

Millenium, 2(Edição Especial Nº20)

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TURISMO RURAL NO ALENTEJO INTERIOR: O POTENCIAL DO MERCADO BRASILEIRO
RURAL TOURISM IN INLAND ALENTEJO: THE POTENTIAL OF THE BRAZILIAN MARKET
TURISMO RURAL EN EL INTERIOR DEL ALENTEJO: EL POTENCIAL DEL MERCADO BRASILEÑO

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RECEIVED: 05th May, 2025

REVIEWED: 08th June, 2025

ACCEPTED: 29th August, 2025

PUBLISHED: 14th October, 2025

RESUMO

Introdução: Considerando o potencial do turismo para o desenvolvimento rural sustentável, uma estratégia de marketing bem direcionada, focada em mercados específicos, pode maximizar esse potencial, especialmente no Alentejo, que, apesar de algumas fragilidades, tem atraído um número crescente de turistas. No entanto, alcançar a internacionalização do mercado continua a ser um desafio, tendo o mercado brasileiro um particular interesse, entre outros fatores, pela sua proximidade cultural.

Objetivo: Explorar o potencial de internacionalização do turismo rural nas regiões do Interior Norte e Centro Alentejano, com especial atenção ao mercado brasileiro

Métodos: Obtiveram-se dados primários através de entrevistas a stakeholders do destino e via questionário dirigido a potenciais turistas brasileiros. Utilizaram-se estatísticas descritivas e análises multivariadas para extrair informação relevante, de modo a apoiar o debate sobre estratégias eficazes visando o mercado brasileiro, embora seja uma abordagem de natureza exploratória.

Resultados: Os resultados mostram que muitos dos estabelecimentos de turismo rural nesta área não estão devidamente preparados para receber turistas brasileiros. Embora esses visitantes apreciem as características únicas da região, também esperam altos padrões de qualidade tanto nas instalações quanto no atendimento. Além disso, parece haver uma falta de informação sobre a região, efetivamente disponibilizada aos turistas brasileiros, sobre os aspectos mais valorizados do destino.

Conclusão: Uma estratégia de marketing do destino bem fundamentada deve fortalecer o seu potencial e promover a colaboração entre diversas partes interessadas para definir uma estratégia de desenvolvimento apropriada para o mercado em questão, tendo em conta as suas expectativas e sensibilidade, sendo desejável completar este estudo por outro mais representativo para validação.

Palavras-chave: turismo rural; marketing de destinos; internacionalização; turistas brasileiros; Alentejo interior

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Given the potential contribution of tourism to sustainable rural development, a targeted marketing strategy, focusing on specific markets, can enhance this potential, particularly in the Alentejo, which, despite certain fragilities, has increasingly attracted tourists. However, achieving market internationalization remains a challenge, with the Brazilian market being of particular interest, among other factors, due to its cultural proximity.

Objective: To investigate the potential for internationalizing rural tourism in the Inland Northern and Central Alentejo region, with a focus on the Brazilian market.

Methods: Primary data were obtained through interviews with stakeholders of the destination and through a questionnaire addressed to potential Brazilian tourists. Descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses were used to extract relevant information in order to support the debate on effective strategies targeting the Brazilian market, although this is an exploratory approach.

Results: The findings indicate that many rural tourism establishments in this area are not adequately equipped to accommodate Brazilian tourists. While these visitors value the unique features of the region, they also expect high-quality standards in both facilities and staff. On the other hand, there seems to be a lack of information about the region, effectively made available to Brazilian tourists about the most valued aspects of the destination.

Conclusion: A well-founded destination marketing strategy should strengthen its potential and promote collaboration between the various stakeholders involved to define a development strategy appropriate to the market in question, considering its expectations and sensitivity. It is desirable to complement this study with a more representative one for validation.

Keywords: rural tourism; destination marketing; internationalization; Brazilian tourists; inland Alentejo

RESUMEN

Introducción: Dado el potencial del turismo para contribuir al desarrollo rural sostenible, una estrategia de marketing específica, centrada en mercados concretos, puede potenciar este potencial, especialmente en el Alentejo, que, a pesar de algunas debilidades, ha atraído cada vez más turistas. Sin embargo, lograr la internacionalización del mercado sigue siendo un desafío, siendo el mercado brasileño de especial interés, entre otros factores, por su proximidad cultural.

Objetivo: Investigar el potencial de internacionalización del turismo rural en la región Norte y Centro-Alentejo del Interior, centrándose en el mercado brasileño.

Métodos: Los datos primarios se obtuvieron mediante entrevistas con actores clave del destino y un cuestionario dirigido a potenciales turistas brasileños. Se utilizaron estadísticas descriptivas y análisis multivariados para extraer información relevante, con el fin de sustentar el debate sobre estrategias eficaces dirigidas al mercado brasileño, si bien se trata de un enfoque exploratorio.

Resultados: Los hallazgos indican que muchos de los establecimientos de turismo rural de esta zona no están adecuadamente equipados para recibir a los turistas brasileños. Si bien estos visitantes valoran las características únicas de la región, también esperan estándares de alta calidad tanto en las instalaciones como en el personal. Por otro lado, hay una falta de información sobre la región, efectivamente puesta a disposición de los turistas brasileños sobre los aspectos más valiosos del destino.

Conclusión: Una estrategia de marketing de destino bien fundamentada debe fortalecer su potencial y promover la colaboración entre los distintos actores involucrados para definir una estrategia de desarrollo adaptada al mercado en cuestión, considerando sus expectativas y sensibilidad. Es conveniente complementar este estudio con uno más representativo para su validación.

Palabras clave: turismo rural; marketing de destino; internacionalización; turistas brasileños; Alentejo interior

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism (RT) in Alentejo has attracted increasing interest from domestic urban markets, while representing an important business opportunity and contributing to the diversification of the national tourism sector, also strengthening the regional economy. Its potential for stimulating sustainable development must be acknowledged, due to its links to local products (particularly food and wine, but also handicrafts and arts) and consequent economic multiplier effects, but also due to the positive impact of RT on cultural heritage preservation and regional identity, considering visitors' increasing interest in unique, authentic, culturally embedded and community-involving experiences (Carvalho et al., 2021; Hashimoto, 2022; Lane et al., 2022; Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024; Serra et al., 2021). Given this potential of RT for enhancing sustainable, even regenerative (Kastenholz et al., 2025), development, realizing a territory's market potential requires a sound knowledge of tourist markets and the capacity of successfully targeting those groups possibly most contributing to sustainable destination development (Kastenholz et al., 2018). Initially characterized as a predominantly domestic phenomenon, rural tourism in Portugal, including the Alentejo region, has progressively gained traction among international markets. This shift has contributed to the sustainable development of rural tourism enterprises by expanding market opportunities and integrating diverse patterns of seasonality and travel behavior (de Almeida & Kastenholz, 2019). Brazilians, coming from longer distances, in Portugal's low season and often staying longer, may play a particular role (Rodrigues & Brito, 2009). Brazil and Portugal share deep cultural, historical, and linguistic ties, which help Brazilian visitors feel at home in Portugal and connect to its places and people. In this context, the role of 'cultural proximity' (Kastenholz, 2010) is worthwhile analyzing, as it revealed a positive impact on the destination image of rural Portugal amongst 'culturally relatively close' visitors. Portugal's proximity makes rural areas particularly appealing for Brazilian tourists seeking cultural enrichment and valuing familiarity. Particularly in a tourism context valuing social interaction (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009), cultural proximity should be understood as potentially enhancing rural tourists' satisfaction and successful destination marketing. The present study aims to assess a Portuguese rural region's potential to attract Brazilian tourists. It specifically yields the following objectives:

1. Assess the interest of Brazilian tourists in rural tourism in Portugal.
2. Identify factors that may enhance Brazilian tourists' interest in engaging in rural tourism in the Inland Northern and Central Alentejo (INCA) region.
3. Recommend approaches that may increase the INCA region's potential to attract Brazilian tourists.

The structure of the paper is as follows: it begins with a review of literature on rural tourism and its markets, emphasizing the concepts of cultural proximity and sustainable destination marketing. This is followed by a brief overview of the rural region under study and a description of the methodology employed to address the research questions. The findings from both the interviews and an exploratory visitor survey are then presented, leading to conclusions regarding the region's potential to attract the Brazilian market. The discussion also addresses marketing implications, key challenges, and outlines the study's limitations, along with suggestions for future research aimed at enhancing the international appeal of Alentejo and similar rural destinations.

The regional context

In the Portuguese region of Alentejo, tourism is a strategic sector for sustainable regional development (García-Delgado et al., 2020; Serra et al., 2021), and the Brazilian market can play a crucial role in this context. However, recent data for 2023 on nights spent in rural accommodation (INE, 2024) show that, apart from a huge domestic market dominance (72.3%), the Brazilian market only ranks 10 among international tourists, with only 3.2% of nights spent in rural accommodation units, largely outnumbered by particularly the German (20.5%), Spanish (15.6%), US (9.7%), UK (8.9%), French (8.2%) and Dutch (7.2%) markets. Still, they represent the second most important long-haul market, after the US.

Given the cultural links and proximity between Portugal and Brazil, as well as the increasing numbers of Brazilian visitors to Portugal, which accounted for 4.8% of bed nights in 2023, the question arises of how to attract more of these tourists to Alentejo, specifically its rural areas.

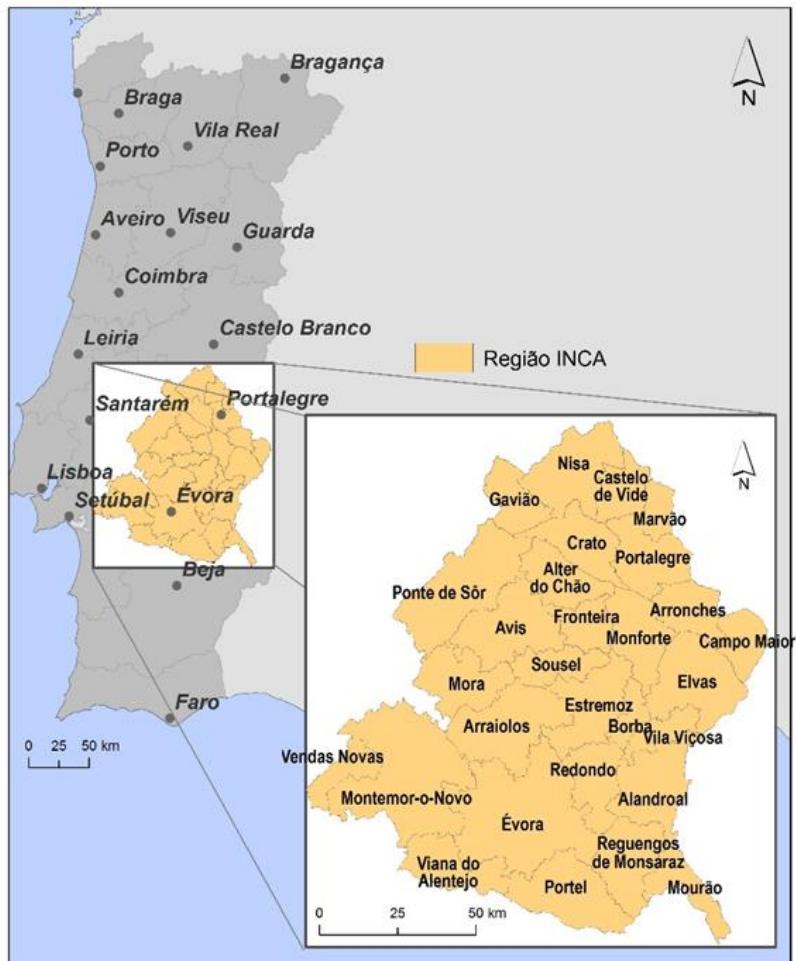


Figure 1 - The Northern and Central Alentejo Inland area (Source: Commission for Regional Development and Coordination of Alentejo)

The present study focuses on the Inland Northern and Central Alentejo (INCA region), consisting of two counties: Portalegre and Évora, as illustrated in Figure 1. These are not far from Lisbon, and host important cultural heritage, including wine and gastronomy, but also traditional craft (e.g. Arraiolos tapestry) and the historic Centre of Évora, recognized as a World Heritage site, apart from numerous, small-scale, often family-owned, locally embedded, rural tourism lodgings (Amaral, 2019; Cunha et al., 2020).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism (RT) has been growing in the past decades in many regions worldwide, mainly associated with these regions' quest for new development opportunities in previously agriculture-focused areas and a simultaneous quest for new experience opportunities for (mostly) urban tourists looking for contrast and escape from stressful, noisy, congested and often artificial city life, as well as increasing interest in diverse and unique experiences and activities in different natural and cultural settings (Hashimoto, 2022; Lane et al., 2022). The Alentejo's rural areas are known for their quality wines (Milheiro & Estêvão, 2024), unique gastronomy and cultural traditions (Duarte et al., 2022), but also for their diverse, often singular RT accommodation establishments with personalized service (Amaral, 2019; Cunha et al., 2020). Such unique place resources and opportunities for authentic, culturally immersive, and highly personalized experiences are at the core of RT, its appeal and competitiveness, however, requiring a sound marketing strategy in an increasingly competitive context (Lane et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024). Particularly within the rural destination context, additional articulation with other local activities and stakeholders, strategic regional governance, as well as digital know-how and deep market knowledge is paramount to yield sustainable destination development (Cooper et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2022; Miao, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Serra et al., 2021).

Also, internationalization strategies contribute to a stronger, more resilient rural destination position, implying wider and more diverse market opportunities (Kastenholz et al., 2022), while a careful selection of each national market is crucial to yield sustainable destination development, particularly when considering tourism impacts on local residents.

One of the biggest challenges in tourism, but also a significant factor of tourist appeal adding to the 'novelty dimension', is cultural diversity in cross-cultural host-guest encounters, possibly moderated by psychographic travel type (Kastenholz, 2010), according to a model first proposed by Plog in 1974 - see (Cruz-Milán, 2024). Indeed, too much novelty may stress some, particularly the most 'psychocentric', familiarity-concerned travelers, while those looking for the most novelty, also designed as 'allocentric' in Plog's model, may look for cultural novelty in such cross-cultural encounters. On the other hand, the model implies that most tourists are situated in the 'mid-centric' field, preferring situations that are neither too culturally distinct from what they are used to in their home environment, nor culturally too similar, as also suggested by (Kastenholz, 2010) when proposing the role of 'cultural proximity' for the development of (more or less) positive rural tourism destination images. (Bi & Lehto, 2018). Similarly, the idea of an 'optimal cultural distance' is considered to condition Chinese outbound travelers' destination choice.

The same argument can be used for the interest of local residents in host-guest interaction, possibly evaluated as more enjoyable if some 'cultural proximity' is given, as too much 'cultural distance' may stress locals in their role as hosts, increasing their uncertainty about how to communicate effectively and interpret tourists' reactions. Consequently, some 'cultural proximity' may lead to more positive cross-cultural encounters, making the tourist experience more enjoyable for both parties involved, enhancing socially sustainable tourism development.

As a matter of fact, the Brazilian tourist market holds significant importance for Portugal, particularly in the Alentejo, due to its potential to enhance cultural exchange and stable economic relations. As an international travel market, this group has been characterized as typically middle-upper class, with a relatively high level of education, and interested in cultural destinations (Pereira et al., 2023). The cultural and historical ties between Portugal and Brazil boost this relationship, as both countries share a common language and cultural roots, which can be leveraged to attract Brazilian tourists (Machado, 2017). (Rodrigues & Brito, 2009) Suggest the importance of perceived cultural richness, natural beauty, historical significance, gastronomy, and hospitality for Brazilian tourists' overall image of Portugal as a tourist destination, with previous visits revealing a positive impact on this image.

An exploratory study on "cultural proximity" undertaken by Kastenholz (2010) classified Brazilian tourists as "culturally relatively close (...) due to common historical and cultural roots, with a common language". The study showed that neither those culturally too close (domestic market) nor those 'culturally too distant' (international travelers with distinct language and culture), but those tourists classifiable as 'culturally quite close' (including the Brazilians) presented a globally most positive image of rural regions visited in the North of Portugal. Consequently, Brazilian tourists may be a particularly interesting target market for rural areas in Portugal, easier to attract and please.

2. METHODS

To gain a comprehensive understanding of potential Brazilian tourists' motivations, preferences, and expectations regarding the Inland Northern and Central Alentejo (INCA) region, the combined use of interviews and questionnaires is particularly valuable. Questionnaires allow for the efficient collection of standardized data from a large sample, enabling the identification of trends, patterns, and meaningful relationships across demographic and/or behavioral variables. Interviews provide deeper qualitative insights, capturing nuanced opinions, emotional responses, and contextual factors that structured surveys may overlook. When used together, these methods offer a complementary approach: questionnaires ensure breadth and comparability, while interviews contribute depth and richness to the analysis. This mixed-method strategy is well-suited to informing targeted marketing strategies and sustainable tourism development plans tailored to the unique characteristics of the rural area in question.

2.1 Data collection instruments and sampling

The data collected for this study were derived from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources included official documents such as statistical records and legislation. Primary sources comprised exploratory interviews and a questionnaire-based survey. In a case study approach, which is very pertinent in destination marketing and governance frameworks, like the present, interviews with destination stakeholders are a crucial source of information (Cooper et al., 2019), allowing interviewees to express their detailed views on specific themes through subjective, experience-based interpretations of complex phenomena (Azizi et al., 2024).

In this study, interviews were conducted with the Executive Director of the Alentejo Promotion Office (ARPTA – "Agência Regional de Promoção Turística do Alentejo") and with the CEO of TZ VIAGENS, a travel agency specializing in the Brazilian market. Additionally, some owners of rural tourism establishments were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, by telephone, and via email. The scripts used to conduct the interviews included the sections indicated in Table 1. Open-

ended questions were used to gather richer and more detailed information, offering a deeper level of analysis. The flexibility and minimal directivity of this method allowed for the collection of testimonies and interpretations without the interviewer's influence.

Table 1 - Interview structure by interviewee

Executive Director of the Alentejo Promotion Office (ARPTA)	CEO of a travel agency specializing in the Brazilian market	Entrepreneurs/owners of Rural Tourism establishments in the region
(1) Rural Tourism (RT); (2) RT in the INCA region; (3) RT development strategy in the region; (4) Brazilian tourist market in Alentejo and the INCA region	(1) Brazilian tourist market; (2) Rural Tourism.	(1) Characteristics of the RT establishment; (2) Brazilian tourist profile; (3) Development strategy of RT in the INCA region; (4) Brazilian tourists in the INCA region; (5) Management of demand for RT accommodation in the INCA region; (6) The role of public entities in RT in the region

(Kuphanga, 2024) underscores the utility of questionnaires as structured research instruments, particularly well-suited for examining the conditions, lifestyles, values, opinions, and behaviors of a given population. By enabling the collection of data from large groups, followed by statistical analysis, questionnaires facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships within the data.

In the present work, a questionnaire was directed at potential Brazilian tourists. This target population was contacted through various channels, Facebook groups, personal contacts, and a network of Brazilian contacts in Portugal and Brazil. Brazilian universities were also included in the study, specifically those that maintain formal cooperation agreements or protocols with the University of Aveiro and ISCTE-IUL. Although recognizing the non-probabilistic convenience sampling approach, the approach used through personal and university networks ensures the inclusion of Brazilians whose profile is close to that already identified as typical tourists to Portugal, defined by a high level of education (Pereira et al., 2023).

From this exercise, a total of 156 responses were collected, of which 143 were deemed sufficiently complete and valid for inclusion in the analysis.

The questionnaire structure includes 28 questions divided into five sections regarding respondents':

1. Typical travel behavior, focusing on European destinations and distinguishing leisure versus work and rural versus other destination contexts.
2. eventual trip to Portugal.
3. View on Portugal as a destination for rural tourism
4. View on Inland North and the Centre of the Alentejo region of Portugal as a potential travel destination.
5. Sociodemographic profile.

Although the questionnaire was not subjected to a formal pre-test, it was informally reviewed by several Brazilian individuals (personal contacts) to identify any potential issues related to its administration or the clarity of its questions. Additionally, the usability of responses to open-ended questions was assessed, leading to minor revisions aimed at improving the instrument's overall effectiveness.

The Cronbach's alpha values obtained for the travel to Portugal motivation items ($\alpha = 0.714$) and the valued aspects of rural tourism ($\alpha = 0.757$) indicate acceptable levels of internal consistency, suggesting the items within each scale are sufficiently reliable for capturing the intended constructs.

2.3 Statistical analysis

Exploratory statistical analyses of the survey data were conducted using univariate, bivariate, and multivariate methods, applying Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics - e.g., Cleff (2025).

In this study, we used the Eta measure of association to analyze the bivariate association between a categorical and a quantitative variable. Principal Components Analysis (PCA) was employed to reveal the underlying dimensions of tourists' holiday motivations in Portugal and of the attributes they most value in rural areas, PC extraction being guided by the "Total Variance Explained by the Components" criterion, with a threshold of 70% of total variance being considered.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Interviews

Regarding the interviews, the owners mostly did not authorize the recording of the conversation, and the researcher took notes of the responses. The interviews with the Executive Director of the Alentejo Promotion Office (ARPTA – “Agência Regional de Promoção Turística do Alentejo”), and with the CEO of TZ VIAGENS, a travel agency specializing in the Brazilian market, were authorized to be audio-recorded.

The interview with the Executive Director of the Alentejo Promotion Office (ARPTA) highlighted that Rural Tourism (RT) in Brazil is often seen as low-quality. Brazilians who travel internationally are generally from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, typically classified as social classes A and B, and occasionally from the upper segment of class C. These classifications reflect income levels, education, and access to goods and services, with class A representing the wealthiest group, followed by class B, and then class C+ as an emerging middle class with increasing purchasing power. Class C+ often travel in groups or for pilgrimages, while class A and B clients prefer high-quality, glamorous luxury stays, especially in Portugal, a country they value for ease of communication. These luxury hotels are promoted at high-end fairs like "Travel Week" in São Paulo. The ARPTA director noted an increase in RT in the INCA region in the 1980s with EU funding for quality investments, but emphasized the need for investment to update facilities. Many owners are old and unmotivated to maintain or restore their units. In INCA, Marvão is a highlight for Brazilian tourists due to its high notoriety in Brazil. To attract Brazilians, RT accommodations with a quality supply of wine and cuisine experiences, offering glamour and charm, are highly valued. High-end establishments should consider offering additional services, such as weddings, which are perceived as sophisticated and distinctive experiences.

According to the CEO of TZ VIAGENS, a Brazilian travel agency, Brazilian tourists are interested in Portugal, including its RT supply and the Alentejo region. They often buy package trips and visit popular destinations like France, England, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. While Brazil has abundant natural options, Portuguese descendants seek culture, good food, and religious sites like Our Lady of Fátima.

Brazilian tourists usually visit more famous tourist spots like Guimarães, Porto, Coimbra, Óbidos, Fatima, Lisbon, Sintra, and Cascais before Alentejo. Digital marketing is crucial here, with Instagram and Facebook being popular amongst this market, who mostly travel to Portugal using travel agencies. This CEO understands that targeting high social classes with wine, personalized gastronomy, and cultural experiences is key. Collaborative promotional efforts with tour operators and travel agents are considered essential for success, while a strong regional image through joint promotion should boost INCA's success in the Brazilian market.

A total of 11 interviews with Entrepreneurs/Owners of Rural Tourism establishments (six in the Evora and five in the Portalegre district, respectively) were carried out between April and May 2016. Most establishments began operating between 2000 and 2016, except one unit with more than 50 years of functioning, which is now under new management. Nearly all are open year-round, with two exceptions for winter/ Christmas. They vary in size, with only one having 29 rooms (also due to the RT legislation in Portugal, with 30 rooms only possible in the 'rural hotels' category). They typically offer around 18 beds. Each establishment employed around five staff members, with seven reporting family members' work engagement and five establishments contracting part-time collaborators. Only five staff members were reported to have tourism training, indicating low professionalism in RT. Most offer accommodation, drinks, and meals (usually by reservation), and many organize entertainment activities, sometimes outsourcing to external companies.

RT accommodation owners view their Brazilian clients as middle-aged, upper-middle class, well-educated, and often executives or entrepreneurs. These clients typically travel with their families for short (1-2 days) or slightly longer stays (4-5 days), showing interest in the region's culture, good food, and wine, thus confirming the travel agent's and regional marketing director's views. They are described as generally kind and cheerful, revealing the opportunity for positive interaction and relationship building.

Strengths of hosting Brazilian tourists include their interest in consuming services, their friendliness, and ample financial resources. Weaknesses involve their demanding attitude, need for premium service, and the time required to attend to them.

International promotion strategies for RT are classified as limited, especially for the Brazilian market. Owners suggest a joint marketing plan. Most owners are satisfied with their tourism activities but seek improvement through exploring different market niches and making sophisticated investments. Collaboration among RT owners and other tourism agencies is seen as beneficial for increasing the region's tourism appeal.

They identify the region's weaknesses in RT: a lack of promotion, funding, management skills, trained staff, and seasonal labor. On the other hand, culture, hospitality, and socializing opportunities, as well as increasing regional tourism appeal, are considered strengths that should be used to develop more high-quality and personalized services. These agents see key challenges to improve the region's position as enhanced marketing communication and refined marketing strategies, anchored in collaborative frameworks, including coordination among municipalities. Overall, respondents believe the region will maintain its authenticity despite tourism development, while also seeing it as essential to its unique appeal.

3.2 Survey results

In total, 143 individuals who responded to the questionnaire were considered. Referring to the valid answers for each question, a brief description of the questionnaire results follows.

Most respondents were female (59.4%), aged between 18 and 71 years, with an average age of 39 years (The most frequent age group is 31-45 years, with a total of 44 individuals). Most have a high academic background (79.4% with postgraduate studies and 33% bachelor's degree). Almost all (97.2%) live in urban areas in Brazil.

When respondents travel to other countries, they frequently choose urban destinations abroad and never or rarely go to rural or sun and sea destinations. Almost all respondents (99%) enjoy visiting Europe. Among them, 12.8% mentioned Portugal, Italy was also mentioned by 12.8%, 10% mentioned France, and 9.6% Spain, revealing Portugal's prime position together with Italy, but not attracting an outstanding market share.

Many respondents have never traveled to Portugal for vacation or leisure (49.6%) or business (73.7%). However, 35.7% have visited the country twice or more often for vacation purposes, and a smaller group (14%) have done so for business. Regarding the respondents who had visited Portugal before, their stay duration ranged from one week or less (28 replies) to more than 30 days (4 cases). Most trips were made by two adults. Most respondents (75) mentioned that they had searched for the destination online (33) or received information from family and friends (21). Accommodation was mainly booked through the internet (26), with the remaining options equally chosen, except for reservations made directly with the accommodation by phone (3), which was rarely an option. According to the estimated daily expenses per person during their stay, based on 59 responses, the majority of tourists (35) spent less than €100.

Table 2 - How did you become aware of the INCA region?

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Travel Agency	2	1.7%	2.7%
Internet	38	31.9%	50.7%
Family/friends	40	33.6%	53.3%
Tourism Fairs	3	2.5%	4.0%
Newspapers and magazines	20	16.8%	26.7%
Brochures of Tourist trips	7	5.9%	9.3%
TV	9	7.6%	12.0%
Total	119	100.0%	158.7%

Note: multiple responses were possible

Most respondents (79.3%) consider RT in Portugal a possible option. Those who do not consider RT as an option cited reasons such as "don't know the region," "other priorities," "do it in Brazil," "prefer large centers," and "no interest in rural tourism". Approximately 70.8% of respondents indicated that they had previously heard of the INCA region, but the majority (74.7%) have not visited it yet. Among those who had visited the INCA region (19 respondents), seven are "very likely" to return for holidays, and eight would recommend it as a holiday destination, leaving, however, quite a number not inclined to revisit or recommend. Those familiar with the INCA region had learned about it mainly through family and friends, the internet, newspapers, and magazines – see Table 2.

For those who have already visited the region, most preferred visiting it between July and September (29 responses), with the period between January and March being the least attractive (27 responses). The main reasons for a longer stay in this region include attractive prices, following a roadmap of thematic activities, a focus on active vacations, and the excellent quality of RT establishments, revealing the opportunity for gaining more relevance for the Brazilian market.

Moreover, around 80% expressed interest in receiving information about the INCA region, indicating potential for future visits. When inquired about the motivations that made respondents consider taking holidays in Portugal, the respondents tend to value "Cultural/Historical interest" and "Enjoy gastronomy and wine" the most (means are 4.26 and 4.19, respectively). As for attributes that tourists valued the most in a rural holiday in Portugal, the following stand out: "Good value for money" (mean is 4.47), "Safety" (mean is 4.45), and "Nature and landscape" (mean is 4.43) – see Tables 3 and 4. Note that all the items were measured on a scale from 1-not important to 5-essential.

Additionally, a significant association between a previous visit to Portugal and the attributes they valued most in a rural holiday in Portugal was assessed, using the Eta measure. Those who had not visited Portugal placed higher value on 'Attractions, places of interest' (p-value=0.009), while those who had visited Portugal valued 'Wine' more highly (p-value=0.001). At a slightly lower confidence level (around 93%), 'Tourist information' was also more valued by those who had never visited Portugal (p-value=0.066), as is understandable given their need for more information when visiting for the first time. Principal Components Analysis allowed a better understanding of the latent structure of the referred motivations and valued

attributes. For the first multi-item construct, we obtained a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure for Sampling Adequacy equal to 0.687; for the second construct, it was 0.627, both acceptable values, with good variance extracted (both above 70%) and reasonable factor loading for each item. The results from the two PCAs are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 - Motivations associated with holidays in Portugal – Means and Rotated Principal Components (rPC)

	Means	Loadings	% of total variance
rC1-Family, Nature & Rurality			22.39
Visiting friends and relatives	2.71	0.77	
Appreciate nature	3.53	0.73	
Enjoying the environment and rural way of life	3.12	0.68	
rC2- Social and health			19.91
Meet new people	3.31	0.85	
Practice of physical activities	2.21	0.76	
Enjoy peace and tranquility	3.52	0.58	
rC3- Culture & History			16.19
Explore an unknown region	3.86	0.84	
Cultural / Historical interest	4.26	0.77	
rC4- Food & wine			13.89
Enjoy gastronomy and wine	4.19	0.90	
TOTAL			72.38

This analysis confirms the importance of the ‘cultural’ and ‘food & wine’ dimensions for the Brazilians’ motivations (Table 3) – e.g., (Milheiro & Estêvão, 2024). On the other hand, the ‘cultural dimension’ is most valued in a rural holiday in Portugal, while also ‘authenticity’, ‘attractions’, a ‘welcoming’ context, ‘gastronomy’, and ‘tourism basics’ (information, access, and accommodation), and calm, beautiful natural scenery are rated above-average in importance (Table 4).

Table 4 - Attributes most valued in a rural holiday in Portugal – Rotated Principal Components (rPC)

	Means	Loadings	% of total variance
rC1- Welcoming context			12.66
Safety	4.45	0.787	
Climate	3.82	0.705	
Ease of communication/language	3.63	0.553	
Hospitality of the local population	4.27	0.528	
rC2- Landscape/ Environment			10.40
Conditions for walking	3.65	0.759	
Rural environment	3.63	0.738	
Nature and landscape	4.43	0.613	
Relaxing place	3.77	0.605	
rC3- Cultural and Historical Tourism Preferences			10.00
Historic Sites	4.15	0.890	
Cultural Heritage	4.28	0.866	
View of the sights of the region	4.08	0.600	
rC4- Tourism basics (access, accommodation & information)			9.97
Tourist Information	4.03	0.749	
Good access	4.07	0.749	
Accommodation	4.17	0.600	
rC5- Gastronomy			9.28
Gastronomy	4.29	0.854	
Quality of restaurants	4.02	0.754	
Wine	3.49	0.685	
rC6- Attractions, Places of interest			6.31
Attractions, Places of interest	4.19	0.841	
rC7- Authenticity of place			6.20
Authenticity of place	4.35	0.819	
rC8- Event-Driven Tourism Preferences			6.15
Festivals and fairs	3.72	0.731	
Good value for money	4.47	-0.531	
TOTAL			70.97

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the study interviews, we found that Brazilians who travel internationally typically belong to socioeconomic classes A, B, or occasionally C+, indicating they possess relatively high financial purchasing power. They commonly opt for accommodation that offers high-quality standards, glamour, and charm, reflecting a lifestyle of high quality and status. The main destination's dissemination tools among Brazilian tourists are personal networks (family and friends), the internet and brochures, newspapers, and magazines, as well as TV. This market prefers to travel between spring and autumn to the Alentejo region. On average, their stays are brief, usually lasting less than 2 days in each location, as their primary motivation appears to be exploring the region. Furthermore, the appeal of rural tourism (RT) in Portugal may not be particularly strong for Brazilian tourists, since in Brazil, RT is often associated with lower quality accommodations, with most Brazilian tourists attracted to major cities and attractions.

Brazilian tourists typically purchase travel packages, with Europe being a popular destination, particularly France, England, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Those who travel to Portugal are often of Portuguese descent and seek cultural experiences, along with good food and wine. They tend to rely on recommendations from friends and appreciate the shared language and cultural similarities, confirming (Machado, 2017) and (Rodrigues & Brito, 2009). In Portugal, they are mostly attracted to the big cities and major attractions, such as Porto, Lisbon, Fátima (for religious tourism), Guimarães, Coimbra, and Óbidos, usually only considering visiting Alentejo after exploring these primary locations. (Kastenholz, 2010) found, in a large-scale survey (N=2280), that this market is part of a 'culturally relatively close' tourist segment that was particularly pleased with rural North Portugal, suggesting a high potential of this market for rural tourism in Portugal.

The here-presented survey on RT in the Inland Northern and Central Alentejo (INCA), showed that, attributes most valued by Brazilians when taking holidays in Portugal were a safe environment, good value for money, natural settings and beautiful rural landscape, history and cultural heritage, gastronomy, accessibility, and authenticity of the place.

However, the rural space in Alentejo should be better presented to attract these tourists, with rurality possibly not being the strongest argument, but rather the region's culture, history, gastronomy, and wine. Compatible experience offerings could contribute to higher occupation rates in RT accommodation and globally, more economic activity, thus enhancing the region's sustainable development. For example, personalized, interactive tours through wine estates, with engaged local guides revealing the historical, cultural, and geographic particularities of the wine-producing region, intertwined with appealing food and wine pairing and tasting events, would certainly appeal to this demanding and authenticity-seeking Brazilian market (Carvalho et al., 2021). Similar tours showing the important, however regionally scattered, heritage of some regions, with historical highlights including significant monuments in Évora, Castelo de Vide and Marvão, or Vila Viçosa, would add value to the destination experience of this culturally interested market (Pereira et al., 2023; Serra et al., 2021), while satisfying their need for more safety and personalization through a well-organized tour with a communicative local guide.

Additionally, hosts in RT accommodation should be aware and work on their role as hosts and 'cultural brokers', helping their clients feel welcome, immerse in local culture, and make the best of their stay (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009). They should help these visitors dive into local culture, simultaneously showing interest in the special needs of their guests and permitting them true moments of highly valued cultural exchange (Carvalho et al., 2021). Partnerships between such lodging units and selected high-quality experience providers, possibly within dynamic regional networks, supported by the regional DMO, could enhance this potential (Serra et al., 2021).

Last, but not least, the identified experience values around unique local resources and welcoming ambience should be strongly communicated in digital marketing campaigns, enhanced by well-managed destination and business websites, with appealing images and testimonies from both enthusiastic Alentejo hosts in rural tourism and happy Brazilian visitors who had the chance of enjoying extraordinary experiences, pairing local culture, landscapes, food and wine and people. Interactive and well-organized communication channels with the Brazilian market is a must for successfully reaching this market, not neglecting social media impact analysis and possible intervention (Milheiro & Estêvão, 2024). RT is based on endogenous, often limited and fragile resources, calling for sustainable tourism approaches (Kumar et al., 2025), concerned with environmental and cultural preservation, as ideally reflected in government planning strategies. Regional DMOs should accordingly sensitize local agents of supply on their role as hosts and share important insight into this specific tourist market to help them specifically cater to its needs and expectations, while empowering them to develop positive host-guest interaction and engaging co-creative tourist experiences (Carvalho et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2022).

Populations and visitors also need to assume their share of responsibility in preserving rural areas. The contribution of RT to regional development is not consensual; however, the more rural tourists consume beyond tourism services, particularly local products, they contribute to a positive effect on the local/ regional economic base while sustaining embedded activities, thereby enhancing the region's social and economic sustainability (Kastenholz et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2022). Brazilian tourists may thus also contribute positively to this development. Those who may have visited or have already visited rural areas in Portugal, including the INCA region, were tourists with a considerable economic position who like shopping. If local trade, in a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship, responds to these needs, their business may be boosted.

RT in Alentejo does not integrate a mass tourism concept, but instead a more differentiated and personalized tourism approach, making it probably difficult to market through a standardized vacation package. RT should also be ready to provide Brazilians with glamour and a certain exclusivity and status sought by this market through high-level units, and an assortment of services and activities beyond plain

accommodation. Some RT establishments, particularly small luxury rural hotels, can offer this exclusive concept, with attractive weekly rates (possibly interesting for honeymooners). Once high expectations are fulfilled, they will spread the word in their network in Brazil. Particularly São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, as well as some cities in the South of Brazil with affluent residents, could be an adequate target market.

Another factor deserving attention is the apparent interest of many Brazilian travelers in exploring and sharing their experiences through intense social interaction with their hosts, as reported by RT accommodation owners. This social dimension of the RT experience, known to be relevant in rural tourism (Li et al., 2024), seems to be particularly important for the Brazilian market to Portuguese rural areas, where this communication is further enhanced through the common language. This study is not without limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. When collecting primary data through a questionnaire, the breadth of the sample may restrict the generalizability of the results. Also, the use of a non-probabilistic sampling method introduces the potential for selection bias. This methodological choice, which was due to practical constraints, limits the ability to generalize findings with statistical confidence. On the other hand, the convenience approach addressed a group of individuals that is often described as the typical and most appealing international travel market from Brazil, therefore presenting interesting exploratory results. Still, the cross-sectional design of the study imposes inherent constraints on causal interpretation. As data were collected at a single period, it is not possible to observe changes or developments over time, nor to establish temporal relationships between variables. Longitudinal studies would, ideally, be required to assess causality and dynamic trends more robustly. These could be the focus of future research. Finally, conducting more in-depth qualitative research into ways to extend the duration of Brazilians' stays in rural areas could be highly valuable, considering the importance of longer visits in creating richer, more memorable tourist experiences and promoting sustainable development in these destinations.

CONCLUSION

Considering the Brazilians' cultural proximity to the Portuguese hosts (Kastenholz, 2010; Machado, 2017; Rodrigues & Brito, 2009), supporting valuable guest-host interaction (Li et al., 2024), there is a good opportunity to appeal to a more significant share of this quite profitable and sustainability-enhancing tourist segment. The Brazilian tourist segment values culture, authenticity, high-quality and personalized service, food and wine, beautiful landscape, and social experiences, while being sensitive to safety and 'good value for money'. The INCA region has unique endogenous resources, local products, and distinctive features valued by this market (Amaral, 2019; Duarte et al., 2022; Milheiro & Estêvão, 2024; Serra et al., 2021). Thus, RT entrepreneurs and the region should prepare to comply with Brazilian tourists' specific needs and expectations, which would additionally contribute to the local economy and heritage preservation (Kumar et al., 2025; Lane et al., 2022).

Accordingly, the mostly family-run RT establishments need to invest in more professional, client-oriented management approaches, which should also help overcome seasonality, attracting distinct tourists from different origins at different times of the year. Internationalizing the region's RT market should strengthen the destination, making it more profitable and sustainable. When focusing on the culturally relatively close Brazilian market, the INCA region seems to have potential, especially with a sound strategy to reach this market and develop resources, services, and, ideally, co-creative experiences (Schilling & Kastenholz, 2024) to match its demand and desires. However, the single, usually small-scale, and not very professionally run RT establishments alone will not be able to implement a successful regional tourism development strategy. A better organized regional RT is needed, based on effective marketing strategies and communication tools, with an accurate definition of interesting target markets, differentiated product development, with well-targeted experiential products, based on local resources and competences, as well as well-defined messages and communication channels, also making the best of Brazilians' intense social media engagement. This would require significant organizational and financial investment, beyond the capacity of small business owners, requiring government support and ideally, regional networks and entrepreneurial partnerships (Agoha et al., 2023; Cooper et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2022).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, grant UIDB/00315/2020 (DOI: 10.54499/UIDB/00315/2020). This work was financially supported by the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization, E.K.; data curation, E.I. and M.C.; formal analysis, M.C., E.K. and E.I.; investigation, E.I.; methodology, M.C., E.K. and E.I.; project administration, E.I.; supervision, E.I. and M.C.; validation, E.I. and M.C.; visualization, M.C.; writing-original draft, M.C., E.K. and E.I.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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