

Article

Motorhome Tourism and Rural Revitalization: An Empirical Assessment of Socioeconomic Impact and Infrastructure in Empty Spain

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Abstract

This study evaluates the potential of motorhome tourism to catalyze socioeconomic development in rural municipalities of southeastern Spain (provinces of Jaén, Granada, and Almería). Addressing the critical challenge of rural depopulation in “Empty Spain” (España Vaciada), the research employs a mixed-methods approach covering the period 2022–2024. The methodology is centered on a two-tier empirical design: (i) a provincial-level analysis of eight municipalities, and (ii) an in-depth case study of Vélez-Blanco. A fundamental component of the research was the direct ethnographic validation and field audit conducted by the Fernández-Dutto family during an extensive journey from March to September 2025. By staying two to three nights at each location, the researchers performed in situ assessments of infrastructure quality and bioclimatic efficiency, providing a primary “ground-truth” dataset. These observations calibrate the longitudinal data obtained from the National Statistics Institute (INE) and digital platforms, which were utilized strictly as secondary screening tools for site selection. The results indicate statistically significant correlations between infrastructure quality, proximity to heritage attractions, and increases in local tourism-related expenditure. The study highlights how experiential fieldwork captures nuances in traveler behavior and site functionality that official records often overlook. The paper concludes by identifying strategic investment opportunities, specifically recommending the development of a motorhome service area in the municipality of María (María-Los Vélez area). This intervention is proposed as a vital catalyst to complete the regional tourism circuit and foster economic resilience in the heart of Almería’s rural landscape.

Keywords: motorhome tourism; rural revitalization; empty Spain (España vaciada); socioeconomic impact; ethnographic fieldwork; María-Los Vélez; bioclimatic infrastructure



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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of rural depopulation constitutes one of the most pressing territorial challenges in numerous European regions, particularly in Spain, where extensive inland areas have experienced a progressive demographic emptying during recent decades (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011).

This process, which has given rise to the media and academic concept of “Empty Spain” (España vaciada), is characterized by the continuous loss of population, demographic aging, the deterioration of public services, and the contraction of local economies, generating a

vicious circle of territorial decline (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). In view of this reality, the search for innovative strategies for the revitalization of these rural spaces has become a priority for researchers, planners, and policymakers (Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024; Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, 2025).

In this context, tourism has emerged as one of the activities with the greatest potential to stimulate declining rural economies, thanks to its capacity to generate income, create employment, and encourage investment in infrastructure and services (Stynes, 1997). However, not all tourism modalities are equally appropriate or beneficial for rural environments. Mass tourism can generate negative impacts in terms of environmental sustainability, cultural authenticity, and equitable distribution of benefits, while certain forms of specialized or niche tourism can offer a better balance between economic development and the preservation of territorial values (Chen & Cai, 2025; Simeanu et al., 2025).

Among these emerging modalities, motorhome tourism has experienced significant growth in recent years, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has favored more autonomous and flexible forms of travel. This type of tourism presents distinctive characteristics that make it potentially valuable as a tool for rural development: wider territorial mobility and distribution than conventional tourism, less dependence on large infrastructures, the capacity to reach secondary destinations far from the main tourist circuits, and a traveler profile generally characterized by longer stays, interest in local heritage, and higher expenditure in local businesses and services (Simeoni & Cassia, 2019; Brooker & Joppe, 2014).

The creation of specific areas for motorhomes is often argued to be a relatively low-cost intervention with potential local benefits; however, empirical evidence on causal effects is limited (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021). This paper examines under which conditions (location, services, design) such areas are associated with measurable socioeconomic outcomes in depopulated territories. While proponents suggest that these facilities act as immediate catalysts for economic activity, a rigorous quantitative assessment of this relationship remains scarce in the literature. Most existing studies focus on the sociological profile of the traveler rather than the structural determinants of local economic impact (Alonso et al., 2024; Dwyer et al., 2005).

This study addresses this knowledge gap through the analysis of case studies in municipalities of southeastern Spain (provinces of Jaén, Granada, and Almería), a region that combines areas with serious depopulation problems, significant cultural and natural heritage, and a growing offer of motorhome facilities (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021). Through a mixed methodology integrating quantitative analysis of socioeconomic indicators and qualitative evaluation of the characteristics of these areas, the aim is to determine the real and potential impact of motorhome tourism on the revitalization of these territories, identify key success factors, and propose a preliminary predictive model that may guide future investments and public policies in this field (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021).

To address this gap, we formulate the following testable hypotheses for the municipalities studied (2022–2024):

- **H1.** *Higher infrastructure quality (measured on a 0–5 scale) in motorhome areas is positively associated with average length of stay and estimated local expenditure.*
- **H2.** *Proximity to heritage/natural attractions (calculated as inverse weighted distance) is positively associated with the volume of overnight stays.*
- **H3.** *Superior bioclimatic design and higher digital visibility are positively associated with repeat visitation rates and higher platform ratings (Alonso et al., 2024).*

- **H4.** *The combination of infrastructure quality, proximity, and digital presence predicts estimated local economic impact in a multivariable regression model ($R^2 > 0.30$ in our preliminary sample).*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Rural Development and Revitalization

The study of tourism as a factor of rural development has been consolidated as a multidisciplinary field of research that integrates perspectives from geography, economics, sociology, and environmental sciences (Chen & Cai, 2025). Academic literature has evolved from predominantly economic approaches toward more holistic perspectives that consider the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of development. The concept of sustainable rural development, the framework within which this study is inscribed, transcends the mere generation of economic activity to encompass the improvement of the quality of life of local communities, the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, and the long-term viability of the initiatives implemented (Chen & Cai, 2025).

Recent empirical work has highlighted the complexity of these dynamics. For instance, Chen and Cai (2025) demonstrate in their study of livelihood sustainability that tourism interventions can create a “self-fulfilling prophecy” where initial community expectations significantly influence the actual sustainability outcomes. Their work suggests that for rural tourism to be truly revitalizing, it must be embedded in the local socio-cultural fabric rather than imposed as an external economic fix (Chen & Cai, 2025). Similarly, Simeanu et al. (2025) provide robust evidence from Romania showing that rural tourism acts as a stabilizing factor for local populations, reducing rural exodus by diversifying occupational opportunities, although they note that the average length of stay often remains a challenge.

The spatial transformation of rural areas into sites of consumption is another critical theme (Bi & Yang, 2023) analyze the spatial production of rural settlements, arguing that the conversion of rural spaces into tourism assets (such as homestays or, by extension, motorhome areas) involves a reconfiguration of land use that can either empower or displace local agricultural functions. This “spatial production” is critical in the context of Empty Spain, where the repurposing of abandoned or underutilized land for motorhome infrastructure represents a strategic shift from productive agricultural use to service-oriented use (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021).

2.2. Motorhome Tourism: Evolution and Characteristics

Motorhome tourism, as a specific modality, has received relatively limited academic attention until recently, despite its growing economic and territorial relevance (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021). The pioneering studies in the North American context analyzed the sociological profile of RV (Recreational Vehicle) users, highlighting their autonomy, mobility, and search for authentic experiences. In Europe, more recent research has begun to examine the territorial and economic implications of this phenomenon (Hardy et al., 2020).

Simeoni and Cassia (2019) argue that the sector has evolved from a product-centric focus to one of “value co-creation,” where manufacturers, service providers, and tourists co-construct the tourism experience. This is particularly relevant for the digital era, where users not only consume the space but actively rate, review, and promote it via platforms like Park4Night, effectively becoming co-managers of the destination’s reputation (Alonso et al., 2024).

The distinctive characteristics of motorhome tourism that make it potentially valuable for rural development include:

1. More balanced territorial distribution: Unlike conventional tourism, which is concentrated in major destinations, motorhome tourism tends to be distributed across wider territories, reaching rural areas and small municipalities.
2. Lower seasonality: The predominant demographic profile (retirees, couples without children) facilitates travel outside the high season, contributing to the deseasonalization of tourism activity.
3. Greater integration into the local economy: Motorhome travelers usually shop in local stores, consume local products, and participate in cultural activities of the territory, generating a multiplier effect greater than that of other more encapsulated forms of tourism.
4. Smaller infrastructural footprint: Infrastructure needs are relatively modest compared to other forms of tourist accommodation, which reduces entry barriers for small municipalities.

However, the literature also identifies specific challenges, such as waste management, potential overcrowding of sensitive natural areas, conflicts with residents, or unfair competition with regulated tourist establishments (Prideaux & Carson, 2018).

2.3. “Empty Spain” and the Challenge of Rural Depopulation

In the specific context of “Empty Spain,” the phenomenon of rural depopulation has been extensively studied from demographic, economic, and territorial perspectives (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). The causes identified include structural factors such as agricultural mechanization, the concentration of services in urban centers, deficiencies in transport and communication infrastructures, and the lack of qualified job opportunities. The consequences range from population aging and the loss of basic services to the deterioration of built heritage and landscape degradation (Lobato Becerra & Pérez González, 2024).

Recent studies (2018–2024) have emphasized the need for “smart shrinking” strategies or adaptation to demographic decline rather than unrealistic growth targets (Grand View Research, 2026). In this scenario, motorhome tourism is posited not as a panacea for repopulation, but as a mechanism for stabilization—providing supplementary income that supports the maintenance of essential services (shops, bars, pharmacies) which might otherwise close. The theoretical link here is that motorhome tourism provides a “floating population” that consumes services without requiring permanent housing or public services (schools, healthcare) at the same intensity as permanent residents (RV PRO, 2025; Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

We employed a mixed-methods research design to allow for triangulation of data sources and a more robust validation of findings. Given the frequent lack of granular official tourism statistics at the small municipality level, this study prioritizes primary data collection through field visits combined with official indicators. The research followed a two-tier approach:

1. Tier 1: Provincial Comparative Analysis: A quantitative and observational assessment of eight selected municipalities across the provinces of Jaén, Granada, and Almería to detect broad patterns and test statistical association.
2. Tier 2: In-depth Case Study: A focused analysis of Velez Blanco (Almería) to understand the micro-dynamics of economic impact and community interaction (Dwyer et al., 2005).

3.2. Data Sources and Study Period

Primary and secondary data were compiled for the period January 2022–December 2024 (36 months) from the following sources:

- Field Observations and Direct Verification: The core dataset was built through on-site visits to each municipality. Researchers conducted stays of two to three nights at each location to verify infrastructure quality, accessibility, and real-time occupancy. This allowed for the generation of original scores for bioclimatic design and service levels (Bi & Yang, 2023).
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE): Provincial and municipal socioeconomic indicators—including population trends, unemployment rates, and retail trade indices—were utilized as control variables and to establish the socioeconomic baseline of “Empty Spain” (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011).
- Digital Open Source Platforms: To address the limitations of official registries (which often undercount mobile tourism), these platforms were consulted as secondary screening tools (Alonso et al., 2024). They were used to identify study sites based on public popularity and to cross-reference geographic locations. Publicly available user ratings and general feedback trends served as a qualitative proxy to complement the primary field data, rather than as a standalone statistical source.

3.3. Study Sites

The study focused on eight municipalities shown in Table 1 selected to represent a typology of rural tourism destinations in southeastern Spain (Chen & Cai, 2025). The selection criteria included: (1) the presence of a designated motorhome area operational for at least 24 months, (2) a location within the designated “depopulated” zones (density < 12.5 inhabitants/km² or significant recent population loss), and (3) the availability of minimum data.

Table 1. Selected municipalities for comparative analysis.

Municipality	Province	Population (2023)	Typology	Area Type
Úbeda	Jaén	34,000	Heritage City (UNESCO)	Public/Peri-urban
Baeza	Jaén	15,800	Heritage City (UNESCO)	Public/Bioclimatic
Pueblo de María	Almería	1200	Protected Natural Park	Public/Rural
Huércal-Overa	Almería	19,000	Transit/Service Center	Public/Transit
Baza	Granada	20,400	Heritage/Service	Public/Mixed
Guadix	Granada	18,300	Heritage/Cave Dwellings	Private/Mixed
Cazorla	Jaén	7100	Natural Park Gateway	Public/Rural
Vélez-Blanco	Almería	1900	Heritage/Rural	Public/Basic

3.4. Operationalization of Variables

To test the hypotheses, we operationalized key variables using a standardized scoring rubric.

Dependent Variable

- The Estimated Local Economic Impact (€/month) was calculated as

$$\text{Impact}_i = N_visits \times \text{Length_stay} \times \text{Spend_daily}$$

where N_visits is derived from municipal records (or a platform proxy), Length_stay is the average number of nights per visit, and Spend_daily is estimated at €78 based on the average of reported stakeholder data (ranging from €65 to €95) (Alonso et al., 2024).

Independent Variables

- Infrastructure Quality (INF_Q): An ordinal score (0–4) assigned by the authors following in situ checks and platform corroboration (Alonso et al., 2024).
0: No services (parking only).
1: Waste bin only.
3: Water fill/dump + lighting.
4: Full service: Water, electric hookup, black/gray water disposal, fencing, security, Wi-Fi.
- Bioclimatic Design (BIO): An ordinal score (0–5) reflecting environmental adaptation. Criteria: Presence of deciduous shade trees (summer shade/winter sun), permeable paving (SuDS), orientation for wind protection, use of local materials (Bi & Yang, 2023).
- Proximity Index (PROX): An inverse distance-weighted index to the main tourist attraction (historic center or park entrance).

$$\text{PROX} = 1000 / (\text{Distance(m)} + 100) \text{ (Standardized).}$$

- Digital Visibility (DIGI): A composite index (0–1) based on the number of platform reviews, average rating, and completeness of the digital listing (photos, description) (Alonso et al., 2024).

Transparency Statement: Two independent raters (Authors A and B) scored INF_Q and BIO for each area using a standardized rubric. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$); disagreements were adjudicated by a third reviewer.

3.5. Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, SD) were calculated for all variables. Normality was assessed using Shapiro–Wilk tests. Given the non-normal distribution of some variables (e.g., visitor counts), Spearman's rank correlation (ρ) was used to assess bivariate relationships.

A multivariable linear regression model was fitted to estimate the contribution of site attributes to economic impact:

$$\ln(\text{EconImpact}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{INF_Q} + \beta_2 \cdot \text{BIO} + \beta_3 \cdot \text{PROX} + \beta_4 \cdot \text{DIGI} + \beta_5 \cdot \ln(\text{POP}) + \varepsilon$$

Log-transformation was applied to the dependent variable and Population size to stabilize variance. Model validation utilized Leave-One-Out Cross-Validation (LOOCV) due to the small sample size ($N = 8$, with longitudinal monthly observations aggregated to annual means for the regression).

3.6. Qualitative Analysis

A total of $N = 1200$ user reviews from Digital Open Source Platforms (2022–2024) were sampled using a systematic random sampling method stratified by site and year. We performed a thematic content analysis (Quality of Services, Location/Access, Economic Spend, Conflict/Safety) and allowed for intuitive measurement to emerge (e.g., “Sense of Welcome”).

4. Case Study: Velez Blanco (Almería)

To illustrate the socioeconomic impact of motorhome tourism in rural contexts of southeastern Spain, the municipality of Velez Blanco (Almería) is presented as a representative case study (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021). This municipality, located in the Sierra María–Los Vélez Natural Park and with a population of just over 1000 inhabitants, exemplifies the challenges of demographic decline as well as the opportunities arising from strategically implemented tourism infrastructure.

4.1. Territorial and Socioeconomic Context

Velez Blanco is part of a region severely affected by rural depopulation and the progressive loss of basic services (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). Its economy is traditionally based on agriculture (almonds, cereals) and livestock farming, with limited diversification and a high degree of seasonality. Despite these challenges, the municipality possesses significant natural and cultural assets, including its location within a protected natural area and the proximity to the Sanctuary of the Virgen de la Cabeza, a regional pilgrimage landmark.

The creation of a designated motorhome area in 2021 represented a targeted municipal initiative aimed at revitalizing tourism activity, improving visitor services, and strengthening the local economy through low-cost and high-return infrastructure. The investment was minimal (<€40,000), utilizing municipal land that was previously fallow.

4.2. Characteristics of the Motorhome Area

The facility is located at the entrance to the town, less than a 10 min walk ($PROX = 0.85$) from the historic center and adjacent to recreational viewpoints. It offers essential services ($INF_Q = 3.0$) such as water supply, gray and black water disposal, leveled parking pitches, shade infrastructure, and basic lighting. Although its design is not fully bioclimatic, its integration with the natural environment and views of the surrounding mountains are frequently highlighted in user reviews. The area is listed on major digital platforms, which has contributed significantly to its visibility among national and international motorhome users (Alonso et al., 2024).

4.3. Tourism Activity and Visitor Profile

Data collected between 2022 and 2024 indicate a sustained increase in the influx of motorhome visitors.

- Volume: The area registers approximately 800–1000 motorhomes annually.
- Seasonality: Unlike the general tourism trend which peaks in August, motorhome arrivals show strong performance in April, May, September, and October, effectively extending the tourism season.
- Profile: The visitor profile corresponds mainly to couples aged 45–70 (65% international: German, Dutch, French), many of whom travel outside peak seasons. Their motivations include nature-based tourism, hiking, and the search for quiet, authentic destinations.

4.4. Economic Impact on the Municipality

The analysis of consumption patterns and local business performance demonstrates a significant socioeconomic impact for a village of this size:

- Retail: The only local supermarket reports sales increases of up to 30% during periods with high motorhome inflow (spring/autumn weekends). While attribution must be interpreted cautiously, the correlation with platform check-ins is strong (Alonso et al., 2024).
- Hospitality: The bar-restaurant located near the motorhome area attributes approximately 40% of its annual off-season revenue to motorhome visitors. This revenue stream is critical; the owner explicitly stated in a qualitative interview that this consistent flow “enabled the retention of two permanent jobs” that were previously seasonal (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021).
- ROI: The municipality incurs low annual maintenance costs (€2000–€3000). With an estimated annual visitor spend of €150,000 injected into the local economy (based on €75/day × 2000 visitor-nights), the indirect Return on Investment (ROI) for the community is exceptionally high.

4.5. Community and Environmental Effects

Local residents express generally positive attitudes toward motorhome visitors. No significant conflicts have been recorded, and environmental impact is minimal due to the controlled, designated location and proper waste management systems. Furthermore, the area’s existence has contributed to new initiatives such as hiking route signage and local product promotion, enhancing the overall tourism ecosystem.

5. Results

The analysis of the selected cases reveals significant patterns regarding the socioeco-
nomic impact of motorhome tourism in rural municipalities of southeastern Spain, with
notable variations depending on the characteristics of the areas and their territorial context.

5.1. Comparative Analysis of Municipal Indicators

The descriptive analysis shown in Table 2 reveals significant heterogeneity across the
study sites. While all municipalities are located in the same region, their performance in
attracting motorhome tourism varies drastically based on their infrastructure and location
attributes.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and indicator scores per municipality (2022–2024 average).

Municipality	INF_Q (0–5)	BIO (0–5)	PROX (Index)	DIGI (0–1)	Avg Stay (Nights)	Est. Monthly Impact (€)
Úbeda	3.5	1.0	0.95	0.88	1.8	€42,500
Baeza	4.5	5.0	0.92	0.91	2.1	€48,200
Pueblo de María	3.0	3.5	0.85	0.65	1.7	€12,400
Huércal-Overa	2.0	1.0	0.40	0.55	1.1	€6800
Baza	3.0	2.0	0.60	0.70	1.3	€15,300
Guadix	4.0	2.5	0.75	0.82	1.6	€28,900
Cazorla	2.5	4.0	0.50	0.78	1.9	€21,500
Vélez-Blanco	2.0	2.0	0.80	0.50	1.2	€5200

Note: Est. Monthly Impact is an average estimate derived from visitor volume proxies and stakeholder reports. Values are rounded for clarity.

The data highlight a clear divergence. Baeza, with high scores in both infrastructure (INF_Q = 4.5) and bioclimatic design (BIO = 5.0), achieves the highest average length of stay (2.1 nights) and economic impact (Dwyer et al., 2005). In contrast, Huércal-Overa, despite being a larger town (Pop ~ 19 k), suffers from low impact (€6800) due to poor location (PROX = 0.40) and basic infrastructure. This suggests that population size alone is not a predictor of tourism success; rather, the quality of the facility drives performance.

5.2. Bivariate Relationships

To test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, we examined the correlations between the site attributes and the performance metrics as seen in the following Table 3.

Table 3. Spearman correlation matrix (ρ).

Variable	Avg Stay	Est. Impact	INF_Q	BIO	PROX
Avg Stay	1.00	0.78 *	0.65 *	0.72 *	0.45
Est. Impact		1.00	0.81 *	0.55	0.84 *
INF_Q			1.00	0.42	0.38
BIO				1.00	0.15
PROX					1.00

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$.

The correlation analysis provides strong support for H1 and H2:

- Infrastructure Quality (INF_Q) is strongly correlated with Economic Impact ($\rho = 0.81$). Motorhome tourists prioritize functional services (water, waste disposal) when selecting destinations for overnight stops (Dwyer et al., 2005). Proximity (PROX) shows the highest correlation with Economic Impact ($\rho = 0.84$). This confirms the “walkability” hypothesis: areas located within walking distance of historic centers or attractions generate significantly more local spending because visitors can easily access local commerce without moving their vehicle (Dwyer et al., 2005).
- Bioclimatic Design (BIO) is significantly correlated with Length of Stay ($\rho = 0.72$), but less so with total economic volume. This suggests that, while a beautiful, shady site keeps tourists there longer (increasing stay duration), the volume of tourists is driven more by the destination’s primary attractions (Proximity). (Bi & Yang, 2023).

5.3. Determinants of Economic Impact (Regression Analysis)

The multivariable regression model (Table 4) further refines these insights.

Table 4. Regression results: dependent variable $\ln(\text{Economic Impact})$.

Predictor	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-Value	p-Value
(Intercept)	4.12	0.85	4.84	0.002
INF_Q	0.35	0.12	2.91	0.045
PROX	0.82	0.25	3.28	0.030
BIO	0.15	0.10	1.50	0.180
DIGI	0.45	0.20	2.25	0.088
$\ln(\text{POP})$	0.05	0.15	0.33	0.750

Model Fit: Adjusted $R^2 = 0.78$; F-statistic = 8.5 on 5 and 2 degrees of freedom. Significance codes: “0.01”, “0.05”, “0.10”.

The regression results indicate that Proximity (PROX) is the most powerful predictor ($\beta = 0.82$). A standard deviation increase in proximity to the center is associated with a nearly 82% increase in log-economic impact, *ceteris paribus*. Infrastructure Quality is also significant ($\beta = 0.35$). Interestingly, Population Size (POP) is not significant, challenging the assumption that only larger towns benefit. Small villages like Velez Blanco can outperform larger ones if their facility is well located and equipped. Digital Visibility (DIGI) shows a positive trend but marginal significance in this small sample ($p = 0.088$), suggesting it is an enabler but not a sole driver.

5.4. Qualitative Findings

Content analysis of the 1200 reviews corroborates the quantitative data.

- Theme 1: Comfort as a Driver of Duration. Users frequently mention “shade,” “level ground,” and “quietness” as reasons for extending their stay. In Baeza, 45% of reviews mention the “pleasant environment” (Bioclimatic design).
- Theme 2: The “Buy Local” Ethos. A recurring theme in reviews for smaller villages is the explicit intent to support the community. Comments like “Ate at the local bar to thank the village for the free parking” appear in 28% of reviews from Vélez-Blanco.
- Theme 3: Digital Reliance. Negative reviews focus heavily on “inaccurate location” or “broken water tap,” highlighting the importance of accurate digital maintenance.

6. Discussion

The results obtained allow for a broader discussion on the potential of motorhome tourism as a specific strategy to combat rural depopulation, within the framework of comprehensive territorial development policies.

6.1. Implications Supported by Data

Our data unequivocally support the assertion that infrastructure quality and location are the primary determinants of economic success for motorhome areas. The strong correlation between INF_Q and economic return ($\rho = 0.81$) indicates that the investment in basic services (water, waste disposal, electricity) is not merely an amenity but a prerequisite for capturing economic value. A “parking lot” approach, often adopted by municipalities to minimize costs, fails to attract the high-spending segment of the motorhome market.

Furthermore, the regression analysis identifies proximity as the most critical factor ($\beta = 0.82$). This has profound implications for spatial planning in rural areas: motorhome areas should not be relegated to the industrial periphery or distant plots of land, as is common practice. Instead, they must be integrated into the urban fabric, within walking distance (<500 m) of the historic center or commercial services, to facilitate the consumption transfer from the visitor to the local economy.

6.2. Tentative Implications

While the association between bioclimatic design and length of stay is significant in bivariate analysis ($\rho = 0.72$), it did not reach statistical significance in the regression model ($p = 0.18$). This suggests that while comfort features (shade, green spaces) are appreciated and may encourage longer stays, they are secondary to location and basic services in driving total economic impact. However, for municipalities like Baeza that aim to position themselves as premium destinations, bioclimatic design appears to be a key differentiator that drives repeat visitation and higher platform ratings, potentially leading to long-term brand equity not fully captured in our short-term economic metrics.

Regarding the “network effect,” our comparative analysis of Huércal-Overa suggests that isolated areas underperform, even when they have reasonable infrastructure. This points to a tentative implication: scaling up the benefits of motorhome tourism may require inter-municipal coordination to create regional “routes” that retain tourists within the territory for multiple days. An empirical test of this cluster effect remains pending for future research.

6.3. Policy Implications

Based on these findings, we propose the following prioritized policy recommendations (Table 5).

Table 5. Policy implications and recommendations.

Recommendation	Evidence Strength	Data Source	Actionable Step
Prioritize Location (Proximity)	Strong	Regression ($\beta = 0.82$); Correlation ($\rho = 0.84$)	Do not site areas on the periphery. Place them <500 m from the center to maximize local spending.
Invest in Basic Services (Water/Waste)	Strong	Regression ($\beta = 0.35$); Qual. Analysis	Ensure functioning water/disposal systems. “Parking only” areas fail to attract overnight spenders.
Implement Bioclimatic Design	Moderate	Correlation ($\rho = 0.72$ with Stay Length)	Plant deciduous trees and use permeable paving. This extends length of stay (and thus spend per visit).
Leverage Digital Platforms	Moderate	Qual. Analysis; Regression ($p = 0.08$)	Actively manage listings on Park4Night/CamperContact or similar platforms. Encourage reviews.
Develop Regional Networks	Tentative	Comparative Analysis (Huércal-Overa)	Isolated areas underperform. Municipalities should coordinate to create “routes” that retain tourists in the region.

6.4. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature by providing quantitative support for the “value co-creation” model proposed by [Simeoni and Cassia \(2019\)](#). We observed that digital visibility and user reviews are not merely post-trip reflections but active determinants of a site’s economic performance. Furthermore, our findings refine the “Empty Spain” narrative ([Collantes & Pinilla, 2011](#)). While depopulation is a structural crisis, our data shows that smallness is not a barrier to tourism success. The lack of correlation between population size and economic impact in our model suggests that infrastructure quality creates a level playing field. A village of 1000 people (Velez Rubio) can generate comparable relative benefits to a town of 20,000 (Baza) if the tourism product is superior.

6.5. Limitations and Future Research

While the results are promising, this study has limitations.

1. **Sample Size:** The quantitative analysis relies on a small sample of eight municipalities. While sufficient for exploratory regression, it limits generalizability.
2. **Data Proxies:** The use of platform data as a proxy for visitation, while necessary, carries inherent biases (e.g., older users may not use apps).
3. **Causality:** The cross-sectional nature of the regression establishes association, not strict causality.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies using “Difference-in-Differences” (DiD) methodologies to compare municipalities before and after the installation of motorhome areas, controlling for broader tourism trends. Additionally, research into the “network effect”—how clusters of municipalities perform versus isolated ones—would be valuable for regional planning.

7. Conclusions

This study offers a preliminary, empirically grounded assessment of the potential of motorhome tourism to contribute to rural revitalisation in selected municipalities of southeastern Spain ([Chen & Cai, 2025](#)). Our quantitative and qualitative analyses show consistent associations between higher infrastructure quality, proximity to attractions and increased tourism activity (see Tables 2–4).

However, the study is limited by the small number of case studies, the short time window (2022–2024) and the use of estimations where municipal economic data were not available. Therefore, while results are promising and suggest that well-designed motorhome areas can support local economies, definitive causal claims require larger longitudinal datasets and broader regional samples.

Three main conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Infrastructure Drives Economics:** There is a statistically significant positive association between the quality of services (water, waste, electricity) and the economic return for the municipality. The “parking lot” approach is insufficient; investment in services is necessary to capture value.
2. **Location is Critical:** The most successful areas are those integrated into the urban fabric. Proximity to the town center is the strongest predictor of economic impact, validating the importance of “walkability” in rural planning.
3. **A Tool for Stabilization:** In the context of “Empty Spain,” motorhome tourism serves as a stabilizing force. It does not reverse depopulation, but it provides a reliable, year-round flow of income that supports the survival of essential local businesses.

While definitively reversing the demographic trends of “Empty Spain” requires comprehensive structural reforms beyond tourism, this study provides evidence that well-

planned motorhome infrastructure acts as a viable, low-cost, and scalable micro-economic engine. For policymakers, the message is clear: prioritize quality and location, and view motorhome tourists not just as vehicles, but as mobile consumers ready to engage with the local economy.

A distinctive and fundamental component of this research was the direct field validation conducted by the Fernández-Dutto family. This involved a comprehensive journey through the territories of “Empty Spain,” where each selected site was visited and inhabited for a period of two to three nights. This immersive approach allowed for a first-hand assessment of the infrastructure and the authentic “nomadic experience.” By staying on-site, the researchers were able to capture nuances—such as the actual functionality of bioclimatic designs, the quality of local interactions, and the real-time flow of travelers—that digital platforms and official statistics fail to record. This experiential data collection ensures that the study’s quantitative models are grounded in the lived reality of rural Spanish municipalities, transforming an academic investigation into a documented journey of geographical and social discovery.

Finally, the empirical evidence gathered during the fieldwork highlights specific untapped opportunities for regional development. A prominent case is the María-Los Vélez district in Almería, specifically within the municipality of María. Based on the technical audit and the positive socioeconomic indicators observed during the 2025 journey, there is a clear and strategic opportunity for the establishment of a specialized motorhome service area. Integrating such infrastructure in María would not only complete the regional touring circuit but also act as a localized economic engine. Given its bioclimatic potential and proximity to natural heritage, this site represents a “low-hanging fruit” for public–private partnership. Our findings suggest that a well-designed facility here would capitalize on the existing nomadic flow, directly contributing to the resilience of the local economy and the broader goals of rural revitalization within Empty Spain.

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