

Article

The Rural and Nature Tourism Development Potential in Islands

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Abstract: It has become evident that rural tourism grew significantly during the pandemic compared to mass tourism. However, at this time, all the forecasts were wrapped in considerable uncertainty regarding travel, which is not without the elevated associated risk. Therefore, we assessed the perceptions of the entrepreneurs in relation to rural tourism activities regarding the advantages of their rural tourism activity in the Azores for customers. Furthermore, the potential for developing this typology of tourism is pivotal for obtaining very reliable data and information on this topic and enabling us to provide guidelines for the leading regional players. In this regard, an exploratory method was used to assess the perceptions of the entrepreneurs with rural tourism activities in the Azores Islands regarding the customers' experiences and some other important aspects concerning the promotion of this type of tourism in the region. Throughout this study, it was possible to verify that the most relevant obstacles to the development of rural tourism in the Azores region are the preservation and conservation of nature and endogenous resources and delivering proper infrastructures and regional accessibilities. Contrarily, the increase in community and regional funding and support for rural tourism could be key to the prosperity of this typology of tourism in this insular territory.

Keywords: Azores; regional planning; regional strategies; rural tourism; sustainable tourism



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1. Introduction

Generally, until 2020, the tourism industry was increasing worldwide. For example, for the Azores Islands, 2019 was remarkable regarding the touristic demand for the region. Nevertheless, this scenario changed quickly with the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020. As mentioned by Abraham et al. [1], "(...) we assist to an unprecedented breach of confidence in world tourism demand". If we look at some of the indicators about regional tourism demand in the Azores region, in the Spring of 2020 (based on the tourism observatory of the Azores), there was a decrease in overnight stays of more than 80% in comparison to 2019. Furthermore, in June and September 2020, this decrease was higher than 70% compared to 2019. Furthermore, according to the above-mentioned observatory data, about 71% of

businesses laid off their employees during the 2020 high season. Thus, in this sense, we can say that tourism enterprises have been fronted their greatest challenge of all time.

On the other hand, it becomes evident that rural tourism was growing significantly during the pandemic compared to mass tourism [2]. In this regard, several studies in low-density and peripheral territories have shown this tendency (see: [3–7]).

Still, at this time, all the forecasts are wrapped by considerable uncertainty regarding travel, which is not without an elevated associated risk. Based on those premises, we assisted numerous decisions by main health actors in different nations that were reversed at the last minute, changing current decisions. Moreover, the dilemma goes on with the newest virus mutations, the so-called variants.

Considering the previous, in the current moment, we have multiple studies on the impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 on tourism and hospitality [7–9], as well as on prospective travel in the post-pandemic period [10,11], and some theory-based investigation regarding these problems [12–14] to demonstrate the consequences of the pandemic on the perceptions and tourist behaviors.

In this regard, this guides us to the necessity to adopt a new strategic reflection for the post-pandemic period, which likewise jointly aims to answer the issue of seasonality in the case of the ultra-peripheral territory of the Azores. Thus, to face seasonality, some measures could be considered as attracting new market features, being less exposed to the rainy climate, or traveling during the low season, among several other strategies that could also be considered [15].

Contextually, the promotion of the Azores destination should strengthen by the brand idea of a nature destination. This destination (Azores) is certified by EarthCheck as the world's first sustainable insular tourist destination, complemented by the cultural characteristic of the destination, which has an expansive substantial, and immaterial cultural legacy. This destination promotion should promote differentiation, betting on an image of a quality destination that is safe, certified, a natural destination, unpolluted, and non-massified, which are all factors favorably appreciated by tourists in this tourism typology. Thereby, greater attention should be given to the digital transformations and promotion of the destination—instead of the obsolete high face-to-face publicity at tourism events, which, in many cases, failed some of the expected forecasts, excluding in the case of some global renown events.

According to Pimentel et al. [16], “(...) *the poor carrying capacity of the destination and given the window of opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic opened for destinations such as the Azores*”. Moreover, those destinations are generally characterized by very low density and almost no constructed areas in nature. Furthermore, planning in the long term should be clearly defined by the goal of attracting fewer tourists that must be selected. However, adequate tourists—the ones who have money to consume and esteem the endogenous offer of the destination or respect it through moral and ethical behavior and responsible conduct, among several other characteristics—are seen as the ones that this destination should be a magnet of.

If we focus on tourism entrepreneurs, it is possible to understand the multiple benefits—i.e., the minimal start-up capital is required for SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), typically tourism-related businesses [17–19]. Moreover, creating employment prospects is a positive consequence of tourism development [20]. Contextually, functional and quality workforces must ensure the success of tourism destinations [21–26]. Therefore, the boundaries and elements of small tourism businesses should be analyzed. According to Jaafar et al. [21], “(...) *articulate the factors that dampen these businesses. (...) In order from most limiting the factors rated out of five, one being rarely limiting and five extremely limiting, (i) changes in the season and climate, (ii) unavailability of trends and opportunity knowledge in tourism e and (iii) lack of marketing abilities*”.

In fact, engagement in tourism activities reduces the rate of unemployment among the regional populations [27] and consequently can decrease the incidence of poverty [27–30].

Accordingly, the prospect of the tourism sector is seen to enhance the quality of life and well-being of the regional societies [31–36].

Considering this, we believe that assessing the perceptions of the entrepreneurs related to rural tourism activities in the Azores region is pivotal for obtaining very reliable data and information on this topic. In the same line, it enables us to provide guidelines for the main regional actors (i.e., main challenges, regional policies, measures to face the COVID-19 pandemic crisis) for the rural tourism development in the Azores region. Thus, this article focuses precisely on the issue mentioned above, and, therefore, an essentially exploratory methodology was used to reach the predefined objectives of the research.

2. Materials and Methods

Our research is based on data collected about Azores entrepreneurs' opinions regarding the potential of rural tourism development in the Azores region to provide guidelines for the leading regional actors concerning the sustainable development of rural tourism. The methodological approach comprised four main stages: interviews design, data collection (non-probabilistic sampling), data analysis, and outcomes description and interpretation—including a brief discussion of the results.

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the data were collected through web interviews in questionnaire format, with several short and direct questions regarding the theme of the investigation. However, the present paper focuses on a set of 13 items concerning the agreement levels regarding the customers' experiences their rural tourism activity allow (see Table 1), measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Totally disagree) to 5 (Totally agree), and on three open-up questions concerning, respectively, obstacles for the development of rural tourism in the Azores region; regional policies that could be taken to foster the rural tourism growth in the Archipelago; and measures to face the current COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the region regarding rural tourism. The combination of the two different approaches (quantitative and qualitative) is recommended by some authors (e.g., Silva et al., 2016), as they can provide additional information. This data collection instrument was subjected to content validity and a pre-test before its application. The value (above 0.9) of Cronbach's Alpha points to an excellent internal consistency of the 13 items in the sample under study, which indicates that this set of items can be used to assess the fullness/ authenticity of the customers' experiences. However, the calculation of this coefficient is generally recommended for large samples.

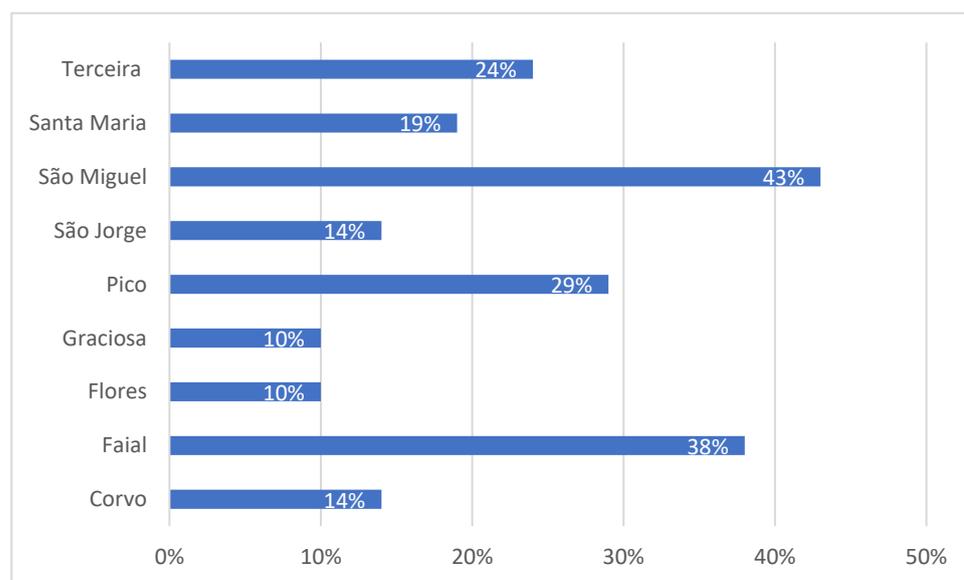
The structured interviews were conducted during the spring and autumn months of 2020 and the winter of 2021, after the informed consent of the participants (the central tenet of research ethics involving human beings) based on the information given (rights of the participants and the purpose of the study).

The target population is concerning a set of 280 rural tourism establishments in the region found in a Google search. The sample comprises some (22) of the main Azorean entrepreneurs in rural tourism (one entrepreneur per establishment, sampling rate of about 8%—non-probability sampling), whose main sociodemographic characteristics are described in Table 1. The majority (59.1%) of the participants are male, and the age group with the highest rate is between 51 and 65 years old (49.1%). Most of the inquired/interviewed entrepreneurs have higher education (59.1%), Portuguese nationality (59.1%), and a large part is married (45.5%). As for the duration of the rural tourism activity, 27.3% of the interviewed entrepreneurs indicated "1 to 5 years", 45.5% said "6 to 10 years", and 27.3% accounted for "10 or more years" (Table 1). We are convinced that the intentional selection of the main entrepreneurs of the region is of crucial importance to obtaining information that could be an asset for the planning of the rural tourism sector in the post-pandemic period.

Table 1. Some sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. Distribution of the respondents (%).

Variables	Categories	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	9	40.9
	Male	13	59.1
	Total	22	100
Age Group	18–35	4	18.2
	36–50	7	31.8
	51–65	9	40.9
	65+	2	9.1
	Total	22	100
Education	Basic Education	2	9.1
	High School	7	31.8
	University	13	59.1
	Total	22	100
Marital status	Single	6	27.3
	Marriage	10	45.5
	Other	6	27.3
	Total	22	100
Nationality	Portuguese	13	59.1
	Foreign	9	40.9
	Total	22	100
Activity running time	1–5 years	6	27.3
	6–10 years	10	45.5
	+10 years	6	27.3
	Total	22	100

Considering the 22 entrepreneurs of our sample who indicated the island(s) where they carry out their activity related to rural tourism, we highlight that 42.9% of them are established on the island of São Miguel, and 38.1% mentioned Faial Island. The percentages regarding the distribution of the participants by the other islands are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Islands of the Azores Archipelago where entrepreneurs carry out their rural tourism activity (% of cases—Multiple response analysis).

Concerning the type of rural tourism with which the activity of entrepreneurs is associated, it should be emphasized that the majority (68.2%) of the participants reported that their activity is referring to “Nature Tourism”. Moreover, half (50.0%) said that their activity is included in “Ecotourism” (Figure 2).

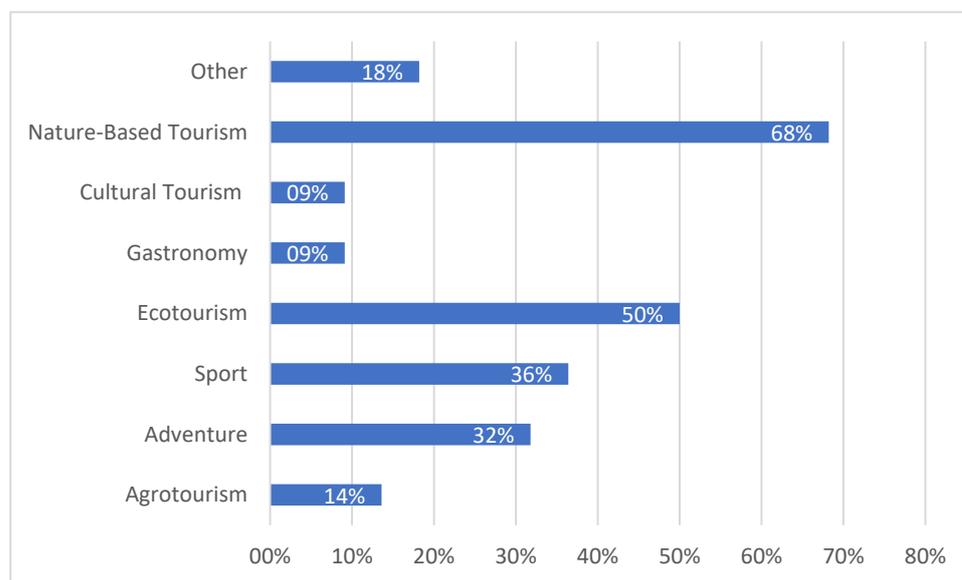


Figure 2. Type of rural tourism to which the activity is associated (% of cases—Multiple response analysis).

The main research questions of the present study are: What are the perceptions of the Azorean entrepreneurs in rural tourism regarding the customers’ experiences their rural tourism activity allows?; How do variables such as Gender, Age Group, Education, Marital status, Nationality, and Activity running time in the activity of rural tourism, differentiate their perceptions concerning the customers’ experiences? What are the main strategies that should be adopted concerning promoting rural tourism in the Azores region (main challenges, regional policies, and measures to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic)? Moreover, we formulated the following research hypothesis: The perceptions of the Azorean entrepreneurs in rural tourism do not vary depending on the number of years of activity in the rural tourism sector.

Data were analyzed essentially based on exploratory data analysis methods, including the nonlinear (categorical) principal component analysis (CATPCA). The goal of nonlinear principal component analysis (NLPCA) is the same as that of principal component analysis (PCA), namely, to reduce the dimensionality of a data set to a smaller number of uncorrelated variables (designed by principal components) that represent the information in the original data as closely as possible [37]. The same authors refer that “the difference between the methods is that PCA can only reveal linear relationships, whereas NPLCA can, in addition, reveal nonlinear relationships by quantifying categorical or nonlinearly related variables in a way that is optimal (in a statistical sense) for the PCA goal” [37,38]. In the present study, we applied the CATPCA using the optimal procedure scaling available from IBM SPSS Statistics. The fact that the sample used is non-probabilistic does not allow the generalization of the conclusions to the population, so the application of hypothesis tests is not recommended. However, some non-parametric tests were used (Mann–Whitney U test, Kruskal–Wallis test, Dunn’s test) only for indicative purposes in order to verify the possible existence of significant differences between the groups of individuals described by the sociodemographic variables, presented in Table 1, about the level of agreement regarding each of the items under analysis.

3. Results

Contextually, to address the participants' perceptions, an agreement level sentences question was made regarding the customers' experiences their rural tourism activity allows (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Agreement levels regarding the customers' experiences their rural tourism activity allow.

Sentences	Agreement Levels (%)				
	1 (Totally Disagree)	2	3	4	5 (Totally Agree)
a—Enjoy a complete tourist package	9.5	23.8	4.8	33.3	28.6
b—Contact with people, local life and customs	0.0	4.5	9.1	45.5	40.9
c—Meet new people and create new friendships	0.0	9.1	22.7	27.3	40.9
d—Feel confidence in your staff	0.0	4.8	9.5	33.3	52.4
e—Feel that the Azores are an authentic destination	0.0	4.5	9.1	18.2	68.2
f—Feeling that the population is welcoming	0.0	4.5	4.5	45.5	45.5
g—Feel safe	0.0	4.5	9.1	4.5	81.8
h—Enjoy the local cuisine	4.5	13.6	13.6	36.4	31.8
i—Buy local products	0.0	9.1	22.7	22.7	45.5
j—Carry out activities in nature	0.0	4.5	4.5	18.2	72.7
l—Carry out activities at sea (eg fishing, boat trips, others)	0.0	9.1	18.2	22.7	50.0
m—The desire to visit the Azores again in the context of Rural Tourism	0.0	4.5	4.5	27.3	63.6
n—A story to tell friends/family	0.0	4.5	9.1	22.7	63.6

The highest values found are in bold.

Concerning the sociodemographic variables shown in Table 1, except for the variable "Activity running time", no significant differences were found among the groups defined by the categories of the other sociodemographic variables ($p > 0.05$) regarding the responses given to the items under analysis. Thus, significant differences were found between at least two of the groups corresponding to the categories of the Activity running time in the case of items "e—Feel that the Azores are an authentic destination" ($H = 6.117$; $p = 0.047$) and "h—Enjoy the local cuisine" ($H = 9.135$; $p = 0.010$). The application of Dunn's test indicated that: in the case of item "e", the statistically significant differences ($p = 0.042$) occurred between those who have worked for fewer years in the tourism sector ("1–5 years") and those who have worked longer (">10 years"); and (ii) in the case of item "h", there were statistically significant differences between those working longer (">10 years") and: those working for less time (1–5 years), $p = 0.016$; those who have worked in the rural tourism sector for 6 to 10 years ("6–10 years old"), $p = 0.034$.

Table 3. Agreement levels regarding the customers' experiences their rural tourism activity allow—grouped by items.

Items	Mode	Q1	Q2	Q3
a—Enjoy a complete tourist package	4	2	4	5
b—Contact with people, local life and customs	4	4	4	5
c—Meet new people and create new friendships	5	3	4	5
d—Feel confidence in your staff	5	4	5	5
e—Feel that the Azores are an authentic destination	5	4	5	5
f—Feeling that the population is welcoming	4 and 5	4	4	5
g—Feel safe	5	5	5	5
h—Enjoy the local cuisine	4	3	4	5
i—Buy local products	5	3	4	5
j—Carry out activities in nature	5	4	5	5
l—Carry out activities at sea (e.g., fishing, boat trips, others)	5	3	4,5	5
m—The desire to visit the Azores again in the context of Rural Tourism	5	4	5	5
n—A story to tell friends/family	5	4	5	5

The highest values found are in bold.

Regarding the advantages of its rural tourism activity in the Azores for customers (Table 3), the statements regarding which the respondents' levels of agreement are higher are the following: (g) *Feel safe*; (d) *Feel confidence in your staff*; (e) *Feel that the Azores are an authentic destination*; (j) *Carry out activities in nature*; (m) *The desire to visit the Azores again in the context of Rural Tourism*; (n) *A story to tell friends/family*; and (f) *Feeling that the population is welcoming*.

After using CATPCA (Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization), three principal components were extracted, explaining 93.6% (64.7% + 16.6% + 12.3%) of the data variance, which has eigenvalues greater than one and a very satisfactory internal consistency of the items (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. CATPCA—Model Summary Rotation.

Model Summary Rotation ^a		
Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha	Variance Accounted for Total (Eigenvalue)
1	0.965	8.406
2	0.750	2.160
3	0.807	1.601
Total	0.994 ^b	12.167

^a Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; ^b Total Cronbach's Alpha is based on the total Eigenvalue.

Table 5. CATPCA—Rotated Component Loadings.

	Rotated Component Loadings ^a		
	Dimension		
	1	2	3
n—A story to tell friends/family	0.962	0.161	0.206
b—Contact with people, local life and customs	0.961	0.160	0.207
f—Feeling that the population is welcoming	0.961	0.162	0.208
d—Feel confidence in your staff	0.960	0.171	0.204
g—Feel safe	0.960	0.155	0.217
j—Carry out activities in nature	0.960	0.162	0.213
e—Feel that the Azores are an authentic destination	0.959	0.170	0.211
m—The desire to visit the Azores again in the context of Rural Tourism	0.955	0.179	0.225
c—Meet new people and create new friendships	0.825	−0.160	−0.184
h—Enjoy the local cuisine	0.019	0.931	−0.101
i—Buy local products	0.277	0.888	−0.020
a—Enjoy a complete tourist package	0.162	−0.330	0.896
l—Carry out activities at sea (eg fishing, boat trips, others)	0.500	0.390	0.630

^a Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. The highest values found are in bold.

The most important items for component two are (h) *Enjoy the local cuisine* and (i) *Buy local products*, so this component can be called “Local commerce”/food and souvenirs. The items most associated/correlated with the third component are (a) *Enjoy a complete tourist package* and (l) *Carry out activities at sea (i.e., fishing, boat trips, others)*, so this component can be called “Other activities” (i.e., nautical activities). In this sense, the most relevant items for component one concern the social interactions, experiences, and contact with nature. Furthermore, three open-up questions were made to the participants to assess their perceptions of a broader concept. These questions are intended to explore and identify the three main challenges for rural tourism development in the Azores region (Table 6). Moreover, it shows which regional public policies should be implemented to foster rural tourism growth in the Archipelago (Table 7) and the measures to implement to face the current COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the region regarding rural tourism (Table 8). To summarize the open questions, the answers were grouped into themes.

Table 6. Obstacles for the development of rural tourism in the Azores region (% of cases—Multiple response analysis).

Themes	(%)
Infrastructures/Accessibilities	31.6
Preservation and Conservation of Nature and Endogenous Resources	26.3
Difficulty in Accessing Community Funds	15.8
Resisting to the Tourism Massification	15.8
Bureaucratic Obstacles at the Regional Governance Level and Lack of Sustainability Policies	10.5

The highest values found are in bold.

Table 7. Regional policies that could be taken to foster the rural tourism growth in the Archipelago (% of cases—Multiple response analysis).

Themes	(%)
Increase the Community and Regional Funding and Support to Rural Tourism	47.1
Reduce Mass Tourism Incentives	17.6
Structural Changes on the Sector	17.6
Foster the Nature Protection and Endogenous Resources	5.9
Increase the Destination Marketing and Advertisement	5.9
Improve the Regional Accessibilities	5.9

The highest values found are in bold.

Table 8. Measures to face the current COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the region regarding rural tourism (% of cases—Multiple response analysis).

Themes	(%)
Increase the Health Measures and Safety on the Destination	41.7
Invert on the Support of Rural Tourism Small-Medium Enterprises	16.7
Foster the Internal Tourism	16.7
Professional Training on the Sector	16.7
Avoid Reducing the Destination Price	8.2

The highest values found are in bold.

In the respondents' perception, the main challenges to the growth of rural tourism in the Azores are "Infrastructures/ Accessibilities" (opinion of 31.6% of the respondents) and "Preservation and Conservation of Nature and Endogenous Resources".

In the respondents' perception, the main regional policies that could be taken to foster the rural tourism growth in the Archipelago are "Increase the European and Regional Funding and Support to Rural Tourism" (referred to by 47.1% of the participants), "Reduce Mass Tourism Incentives" (17.6%), and Structural Changes on the Sector (17.6%).

In view of the current situation of pandemic crisis, in the opinion of 41.7% of the respondents, the main measure that must be taken to counter/mitigate the negative impact on rural tourism in the region is "Increase the Health Measures and Safety on the Destination".

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In the Azores, rural tourism activity increased significantly during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic compared to mass tourism. This performance also occurs in other low-density and peripheral territories. In the Azores, nature, endogenous resources, and low density played a crucial role in rural tourism performance during the pandemic. From now on, Azores promotion should focus on differentiation, betting on an image of a quality destination, safe, certified, natural destination, unpolluted, non-massified, all factors highly appreciated by rural tourism lovers. Furthermore, destination promotion should benefit from digital transformation to selected high-end market niches instead of the obsolete face-to-face promotion at global tourism events.

This setup incites tourism entrepreneurs since a minimal start-up capital is required, and management proximity is the key to delivering high-standard service to tourists and fulfilling their expectations during a rural tourism stay. Thus, entrepreneurs' opinions about the potential of rural tourism in the Azores are insightful to better position the Azores' rural tourism shortly.

Our research lies on an experimental methodology upon web interviews with entrepreneurs using a questionnaire format with 13 items measured in a 5-point Likert scale

ranging from totally disagree to agree totally. Of 22 Azorean entrepreneurs in rural tourism, almost 60% are male, nearly 50% are aged between 51 and 65 years, about 60% have higher education, and 45.5% run the business up to 10 years, 42.9% in São Miguel Island.

As expected, entrepreneurs mainly act in nature tourism and ecotourism. Unfortunately, one of the leading rural tourism entrepreneurs' handicaps is gastronomy, mainly because it lacks adequate know-how to add high standard service to the high-quality local food products (vegetables, fish, and meat). Note that gastronomic activity seems to be part of the second (of three) principal component according to CATPAC results, having relevant importance in the rural tourism experience in the Azores. These insights could help policymakers better promote rural tourism development in the future, such as reinforcing financial support for professional qualifications and entrepreneurs initiatives in gastronomic activities.

Of the three principal components that identify the main challenges for rural tourism development in the Azores, the most relevant are the social interactions, experiences, and contact with nature. Less relevant are other activities than accommodation and gastronomy. According to previous studies, rural tourism, particularly in rural island contexts, can productively integrate both material and immaterial heritage manifestations as well as more holistic place-based and cultural landscape approaches—in which quality (rather than quantity), sensorial aspects, and environmental sustainability are also taken into account [39,40].

In order to develop rural tourism, the concept of authenticity must be critically considered. Going through the literature on community-based tourism, Blapp and Mitas [41] analyze how different theories of authenticity (objective, constructive, and existential authenticity) have been applied and propose a theory of authenticity applicable to creative tourism development in rural areas. Thus, these authors claim that it may be more useful to speak of authenticities, varying according to regional, temporal, and cultural contexts and ontological positions [39].

Main research outputs show that the most relevant obstacles to the development of rural tourism in the Azores region are the preservation and conservation of nature and endogenous resources and delivering proper infrastructures and regional accessibilities. Boosting rural tourism growth in the Azores should be attained with higher financial support from the EU and regional government to rural tourism entrepreneurs. This focus will bring sustainable prosperity to insular rural tourism and foresee a faster recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic economic hit, naturally complemented by health measures increase and safety on the destination.

This research is also interesting to the academia and the literature regarding insular regions whose economy is interlinked with tourism. Furthermore, this paper is particularly relevant for rural tourism once we can develop some further research questions from it as: *Will these factors remain the same, or will they somewhat change with the extinction of the pandemic situation? Will tourists who experience the supply adjustment to these factors consider it crucial as suppliers?* Therefore, this topic has ample space for continuous applied research.

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