



Cuadernos Gestión Turística del Patrimonio

Handbook of tourism management heritage

Journal homepage: <https://cuadernosgestionturisticadelpatrimonio.es>

ISSN: 2952-2390

Rethinking Heritage Tourism in Portugal: Challenges and Opportunities

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Heritage tourism, Portugal, sustainability, archaeological tourism, challenges, opportunities.

RESUMEN

Heritage tourism in Portugal faces a few challenges that reflect the complexity of balancing the preservation of cultural and natural heritage with the growing demand for tourism, the preservation of local identities, and the commercialization of heritage, which has a profound impact on the lives of Portuguese people, especially in cities. The over-commercialization of cultural heritage, driven by mass tourism, dilutes the authenticity of local traditions and practices, turning them into simplistic attractions. Local communities face challenges such as rising living costs, gentrification, loss of access to their spaces, and social tensions. To mitigate negative impacts, it is essential to adopt sustainable tourism strategies that limit the number of visitors, protect cultural and natural resources, value archaeological and rural tourism, and ensures that economic benefits are shared equally among local communities. This way, it is possible to preserve cultural and natural heritage for future generations and maintain a balance between tourism and community life.



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Received 20 January 2026; Received in revised form 23 March 2026; Accepted 27 June 2026

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a fundamental economic activity for Portugal, contributing significantly to wealth and job creation. In 2024, the tourism sector surpassed pre-pandemic levels, breaking records with 31,6 million registered guests, including 19,4 million foreigners. Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Germany were the main source markets. The country recorded 80,4million overnight stays - an increase of 8,8% compared to 2023 - 56,4 million of which were from foreign visitors².

This growth in the sector is largely driven by heritage tourism, which plays a crucial role in enhancing Portugal's cultural and natural heritage. The country, rich in archaeological sites, historical monuments, and natural landscapes offers tourists immersive experiences beyond simple visits, becoming an essential tool for preserving and promoting national identity (Martins & Costa, 2010). Heritage tourism contributes to the economic development of regions but also helps to strengthen the cultural identity of local communities, fostering a deep connection between past and present (Pereiro, 2009).

Heritage tourism involves exploring resources strongly linked with a territory's historical, cultural, and natural identity (ICOMOS, 1999). In Portugal, this concept includes cultural heritage, such as archaeological sites and historical monuments, and natural heritage, including significant landscapes, ecosystems, and environmental resources. With its rich diversity of landscapes and historical remains, from prehistoric archaeological sites such as the Côa Valley engravings to natural parks such as the Alvão Natural Park or the Florest of Laurissilva (Madeira), the country has a wealth of resources that can be used to promote sustainable and educational tourism. From the impressive megalithic monuments of the Alentejo region and the Roman ruins of Conímbriga to the unique landscapes of the Peneda-Gerês National Park or the coastal formations of the Algarve, each element offers an opportunity for heritage tourism³. This type of tourism can enhance historical sites through guided tours, virtual recreations, and cultural events while promoting the sustainable exploration of natural areas. By involving local communities and adopting responsible practices, it can create authentic experiences that preserve its cultural and environmental identity, attract visitors, and contribute to regional development (Pereiro, 2009; WTO, 2002).

² https://www.turismodeportugal.pt/pt/Turismo_Portugal/visao_geral/Paginas/default.aspx

³ <https://www.visitportugal.com/pt-pt>



Fig. 1. The ruins of Carmo's Church, Lisbon.

However, the use of heritage for tourism purposes faces several challenges, including the lack of adequate research, the state of conservation of many archaeological remains (Correia, 2002; Tahan, 2020), and the need to ensure that natural resources are protected while promoting public access. Many archaeological and natural sites are not adequately prepared for integration into tourist itineraries, which requires a joint effort in conservation, interpretation, and education (Viegas, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the opportunities are equally significant. Heritage tourism offers enormous potential for the sustainable development of regions, contributing to economic development and the enhancement of heritage and attracts tourists interested in exploring and learning about the cultural and natural resources of a destination, with a view to preserving and interpreting the heritage. This article aims to rethink heritage tourism in Portugal, analysing the main challenges in promoting and preserving its cultural and natural resources and the opportunities for more sustainable and integrated tourism. It seeks to propose directions for valorising archaeological and rural heritage as a tourist resource, focusing on balancing conservation, cultural authenticity, and sustainable development.

This is a topic of growing interest, reflecting its relevance in the current context. Cultural heritage is not only a marker of identity but also a valuable resource that strengthens the link between communities and their history when properly valued and promoted (Pereiro, 2003). It also serves as a pillar for tourism development, making its preservation and promotion essential for future generations (Poria et al., 2003). When it comes to raising public awareness, community involvement is vital to the success of the heritage conservation process (Peres, 2008). The importance of creating a link between citizens and cultural assets, whether through the interpretation of heritage or the promotion of cultural activities, is a key point to consider for developing heritage tourism in Portugal.

2. Methodology

A qualitative approach based on bibliographic and documentary research was used to prepare this article. First, relevant sources were identified and selected, including books, academic articles, and previously published studies on heritage tourism. This phase provided a theoretical and conceptual overview to support the proposed analysis.

In addition, websites and documents from governmental and institutional bodies, such as Turismo de Portugal, among other national and international organisations related to the sector, were consulted. These sources provided up-to-date information on public policies, initiatives to promote cultural heritage, and statistical data. The reading and critical analysis of these sources allowed us to identify practices, challenges, and opportunities in heritage tourism.

The data obtained was organised and analysed to answer the article's central questions, seeking to articulate the empirical information with the selected theoretical references. This methodology aims to ensure an in-depth understanding of the topic, and the relevance and consistency of the reflections presented.

3. Heritage tourism in Portugal.

Tourism is a phenomenon of great social and economic importance, which has been developing since the 18th century and has become increasingly important in socio-economic terms. This activity, which goes beyond the traditional economic sectors, is the subject of various approaches: social, cultural, geographical, environmental, etc. In the last decades of the 20th century, tourism has become a social phenomenon of significant proportions. Millions of people travel to other regions within their own country and abroad to visit other places, their humanisation, cultural aspects, fauna, and flora. Today, in many countries, tourism is an important economic sector and an activity with enormous influence on the configuration of the landscape and territory (Castro, 2014).

"Tourism is one of the phenomena that best characterises the nature of modern societies, being a consequence of needs in the areas of leisure, culture, religion, professional activity and knowledge of other countries and peoples" (Costa & Águas, 2001: 2). The above statement shows the importance of tourism today, acting as a means of satisfying different human needs, often recurring in the "unbridled" pace currently experienced in the most developed countries. Tourist activity is an act that generally provides contact between people of different cultural and socio-economic levels since it involves the mobility of people to places different from their usual environment. Thus, tourism activities impact social relations between tourists from sending countries and citizens of receiving countries, generating exchanges of habits and social customs and allowing for better knowledge between peoples (Montejano, 1991).

In the 1960s, Portugal experienced increased foreign arrivals and high hotel occupancy rates. However, tourism primarily focused on sun and beach tourism and coastal regions, neglecting interior, rural, and peripheral regions' economic importance, despite their potential. At that time, tourism was synonymous with "coastal tourism," following the trends of other countries with similar physical characteristics, such as Portugal (Castro, 2014). The 1980s saw the recurrent "regional policy phase" of the strategy defined in the Tourism Plan. This strategy was mainly aimed at creating incentives, with a predominance for the inland regions of the country. These phases in tourism development

culminated in a phase known as "mass tourism," which began in some regions of the Portuguese coast. This type of tourism obviously brought concerns arising from the phenomenon, in which the "high pressure" on structures was particularly significant (Arroteia, 1994). Tourism development in Portugal over the last decades has gone through different stages, with social and economic events determining its growth.

The concept of cultural heritage as we understand it today has changed significantly over time. At the end of the 19th century, we witnessed the growing importance of historical and artistic heritage, mainly through the concern for the protection of real estate. This period marked the construction of a new vision of historical monuments, which began to be recognised as essential elements in the formation of national identity and as a legacy for future generations. According to Custódio (1993: 36-37), it was in the 19th century that the need arose to form a public opinion aware of historical and cultural values, which was essential for preserving these assets. This heritage conservation movement was led by figures such as Alexandre Herculano, who pioneered heritage conservation in Portugal. Herculano argued that monuments were not just objects or ruins of the past but "a social wealth," living documents with historical, cultural, and aesthetic value. This view allowed for the creation of a concept of heritage valorisation that was not limited to its conservation but also its integration into public life and national identity. The concept of cultural heritage was not limited to architectural works, monumental sculptures and paintings, archaeological objects, numismatics, and epigraphy but also extended to ethnographic and industrial heritage. In order to collect, study, and disseminate cultural heritage, the creation of museums in various parts of the country was intensified, and various exhibitions were held as a privileged form of dissemination. Cultural associations played an important role in the inventory, collection, and study of "national antiquities" (Nabais, 1991).

In the first half of the 20th century, efforts to conserve the architectural heritage focused on preserving the most historically significant monuments. On 24 October 1901, a decree established the "basis for the classification of properties to be considered national monuments." Moreover, a decree of 27 September 1906 effectively promoted the first classification of properties in Portugal. On 14 January 1907, the first official classification of monuments considered emblematic, such as the Jerónimos Monastery, the Alcobaça Monastery and the Batalha Monastery, as well as the Convent of Christ in Tomar, the Cathedrals of Lisbon, Évora, Coimbra and the Belém Tower, took place, intending to protect what was considered to be an essential part of the collective national memory (Custódio, 1993). These legal frameworks and public awareness led to the creation of a national heritage that today serves as a basis for developing heritage tourism in the country.

The second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of numerous legal instruments at the international level, and Portugal signed and complied with international conventions. In April 1976, the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, in Part I, "Cultural Rights and Duties," specifically refers to cultural heritage, stating that "everyone has the right to enjoy and create culture, as well as the duty to preserve, defend and valorise cultural heritage" (Article 78), emphasising the idea that the preservation and valorisation of cultural heritage should also be promoted. Although the Constitution was a pioneer in adopting the concept of cultural heritage, it was not until the publication of Law 13/85 of 6 July (Framework Law on Portuguese Cultural Heritage) that this concept was consolidated in the Portuguese legal system. This law defines cultural heritage as "all the

material and immaterial assets that, because of their recognised intrinsic value, should be considered of relevant interest for the permanence and identity of Portuguese culture over time." In 2001, the Portuguese Cultural Heritage Law - Law No. 107/2001 of 8 September - was published, establishing the foundations of the policy and system for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage:

The concept of Cultural Heritage includes all assets that, as testimonies of civilisational or cultural value and bear relevant cultural interest, should be subject to special protection and enhancement. The relevant cultural interest, namely historical, palaeontological, archaeological, architectural, linguistic, documentary, artistic, ethnographic, scientific, social, industrial, or technical, of the assets that make up the cultural heritage will reflect values of memory, antiquity, authenticity, originality, rarity, singularity or exemplarity. Likewise, those intangible assets that constitute structural elements of the Portuguese identity and collective memory are included in the cultural heritage (Article 3).

At the international level, the concepts of monuments, groups of buildings and sites were introduced in 1972 by the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972) and marked a significant expansion of the concept of heritage to include both cultural and natural heritage. In 2003, the definition of cultural heritage was further broadened to include intangible cultural manifestations such as traditional knowledge, folklore, and ways of life, with the publication of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). This evolution is evident in Portuguese legislation, particularly in Law 107/2001, which emphasizes the importance of both tangible and intangible heritage. This broader conceptualisation has direct implications for heritage tourism, promoting the appreciation of diverse cultural resources that remain to be explored and integrated into sustainable tourism itineraries.

In 1999 and 2022, International Charter on Cultural Tourism (ICOMOS) advocates that revenue from visits to cultural sites and monuments should primarily be allocated to their maintenance, improvement, and enhancement. These developments reflect the broader understanding of cultural heritage encompassing any cultural property or manifestation contributing to collective memory, a principle enshrined in our Basic Law on Cultural Heritage.

The conceptual scope of Cultural Heritage is intrinsically linked to the anthropological understanding of culture. Culture can be seen as "everything that characterizes a human population," or "the set of ways of being, living, thinking, and speaking of a community," or even "all the knowledge that a society has about itself, other societies, the material environment, and its own existence, including the forms of symbolic expression of this knowledge through ideas, the construction of objects, and ritual and artistic practices" (Beltrão, 2002). Heritage, therefore, is not limited to material assets but also includes the legacies that define and characterize a people, a civilization, or humanity itself. Traditionally associated with 'paternal inheritance' or 'family property,' the concept of heritage has expanded to include 'cultural property,' understood as 'value' - something unique, whether of personal, local, or universal belonging. Heritage implies history and stories that serve as testimonies and memories transmitted across generations. As Flores (1998: 11) states, "Heritage thus plays an important role in the formation of our collective memory." On this basis, the concept of cultural heritage has grown to include popular traditions, rituals, beliefs, and "a whole series of social acts" (Flores, 1998). These

elements, seen as the cumulative property of a community, are passed down from generation to generation. Carlos Alberto Ferreira de Almeida defines heritage as "everything that has a quality for the cultural and physical life of human beings and has a notable importance for the existence and affirmation of different communities, from the local, parish, municipal and regional to the national and international" (Almeida, 1998). Heritage is, therefore, a value of identity, memory, and quality of life.

Cultural heritage is no longer seen as a limited set of historical and artistic monuments or material goods belonging to a legal entity or institution but a set of goods that one generation feels it should pass on to the next. This perspective incorporates time in its three dimensions - past, present, and future - and positions the cultural heritage of a human community as a guarantee of its identity. As Carlos Alberto Ferreira de Almeida (1998) explains, all communities have their cultural goods or "monuments" (from the Latin *monere*, meaning "to warn" and "to remember") that serve as indicators of identity and affirm their collective memory. Guillaume (2003) further complexifies this idea, noting that heritage is a basis for legitimising identity narratives that a community - or segments of it - may wish to create. The interpretation of heritage is not fixed but serves as a platform for multiple narratives about a community's past, present, and future. Elsa Peralta da Silva (2000) adds that all material cultural manifestations humans create exist within specific spatial and temporal contexts. While some disappear and others endure, not all traces of the past qualify as heritage. Heritage is more than an inherited legacy—it is a "social construction" shaped by conscious selection; a significant portion of a population must consider it is worthy of transmission to future generations. Thus, what constitutes heritage depends on a given community's values and cultural references at a particular moment in time. In this context, heritage itself lacks inherent value; it is humans who assign it meaning, which varies across periods and cultural frameworks. Olaia Fontal Merillas (2003: 45-46) identifies four categories of values: use value, material value, symbolic value, and emotional value. Françoise Choay (2000) highlights three additional values characterizing built structures, which underpin their classification as "heritage" in the expanded modern sense: economic value, artistic or aesthetic value, and cognitive or memory value. Memorial value, in particular, has become central to defining heritage today, rendering it broad, inclusive, and "democratic," encompassing erudite and vernacular works (Flores, 1998: 13).

4. Heritage Tourism Challenges in Portugal

Heritage tourism faces several contemporary challenges, reflecting the complexities of balancing cultural and natural heritage preservation with the growing demand for tourism, given that mass tourism can lead to over-commercialization and loss of authenticity (Ashworth, 2009; Álvarez, 2010).

In Portugal, heritage tourism presents an evident duality, reflected in the disparity in tourist flows between the country's major cities and the interior (INE, 2017). On the one hand, Lisbon and Porto, the main tourist cities, have experienced a significant increase in tourism (Fernandes, et al., 2018; Martins, 2019). Overtourism occurs when a destination attracts more visitors than its infrastructure can support. This can lead to heritage degradation, overburdening local resources, increasing the cost of living for residents, and generating social tensions (Ashworth, 2009). Historic cities such as Lisbon and Porto

are examples of places facing this problem, where the influx of tourists puts the preservation of historical sites at risk (Tojal, 2022; Oliveira, 2004).



Fig. 2. S. Bento train station, a tourist attraction in the city of Porto, with its tile panels.

At the same time, the country's inland, which is rich in natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and traditions, suffers from undertourism. Rural depopulation also contributes to the lack of tourism services, and investments needed to revitalize these areas are often low. However, there are also opportunities in the interior of the country, where heritage tourism can be promoted in a more sustainable way (Reis & Baltazar, 2019). Despite their great diversity and potential, these regions face challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, difficult access, and a lack of effective promotion, which results in low attractiveness for tourists, especially international ones. Furthermore, desertification and the aging of the rural population, combined with the lack of a more dynamic tourism offering, contribute to the stagnation of tourism in these areas. This duality reflects a lack of balanced planning in developing tourism in Portugal, which urgently needs public policies that promote a more equitable distribution of tourist flows, encouraging decentralization to the interior and ensuring the sustainability of the most saturated destinations (Lopes & Mota, 2021).

Conservation and preservation are another significant challenge. Many heritage sites are fragile and vulnerable, subject to degradation processes caused by excess and lack of care on the part of visitors. Balancing public access with heritage preservation requires careful management and often restrictive measures, such as limiting visitor numbers (Carbone, 2006; Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). Effective heritage tourism governance requires coordination among various stakeholders, including local governments, conservation

organizations, tourism businesses, and local communities (Lopes & Mota, 2021; Henriques, 2003).

The growing popularity of heritage tourism has brought with it a worrying trend of commercialising and ‘folklorising’ cultural traditions to attract tourists. This can dilute the authenticity of cultural experiences, turning local traditions into standardised tourist attractions and causing them to lose their intrinsic cultural value. The commercialisation of heritage tourism presents many complex challenges, mainly when heritage is treated as a business (Guillaume, 2003). One of the most critical challenges is maintaining the authenticity of heritage while it is commercialized. In an attempt to attract more tourists, there is a risk of simplifying, adapting, or “folklorizing” heritage to meet market expectations. This can result in the loss of its cultural essence and intrinsic value (Silva, 2000).

The commercialization of heritage can lead to gentrification, where tourism development makes historic areas more expensive, resulting in the displacement of local residents and the loss of authentic community character. This transforms neighborhoods into tourist zones that prioritize the consumption of visitors over the daily lives of residents (Sampaio, 2018). Tourism can generate significant economic benefits for local communities but also create inequalities. Gentrification and the transformation of historic areas into exclusively tourist zones can displace residents and change the social dynamics of communities. The cost of living increases exponentially in highly touristic areas, such as many cities in Portugal (Lisbon, Porto, Algarve) (Martins, 2019; Fernandes et al., 2018). This phenomenon is caused by tourists' and foreign investors' high demand for services and real estate. As a result:

- a) Housing prices are soaring due to the conversion of residential properties into local accommodation or tourist rentals, making it harder for residents to buy or rent a home.
- b) Businesses catering to tourists tend to raise prices, making food and other essential services unaffordable for locals. Traditional restaurants, grocery stores, and markets adapt to the needs of tourism to the detriment of residents.
- c) Increased demand puts pressure on local services, such as public transport and infrastructure, increasing operating costs and negatively impacting the resident population (Rodrigues, 2025; National Geographic Portugal, 2020).



Fig. 3. Historic Centre of Oporto, classified as World Heritage by UNESCO.

The combined impact of rising living costs and gentrification results in a growing sense of exclusion among residents. This can lead to social tensions: locals begin to feel that their cities no longer belong to them and become “foreigners” in their own communities. This contributes to an emotional and cultural detachment from the place. Overtourism and inappropriate behavior by some visitors, such as excessive noise, disrespect for local traditions and practices, or even vandalism of historic sites, create discomfort and resentment among residents (Sampaio, 2018).



Fig. 4. The Côa Museum, Vila Nova de Foz Côa (panoramic photograph).

Natural and archaeological sites, faces significant environmental challenges (Baloch et al., 2023). Increased tourist traffic to these areas can have serious and often irreversible impacts, such as erosion, pollution, and the destruction of delicate ecosystems (Deb et al., 2023). These effects are particularly worrying in places with unique biodiversity or sensitive archaeological structures, where even a slight increase in visitor numbers can cause significant damage (Zhang et al., 2023). Heavily used trails or historic surfaces,

such as ruins and natural formations, are worn away by the continuous flow of visitors. This phenomenon is evident in the degradation of trails in national parks and the erosion of stones at archaeological sites (Żemła-Siesicka, 2023)

Another significant problem is pollution, which results from excessive waste. When this waste is not managed effectively, soil, waterways, and even the ocean become contaminated, directly affecting local habitats. Furthermore, the impact on fauna and flora is worrying. The presence of tourists can alter the behavior of animals, driving them away from their natural habitats or compromising their living standards. At the same time, trampling or uncontrolled exploitation of natural areas threatens endemic flora and can destroy entire ecosystems, especially the most delicate ones (Greentumble, 2024).

Infrastructure construction to meet tourism demands is also a significant source of environmental impact. Hotels, resorts, roads, and other structures often drastically alter the natural landscape. Furthermore, the consumption of local resources such as fresh water and energy tends to increase dramatically in popular tourist destinations (Arimany-Serrat & Gomez-Guillen, 2023) This strain on natural resources harms the environment and directly affects local communities, which often face shortages of essential resources due to the pressure caused by intensive tourism (Sunlu, 2003).

The drought in the Algarve, exacerbated by climate change, has become one of the region's foremost environmental and social concerns (Agência Portuguesa do Ambiente, I. P., 2024). Water scarcity is a growing problem, especially in an area that combines high population density during the summer months with an economy highly dependent on tourism. This scenario presents complex challenges, as tourism, although essential to the local economy, puts considerable pressure on water resources (Gabarda-Mallorquí et al., 2017). Water shortages in the Algarve affect tourism, local communities, and agriculture. Small farmers face increasing hardship due to a lack of water for irrigation, while residents are dealing with water restrictions, such as limits on domestic use (André, 2024; DECO PROteste 2024).

5. Opportunities and Good Practices in Heritage Tourism in Portugal

This section presents and analyses examples of good practices implemented in Portugal, exploring opportunities to promote sustainable tourism (OMT, 1998), such as promoting less visited regions, decentralizing tourism, and creating tourist itineraries that integrate several regions. Enjoying heritage elements or cultural assets will only be possible if strategies for managing and promoting heritage elements are developed (Cerdeiras *et al.*, 2018; Lacerda, 2001; Lacerda & Barata, 2013). Thus, managing Cultural Heritage means “administering it in such a way that it not only does not deteriorate or perish but that it is also rehabilitated, enriched, known and enjoyed by all and becomes an element of economic and social development” (Campillo Garrigós, 1998). It implies efficient management of heritage and human and economic resources, among others (Lopes, 2000).

Finally, heritage tourism can contribute to Portugal's international recognition as a prime tourist destination. With its World Heritage List, UNESCO plays an important role in this context. Cities and sites classified as World Heritage attract tourists worldwide, eager for authentic and enriching cultural experiences (Ramos & Fonseca, 2014). Portugal's classified heritage sites, including monuments/sites/natural landscapes such as the

Jerónimos Monastery, the Belém Tower, the Côa Valley, the Floresta Laurissilva in Madeira⁴, are a valuable asset that can be used to create tourist itineraries and international marketing strategies.



Fig. 5. Floresta Laurissilva in Madeira.

Therefore, this chapter will emphasize the country's rich natural, archaeological, and cultural resources. It begins by examining the role of natural heritage in attracting visitors and fostering sustainable tourism practices; then highlights the value of archaeology in heritage tourism and how archaeological sites can be responsibly integrated into tourist experiences, followed by an analysis of museums and ecomuseums as key instruments for interpretation and public engagement. Next, it presents the development of cultural itineraries as a means to connect diverse heritage assets and create immersive experiences. The discussion continues with strategies to diversify the tourist offer and explores the potential of rural tourism in promoting local culture, traditions, and heritage conservation.

5.1.Natural Heritage

Natural heritage plays a fundamental role in heritage tourism, particularly in countries like Portugal, which boasts a rich diversity of landscapes and ecosystems (Forte et al., 2024). Natural heritage encompasses all natural resources with cultural, historical, or scientific value, including landscapes, biodiversity, and ecosystems closely linked to local communities' history and culture (Castro, 2014). Portugal's natural heritage, including protected areas, natural parks, ecological reserves, and regions of exceptional scenic

⁴ <https://www.patrimoniocultural.gov.pt/patrimonio-mundial/>

beauty, is essential for shaping national identity and promoting sustainable tourism (ICNF, 2025). However, the tourism use of natural heritage presents challenges similar to those faced by cultural heritage. Effective management is necessary to balance preservation with public accessibility, ensuring that increased tourism does not result in irreversible damage to ecosystems and landscapes (Castro, 2004).



Fig. 6. Natural lagoon in Pateira de Fermentelos (Águeda)

Integrating natural heritage into tourist routes and cultural itineraries represents a significant opportunity for sustainable tourism (Marques & Abrantes, 2021; Maia & Baptista, 2012). Sites such as the Montesinho Natural Park, Serra da Estrela Natural Park and the The Douro International Natural Park exemplify this potential, offering unique natural wealth and a deep historical and cultural connection to local communities. These attributes make them particularly attractive to tourists seeking authentic and educational experiences (Esparza et al., 2020). By integrating natural and cultural heritage, it is possible to create richer tourism products that deliver holistic experiences, aligning with global trends in sustainable and heritage tourism (Almeida et al., 2013). Both play complementary roles in heritage tourism.

5.2. Valuing Archaeological Heritage

Despite its challenges, exploiting archaeological heritage as a tourism resource offers significant opportunities (McKercher & Du Cross, 2002). Whether well-known or remote, archaeological sites can be transformed into tourist attractions that contribute to the socio-economic development of regions while fostering knowledge and heritage preservation (Timothy et al., 2024; Burtenshaw, 2020). Cultural tourism, including archaeological tourism, aligns with contemporary trends of valuing heritage as part of a destination's cultural identity, serving as a key motivator for tourists (Garcês et al., 2025; Timothy and Tahan, 2020).

Heritage interpretation, as a communication strategy, plays a central role in transforming archaeological heritage into both a tourist product and a tool for engaging public reflection (Gonçalves et al, 2005). Archaeological heritage includes all traces of human existence and the structures left by ancient societies. Portugal's archaeological heritage is central to its cultural identity, with thousands of sites inventoried and integrated into the Endovélico – Archaeological Information and Management System (Gomes & Bugalhão, 2002). Since 2012, the system's contents have been available online via the Archaeologist's Portal (PC IP, 2025), providing valuable information for research and public engagement. However, many sites remain inadequately catalogued, are inaccessible to the public, and excluded from tourist routes.

Challenges in the tourist exploitation of archaeological heritage include insufficient research, poor conservation conditions, and limited accessibility. Additionally, the lack of proper context for interpreting archaeological remains often hampers their appeal to tourists. Heritage interpretation has emerged as a vital strategy for making these sites more accessible and enhancing their value sustainably (Mathews, 2020). Despite these obstacles, archaeological sites hold immense potential as tourism resources (Burtenshaw, 2020). Their integration into cultural tourism initiatives can contribute to local development, strengthen regional identities, and boost economic activity. Moreover, this form of tourism serves as a tool for preservation, as public interest and appreciation encourage conservation and maintenance efforts (Correia, 2019; Thomas & Langlitz, 2019).

Archaeological interventions are an essential and fundamental element for the continuation and development of projects for the preservation, conservation and restoration of monuments, that is, for the process of heritage enhancement (Pereira, 2001). As regards the construction of “bases” for welcoming the public, the following actions can be developed in this process of enhancing the value of archaeological sites: sealing, cleaning, recovery, restoration and maintenance of monuments (Thomas & Langlitz, 2019). Whenever possible, the structures should be restored or scientifically reconstructed. Some of the actions that can protect and also improve the quality of visits to archaeological sites, creating conditions for welcoming visitors, include landscaping of visitable structures and the entire surrounding area of archaeological sites, as well as the development of architectural and landscaping projects for Reception and Interpretation Centers (Pereira, 2001; Comer & Willems, 2019)

Recent initiatives, such as the creation of ArqueoLoci – the Portuguese Archaeological Tourism Network – which aims to promote archaeological sites with suitable visiting conditions, illustrate how archaeotourism can contribute to both heritage preservation and public engagement. By integrating archaeological heritage (Raposo, 2001; Raposo, 2016) into tourist routes, Portugal can enhance educational and conservation opportunities while

ensuring that local community's benefit from the socio-economic development generated by this form of tourism (Ross et al., 2027; Thierstein, 2019).

Archaeological parks represent another highly relevant aspect of heritage tourism, as they offer tourists the opportunity to explore historical and archaeological remains in authentic and preserved contexts. According to Law No. 107/2001, an archaeological park is defined as any monument, site, or group of archaeological sites of national interest, integrated into a surrounding territory significantly shaped by past human activity. This territory both contextualizes and gives meaning to the monument, site, or group of sites, and its planning and management should be guided by the need to ensure the preservation of the archaeological remains located there (Article 74, Law No. 107/2001). Archaeological parks such as the Côa Valley Archaeological Park⁵ (Côa Parque, n.d.) and the Terva Valley Archaeological Park⁶ (Rodrigues, 2017; Terracallaeci, 2017), situated in low-density regions, represent initiatives that have contributed to revitalizing the interior of the country.⁷

The establishment of visitor support infrastructures, such as interpretation centres and landscaping at archaeological sites, plays a crucial role in enhancing the visitor experience while ensuring the preservation and appreciation of these cultural assets (Lacerda, 2001). Interpretation centres serve as platforms for disseminating knowledge about the site's historical and cultural significance, providing visitors with context and fostering a deeper connection to the heritage. These centres often employ interactive exhibits, multimedia presentations, and educational programs to engage diverse audiences effectively (Lacerda & Barata, 2013).

Incorporating these elements into the management of archaeological sites not only improves the quality of visitation but also contributes to the sustainable development of the site, benefiting both visitors and the local community (Walker & Carr, 2013).

5.3. Museums and Ecomuseums

Another strategy is the creation of structures such as museums, ecomuseums, which involve the management of one or more spaces and their articulation with land use planning policies; or consider holding temporary and traveling exhibitions and creating cultural routes and itineraries (Maia & Baptista, 2012; Pereiro, 2002).

Museums are permanent, non-profit institutions open to the public, created for the general interest of the community and its development, which gather, acquire, organize, preserve, study, disseminate, and exhibit for research, education, scientific and cultural enjoyment and promotion, sets and collections of movable assets of cultural value that are evidence of human activity and its environment, are essential pillars in heritage tourism, functioning as spaces dedicated to conserving and disseminating cultural heritage, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in local stories and traditions (ICOM Portugal, 2022; Assembleia da República, 2004).

⁵ Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa

⁶ Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Terva

⁷ <https://roteirodasminas.dgeg.gov.pt/pt/lista-de-locais/parque-arqueologico-do-vale-do-terva-pavt-pt-1/>

Ecomuseums share the same objectives as traditional museums even though they are not confined to the physical space of a building but are linked to a specific territory, promote the active participation of their inhabitants, and prioritize the integration of cultural assets in loco. Furthermore, they are an innovative way of integrating cultural heritage into the territory, involving local communities in preserving tangible and intangible assets. Unlike traditional museums, which are limited to physical buildings, ecomuseums, such as the Ecomuseu do Barroso, operate within the context of a territory, promoting the active participation of inhabitants and creating a strong bond between locals and their heritage (Teixeira, 2005).



Fig. 7. Ecomuseu do Barroso in Montalegre.

The valorization of the territory and its local traditions through museums and ecomuseums represents an opportunity to create a differentiated tourism offer, which offers immersive cultural experiences while preserving collective identity and memory (Fernandes & Carvalho, 2003; Magalhães, 2003). It would be possible to invest in holding temporary and itinerant exhibitions that could be installed for a certain period of time in a pre-existing structure in a given location, that is, in a municipal or regional museum, an exhibition center, a cultural center, or other type of cultural facilities, as well as in the headquarters of recreational and cultural associations and schools, when there were suitable spaces for this purpose (Figueira & Coelho, 2017).

The touristic value of museums, monuments, and sites can be promoted through a multifaceted approach that enriches the visitor experience (Magalhães, 2003). It is essential to offer appealing interpretative content and make it available in several languages, ensuring cultural accessibility. Guided tours and multilingual entertainment programs are essential to engage visitors and deepen their understanding of the sites. In addition, the development of diverse and interesting merchandising, the presence of cafés,

restaurants, and other complementary services increase the appeal of visits (Figueira, 2013). Quality promotional materials and a multilingual website help to attract a variety of audiences while a welcoming environment tailored to groups, including specific tickets, service in several languages, suitable physical conditions, and partnerships with tour operators enhance the experience. Organising tourist events and possibly tailor-made visits make museums and monuments more attractive and dynamic (Ferreira et al., 2012).



Fig. 8. A group of international archaeology students visiting Castelo de Numão during excavations at the archaeological site of Castanheiro do Vento, Horta do Douro, Vila Nova de Foz Côa.

5.4. Cultural Itineraries

The creation of cultural routes and itineraries, such as the *Rota do Românico*⁸ or *Rota Saber Fazer (Terra Quente)*⁹, represents another significant opportunity in the field of heritage tourism. Integrating cultural assets into tourist routes as the Algarve Cultural Heritage Guide (2015) not only ensures their promotion but also contributes to the diversification of the tourist offer, allowing tourists to explore different regions and aspects of Portugal's cultural heritage (Nascimento et al., 2023). Collaboration between tourism professionals and heritage technicians is essential to guarantee the quality and accuracy of the information provided and respect for heritage values. Cultural routes thus offer an opportunity for tourists to engage more deeply with local history and traditions while exploring different areas of the country, including the interior, which still represents

⁸ <https://www.rotadoromanico.com/pt/>

⁹ <https://saberfazer.pt/mapa/#>

an area with great potential for sustainable tourism (Maia & Baptista, 2012; Figueira, 2013; Rodrigues, 2019).



Fig. 9. Guided tour to the Castro de S. Brás, Torre de D. Chama, Mirandela.

5.5. Diversifying the Tourist Offer

To avoid saturation and erosion of the most popular heritage resources, there is a need to diversify tourism offerings, innovating how heritage is presented and creating new experiences (Lopes, 2000), which might help to better distribute tourist flows and reduce pressure on significant destinations, promoting lesser-known destinations, developing themed routes, etc. To reverse the duality of over-tourism on the coast and under-tourism in the interior, a concerted effort would be needed to decentralize tourism in Portugal, encouraging tourists to explore the interior and to value the intangible and natural heritage of these regions (Marujo & Borges, 2013).

Although some destinations in the interior of Portugal, such as the Côa Valley Museum, have managed to increase their visibility and attractiveness¹⁰, many inland regions, particularly in Trás-os-Montes, continue to fail to benefit fully from the flow of tourists. For example, cruises on the Douro have proven popular¹¹, taking tourists across the river

¹⁰ <https://www.publico.pt/2024/12/10/culturaipilon/noticia/museu-coa-bate-recorde-visitantes-subida-75-face-2023-2115156>

¹¹ <https://rr.pt/noticia/pais/2025/01/14/turistas-no-rio-douro-aumentaram-1065-para-13-milhoes-de-passageiros-em-2024/409536/>
<https://eco.sapo.pt/2022/12/13/via-navegavel-do-douro-com-mais-de-um-milhao-de-turistas-em-2022/>

to the Mateus Palace and several Port wine estates. However, tourists' itineraries are often limited to these experiences without exploring the rich history and culture of the Trás-os-Montes region in greater depth. After visiting these specific sites, tourists quickly return to Porto, often without having a real sense of the potential of the interior. This dynamic reveals a gap in the full exploitation of the region's tourism potential, which could benefit from a more diversified offer, with tourism packages that encourage more profound exploration of the territory, including visits to historic towns and villages, as well as the appreciation of aspects such as gastronomy, cultural tradition, and natural heritage.



Fig. 10. Douro River.

Promoting a more integrated approach, with itineraries that include points of the most popular circuits, could contribute to a better distribution of tourist flows and benefit the regions, such as Trás-os-Montes, in a more balanced way (Ferreira et al., 2012; Pereiro, 2002). This would lead to a deeper reflection on how heritage tourism could be better used in the interior and how joint promotion between the various regions could solve this issue. One possible strategy is to explore the promotion of heritage tourism in Portugal, such as digital marketing campaigns, presence on travel platforms, and partnerships with other industries (e.g., gastronomy or adventure tourism), which would help increase heritage visibility outside the major tourist centers (Carvalho, 2008).

5.6. Rural Heritage Tourism

Rural tourism has a strong connection to each region's gastronomy and authentic products and Portugal has an enormous cultural wealth throughout its territory, especially in the interior, where we can find traditions, festivals, customs, and cuisine that are an integral part of its identity (Milheiro et al., 2013). Many traditional festivals and celebrations are deeply linked to intangible cultural practices that are part of the heritage of various regions of the country. These festivals, often linked to agricultural cycles or popular beliefs, such as the carnival festivities (Caretos de Podence), can be a way to attract

tourists to the interior, encouraging them to experience the local culture and participate in traditions in an immersive way¹²(Costa, 2015).



Fig. 11. Portuguese cuisine, Restaurante Flor de Sal, Mirandela.

Crafts are another important example of intangible heritage that can be explored in rural tourism. Many rural areas of Portugal have unique craft techniques, such as Madeiran embroidery, Bisalhães's ceramics (Bernardo, 2022), or wicker baskets from Minho. Rural tourism can offer workshops or experiences where visitors can learn how to create their products, keeping ancestral traditions alive (Carvalho, 2020).

Rural tourism can also be deeply linked to natural heritage by integrating cultural landscapes, i.e., areas shaped by human activity over time, with agricultural practices or other activities related to the environment (Blasco, 1999; Martins & Costa, 2010). Wine routes in the Douro and Alentejo regions (Paíga, 2022; Silva, 2012) can promote both the intangible cultural heritage associated with vine cultivation and wine production or the production of olive oil, as well as the natural heritage, showcasing the unique landscapes of these territories (Bezerra & Correia, 2019). In addition, activities such as hiking, cycling, or even astrotourism in Parque do Vale do Tua or in Alqueva¹³, in Alentejo (Tapada *et al.*, 2020) allows tourists to have an integrated experience of heritage and nature.

¹² <https://www.caretosdepodence.pt/> or https://www.patrimoniocultural.gov.pt/pat_cul_imat_human/festas-de-inverno-carnaval-de-podence/

¹³ <https://www.olagoalqueva.com/>

By integrating intangible cultural heritage, rural tourism offers an authentic and personalized experience (Cabeça, 2022). Tourists can directly engage with local practices and knowledge through manual activities such as making cheese, painting tiles, dancing traditional dances, or participating in festivities and celebrations (Serra *et al.*, 2021). These experiences provide an emotional connection with the place and its traditions, therefore rural tourism represents a unique opportunity to diversify the tourism offering in Portugal (Ribeiro & Vareiro, 2007) while promoting intangible cultural traditions and preserving local identities, generating new economic dynamics in rural regions (Bento *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, directing more visitors to the country's inland can contribute to the decentralisation of tourism and the revitalisation of less explored areas, creating a more balanced and sustainable future for tourism in the country (García-Delgado *et al.*, 2020; Gullino *et al.*, 2015).



Fig. 12. Traditional music played by young people in Castro de S. João das Arribas, Miranda do Douro.

In short, heritage tourism in Portugal has been gaining relevance as a way of combining economic development with the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. This sector represents a unique opportunity to promote national identity, enhance historical and archaeological heritage, and contribute to the sustainable development of regions. However, for tourism to be truly effective and responsible, it is essential to adopt good practices that ensure the conservation of heritage, the involvement of local communities, and the provision of enriching experiences for visitors (Condeso, 2011).

6. Final considerations

Heritage tourism faces significant challenges such as over-tourism, cultural preservation, and commercialization, which profoundly impact community and national identities. It is crucial to promote sustainable tourism practices that respect authenticity and engage local communities. Co-creation with these communities and the responsible use of technology are essential to balance preservation and tourism development (WTO, 2002). Heritage, as an anchor of identity, can be strengthened by tourism, but it also runs the risk of cultural dilution. It is therefore necessary to ensure that heritage tourism is inclusive, equitable, and respectful, contributing positively to the appreciation and preservation of diverse cultural identities. Balancing preservation and accessibility and guarding against excessive commercialization is key to ensuring that heritage tourism contributes positively to cultural preservation and sustainable development.

It is essential to rethink heritage tourism to balance economic development and cultural preservation. This balance can be achieved by adopting public policies that value heritage protection and encourage sustainable tourism practices. In addition, strategies that foster community engagement are essential to ensure that local populations are actively involved in preserving and promoting tourism while benefiting from the economic opportunities generated.

Furthermore, the expanded concept of cultural heritage, which now includes intangible assets such as folklore, traditional music, local festivities, and know-how, opens up possibilities for creating innovative and diverse tourism products. Experiential tourism, which values the active participation of tourists in cultural activities and local traditions, can be an important strategy. Promoting cultural festivals, traditional craft workshops, gastronomic itineraries, and cultural walks are examples of how heritage tourism can be diversified and, at the same time, ensure the preservation and appreciation of the intangible heritage of communities.

Overtourism, characterized by excessive visitor numbers to cultural and natural destinations, poses a significant threat to heritage preservation and the well-being of local communities (Marques, 2019). Heavy traffic to historic sites and natural areas can cause physical damage, environmental degradation, and ecosystem erosion, compromising the integrity and value of these sites. In addition, the over-commercialization of cultural heritage, driven by mass tourism, dilutes the authenticity of local traditions and practices, transforming them into simplified attractions. Local communities face challenges such as rising living costs, gentrification, loss of access to their own spaces, and social tensions. The quality of the tourist experience is also affected by overcrowding and the trivialization of visits (Santos & Cabrera, 2014). To mitigate these negative impacts, it is essential to adopt sustainable tourism strategies that limit visitor numbers, protect cultural and natural resources, and ensure that economic benefits are equitably distributed among local communities. This will preserve cultural and natural heritage for future generations and balance tourism and community life.

On the other hand, appreciating local heritage also positively impacts local communities by generating employment and income through tourism activities related to culture, education, and heritage protection. Raising awareness among the local population about the importance of cultural heritage can be one of the main tools for strengthening the bond between citizens and their cultural assets. By actively engaging in preservation and promotion activities, communities can become protagonists in the tourism process, helping to ensure its long-term sustainability.

Portugal is rich in cultural and natural heritage, from coastal cities such as Lisbon and Porto to inland regions such as Trás-os-Montes and Alentejo or to the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira. The opportunities for heritage tourism are numerous and can be understood from several perspectives. Firstly, promoting tourism in inland regions, where tangible and intangible heritage is rich but underexploited, represents an opportunity for economic revitalization (TNews). Cities such as Lisbon and Porto are already facing the challenges of over-tourism, with an overload of tourists in their urban centers, which requires a redirection of tourism strategies. The country's inland, in turn, has untapped potential, with unique landscapes, a diverse gastronomy, and an immeasurable cultural heritage. Heritage tourism can contribute significantly to the development of these destinations, offering tourists authentic and immersive experiences in rural areas, with local traditions and culture, away from the large masses of tourists (Eusébio & Carneiro, 2012).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the intrinsic relationship between cultural and natural heritage. Integrating natural elements into heritage tourism can diversify the experiences offered and reinforce the understanding of the interconnection between built environments and natural ecosystems, promoting more holistic and conscious tourism.

In short, the opportunities for heritage tourism in Portugal are vast and multifaceted. The country has a rich cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, which can be valued and promoted sustainably, offering tourists authentic experiences while generating economic and social benefits for local communities. With the right public policies, heritage tourism can be an important driver for sustainable development and preserving Portugal's cultural legacy. Heritage tourism in Portugal, through the strategic use of museums, ecomuseums, archaeological parks, and cultural itineraries, offers enormous opportunities for heritage preservation, the appreciation of local traditions, and sustainable economic development. These initiatives promote tourism and strengthen the country's cultural identity and collective memory while protecting cultural assets for future generations.

I dedicate this text to my late friend José Paulo Castro.

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