

# **The relevance of landscape in the rural tourism experience: Identifying important elements of the rural landscape**

**Maria João Carneiro<sup>1</sup>**

**Joana Lima<sup>2</sup>**

**Ana Lavrador Silva<sup>3</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Rural tourism is an important development strategy for some rural areas. The development of rural tourism is highly determined by the features of the territory of the rural areas and landscape may have an important impact on the tourism experience lived by visitors in these areas. The literature suggests several rural landscape features that are likely to be attractive to visitors. However, the research in this field is rather limited, and mostly confined to studies supported in visual stimuli (e.g. photos), ignoring the impact of the direct contact of visitors with the territory. Moreover, differences among different types of visitors have been largely ignored. The present study attempts to overcome some of these limitations by assessing visitors' perceptions of the rural landscape of a village and, also, the impact of landscape features in the rural tourism experience, while the visitors are still in the village. Vegetation, slopes and built heritage emerge as key elements of the rural landscape with a major impact on rural tourism experience. Recommendations regarding the development and promotion of tourism in rural areas, with special emphasis on landscape features, are provided. Differences among groups of visitors are noticed, suggesting that different groups of visitors require different approaches.

**Keywords:** Landscape Perception; Rural Areas; Rural Tourism Experience; Historical Villages of Portugal.

## **1. Introduction**

In the last decades rural tourism has emerged as an alternative development strategy for some rural areas. These areas usually concentrate important heritage resources and are, also, losing their traditional productive function and trying to find new activities for stimulating their development (OCDE, 1994; Sharpley, 2005). Environmental and cultural quality are rural areas' resources that have become part of the tourism experience sought by more demanding rural tourists and that, to a great extent, defined one of the main objectives of the destination management - to provide quality experiences based upon nature and culture (Aranzabal *et al.*, 2009; Walmsley, 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> PhD, University of Aveiro and GOVCOPP, Portugal, mjcarneiro@ua.pt

<sup>2</sup> PhD Student, University of Aveiro and GOVCOPP, Portugal

<sup>3</sup> PhD, e-GEO, Research Centre for Geography and Regional Planning, Lisbon University, Portugal

Landscape is one endogenous resource that combines historical, rural-cultural and natural heritage elements, influencing visitors' expectations and their search for new places or experiences (Aranzabal *et al.*, 2009; Marujo & Santos, 2012). However, there seems to co-exist two apparently contradictory phenomena – on the one hand, rural landscapes are under important transformations reflecting the (physical and cultural) changes they go through (Arnberger & Eder, 2011; Howley, 2011) and, on the other hand, rural areas and rural landscapes are often perceived as “genuine” by the visitors that increasingly seek “authenticity”, much related to culture and nature.

The study of visitors' perceptions of rural areas' landscape, emerge as an important tool for rural destinations' managers to identify the elements of this landscape most valued by visitors and to improve the experience offered to visitors in rural areas. Despite this importance, few studies have been conducted aiming to identify visitors' perceptions of rural areas' landscapes and understand the effective importance of landscape features on the lived experience at rural destinations. Moreover, in the majority of these studies, visitors' perceptions of the landscape are assessed based on photographs or other visual support, ignoring the potential impact of the direct contact with the landscape on perceptions (Arnberger & Eder, 2011). Furthermore, as remarked by Brush *et al.* (2000), relatively little attention has been given to differences in landscape preferences among people with different characteristics.

The present paper attempts to overcome some of these limitations. The objectives of this paper are to identify features of the rural areas' landscape that should be given special consideration when managing rural tourism destinations and to identify the elements of the landscape of a Portuguese Historical Village most significant in the visitors' experience, which should be valued when designing appealing and sustainable tourist experiences in the Village. In contrast to other studies, this paper intends to assess the visitors' perceptions of the landscape during the visitors' experience in the Village in order to capture the impact of the direct contact with the destination in those perceptions. Comparisons are also made in order to detect differences among different types of visitors. The present paper reports partial results from an exploratory research undertaken in the context of a larger research project information concealed due to confidentiality issues. To accomplish the objectives of this paper, first, a literature on the rural tourism experience, focusing the role of landscape perceptions on this kind of experience, and on perceptions of rural landscape, is provided. After this, an empirical study is presented, in order to identify the visitors' perceptions of the rural landscape of the Portuguese Village and the landscape features with greater impact on their tourism experience in the Village. Finally, implications of the results for the development and management of tourism experiences in rural destinations and, specifically, in the Village, are discussed.

## **2. The rural tourism experience**

Rural areas have a very important role in the context of leisure. This role is assuming greater significance, with rural tourism often being considered a development option for some rural areas,

considering the problems of these areas (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009; Sharpley, 2005). These problems are related to a number of changes occurring in recent decades, all over Europe, essentially marked by the loss of economic importance of agriculture and decrease of population in these territories. Despite the importance of rural tourism, there is no consensual definition of this type of tourism. According to Lane (1994) rural tourism should ideally be located in rural areas, be functionally rural and small, require some customization of the products and services provided to visitors, have an eminently traditional character and its growth should be sustained, gradual and locally controlled. This definition suggests that rural tourism requires an integrated approach of development. Saxena *et al.* (2007) advocate the need of an integrated rural tourism, which requires the existence of coordination and integration at the local level, aiming at a sustainable tourism development with benefits for all involved in a long term perspective.

Research on the generic profile of rural tourists and trends of the tourism market point to a promising future for rural tourism, due to the usual high level of education and travel experience of these tourists, to their growing interest in the “authentic”, in the natural and cultural heritage, to their concern for the environment and for a healthy lifestyle, seeking new destinations, activities and experiences (Chambers, 2009; OECD, 1994; Todt & Kastenholz, 2010). These profiles and motivations perfectly fit into the tourism resources of rural areas, perceived as being able to provide diverse tourist experiences that meet a heterogeneous market (Kastenholz *et al.*, 1999).

Previous experiences of rural tourists (especially those associated with nostalgia feelings and the quest for the authentic), the existing supply at the destination, as well as its broader context (e.g. the hospitality of local people, the landscape, the local and regional attractions), partially determine the tourist experience in a destination and, therefore, must be looked at as key-elements and considered in an integrated perspective for providing memorable experiences (Kastenholz *et al.*, 2012).

Landscape is one of those key-elements of the tourist experience that, though playing an important and recognized role in motivating the visit and influencing the quality of the tourist experience (Marujo & Santos, 2012), has been undervalued, because in most cases it is only considered as a setting for an attractive experience (Mitchell *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the landscape of a destination can decisively shape the provided experience and how it can be designed and enjoyed by the visitor (Inácio, 2009; Mitchell *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, it is common that the visitors refer the “beauty” and/or the “quality of the landscape”, as reasons for visiting some places (Marujo & Santos, 2012). Thus, the diversity of the landscape (a set of natural, human, cultural elements and aesthetic values) and its ability to generate emotions, transform landscape into a privileged resource in the differentiation of regions and of their products (Lavrador Silva, 2011).

The recognition that one of the main motivations for visiting the rural space is relaxing and being close to nature and “authenticity” (Chambers, 2009; Kastenholz, 2002) reinforces the role that landscape assume in the rural tourist experience. Landscape has been considered an important rural

tourism resource (Garrod, 2006) and one of the factors that most contributed to enjoyable and pleasant experiences in rural areas in several contexts (Musa *et al.*, 2010). In their model of the inputs of the tourism experience, Disart and Marcouiller (2012) also stress the importance of the multifunctional rural landscape, characterized not only by the natural uncrowded setting, but also by the people who live and work there, as well as by the built amenities and cultural and historical heritage of those areas.

Understanding tourism experiences and the impact of landscape on those experiences may contribute for the efficacy of the landscape diagnosis, for the selection and prioritization of the planning measures and to evaluate the acceptance of the management measures. Secondly, assuming landscape as a territorial expression of a technical, social and economic project, the tourists experiences and opinions could help to identify what should be done to improve landscapes as commodities (in the context of agricultural production, forestry, tourism and other) or to reduce negative impacts (environmental, socio-economical, aesthetical and other) (Bell, 2001; Lavrador Silva, 2008). Thirdly, analysing tourist experiences is useful for “(re)making” territorial identities, and for involving local stakeholders, planning and management technicians, tourism and marketing entities, in caring, developing and promoting places and regions in a more appropriate way.

Despite the recognition that the visitors’ perceptions of the landscape of rural areas may be an important element for rural destinations’ managers to improve the expected and lived experience in rural areas, few studies focused on identifying visitors’ perceptions on the rural areas’ landscapes and understanding the effective importance of specific elements of the landscape on the lived experience at rural destinations.

### **3. Visitors’ perceptions of the landscape of rural areas**

According to the Article 1<sup>st</sup> of the European Landscape Convention, landscape is “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (CE, 2000). Landscape emerges in the relation people establish with places and results from the physical and mental way people approach places (Crouch, 2013). By other words, landscape involves the site and the place, corresponding to a site with historical memory, emotions and identity (Cauquelin, 2000, *in* Lavrador Silva, 2008; Cosgrove & Daniel, 1988). In this context, as the present study aims at identifying which elements of the territory are recognized and valued by visitors, considering the representations of the territory that visitors hold, the “landscape” is assumed as the result of a particular view (individual and collective) about a specific territory (which has natural and human components).

Research on landscape preferences has been gaining relevance in the last decades. Despite the low number of studies that focus on visitors’ perceptions of rural landscapes, a high interest on rural landscapes can be noticed (Arnberger & Eder, 2011; Brush *et al.*, 2000; Pérez, 2002; Sayadi *et al.*, 2009; Surová & Pinto Correia, 2008). Rural landscape is understood as the sensory perception of the rural territory, mainly composed by visual elements, including nature (all elements independent of the

human intervention), built environment (features that are manmade or modified by human intervention such as houses and roads) and combinations of both (Groot & van der Born, 2003; McGinn *et al.*, 2007).

Vegetation (type, intensity and diversity of vegetation), slopes, presence of water attractions (e.g. rivers), buildings (e.g. traditional houses) and presence of people are factors that may influence the perception and preference for landscape of rural areas, since the selection of the visual stimuli (e.g. photographs) shown to the respondents in several studies (Arnberger & Eder, 2011; Pérez, 2002; Rogge *et al.*, 2007; Sayadi *et al.*, 2009) was based in differences on these factors.

The type of vegetation emerges as one of the most important features determining rural landscape preferences. Vegetation layer is the feature with most influence in preferences for the landscape of Alpujarra (a mountain region in Spain) in the study conducted by Sayadi *et al.* (2009). Furthermore, in Pérez (2002), Lindemann-Matthies *et al.* (2010) and Surová and Pinto Correia (2008) researches, the preferred landscapes are, respectively, those with oak and chestnut, with arable land and with *montado* with shrubs. In the study of Brush *et al.* (2000), conducted in rural Wisconsin, respondents prefer to drive through a forest landscape. The type of vegetation preferred varies according to the tourism destination.

According to a study of Aranzabal *et al.* (2009) mountains are one of the most attractive features in the landscape of Castellon (a province of Spain). Mountain areas are also among the areas people prefer in the Doñana National Park (Múgica & De Lucio, 1996). This suggests that slope also plays an important role in landscape preferences formation.

Water attractions such as rivers do not emerge as an important element in all landscape studies since not all the destinations have this kind of attractions. However, when destinations have water attractions, they emerge as one of the most valued features of the landscape (Aranzabal *et al.*, 2009; Múgica & De Lucio, 1996; Pérez, 2002).

Research also show that people prefer landscape where a village is visible (Sayadi *et al.*, 2009) or that stonewalls are traits of the landscape much appreciated by people (Pérez, 2002). Historical-artistic heritage is one of the most appreciated elements in Aranzabal *et al.*'s (2009) study. Buildings are also, the second feature tourists recalled from the Finish Lapland's landscape in Uusitalo's (2010) research. The results of these studies suggest that buildings also influence the attractiveness of the rural landscape, despite not being as important as other features, like the type of vegetation.

While dense vegetation areas are preferred in the study carried out by Surová and Pinto Correia (2008) in the oak *montado* region of Alentejo (in Portugal), openness is highly valued in the Rogge *et al.*'s (2007) research undertaken in Pajottenland - an area of Flandres (in Belgium). Visitors of an Alpine Swiss area also refer they preferred landscapes that are more species-rich (Lindemann-Matthies *et al.*, 2010). This information highlights that the quantity and diversity of vegetation also influences rural landscape perceptions and preferences, although not being so important as the type of vegetation.

Studies also reveal that landscape preferences may also be influenced by situational variables such as season of the year and weather conditions (Pérez, 2002) as well as by several characteristics of people such as: age (Múgica & De Lucio, 1996; Pérez, 2002); activities undertaken/reasons for visiting the territory (Aranzabal *et al.*, 2009; Múgica & De Lucio, 1996; Rogge *et al.*, 2007; Surová & Pinto Correia, 2008); time spent in the territory (Múgica & De Lucio, 1996); kind of settlement where people grown up and experience with agriculture (Arnberger & Eder, 2011).

#### **4. Visitors' perceptions of the landscape of Lihares**

##### **4.1. Methodology**

This paper presents part of the first qualitative results regarding the importance of landscape in the tourist experience lived in the rural context, analysing concretely the perceptions of visitors of Lihares da Beira (from now on referred to as Lihares), a Portuguese Historical Village.

The majority of the studies reviewed assess landscape preferences based on the presentation of visual stimuli (e.g. photographs) to people that, in some cases, do not even are in the territory to which the landscape of the visual stimuli corresponds. Although the direct contact with the territory and features of the experience lived in the territory (e.g. time spent there and activities carried out there) may have an influence in landscape perception, this influence has been widely neglected in previous research. To overcome this limitation the empirical research of this paper examines preferences for rural landscapes based on interviews of persons who are visiting rural areas. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 37 individuals who were visiting several sites of Lihares da Beira (to ensure heterogeneity of the landscape), between January and December 2011. In the interview, visitors of Lihares were asked to indicate some of their socio-demographic data and to refer the following features: (i) the colours and images they associated to Lihares; (ii) the most positive impressions of their experience in Lihares; and (iii) the features they considered to be most distinctive of Lihares. The guidelines for the interview were developed based on literature review and interviews were conducted by trained interviewers. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and subject to content analysis in an attempt to identify the main issues of the respondents' discourse (McCracken, 1988), aided by the software *WebQDA*<sup>4</sup>.

##### **4.2. Characterization of Lihares**

*Lihares da Beira* is located close to the mountain area and Natural Park of Serra da Estrela and is also known as the Portuguese capital of paragliding, due to its privileged natural conditions for the practice of this sport. The village is also integrated in a series of pedestrian and BTT trails. The abundance of water in the region has contributed to the fertility of the fields, also contributing to a

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about the software, see [www.webqda.pt](http://www.webqda.pt) and / or Neri de Souza, F., Costa, A. P. & Moreira, A. (2010) *WebQDA: Qualitative Data Analysis Software Supported by WebQDA*. In Dias, P. (Ed.) VII International Conference on Information and Communication Technology in Education - Challenges 2011, University of Minho. 12 and 13 May, Braga, Portugal.

landscape marked by agriculture. Serra da Estrela also holds relevant geological resources. The type and distribution of vegetation is considered very important in characterizing the landscape (Marques, 1996) and Linhares integrates the landscape unit called “Serra da Estrela” that holds a “strong identity resulting from historical, cultural and natural feature”, according to a study that aims at identifying and characterizing the landscape units of mainland Portugal, and, therefore, can be considered “for its size and uniqueness, as unique in the national context” (Abreu *et al.*, 2004, p. 191) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Linhares’ surrounding landscape

Source: own elaboration

Besides these nature-based attractions, one of the main tourism attractions of *Linhães* is its castle (Figure 2), a National Monument, built in a strategic geographical location for the country’s defence and rebuilt in 1291.



Figure 2. Linhares' Castle and its surrounding landscape

Source: own elaboration

This old medieval village, inhabited since the Roman times, with less than 260 inhabitants, integrates the network of *Historical Villages of Portugal* (1994). Several graves, a Roman road and part of a building - Forum of *Linhares*, prove the passage of the Romans through this village (Falhas, 2010) and, jointly with the main church of Romanesque origin, the Manueline pillory, manor houses, and the restored architecture of the entire village<sup>5</sup>, create an aesthetically appealing landscape (Figure 3). The legends, the local products (art crafts and agricultural products, as cheese, honey, chestnut, lamb) and the gastronomy are also important cultural resources of Linhares.



Figure 3. The village

Source: own elaboration

The village has four official lodging units, including a boutique hotel (*Pousada*), as well as two restaurants, a bar, a handicraft shop and a tourism information office. The number of visitors is above 10,000 visitors a year, although numbers were well above 20,000 visitors between 2002 and 2004. Most visitors are excursionists passing by to visit the castle and its surroundings. The domestic market

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1994, the village has been associated to the brand "*Historic Villages of Portugal*", whose origins lie in a publicly funded requalification program of 12 villages of Portugal's Central Region.



represents more than 89% of the total market, although the share of international tourists has increased from 2005 to 2009 (AHP, 2010; CMCB, 2005).

#### 4.3. Discussion of results

The interviewed visitors (37) were mostly Portuguese (20), residents in urban areas with a high level of education, aged mainly between 31-50 years and same-day visitors (excursionists) (21). The international visitors interviewed (17) come mostly from France, England and Spain (Table 1).

Table 1 – Profile of the respondents

<b>Number of interviewees</b>	37 visitors
<b>Nationality</b>	. 20 Portuguese . 17 Foreigners [France (4); Great Britain (3); Spain (3); Other (Italy, Brazilian, USA, Netherlands, and Belgian) (7)]
<b>Gender</b>	. 20 Males . 18 Females
<b>Ages</b>	. 18-24 years (3) . 25-64 years (31) . 65 years or older (3)
<b>Place of residence</b>	. Urban or periurban (31) . Rural (6)
<b>Education level</b>	. 12 or more years of education (33) . less than 12 years of education (1) . No answer (3)

Source: own elaboration

When asked about the images and colours they associate with Linhares, the majority of the visitors referred the green – probably related to the vegetation –, with some also mentioning other colours such as the grey of the houses and the blue (Table 2).

Table 2. Visitors' perceptions of the landscape of Linhares and main impressions of the tourism experience in Linhares

	Visitors				
	Total N= 37	Tourists N=16	Excursionists N=21	Portuguese N=20	Foreigners N=17
<b>Colours associated to Linhares</b>					
green	21	12	9	15	6
grey	7	1	6	3	4
blue	5	3	2	2	3
brown	2		2	1	1
yellow	2		2		2
orange	1	1			1
purple	1	1			1
red	1		1		1
<b>Images associated to Linhares</b>					
stone	16	6	10	9	7
castle	15	11	4	11	4
mountain	14	9	5	9	5
architecture/ houses	10	5	5	9	1
fields	7	3	4	7	1
animals (goats, birds)	5	2	3	3	2
landscape	4	2	2	4	
other monuments (e.g. churches, pelourinho)	4	1	3	2	2
paragliding	4	3	1	3	1
roads	3	2	1	2	1
pure nature	3	2	1	2	1
sky/clouds	3	2	1		3
watercourses	2	1	1	1	1
<b>Most positive impressions of the tourism experience in Linhares</b>					
architecture/ houses	6	3	3	5	1
the views/ landscape	5	2	3	3	2
preserved character of the village	4	4			
the castle	3	2	1	2	1
the environment	2	2		1	1

Source: own elaboration

However, some differences are noticed between different visitors. The excursionists are less likely to refer the green and more likely to refer the grey, probably due to the limited time they stay in Linhares, which is mostly spent in the village and not in the surrounding territories. Foreigners are more likely to mention other colours than green and grey, such as the blue “of the sky” or the orange “of the sunset” and “of the roofs”.

Analysing the images visitors associated with Linhares, it may be noticed that all the visitors referred elements of the rural landscape related to nature or culture. Almost all tourists mentioned the “the Castle”, “the rocks”, “the mountain”, “the restored houses” and “the village architecture”, with some also referring to fields. The surrounding landscape of Linhares, predominantly agricultural, characterized by fields of pine, oak, chestnut and olive trees, white and yellow brooms, rosemary, cornfields, vineyards, meadows and marshes (Barbosa & Correia, 1990; ICN, 2005) seems, then, to be valued by visitors. The Portuguese are more likely to mention these elements than the foreigners, what suggests that the Portuguese probably attach more importance to these elements. Same-day visitors are

more likely to mention “stones” whereas tourists are more likely to mention “the castle” and “the mountain”, which is in line with the colour associations previously referred.

The most positive impressions of the visit were often described using very positive and strong adjectives referring to landscape, such as “very beautiful”, “untouched landscape” or “spectacular!”. The majority of the visitors identified the landscape or some of its elements as the most positive impressions of their experience in Linhares, what shows that landscape is an important element in their experience. Their most positive impressions are associated to some cultural elements - “architecture/houses”, “the preservation of the village” and “the castle” – and, also, to some features that may be also related to natural elements, such as “the environment” and “the views/the landscape”. The reduced number of answers in this field makes comparisons among visitors impossible. However, rural landscape also appears in contrast with the city, permitting the contact with nature and seeing new things, as illustrated by one of the Portuguese respondents, who states that “we came because we need to rest. And here we wake up and see something different, not those buildings that we see in cities” (V1). The landscape appears associated with sensations and as a counterpoint to the everyday landscape, as illustrated by the following testimony: “looking through the window and see the mountain... You don’t see all those grey buildings” (V14). Foreign visitors referred that they visited the village because of its beauty and heritage elements that it integrates: “we came here because it’s just the wonderful, the village itself. And the castle - it is quiet, there are no other people, it is beautiful! How nice it is you don’t have to trip over other tourists to look at the views” (V34). The importance of landscape experience in this region is also noticed when the visitors mentioned the activities practiced – most of them referred that they only walk in the village and see some attractions in the region, mainly rural museums (the cheese museum, the farmer museum and the bread museum). In this context, some of the visitors emphasized the dimension of enjoying the scenery [“So far, just sightseeing, the whole time” (V34)] and take pictures [“I enjoy to take pictures of the little things that catches my attention” (V18)].

In the discourse of visitors, the distinctive aspects of village/region were mainly its cultural elements - “the landscape here is marked by the Castle” (V18), “very traditional, restored, it maintains the old style. A beautiful place.” (V26) and “the houses and the monuments – castle, churches and noble houses” (V8).

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

Overall, the respondents’ answers confirm the relevance of the landscape as a central element in the visitor experience, especially in its dimension of visual experience, conceptualized by Urry (2002) as “the tourist gaze”. The results show that visitors revealed a rather passive absorption or immersion in the village context and an aesthetic perspective of the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), what indicates that the perceptions of visitors about the landscape are an essential element for their satisfaction with the experience.

The importance of natural landscape elements in the rural tourism experience found in literature review seems to be confirmed in this study. In this context, the high number of visitors associating Linhares with “green” and “mountains” reinforce that vegetation and slope are important visual stimuli for those who visit rural areas. However, this study highlights the importance of the cultural elements of the landscape, mainly of “traditional houses” and monuments, specially “the castle”, elements that visitors highly associate with Linhares and that correspond to the most positive impressions or distinctive features of that area. This study suggests that, despite built environment did not emerge as an important element of rural landscapes in many studies and has been highly neglected, built environment may have a major role in rural tourism experiences. The results of the present study highlight the importance of initiatives such as the *Historical Villages of Portugal* network for improving the attractiveness of rural landscape. Therefore, the impact of built environment should be further studied.

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of preserving and promoting some natural and cultural heritage that correspond to key elements of rural tourism landscape – territories with a considerable slope, vegetation and built environment. Those involved in tourism development in Linhares should promote this village based on its vegetation, mountains, castle, traditional houses and typical architecture. These managers and planners should also adopt strategies for preserving these assets.

It seems also important to promote some landscape features that may be associated with a calm environment, giving the importance assigned to landscapes that contrast with the noisy and stressful landscape of urban areas and to the potential impacts of natural environment in human wellbeing (Velarde *et al.*, 2007). However, managers of rural destinations may identify opportunities for exploring other motivations than only “rest and relax”, by developing products/activities that lead to a better use of the destination’s endogenous resources, namely some landscape elements, through the integration of these elements in complex, appealing and distinctive rural tourism products. Results indicate the existence of a strong tourism potential in Linhares that is still largely untapped – the exploration of the landscape. Several elements of the landscape are never associated with Linhares by the large majority of the respondents and the excursionists’ visit is highly restricted regarding the geographic scope. As suggested by Lavrador Silva (2008) and Porteous (1996), the emotion of enjoying a panoramic view is always reinforced by the experience of walking and immersing in the landscape (through roads and paths), discovering what is hidden, involving all the senses in that discover, enriching the experience and contributing to its memorability. In this sense, to build places or elements of aesthetic interest and that offer an opportunity to exploit the environment as well as creating appealing products that include landscape appreciation, assume high importance. Local agents are a key-element in this type of experience design, for example, in the creation/promotion of roads and paths that may become decisive elements of a deeper rural tourism experience. Different

promotional strategies to different visitor segments may also be useful. For example, promotional material for foreigners should emphasise a wider range of colours, including the blue of the sky.

One limitation of the study is the adoption of only one technique – the interview demanding free elicitation of elements of the landscape – undertaken during the visit to Linhares. It would be interesting to develop longitudinal studies using several techniques other than just interviews during the visit, namely, collecting the photos visitors' take during the visit, and a follow up interview after the experience, to identify the landscape elements that are really appealing and memorable and that may improve the promotion of rural destinations.

This kind of research, although indicating the most important landscape features to visitors, is restricted to the landscape elements that visitors referred. Complementing data collection with the administration of questionnaires could contribute to increase the number of respondents, to facilitate comparisons among visitors and to have a more detailed and deeper understanding of the relevance of elements of rural landscape focused in other research (e.g. type of vegetation, diversity of vegetation and presence of people).

Taking into consideration the importance that built environment assume in the present study, further research should also be carried out in order to understand the impact of built environment according to the different kinds of built heritage (e.g. religious heritage, military heritage, civil heritage typical of rural areas – e.g. restored houses, farm buildings).

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