

“Night walks” and rural development: A Case Study of Alentejo, Portugal

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Alentejo is a large rural area in Portugal with the largest artificial lake in Europe, Alqueva. The lake has an area of 250 km² and extends through six municipalities: Barrancos, Moura, Mourão, Portel, Reguengos de Monsaraz and Alandroal (see Figure 1). In recent years the area has emphasized rural tourism and most recently invested in “astro-tourism” and was named the first “Starlight Tourism Destination” in the world.

According to Crouch (2001), terrestrial space tourism probably began with the movement of astronomical observers to different locations to better observe certain astronomical phenomena like eclipses and the movements of planets. But interest in preserving starlight as world heritage is very recent. The Starlight convention began in 2007 and Starlight Tourism destinations are an initiative of UNWTO with support of UNESCO and IAC. These destinations are accessible for tourists, but at the same time, they offer visitors high quality settings for the contemplation of the night sky and other the tourist activities based on this resource such as night horse ridings, night walks, night canoeing amongst other activities. According to Ros (2007) humanity must preserve the unpolluted night sky for future generations in order to:

- a) Enjoy the sky and feel emotional about it;
- b) Promote positive feelings towards astronomy and towards science in general;
- c) Help people discover and experience the excitement of gaining new knowledge by means of simple observations using the naked eye, binoculars, amateur telescopes or public observatories;
- d) Impress upon humanity the beauty of natural phenomena;
- e) Look at the sky to rediscover the stories of our ancestors.

The impact of starlight on humanity has been expressed in words of religion, art, literature, science, philosophy, business and travel. Alqueva offers several night time activities that offer a diverse tourism experience. One of these new products is the “night walk”. These walks take place around the surroundings of the lake and offer a different experience to visitors, including opportunities to observe the dark night sky, learn about celestial phenomena, fairy-tails, and local folklore related to the night, and to hear the sounds of the local fauna.

According to Morris (2011), human sensory orders are recalibrated when faced with the reduced illumination levels of the night; it is harder to judge depth and distance, details are obscured, colors muted, and one is obliged to compensate for this loss of visual acuity by drawing on the other senses. At night it is necessary to use peripheral vision because central vision is relatively weak in the dark when the lack of color cues and lighting makes cone cells far less useful. Rod cells, which are concentrated further away from the retina, operate better than cone cells in low light. This makes peripheral vision useful for seeing movement at night. This means that the same activity done during the night can lead to very different experiences. According to Clarke (2005) many tourists nowadays seek ‘doing’ activities in rural places. These activities are not directly connected with the local traditional culture but rather with what is possible to do. For example, ecotourism activities, adventure and sport tourism activities and some activities related to niche markets interested in space tourism based on land. At the same time, there are other, emerging tourism movements, like slow tourism, that enable the visitor to become part of the destination by interacting with the population and the physical geography at a pace appropriate to the retention of local culture and the place as a whole.

In this case study, we present a strategy based on the maximization of local hiking trails that can be used during the day or night reaching, thereby reaching different tourism segments and contributing to the occupancy rate of local rural lodging units and other tourism services. Walking trails in a context of developing rural and natural destinations represent a source of alternative income for the increasingly marginalized interior regions of Portugal. (Rodrigues, 2006).



Figure 1. Location of Alqueva

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