TURISMO E CULTURA

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LIVING, SHARING AND MARKETING
THE OVERALL RURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCE –
A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION AND FIRST RESULTS FROM
A RESEARCH PROJECT IN 3 PORTUGUESE VILLAGES

1. Introduction

This communication focuses on the “overall rural tourism experience”, suggested as a particular and rather complex phenomenon that deserves special attention from researchers in tourism, in an approach that would at best be interdisciplinary in nature. This is the aim of a three years research project, funded by FCT1 (PTDC/CS-GEO/104894/2008), in which the phenomenon, its nature, dimensions, determinants and consequences, as well as possible way to plan and manage it sustainably, are studied from the perspectives of marketing, in particular consumer behavior research, sociology and social psychology, economics, anthropology, geography, general management and planning. This is done, based on extensive field work in 3 case study villages in North and Central Portugal: Janeiro de Cima (Fundão), Linhares da Beira (Celorico da Beira) and Favaios (Alijó).

I will here first present some conceptual aspects that help understand the “overall rural tourism experience”, based on a selection of literature

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1 This paper was produced in the context of a research project financed by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (co-financed by COMPETE, QREN e FEDER), which has recently started: “The overall rural tourism experience and sustainable local community development” (PTDC/CS-GEO/104894/2008).
that has been reviewed extensively in the context of the project. I will privilege in this communication the perspective of experience or experiential marketing – however trying to incorporate dimensions of the before mentioned disciplines that need to be integrated to produce relevant inputs for a sustainable rural tourism marketing strategy. I will then briefly present the project in further detail and in the third part of the presentation show some first results from two of the villages analysed, where field work is most advanced: Janeiro de Cima and Linhares da Beira. These results are work in progress and refer to the qualitative data collection, focusing here on the interviews directed at tourists visiting the villages. Finally, some experience and destination marketing implications are suggested.

2. The overall rural tourism experience and its potential role for sustainable development

Although any kind of tourism taking place in the rural space may be called “rural tourism” (OECD, 1994), ‘rural features’ of the territory and the community which host the tourists, should be recognized as playing a fundamental role in any tourism experience designated as ‘rural’. According to Lane (1994), rural tourism should ideally be: located in rural areas; functionally rural (based on the rural world’s special features, such as open space, natural resources and traditional practices); rural in scale (small scale) and traditional in character, organically and slowly growing and controlled by local people. If the last condition is fulfilled, the term ‘rural community tourism’ (Keane, 1992) seems appropriate, where tourism development takes place in an integrated, participatory and coordinated manner at the local level. Based on similar assumptions, Saxena et al. (2007) suggest the term “integrated rural tourism”, where tourism development occurs in an integrated and coordinated manner, yielding maximum benefits for long-term development, that is yielding sustainable destination development.

Even if frequently of small scale and not as impressive as other, more massified tourism phenomena, the economic significance of rural tourism