

POTENTIAL OF EQUESTRIAN TOURISM IN PORTUGAL

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ABSTRACT

Portugal offers a vast number of factors that boost the development of the national equestrian tourism. Equestrian tourism represents an important opportunity for the qualification and differentiation of the national tourism, as well as stimulating rural economies, helping to combat seasonality and asymmetries.

The aim of this study is to understand how critical success factors such as the *Lusitano* horse, the national equestrian culture, the landscape diversity, among others, are important for the equestrian tourist. Also, to understand how they can contribute to the differentiation of the national equestrian tourism for international destinations that are already deployed in the market.

For the purpose of this study is crucial to understand the perspective of those involved in the various equestrian tourism activities. In this sense, a group of companies were selected and exploratory interviews were conducted that contributed to a number of important outputs in the construction of the questionnaire, only applied to equestrian tourists.

A total of 110 individuals participated in the research, with different profiles, motivations and types of involvement. From the analysis, it is concluded that the critical success factors are significant in motivating equestrian tourists, namely the quality of equestrian infrastructures, the *Lusitano* horse, the hospitality, among others. It is also possible to analyze that the equestrian tourist demonstrates a strong commitment: they are knowledgeable, since they read a lot about riding, belong to equestrian clubs and often face the possibility of having an occupation linked to the equestrian sector.

Finally, the results highlight the agreement between participants and a significant number of statements made in the questionnaire related to motivation and involvement. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that equestrian tourists look for relaxing moments and opportunities to expand their equestrian knowledge in these type of activities.

KEY WORDS: Equestrian Tourism; Tourism product; Consumer behavior; Motivation; Involvement; *Lusitano* horse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Equestrian tourism is the tourist activity that uses the horse or other equine as the main factor of tourist attraction. Subdivided into tourism by horse and tourism of the horse, each subgroup has different public products (TURIHAB, 2012; Oliveira, 2010; Patrão, 2008; Figueira, 2007). Portugal has the potential to produce about 300 million Euros (Neoturis, 2008), contributing to the development of rural economies and domestic tourism. It is important for the qualification of the tourism offer because it contributes to diversify tourist activities, to reduce seasonality and serve to boost regional economic activity (Portugal, 2014). However, this type of tourism has not been worthy of study and analysis (Guðrum & Ingibjörg, 2008), despite the historical importance that the horse had and has in travel (Ollenburg, 2005).

Considering the long history linked to horse and the diversity of unique elements that exist in Portugal that differentiate it, there still is much to do for the country to assert itself as a European or worldwide equestrian tourism destination.

Therefore the objectives of this work are:

- i. To perceive the national equestrian tourism potential and contribute to its development;
- ii. To identify needs and gains of the country as an equestrian tourism market;
- iii. To generate outputs that build a competitive offer;
- iv. To know the motivations of equestrian tourist;
- v. To understand the involvement of the equestrian tourist by the choosing of an equestrian tourism destination
- vi. To contribute to the creation of a differentiated product according to the consumer's profile;

Accordingly, this study begins with a brief literature review about equestrian tourism and the variables of the consumer's behavior – motivation and involvement, followed by the research methodology. In the fourth part, the results are discussed and finally, some contributions and recommendations for future research are suggested.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Portugal has a strong potential for the development of equestrian tourism. In horse or by horse we can enjoy a less commercial and mass-country, most typical, more human, which allows experiencing unique environments, with rich landscape and culture (ANTE, 2003).

Equestrian tourism is the tourist activity that uses horses or mules for transportation and/or as main factor of interest or motivation (ABNT, 2007), intended to offer a rich and authentic experience in the natural environment (Líbano, 2008). It is an element of active tourism, practiced by people looking for contact with different elements such as: nature, culture, traditional features of the rural areas, popular culture, crafts and cuisine (Györffy, 2001).

The equestrian tourism includes two distinct concepts inside the global offer, such as tourism by horse or tourism of the horse, each one with distinct public and products.

Regarding tourism by horse we use the horse as resource (Figueira, 2007), tourists are moved using the horse as the primary means of locomotion and/or as tourism activity (APPCE, n.a.). People are motivated by the opportunity to participate in sport competitions or leisure activities, in horseback ridings, in trainings and/or in stages.

In regard to the tourism of the horse, the main reason for the trip is the horse, even without practicing equitation people travel to participate in activities related to the equestrian world, such as shows, to visit fairs, museums, academies and stud farms. The reason for traveling is the admiration for the equestrian world and not the desire to ride a horse (Neoturis, 2008).

It attracts very significant flows of tourists, with an upward trend, with different ages, profiles and motivations. The equestrian tourist tends to spend more time in the destination than the majority of sports tourism consumers (Brown, 2003). Riding is one of the four favorite activities of rural tourists (Neoturis, 2008).

Due to the intensification of equestrian events promotion, there has been an increasing number of people participating in equestrian events, either actively or passively (Neoturis, 2008).

According to the Portuguese Equestrian Federation, the equestrian tourism emerged in France in 1985 with the ambition to contribute to the development of horse education practitioners providing greater autonomy and promoting horseback travel more safely (Neoturis, 2008). In Hungary the development of this type of tourism was motivated by the enthusiasm of horses, traditions, equestrian culture and programs related to horses (Konyves & Suta, 2009).

Due to these characteristics horse tourism can be articulated with other tourism products, creating a composite and distinctive offering that provides enriching and different experiences. Equestrian tourism, as in any type of tourism, offers a wide range of products or activities available at different prices to different publics, with the most contrasting levels of experience or knowledge (Ollemburg, 2005).

This type of tourism has considerable impact on the development of rural tourism, adventure tourism, nature and sports tourism (Auchter, 2008), interacts with many other sectors, such as cultural or health tourism (Neoturis, 2008), with golf (Líbano, 2009) and food and wine (Boavida, 2012).

Surrounding environment and the local culture are essential to create a tourist destination image associated with horse tourism (Neoturis, 2008).

The products offered by equestrian tourism range from simple horse riding or carriage, to itineraries of several days or weeks in places more or less sinuous, to periods spent in farms where tourists pay to live the experience of the fields labors and the day-to-day of a stud, is also available the assistance in equestrian events, participation in competitions, fairs or in stages.

To better understand equestrian tourism its characteristics, the profile and motivation of its consumers, and the available supply, this study has emerged and its methodology is presented below.

3. METHODOLOGY

To understand equestrian tourism, its characteristics, the profile and the motivation of its customers, as well as the available supply, we used the following methodology:

- 1) Review of existing and relevant literature to the subject at global and national level, through the use of scientific articles databases.

- 2) Analysis of case studies presented as “good practice examples” in the technical workshop “Equestrian Tourism in Portugal - development opportunities,” sponsored by *Turismo de Portugal*, and tourism industry companies with equestrian tourism activities.
- 3) Participation in various events related to equestrian tourism: launch of the “Intervention Plan for Equestrian Tourism in *Alentejo* and *Ribatejo*”; presentation of the project “Route Horse and *Ribatejo*: An Integration Project”; which took place on the 24th of May of 2014 in Golegã.

From the document analysis, exploratory interviews were conducted with companies that aim for equestrian tourism. The analysis selected a group of six entities with tourist and/or equestrian activities to try to understand the industry reality and to prepare the questionnaire that was applied to equestrian tourists. Only four entities accepted to cooperate with the investigation.

The questionnaire was developed based on the interviews and on scales previously tested and applied by other authors, to understand what motivates the equestrian tourists and their involvement in the choice of a particular destination over others. This consisted of five parts:

- I. Presentation of the research and the objectives;
- II. Questions 1 to 7 – evaluate the equestrian experience of the participants;
- III. Questions 8 and 9 – evaluate, through 7 point Likert scale (1= not important and 7= very important), the equestrian tourism experience in Portugal, identify the critical factors of success with influence in the decision of equestrian tourism in Portugal and to understand which national places/ events are more visited by the equestrian tourists.
- IV. Question 10 and 11 – analysis of consumer behavior variables – motivation and involvement;
- V. Questions 12-20 – socio-demographic analysis of the respondents;

The questionnaire was applied to equestrian tourists through an online survey, between 15th of July and 30th of September of 2014. This data collection method allows us to obtain a large sample and with reduced costs (Wright, 2005). We chose to use online communities since it is one of the methods that provides easy access to a group of individuals with common interests (Paris & Teye, 2010; Wright, 2005). Data analysis was performed using SPSS 21 software.

4. RESEARCH AND RESULTS

After the analysis of sociodemographic characteristics it can be concluded that 74% of 110 participants in the study are female, 38% were aged 36-45 years, 55% were single/divorced/widowed and 72% have higher education. Regarding the occupation, 19% are students and 16% are individual entrepreneurs.

Nearly 80% practice equestrian sports, 55% practice dressage, 32% riding only for laser, 34% jumping and 15,5% do working equitation.

Approximately half of the respondents practice equestrian tourism once a year and 42% do it with friends. The countries where they have practiced equestrian tourism were: Portugal (99), Spain (16), United Kingdom (13), France (8), and Germany (7), among other.

Forty-eight percent of respondents acquire the equestrian tourism travel directly by the operator. The most used complementary services are restaurants and hotels and the most popular activities were horseback riding and watch equestrian shows. Almost 70% practiced more than one activity during their last equestrian tourism experience.

Table 1 shows that 42.4% of the respondents consider “quality of equestrian infrastructures” very important for equestrian tourism practice in Portugal, followed by “*Lusitano* horse” (40.4%), hospitality (37.4%), national equestrian tradition (37.4%), qualification of human resources (33.3%), renowned riders and riding teachers (34.3%) and security (31.3%).

Local/national events most visited by participants were: “Golegã Horse Fair” (59); “Hippodrome Campo Grande” (45); “Portuguese School of Equestrian Art - Queluz Palace” (39); “International *Lusitano* Horse Festival” (37); “Alter Stud Farm” (33); “Ponte de Lima Horse Fair” (27).

The most relevant individual motivations to practice equestrian tourism in Portugal were: “increasing the equestrian knowledge” (61,6%); “looking the *Lusitano* horse” (49.5%); “have fun with friends” (47.5%); “using my skills to the equestrian sport” (41.4%); “know the culture/Portuguese equestrian tradition” (39.4%).

Concerning the variable involvement the following items were those that gathered greater agreement: “I read a lot about riding in specialty magazines and books” (46.4%); “I belong to a horse riding/riding center” (42.7%); “the ideal job for me is tied to horses” (40.9%).

Table 1. Main factors that influence the decision to practice equestrian tourism in Portugal

(from 1= not important to 7= very important)

Main factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean
	%							
Proximity to my home area	23.2	11.1	12.1	11.1	10.1	11.1	21.2	3.92
Lusitano horse	12.1	5.1	1.0	13.1	18.2	10.1	40.4	5.12
Other indigenous breeds (garrano; sorraia; pony of Terceira Island)	34.3	10.1	9.1	11.1	19.2	9.1	7.1	3.26
National equestrian tradition	4.0	5.1	4.0	10.1	16.2	23.2	37.4	5.48
History of Country	6.1	9.1	6.1	27.3	21.2	16.2	14.1	4.54
Ethnography	15.2	11.1	16.2	25.3	15.2	11.1	6.1	3.72
Gastronomy	11.1	8.1	11.1	21.2	20.2	17.2	11.1	4.27
Landscapes	6.1	0.0	3.0	18.2	24.2	25.3	23.2	5.23
Weather	6.1	2.0	6.1	19.2	23.2	19.2	24.2	5.06
Security	8.1	4.0	4.0	13.1	18.2	21.2	31.3	5.18
Quality of the equestrian infrastructure	2.0	2.0	2.0	10.1	20.2	21.2	42.4	5.78
Quality of the tourism infrastructure	4.0	2.0	3.0	16.2	31.3	17.2	26.3	5.25
Hospitality	2.0	2.0	4.0	5.1	17.2	32.3	37.4	5.80
Qualification of human resources	4.0	5.1	6.1	11.1	12.1	28.3	33.3	5.40
Accessibility	3.0	6.1	0.0	17.2	27.3	30.3	16.2	5.15
Renowned riders and riding teachers	6.1	5.1	9.1	15.2	13.1	17.2	34.3	5.13
Offer of equestrian events	5.1	5.1	5.1	16.2	21.2	22.2	25.3	5.11

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that 80.9% of the respondents usually ride horses and they are mostly dressage practitioners or they just ride for fun without any equestrian discipline in particular. Participants in the study practiced equestrian tourism once a year, for one or two days, preferably with friends. They purchase their trip through the internet. Catering and accommodation services are the most popular. The equestrian tourist practices a variety of activities: horseback riding, equestrian shows, visits to stud farms, riding lessons, among others.

The most popular countries destinations for equestrian tourism are: Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom and France.

The equestrian tourist appreciates elements, identified in the literature review, such as the differentiating factors: the *Lusitano* horse, the national equestrian tradition, the security that features in the country, the quality of equipment and infrastructures, the typical and renowned hospitality of the Portuguese people, the qualification of human resources, nationally and internationally recognized riders, offering sporting events, are considered some of the most important elements.

The best known places and events are: the secular and traditional fair Golegã; the Hippodrome *Campo Grande*; the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art; the *Alter* Stud Farm and the International Festival of Pure Bred *Lusitano* Horse.

The main reasons to practice equestrian tourism are related to the need to learn and know more about riding and the equestrian world, with the possibility to admire the *Lusitano* horse and the national equestrian culture. Also they value having fun and relaxing with friends.

The equestrian tourist has a strong involvement, is informed, reads and investigates about riding and horse riding. Almost half of the participants claimed to be part of a riding center or equestrian club. Also, they do not consider that horses can consume too much of one's time and that it deprives them from other activities. Thus we conclude that they have a great involvement.

This research highlights to the relevance of enjoying unique elements such as the *Lusitano* horse and culture, Portuguese equestrian tradition and art of hospitality featuring the Portuguese people to differentiate the equestrian tourism, offering a product that is neither better nor worse than available in countries already established, it's just different and unique, it is Portuguese.

People who choose Portugal, want to appreciate the opportunity to know all the process of creating the *Lusitano* horse, since the conception to the development. They value the experience of riding *Lusitano* horses.

The equestrian tourist likes to practice various activities. This validates the opinions given in the exploratory interviews that defend the need of products and services inserted into the network. This communion will serve to increase the duration of the stay and to increase the revenue generated. It is very important to meet the public, their motivations, their profile, their expectations and needs.

Finally, we believe that equestrian tourism in Portugal is likely to have a significant growth. Examples of this are the maximization on behalf of the policy makers, through investment on the visibility of the *Lusitano* horse and the consideration of this type of tourism in the National Strategic Plan for Tourism, presented by the Portuguese government.

We hope that academic research can contribute to the achievement of the national equestrian tourism progress goals.

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