al. (2000) associate this type of effect from the tourism experience with the individual characteristics, namely curiosity and leisurely and challenging experiences. Results suggest that experience is likely to have a positive impact on arousal (Oh et al., 2007; Song et al., 2015). Multiple dimensions of experience contribute to a differential impact on arousal in different contexts.

Another outcome of the tourist experience is memory, which plays an important role in the economic conceptualisation of the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Associating memory to experience translates the dynamic and holistic nature of the tourist experience itself felt prior to, during, and after visiting a specific destination or attraction. Memories related to past tourist experiences are important factors that promote pleasant memory, as well as the expectation of affectionate expectations which, in turn, condition future evaluation and memory (Goossens, 2000; Klaaren et al., 1994; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

3 Methodology

In seeking to contribute to the profile of the tourist in rural areas in Portugal, this chapter aims to identify the factors that contribute to the quality of the tourist experience in these areas. We focus on the tourist experience in the “Minho Quadrilateral” region.

We use an online questionnaire survey with 18 items. According to authors, such as Evans and Mathur (2018), online questionnaires have the advantage over the traditional paper and pencil ones. The ease of analysis and the diversity of questions are some of the benefits of opting for online questionnaires over the more traditional ones. They are also more convenient and flexible, quicker to obtain, and they reach a greater number of individuals.

Our survey is organised in three distinct parts:

- Part I—Characterisation of rural tourism.
- Part II—Diversification of tourism supply.
- Part III—Characterisation of the socio-demographics.

This organisation promotes the understanding of the profile of the tourist in rural tourism in Portugal, particularly with regard to aspects such as the importance attributed to the factors. These factors can complement the accommodation units, as well as the importance of the emotional experience in combination with the physical experience (multidimensional experience).

The survey was carried out between April 19th and June 12th of 2020. To foster reliability, we made the online survey available in two groups of the social network Facebook, providing links to the rural territory entitled “Rural Tourism in Portugal”. This territory with a sample of 4500 members, the group “Tourism in rural areas” with 1700 members, the group “Higher Technicians of Tourism” with 1600 members and the group “Tourism Researchers” with 5000 members.

At the end of the data collection, it was possible to obtain a total of 133 survey responses for further processing. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis. In addition to data analysis using descriptive statistics, statistical tests were also performed, namely the Chi-square test and the t-test (Maroco, 2010; Pestana & Gageiro, 2005). In this research, the main purpose of these tests was to understand whether there are differences between individuals who have already stayed in rural tourism units in the “Quadrilátero do Minho”, designated as “Quadrilátero” and those who have never stayed in rural tourism units in the “Quadrilátero do Minho”, designated as “Others”.

4 Results

Table 1 shows us the characteristics of our sample. We can see that, with the exception of the place of residence ($X^2 = 11.663$; Sig = 0.040; $p < 0.05$), there are no statistically significant differences in the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. In both groups, there are more female respondents, aged 25–44 years. Academically speaking, an overwhelming majority (81.2%) is university graduates and 59.4% were employed at the time.

In his study, Gonçalves (2020) draws very similar conclusions when evaluating the profile of the tourists of rural tourism units in the Centre region. He finds that almost three-fourths of the sample (73.8%) is female, and that the most representative age group is that of individuals aged 18–30 years (32.9%), followed by

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of respondents

	Quadrilátero n (50)	Others n (83)	X^2	Sig.
<i>Gender</i>			1.524	0.217
Female	33	63		
Male	17	20		
<i>Age</i>			5.377	0.251
Up to 24	5	10		
25–34	12	18		
35–44	11	32		
45–54	18	18		
55–64	4	5		
<i>Profession</i>			2.082	0.721
Unemployed	5	11		
Retired	2	1		
Self-employed	12	17		
Employee	28	51		
Student	3	3		
<i>Education</i>			3.036	0.219
Primary education	2	1		
Secondary education	11	11		
Higher education	37	71		
<i>Place of residence</i>			11.663	0.040
Norte	30	30		
Centro	10	20		
Lisboa e Vale do Tejo	8	24		
Alentejo	1	4		
Algarve	0	5		
Madeira	1	0		

A p -value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant denoted in bold

Source: Elaborated by the authors

individuals in the age bracket of 31–40 years (26%). Roughly 71% of the sample has a university degree and about half (50.3%) was employed at the time the survey was carried out. Other studies present similar conclusions, namely Almeida and Pinto-Correia (2012), Fernandes (2016) and Gonçalves (2020).

5 Characterisation of the Experience in Rural Tourism

This part of the questionnaire was designed to characterise the experience of the tourist in rural tourism in Portugal, namely: places of accommodation, frequency of accommodation, average length of stay, those with whom they usually stay and the average amount spent per day. The main characteristics most valued by tourists in rural tourism are also analysed, along with the degree of satisfaction and the probability of recommending and/or returning. Table 2 presents the accommodation profile in rural tourism.

Table 2 Accommodation profile in rural tourism

	Quadrilátero n (50)	Others n (83)	X ²	Sig.
<i>Frequency of accommodation</i>			12.853	0.005
Once a year	29	57		
Twice a year	13	17		
3 or more times a year	8	2		
Other	0	7		
<i>Average length of stay</i>			0.725	0.696
1–3 days	32	59		
4–6 days	15	20		
7 or more days	3	4		
<i>With whom do you usually stay</i>			8.696	0.122
Alone	4	3		
Family	31	51		
Friends	6	17		
Alone, family	0	5		
Alone, friends	1	0		
Family, friends	8	7		
<i>Average daily amount spent</i>			2.655	0.448
Between 50€ and 100€	34	52		
Between 150€ and 200€	12	27		
Between 250€ and 300€	3	4		
Between 350€ and 400€	1	0		

A *p*-value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant denoted in bold

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The frequency of accommodation is the only characteristic that reveals a statistically significant difference between the two groups under analysis ($X^2 = 12.853$; Sig = 0.005; $p < 0.05$). A study carried out by Eusébio and Kastenholz (2010) show that the average length of stay in rural tourism units in the Centre region is that of 5 days and that tourists around 72€ per day. We can also see that 63% of respondents enjoy these units with family members. This result is corroborated by studies, namely Milheiro et al. (2017, p.84), when they assert that “the region, and the units in particular, seem to be appealing for family travel”. With respect to the frequency of accommodation, Fernandes (2016), corroborates the results of this study, since he also concluded that the most representative sample concerns individuals who visit rural tourism units only once a year.

6 Most Valued Characteristics in Rural Tourism

Tourist attraction to certain destinations depends on the physical factors, environmental or sociocultural attributes (Jafari, 1982). Physical and environmental attributes include climatic conditions, landscape and ecology; and sociocultural attributes include history, politics, art, economic activities, ways of life, monuments, individual buildings and man-built environments (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). Table 3 shows the characteristics of rural tourism valued by the respondents.

Calmness and tranquillity stand out from the other characteristics, reaching a total of almost 80% of the answers. These are followed by “hospitality”, with 55.6%, “escape from daily stress” and “local gastronomy”, each with 45.9% of total answers. A distant fourth factor is “authenticity of heritage” with a total of 28.6% and “novel experiences” with 27.1%. Only one respondent mentioned other characteristics in addition to those mentioned above.

Table 3 Characteristics of rural tourism

	n (133)	%
Hospitality	74	55.6
Calmness and tranquillity	105	78.9
Heritage authenticity	38	28.6
Escape from daily stress	61	45.9
Local gastronomy	61	45.9
Relationship with the local community	23	17.3
Novel experiences	36	27.1
Other	1	0.8

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Table 4 Satisfaction, recommendation and likelihood of revisiting rural tourism

	Quadriátero <i>n</i> (50)		Others <i>n</i> (83)		<i>T</i>	Sig.
	Satisfied/ probably (%) ^a	Mean (SD)	Satisfied/ probably (%) ^a	Mean (SD)		
How satisfied are you with your experience of rural tourism? ^b	98.0	4.58 (0.538)	95.2	4.51 (0.592)	0.722	0.472
How likely are you to recommend your stay at a RT unit to friends and family? ^c	98.0	4.66 (0.519)	94.0	4.65 (0.593)	0.093	0.926
How likely are you to stay at a RT unity again? ^c	96.0	4.66 (0.557)	96.4	4.66 (0.590)	-0.026	0.980

Source: Elaborated by the authors

^aPercentage of respondents answering 4 or 5 on the respective Likert scales

^bScale from 1 = not at all satisfied to 5 = very satisfied

^cScale from 1 = Very unlikely to 5 = Very likely

7 Satisfaction, Recommendation and Likelihood of Revisiting Rural Tourism

As for the degree of satisfaction regarding experiences of rural tourism, the percentage of respondents who replied that they were at least satisfied was 96.2%. This value corresponds to an average of 4.53, based on the Likert scale, where 1 is “not at all satisfied” and 5 is “very satisfied”. Martínez-Roget et al. (2015) found that the degree of satisfaction of the respondents was 66%. This corresponds to a mean value of 3.8, using the same scale.

The percentage of respondents who say they are likely or very likely to recommend rural tourism (95.5%) is extremely high. This value corresponds to an average of 4.65, based on the Likert scale, where 1 is “not at all likely” and 5 “very likely”. Fernandes (2016) found that the likelihood of recommending a rural tourism unit was also quite high, at 87.7%. Silva (2007, p. 157) asserted that “It is . . . symptomatic that some tourists write in their honour books that they will not recommend the rural tourism places and units in which they stayed to many people”, coming to the conclusion that this happens, “so that these people do not destroy with their presence the tranquillity and charm of these places”.

With respect to the probability of returning to a rural tourism unit, the results are in line with previous studies with about 97% responding that it is likely or very likely that they would return. This value corresponds to an average of 4.66, based on the Likert scale, where 1 is “not at all likely” and 5 is “very likely”. According to Martínez-Roget et al. (2015, p. 78), “the success of rural tourism destinations will depend largely on the potential loyalty of their tourists, and the recommendation to third parties plays a decisive role in the election of a tourist destination” (Table 4).

8 Diversification of Supply in Tourism

In this section, we seek to understand which factors influence the experiences of tourists in rural tourism. We are particularly also interested in the most valued characteristics, apart from accommodation. Again, using a Likert scale of five points, tourists rated their stance in regard to a given number of statements, where 1 represents “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree”.

The data show that respondents agree with all of the statements presented when asked about a more general perspective of rural tourism (Table 5). With regard to the first statement that the typical tourist is drawn to a calm and peaceful environment, contact with nature and the possibility to enjoy a holiday in a non-massified environment, it is very highly rated in the *Quadrilátero*, as well as in rural tourism in general (4.72 and 4.47 out of 5, respectively), thereby making these factors greatly associated with an increase the demand for tourism in rural areas.

Although having failed the difference in means test, the second and third statements, highly rate both genuine endogenous experiences in the region (4.6 and 4.48, respectively, in the *Quadrilátero* and rural tourism in general) and novel destinations and experiences, albeit a little less so (4.36 in the “*Quadrilátero*” group and 4.25 in the “*Others*” group).

No statistically significant results pertaining to the multidimensional experience were found (Table 6). Despite the slight difference found between the two groups concerning all of the statements, it is worth noticing that the “*Quadrilátero*” group always scores higher than the “*Others*” group. The first statement, a high satisfaction of the rural tourism experience resulting from the recollection and emotion of the moments lived, shows the highest average response, both in the “*Quadrilátero*” group and in the “*Others*” group, with values of 4.58 and 4.46, respectively. Social interaction with the community enhances the meaningfulness and lasting impression of the rural tourism experience obtained an average of 4.36 in the first group and 4.19 in the second group.

Table 5 Introductory questions

Statements	<i>Quadrilátero</i> <i>n</i> (50)	<i>Others</i> <i>n</i> (83)	<i>T</i>	Sig.
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
A calm and peaceful environment, contact with nature and the possibility to enjoy holidays in a non-massified environment boost the demand for rural tourism	4.72 (0.454)	4.47 (0.721)	2.454	0.015
The rural tourist wishes to experience genuine experiences endogenous to the region	4.60 (0.639)	4.48 (0.669)	1.002	0.318
The rural tourist continuously seeks new destinations and new experiences	4.36 (0.663)	4.25 (0.730)	0.847	0.398

A *p*-value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant denoted in bold

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Table 6 Multidimensional experience in RT

Statements	Quadrilátero <i>n</i> (50)	Others <i>n</i> (83)	<i>T</i>	Sig.
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
The high satisfaction of the rural tourist experience results from the memory and emotion of the moments lived	4.58 (0.642)	4.46 (0.611)	1.096	0.275
Social interaction with the community enhances the meaning and memorisation of the rural tourism experience	4.36 (0.722)	4.19 (0.706)	1.312	0.192
The memories of tourist experiences are important elements for a pleasant recollection and condition the evaluation of future memories	4.54 (0.613)	4.42 (0.627)	1.063	0.290
The local community plays an active role in creating the tourist experience	4.30 (0.647)	4.17 (0.746)	1.032	0.304
Diversified offer promotes destination loyalty.	4.48 (0.614)	4.31 (0.825)	1.236	0.218
Loyalty to the destination promotes environmental sustainability, due to the preservation of the authenticity of the rural area	4.36 (0.722)	4.13 (1.021)	1.380	0.170

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The third statement regarding memorable tourism experiences and their potential effects on future memories reached an average of 4.54 in the “Quadrilátero” group and 4.42 in the “Others” group. The extent to which the local community plays an active role in shaping the tourist experience scores an average value of 4.30 in the “Quadrilátero” group and 4.17 in the “Others” group. Roughly the same difference in average scores, diversity provided by rural tourism, the “Quadrilátero” group averaged 4.48 and the “Others” group 4.31. Finally, the idea that client loyalty to the destination promotes environmental sustainability because of the preservation of the authenticity of the rural area presents as average value 4.36 in the “Quadrilátero” group and 4.13 in the “Others” group.

Of all the services/activities complementary to the type of accommodation, only the existence of a spa shows a statistically significant difference between two groups ($M = 3.26$; $t = 2.231$; Sig = 0.027; $p < 0.05$). Despite it is worth a look at the data. Table 7 shows the types of services/activities that can be provided as complements to a simple accommodation. Respondents from the “Quadrilátero” group rated the availability of a swimming pool the highest, with an average score of 4.08, followed by the provision of cultural activities (4.02) and participation in experiences (3.96). Services/activities towards which respondents of the “Quadrilátero” group seem to appreciate to a lesser degree are the existence of a golf course (1.74), a meeting room (2.08) and the possibility of fishing (2.22).

As for the “Others” group, respondents valued the existence of cultural activities the most, scoring an average of 3.96. This is closely followed by the availability of a swimming pool (3.95) and participation in experiences (3.90). Tennis and golf courses (2.27 and 1.67, respectively) and the existence of a meeting room come in last (1.94).

Table 7 Complementary offer in rural tourism

Complementary offer	Likert scale (1–5) %					Quadrilátero <i>n</i> (50)	Others <i>n</i> (83)	<i>T</i>	Sig
	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
Golf course	62.4	12.0	19.5	5.3	0.8	1.74 (0.965)	1.67 (1.037)	0.361	0.719
Swimming pool	2.3	12.8	8.3	36.1	40.6	4.08 (1.085)	3.95 (1.114)	0.649	0.517
Spa	9.8	14.3	25.6	40.6	9.8	3.54 (0.994)	3.10 (1.175)	2.231	0.027
Gym	17.3	17.3	33.8	24.1	7.5	3.00 (1.195)	2.80 (1.177)	0.967	0.336
Tennis court	32.3	18.8	38.3	8.3	2.3	2.34 (1.099)	2.27 (1.072)	0.387	0.699
Meeting room	48.1	12.0	33.1	6.0	0.8	2.08 (1.140)	1.94 (1.016)	0.736	0.463
Horseback riding	33.8	11.3	33.1	18.0	3.8	2.50 (1.165)	2.45 (1.281)	0.244	0.807
Birdwatching	20.3	10.5	32.3	29.3	7.5	2.92 (1.291)	2.94 (1.203)	−0.089	0.929
Fishing	40.6	10.5	35.3	10.5	3.0	2.22 (1.148)	2.27 (1.211)	−0.212	0.832
Trails	6.8	9.0	16.5	41.4	26.3	3.62 (1.244)	3.77 (1.097)	−0.731	0.466
Cultural activities	3.8	5.3	15.8	39.1	36.1	4.02 (0.892)	3.96 (1.120)	0.301	0.764
Experiences	6.8	3.0	17.3	36.8	36.1	3.96 (1.124)	3.90 (1.133)	0.279	0.781

A *p*-value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant denoted in bold

Source: Elaborated by the authors

9 Conclusions

This study sought to understand the profile of the tourist in rural areas in Portugal, specifically that of the tourist in the “Quadrilátero do Minho” region. It also aimed to identify the factors that contribute to the quality of the tourist experience in these areas. Findings show that the profile of the tourist in the rural area in Portugal is mostly composed of higher educated (81.2%) women (72.2%), aged 35 through 44 years (32.3%), who are not self-employed (59.4%) and live in the Northern region (45.1%). These results support other studies which present similar conclusions, namely, that of Almeida and Pinto-Correia (2012), Fernandes (2016) and Gonçalves (2020).

In analysing the accommodation or housing profile, we found that typically respondents are individuals who stay in rural tourism units once a year (64.7%),

with family members (61.7%), for 1–3 days (68.4%) and spend anywhere from €50 to €100 per day (64.7%); similar findings can be found in Eusébio and Kastenholz (2010), Fernandes (2016), and Milheiro et al. (2017).

Of the 133 respondents, only 50 had already stayed in a rural tourism unit in the “Quadrilátero do Minho”: 57.4% in Braga, followed by 29.8% in Guimarães, 12.8% in Vila Nova de Famalicão (12.8%) and, lastly, 10.6% in Barcelos. With regard to the characteristics considered most relevant in the RT, “calmness and tranquillity” stands out among the others, reaching a total of 78.9% of responses. This is followed by “hospitality” with 55.6%, “escape from daily stress” and “local gastronomy”, each with a total of 45.9% of the responses. Factors such as “authenticity of heritage” and “new experiences”, come in last with 28.6% and 27.1%, respectively.

With respect to the degree of satisfaction concerning the experiences in rural tourism, an overwhelming 96.2% of individuals replied that they were satisfied or very satisfied. Roughly 96% stated that they would stay at a rural tourism unit with friends and family. When asked if they would again return, 96.6% of the respondents answered yes. Taking into account the respondents’ level of agreement with the statements on rural tourism, it is important to highlight the three with the highest level of agreement. Highly in line with Martínez-Roget et al. (2015) and Milheiro et al. (2017), and using the Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to “totally disagree” and 5 to “totally agree”, “maintaining the authenticity of the rural destination fosters tourist attraction” was the statement most agreed with, with an average value of 4.57, followed by the idea that “a calm and peaceful environment, contact with nature and the possibility of enjoying a holiday, in a non-massified environment, boosts the demand for tourism in rural areas” with an average value of 4.56. Finally, “the tourist in rural areas looks for what is genuine and endogenous to the region” reached an average value of 4.53.

The limitation of this study is the sample size of tourists staying in the “Quadrilátero do Minho”. Future research could be understanding the profile of the tourist in rural areas in the “Quadrilátero do Minho” region, using in-person surveys distributed by the rural tourism units of the region.

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