

PROPOSAL FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THEMATIC CULTURAL TOURIST ROUTES IN ALENTEJO, PORTUGAL

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Abstract: *The Alentejo region of Portugal is a beautiful and diverse tourist destination located in the south of the country, offering a variety of cultural activities as modern forms of tourism that include many thematic cultural tourist routes. In addition to the rich historical asset of the area reflected in the multitude of architectural elements, the rural part of the region is full of numerous wine regions, cork oaks, olive trees, factories of coloured ceramics with marble inlays – all perfectly combined with the local gastronomy.*

Key words: *Alentejo, cultural tourism, authenticity, thematic routes*

INTRODUCTION

Alentejo, one of the most authentic regions of Portugal, a territory rich in history, in vast cultural heritage and peaceful landscapes that preserve centuries-old traditions, is a tourist destination of excellence, where authenticity and sustainability combine to offer unique experiences to travellers. Focusing on the traditions and products characteristic of the area-such as local wines, cork, marble, traditional folk songs, ceramics, olive oil, and local gastronomy-this study aims to enrich the tourism offer of the region, while promoting the cultural preservation and appreciation of Alentejo. This perspective is corroborated by Romanian studies, such as highlighting the potential of cultural tourism in European rural regions. [1,4,5,10,11,12,13,15,25]

The Alentejo region stands out for its characteristic landscape marked by golden plains, cork oak forests, and centuries-old olive groves. This rural setting serves as a background to a rich cultural heritage that manifests itself in its historic villages, traditional crafts, and local cuisine. [2,3]

Only 1 h and 30 min from Lisbon Airport, Alentejo is one of the most surprising and peaceful destinations in Europe, the largest and most authentic Portuguese region full of unique experiences, culture, history, and nature. [14,15]

Tourists visiting it have the feeling that time passes more slowly. Visiting the Alentejo, full of stunning landscapes, cultural heritage, and hospitality, is a perfect opportunity to discover a new site of Portugal and gather unforgettable memories.

The implementation of thematic tourist itineraries appears as a strategy to capitalize on these resources, offering visitors a deep immersion in the history and culture of Alentejo: [2,5,18]

- Roman period: Introduction of grapevine and olive tree to the region;
- Middle Ages: Development of ceramic production and marble extraction techniques;
- 18th century: Expansion of cork production and consolidation of popular traditions;
- Today: Valorisation of cultural heritage as a tourist resource.

Local Wines: The Essence of The Alentejo Terroir

Alentejo wines are internationally recognized for their quality and distinctive character. According to Mendes et al. [6], “Alentejo winemaking combines centuries-old traditions with modern techniques, resulting in wines that truly express the region’s terroir.” This statement is supported by Romanian studies, [11,12] who observes how the

promotion of wine tourism, combined with cultural itineraries, enriches the tourist experience offering visitors the opportunity to understand the territory and the cultural identity behind each wine. [16,19,22]

Native grape varieties such as Touriga Nacional, Alicante Bouschet, and Aragonez are grown in schist and granite soils under the intense Alentejo sun. This results in full-bodied wines with notes of ripe red fruit and a characteristic minerality. Including visits to vineyards and wineries in tourist itineraries allows visitors to understand the entire production process – from vineyard to bottle – providing a complete sensory experience.

Cork: The Green Gold of Alentejo

Cork production in Alentejo is a notable example of sustainability and tradition. The cork oak forest, a typical Alentejo landscape, is not only an ecological element, but also an economic one, cork being one of the most valuable products of the region. The sustainable exploitation of cork ranks Portugal as a world leader in the production of this material. Studies highlight the positive impact of the cork sector on sustainability and tourism, highlighting cork as a symbol of cultural and environmental innovation. Cork is used in a variety of products, from wine stoppers to handicrafts to innovative uses in design and fashion. Visiting cork factories and workshops allows tourists to understand the versatility of this material. [6,7,23,24]

The process of extracting the cork, known as stripping, is done by hand every nine years, ensuring the health and longevity of the cork oaks. This ancient practice, passed down from generation to generation, is a fascinating spectacle that deserves to be included in tourist itineraries. Ecosystems host a rich diversity of flora and fauna, including threatened plant and animal species. [2,5,8,9,18]

Marble: The Noble Stone of Alentejo

The extraction and processing of marble in Alentejo, especially in Estremoz, Vila Viçosa, and Borba, is an ancient tradition dating back to the Roman period. According to Silva & Rodrigues [19], “Alentejo marble, known for its exceptional quality and chromatic variety, has decorated monuments and works of art around the world.” This statement is corroborated by Romanian studies, such as compares marble extraction and processing techniques in different European regions. [22]

Including visits to quarries and stone workshops in tourist itineraries gives visitors a unique insight into this industry. Tourists can observe the process of extracting marble blocks, learn about traditional carving techniques, and appreciate the natural beauty of this noble stone in different stages of transformation. In addition, visiting the monuments and historical buildings built with local marble allows visitors to realize the importance of this resource in the architecture and art of Alentejo.

Cante Alentejano (Traditional Alentejan Song)

Cante Alentejano, declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by U.N.E.S.C.O., is a traditional event that reflects the collective soul of Alentejo. This polyphonic choral singing without instrumental accompaniment is a unique form of cultural expression that conveys stories and emotions related to rural and community life. Cante Alentejano is one of the main elements of cultural identification in the region, making it essential in any cultural tourism itinerary. Therefore, the inclusion of choral group performances in local events and festivals enriches visitors’ knowledge of the region’s intangible heritage.

Traditional Ceramics

Pottery is another prominent art in Alentejo, with roots dating back several centuries. Clay and modelling techniques are passed down from generation to generation, perpetuating the tradition of craft production. Alentejo ceramics, with their geometric patterns and vibrant colours, reflect the region’s history and aesthetics. In towns like

Redondo and São Pedro do Corval, pottery is one of the most popular craft activities among tourists. Tourist itineraries that include visits to ceramic workshops allow visitors to experience the process of manual creation, strengthening the cultural interaction between tourists and local artisans. [20,23,24]

Olive Oil

Alentejo olive oil is known for its exceptional quality, being an essential product in regional gastronomy. Olive cultivation is a practice that has been alive since ancient times, with production techniques that preserve the authenticity of the product. Visits to olive plantations and oil mills offer tourists the opportunity to learn about the cultivation and production process, in addition to tasting the region's extra virgin olive oil recognized for its rich flavour and health benefits. Alentejo olive oil, produced from indigenous olive varieties, is internationally recognized for its quality and unique organoleptic features.

Local Gastronomy

In Alentejo, gastronomy is characterized by simplicity and the use of high-quality local products, such as bread, olive oil, black pork, and aromatic herbs. Traditional dishes such as Alentejo açorda, pork migas, lamb stew, and tomato soup with poached eggs are symbols of Alentejo cuisine. Gastronomy is an essential tool for promoting cultural tourism, as it offers visitors a sensory experience that complements the knowledge of regional history and traditions. [18, 19]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Since the analysed area has many authentic natural and anthropogenic tourist resources, in this scientific approach, using the known methods presented in literature, the authors propose new thematic tourist routes starting from the authentic elements of the area, through which to enhance tourist activity, valuing the reputation of these resources with the aim of sustainably develop the area.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The implementation of thematic cultural tourist routes in Alentejo should rely on the capitalization of the material and immaterial heritage of the region, creating a tourist offer that combines culture, economy, and nature.

The proposed itineraries, covering authentic elements of the region-local wines, cork, marble, traditional folk song, ceramics, olive oil and local gastronomy-offer an engaging and authentic experience of Alentejo culture as a sustainable and vibrant cultural tourist destination.

The history of Alentejo winemaking is a saga of perseverance and passion, marked by centuries of innovation and tradition. During the Middle Ages, monks were the guardians of wine knowledge, cultivated grapes, and produced wines that supplied monasteries and palaces. Over the years, the region has seen the emergence of small family producers and cooperatives that have kept the flame of winemaking alive in Alentejo even in the most difficult times.

The city of Évora is internationally known for its cultural heritage, whose roots date back to Roman times. In addition to the cultural aspect, the destination offers good surprises for wine lovers, but before the tour reaches the wineries, it is worth mentioning that the historical centre of Évora is considered a world heritage site by U.N.E.S.C.O. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). The tour, in fact, can start in the heart of the city: Praça do Giraldo, which hosts some of the main tourist attractions.

The itinerary includes visits to renowned wineries and wine tourism experiences with wine tasting activities and workshops on wine pairing and local cuisine:

- Herdade do Esporão (Reguengos de Monsaraz) – historic winery with guided tours and tastings;
- Vinícola Cooperativa de Borba (Borba)-famous for its high quality white and red wines;
- Cartuxa (Évora)-one of the most prestigious wineries in Portugal, producing the famous Pêra-Manca;
- Vidigueira: with tradition in wine production, including “Talha” wines, matured in clay vessels.

Activities:

- Wine tasting: the sensory experience of Alentejo wines is a fundamental element of the proposed tourist itineraries;
- The wine landscape: the vast vineyards of the Alentejo provide a stunning setting for visitors, illustrating the importance of viticulture in the region;
- Traditional winery: Alentejo’s historic wineries allow tourists to immerse in the region’s centuries-old winemaking tradition.

Alentejo is one of the largest producers of cork in the world, so the route will focus on exploring the cork cycle, from extraction to use:

- Coruche – Cork Museum and field activities introducing cork extraction;
- São Brás de Alportel – factory visit and information on the process of transforming cork into products;
- Grândola – various ecotourism activities related to the cork oak landscape typical of the region.

Activities:

- Live cork extraction demonstrations;
- Visits to cork processing factories;
- Workshops on the sustainable use of cork.

Alentejo is also known for its marble quarries, especially in Vila Viçosa, Estremoz, and Borba, which can offer a unique experience to tourists interested in art and industry:

- Vila Viçosa – marble production centre with visits to quarries;
- Borba – visit to the marble workshops and the historical centre, which exhibits many marble buildings;
- Estremoz – the city of the “Estremoz Dolls,” where marble also has a strong presence.

Activities:

- Tours to active marble quarries;
- Marble sculpture workshops;
- Visits to historical marble monuments.

O Cante Alentejano (Traditional Alentejan Song), intangible heritage of humanity by U.N.E.S.C.O., is a form of traditional song from the region and a themed route could offer authentic experiences with local choral groups.

- Serpa – Centro do Cante Alentejano, where regular presentations of local groups take place;
- Mértola – singing concerts in churches and cultural spaces;
- Beja – city where there are also active Cante Alentejano groups.

Activities:

- Concerts and open rehearsals of choral groups;
- Workshops to learn a singing technique;
- Singing festivals in various localities.

Alentejo pottery is renowned for its vibrant patterns and colours and this route would highlight the villages where pottery is handcrafted;

- Redondo – one of the main centres of traditional ceramics, known for its decorative and utilitarian pieces;
- São Pedro do Corval-the largest pottery village in Portugal, with dozens of artisan workshops.

Activities:

- Visits to pottery workshops with live demonstrations;
- Pottery workshops where visitors can create their own pieces;
- Craft fairs where you can purchase local products.

Alentejo is also a major producer of olive oil, with olive groves all over the entire territory. A themed olive oil route can include visits to olive groves, mills, and tastings.

- Monsaraz-traditional and modern olive groves with guided tours;
- Moura-region known for high quality olive oil, with mills offering guided tours;
- Beja-one of the most important olive oil production centres in the region.

Activities:

- Visits to olive oil mills;
- Tasting different types of olive oil;
- Workshops on the use of olive oil in cooking.

Alentejo gastronomy is rich and diverse, with an emphasis on dishes such as lamb stew, Alentejo bread, and migas. This route will focus on a regional culinary experience. Suggested locations:

- Évora-traditional restaurants with typical dishes;
- Arraiolos-famous for its lamb and cheeses;
- Beja-another destination where travellers can find the best dishes of Alentejo cuisine.

Activities:

- Cooking classes at local restaurants;
- Tasting traditional dishes at markets and fairs;
- Visits to local food producers such as cheese and sausages.

CONCLUSIONS

These themed tourist routes offer a rich and exciting way to explore Alentejo, promoting an experience that combines culture, tradition, gastronomy, and regional products. In addition to highlighting the unique characteristics of Alentejo, they also encourage sustainable tourism and the appreciation of the cultural and natural heritage of the region.

Future perspectives. The implementation of thematic cultural tourism routes in Alentejo presents itself as a promising strategy for the sustainable development of tourism in the region. The appreciation of cultural heritage through tourism not only contributes to the preservation of local traditions, but also promotes the economic development of communities. By integrating these diverse aspects of the region's cultural heritage, it is expected not only to increase the tourist attractiveness of Alentejo, but also to promote the preservation and appreciation of its centuries-old traditions. For the future, it is recommended to continuously monitor the impact of these itineraries both from an economic and socio-cultural point of view, ensuring a balance between tourism development and the preservation of local authenticity.

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