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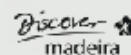
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Mapping Cultural Tourism Routes in Baixo Alentejo, Portugal: An Exploratory Study of the Municipality of Beja

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Abstract

Routes have been a characteristic of human societies since ancient times: two prominent examples are the Silk Roads and the Pilgrim's Ways (namely the Way of Saint James – Santiago de Compostela), which are now World Heritage sites and highly popular, well-established tourism products. The creation of routes with leisure purposes is, however, a phenomenon of modern industrial societies.

From the last decades of the 20th century onwards, we have witnessed the unprecedented growth of tourist routes and itineraries around the globe, purportedly due to the changing patterns of tourist demand, namely the search for more flexible, non-traditional holidays and for new experiences, and to the perceived benefits of tourist routes, namely in terms of tourists/income diffusion, the affirmation of lesser known localities, and the increased attractiveness and sustainability of destinations.

For its geographical, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, the Baixo Alentejo region would at first sight benefit greatly from a route-based tourism development strategy. It consists of a thinly populated, vast rural territory, with distinctive natural features, a rich history, heritage and culture and an outstanding gastronomy, based on high-quality, certified and prize-winning products, such as olive oil, cheese, meat products and wines.

Against this backdrop, the present study, which is of a mostly exploratory nature, aims at mapping the tourist routes and trails that exist in and around Beja, the capital of the Baixo Alentejo region and intermunicipal community. It offers a preliminary evaluation and classification of the identified trails, based on the typologies proposed by Timothy and Boyd (2015). It also makes a first assessment of the uses and perceived relevance of the existing itineraries, based on collected primary data. The paper draws some conclusions which may contribute to the development and/or improvement of cultural tourism routes in Baixo Alentejo, particularly in the region of Beja. Given its intended purposes, the study relied both on qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Keywords: cultural tourism, routes, itineraries, trails, Beja, Baixo Alentejo

1. Introduction

The constitution of routes has been a distinctive and meaningful element of human societies throughout history (Moulin & Boniface, 2001; Durusoy, 2014). However, the affirmation of routes as a type of cultural and tourism product is a phenomenon of modern industrial societies and coincided with the advent of the tourist industry, namely with the organisation of the first tours by Thomas Cook in 1841 (Flognfeldt, 2005). The idea of cultural route emerged in the 1960s and gained momentum in the last decades of the 20th century, fostered by European or Europe-based international organisations (Council of Europe, UNESCO and ICOMOS) with the main goal of promoting European cohesion and affirming of European heritage, culture and identity (Durusoy, 2014; Moulin & Boniface, 2001).

Over the last three decades, the concept of “cultural route” has been gradually expanded to include intangible heritage, to allow for the creation of new themed routes and to acknowledge the tourism potential of such itineraries. This has been coterminous with the unprecedented rise of cultural

tourism in the last decades, from a niche market into “one of the largest and fastest-developing global tourism markets” (World Tourism Organisation, 2018, p. 8). Underlying these trends are wider societal changes that have greatly transformed the experience of travelling: the continuous development and widespread use of ICT, the availability of cheaper air transport, coupled with increased income and education, have brought about ‘new’ types of tourists, who search for more diversified, flexible or individualised experiences.

2. Literature Review

Against this backdrop, cultural routes have recently gained prominence, as they are seen as effective means of catering for this “post-fordist”, “new-tourism” demand (World Tourism Organisation, 2015, p.35; Majdoub, 2015). Routes are increasingly viewed as an “attraction-mix strategy” (Ivanovic, 2008, p. 163) and an innovative cultural tourism product. Their popularity seems to lie in the advantages they are believed to possess, particularly when compared to other types of cultural tourism products. Below are some of the aspects most commonly referred in the literature (Murray & Graham, 1997; Meyer, 2004; Lourens, 2007; Majdoub, 2010; Council of Europe, 2011; World Tourism Organisation, 2015):

- Routes deliver a more enriching overall tourist experience (than other types of tourism), as visitors contact with diverse and unique tangible and intangible cultural resources and interact with local people.
- Routes encourage the participation and development of local communities and they reinforce feelings of pride in local culture, history and heritage.
- They provide opportunities for economic growth and for inclusive development, as they foster the creation of jobs and small businesses and help distribute the benefits of tourism across multiple value-chains.
- Routes foster transboundary cooperation, public-private partnerships, collaborative destination marketing and the creation of new and innovative products; they can help create ‘new’ destinations or revitalise mature ones.
- They may contribute to safeguarding natural, tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- By spreading tourism demand and income across the territory and throughout the year they contribute to address problems of overcrowding and seasonality.
- They afford rural, inland regions opportunities for promotion and development (over 90% of the existing routes are located in rural areas).

However, the creation and management of routes is complex and requires careful planning. Among the main factors responsible for the identified deficiencies in the design and functioning of cultural/tourism routes are the adoption of top-down approaches, poor communication and cooperation among actors, and lack of route monitoring or of impact assessment instruments (Council of Europe, 2011; Moulin & Boniface, 2001; World Tourism Organisation, 2015; Pattanaro & Pistocchi, 2016).

Despite the ubiquity and popularity of trails and routes, and the attention they have merited from public-sector international organisations, there isn’t a hefty body of research on the subject within the broad field of tourism and related studies. According to Timothy and Boyd (2015), this has to do with the fact that research on either the supply or the demand aspects of routes and trails is not easy to conduct (Timothy & Boyd, 2015, p. 248). Despite this, several authors defend that, although destinations and attractions are more popular than routes as objects of academic inquiry, routes may be just as important (Wall, 1997). For Flognfeldt, the fact that the travel experience encompasses both the journey and the destination should motivate tourism research to focus on tourists’ behaviour not only at “sites” or “within the destination areas” but also “along the route” (Flognfeldt, 2005, p. 3).

3. The Baixo Alentejo Region and the City of Beja

Given its geographical, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, the Baixo Alentejo region would at first sight benefit greatly from a route-based tourism development strategy. It is the largest Portuguese NUTS 3 region but also one of the least populated. It is thus a vast, mostly rural and

agricultural territory, with distinctive natural features, a rich history, a unique tangible and intangible heritage and culture recognised by UNESCO, and an outstanding gastronomy, based on high-quality, certified and prize-winning products. Despite the wealth of its natural and cultural resources, the Alentejo region is also one of the least visited in the country, accounting for 3% of overnight stays (Turismo de Portugal, 2017).

Located 180 kilometres from Lisbon, Beja is the capital of Baixo Alentejo. The municipality of Beja is one of the biggest in the country, in terms of land area. According to the latest available data, it has approximately 34,000 residents (PORDATA, 2019). In administrative terms, Beja is divided into 12 civil parish councils: 2 of them are in the city itself and account for 23,000 of the municipality's total population. 11,000 live in the remaining 9 parish councils, situated in the neighbouring countryside and in its main villages (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012).

Beja is an ancient city, its origins going back to time immemorial. It was an important administrative and political centre of the Roman Empire. Through the ages, it was home to several peoples, such as the Visigoths and the Arabs, and the stage of successive territorial disputes. Beja's eventful history took its toll on the city's built heritage, which was substantially destroyed over the centuries. In this context, the city's strength, as far as its tourism attractiveness is concerned, does not lie in its imposing buildings and monuments, nor in its (few) museums, but in the wealth and uniqueness of its natural and cultural assets, taken as a whole and dispersed over the territory.

4. Research Objectives and Methodology

The primary aim of our study, which had a mostly exploratory nature, was to make an inventory of the tourist routes, itineraries and trails that exist in the city and municipality of Beja. A secondary objective was to try and assess the uses and scope of the identified trails. The final goal was to gain an insight, however tentative, into the actual uses of such itineraries for tourism purposes. Given the study's focus and objectives, we relied mostly on secondary data and desk research methods, namely online research, enquiries at the local Tourist Information Centre and analysis of tourist information materials. We focused exclusively on the trails designed or managed by public-sector, local administration bodies (municipality and civil parish councils) and by cultural associations. In order to assess the uses, the perceived relevance and the potential of the identified itineraries, we resorted to primary data research and inquired the municipality's civil parish councils about the existing routes/trails, namely by means of a short questionnaire.

Routes, itineraries, trails and paths are multifarious, nuanced, linguistically, culturally and geographically contingent words, ideas and concepts. However, in the present study we adopted the broad definition of "trail" proposed by Timothy and Boyd, which "includes all natural or human made linear corridors in rural or urban areas designated as trails, paths or routes for the use of recreationists, tourists or travelers regardless of their mode of transportation." (Timothy & Boyd, 2015, p. 4).

In our inventory of the routes, itineraries, trails and paths that cross the municipality of Beja, we considered the following details: name of the trail, location (civil parish councils/towns and villages), organisation and information/promotional media. With the aim of putting the collected data into perspective, we then organised the identified routes according to the typologies proposed by Timothy and Boyd (2015), namely in terms of their spatial dimension, their setting and their type or "rationale"

We adapted Timothy & Boyd's model slightly and grouped the three types of large-scale routes into a single category. We thus classified the identified itineraries according to their spatial dimension as local (i.e., within the ambit of the municipality); regional (within the region of Alentejo); national (with a national scope); and transnational (crossing two or more countries). Additionally, we grouped the mapped trails according to the models put forward by Timothy and Boyd as regards their "setting" – urban, rural-urban and rural – and their features or "rationale" – culture and heritage, nature and mixed.

4. Findings/Results Discussion

4.1. Trail inventory

The analysis of the data collected allowed us to draw the following general conclusions: there seems to be a significant number of routes in the municipality – in our research, we identified 30

itineraries. There is at least one or more trails/routes in most of the civil parish councils (i.e. towns and villages) which make up this administrative territory. However, despite being different, several trails fall under one and the same themed route: for example, the pedestrian walks (PR1, 2, 3, etc.), the “Ways of the Water” trails, or the three itineraries which are part of the Ways of St James Route. The plurality of terms in use – “caminhos”, “percurso”; “percurso pedestre”; “itinerário”; “rota”; “roteiro” – attests to the aforementioned conceptual complexity.

The application of the typologies propounded by Timothy and Boyd allowed us to gain a fuller insight into the identified itineraries. In terms of dimension and scope, our study shows that most of the trails are of a local nature: they cover predominantly one or two parish councils of the municipality; some walking trails have a broader, regional scope. Significantly, the municipality of Beja is traversed by 4 transnational trails, which are part of two well-known Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe: the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes and the al-Mutamid Route (one of the Routes of El legado andalusi). As far as the setting is concerned, it can be observed that most are located in the rural areas of the municipality. With regard to their type or rationale we are led to conclude that many of the existing itineraries privilege the enjoyment of nature/landscapes, even when they include some cultural elements; some itineraries combine natural and cultural experiences, the latter consisting mostly of local products (bread, honey, mushrooms) or of the regional gastronomy. The few itineraries that focus exclusively on cultural heritage are located primarily in the city of Beja.

Regarding the organisation of routes, our study shows that a significant number of the identified trails have been designed by the city council and have a local scope. Most of the regional itineraries, and the Way of St James Routes, fall under the responsibility of the Regional Tourism Board (Turismo do Alentejo e do Ribatejo). A small number of itineraries have been created by local cultural heritage associations. The transnational al-Mutamid Route was designed and is managed by entities external to the region. Information on the routes is available online or in tourist information materials (in print or electronic format). The information and digital materials related to the transnational routes are to be found on dedicated websites. Beja city council’s website has been recently renovated and the routes designed by this local government body are no longer displayed or visible on that platform.

4.2. Questionnaire

After mapping the tourist trails that exist in the municipality of Beja and in each civil parish council, we queried the councils about the following aspects: knowledge of the route(s) that exist in their administrative territories (open-ended question); the perceived overall importance of the said itineraries for the territory (rating scale); the perceived advantages of these tourist trails for the local community (checkboxes); whether the impact of these routes was somehow measured by the council (close-ended question).

The questionnaire survey allowed us to draw the following conclusions: some respondents are well informed about the trails that exist in their territory, namely those who intervened in the design of the itineraries; others have a general idea of these itineraries, although they do not seem to have any intervention in the process; some respondents are not aware of the existence of trails in their area. The respondents in general believe that tourist trails are important for their councils. Most see the “sale of local products” and “the preservation of heritage and tradition” as the main potential beneficial effects that routes may bring to their local area; the building of tourist infrastructures which may be used by the local population is considered an additional benefit. None of the respondents indicated the existence or application of monitoring tools to assess the impact of the existing routes.

4. Conclusions

This exploratory study has mapped the trails that exist in the municipality of Beja, namely those which have that been created by public administration bodies or by associations for recreational and/or tourism purposes.

Our inventory and multi-typology classification of the identified trails allowed us to conclude that, despite the substantial number of trails that exist in the municipality, approximately half of them have a purely local (and localised) dimension/scope. The fact that a significant number of the existing trails are nature-based attests to the mostly rural character of the municipality, as well as to its

beautiful landscapes and rich fauna and flora. The lack of distinctively cultural itineraries is a relevant idea that stands out from our research. The number of mapped cultural routes does not match up to the ancient and rich history of the city/municipality, neither to the wealth of the tangible and intangible cultural resources which the region is well known for – its typical products, its gastronomy and wines, or the ‘Cante Alentejano’ (World Intangible Heritage). The implementation of cultural tourism routes in the municipality therefore seems to be in an incipient stage.

The communication/promotion of the existing routes seems to be deficient and ineffective. Information is presented in several media (online, in print and electronic form); the information available online is scattered through different, not easily identifiable webpages. The city council’s website does not have any section on routes, despite being responsible for 12 of the mapped itineraries. In sum, information on routes in and around Beja is difficult to find, which may indicate that some of these routes exist only in purely formal terms. The knowledge and use of these trails by visitors/tourists to the region is doubtful and would need monitoring.

The heads of the civil parish councils seem to be aware of the potential economic and sociocultural benefits of tourist routes for their territories and communities. However, the partial lack of knowledge on the subject, coupled with the inexistence of monitoring mechanisms, are again indicative of the incipient (or non-existent) use of such trails.

The fact that two Routes of the Council of Europe cross the municipality constitutes a valuable asset and merits deeper analytical attention. The case of the Al-Mutamid Route is particularly striking: although Beja is the birthplace of the famous Arab prince and poet, the local authorities apparently had no intervention in the design of this route, which is mostly set in Andalusia and in Algarve. Beja could feature in other Routes of the Council of Europe, namely the Routes of the Olive Tree or Destination Napoleon. It would also be a must-see stop in a potential transnational route dedicated to Roman heritage (one of the current priority themes of the Council of Europe’s Routes Programme) (Council of Europe, 2019). The setting up of regional routes which might link up the rich and diverse cultural resources that exist in the 13 municipalities of the Baixo Alentejo should also be pondered, namely by the intermunicipal community.

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