

## **Dimensions of the rural tourism experience: the perspective of visitors with visual disabilities**

**ANA CATARINA GOMES<sup>1,2</sup> & CELESTE EUSÉBIO<sup>1,2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>DEGEIT (University of Aveiro), <sup>2</sup>GOVCOPP

**Keywords** | Accessible tourism, Rural tourism destinations, People with visual disabilities, Experience economy

**Objectives** | The continuous increase in the engagement of individuals with disabilities in the tourism sector has been a subject of academic investigation. Despite this, there is a limited body of research specifically delving into the involvement of people with visual disabilities (PwVD) in tourism activities. Simultaneously, the demand for rural destinations has witnessed substantial growth in recent years. However, literature addressing the demand for rural tourism destinations by PwVD remains notably scarce. While some studies theorize that people with sensory disabilities, including PwVD, may derive heightened benefits from rural tourism (Gomes & Eusébio, 2023), empirical investigations into the pursuit of this specific tourism product by PwVD are still lacking. The dimensions shaping the rural tourism experience encompass aesthetics, education, escapism, and entertainment, exerting influence on satisfaction, memory, and arousal (Kastenholz et al., 2018). In tourism, the aesthetic dimension (passive immersion) often relies on visual stimuli. This empirical study explores the dimensions of the rural tourism experience and the weight given to the visual component of the product, focusing on the perspective of visitors with visual disabilities.

**Methodology** | To meet the predefined objectives, a mixed-method approach was employed for data collection and analysis. Utilizing Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy framework and applying Kastenholz et al.'s (2018) methodology, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Portuguese individuals with visual disabilities, between June and August of 2021. The interviews aimed to delve into the past travel experiences of the participants, particularly concerning rural tourism destinations. To enhance the insights obtained from these interviews, a specific rural tourism destination situated in the Central region of Portugal, namely the village of Vilarinho de São Roque, was visited by three of the interviewed PwVD. These visitors prefer distinct mobility aids in their daily life, specifically a guide dog, a white cane, and a personal assistant. Through direct observation, it was possible to examine how each visitor perceived the rural destination, and how their mobility aid of choice impacts their overall rural tourism experience.

**Main Results and Contributions** | Results from both interviews and direct observation confirm that PwVD intensely feel the benefits from rural tourism activities. PwVD pursue immersive sensorial stimuli in nature, despite the structural constraints inherent to their participation in tourism activities. The interviewed PwVD describe their rural tourism experiences as being strongly esthetic despite their lack of visual cues. Respondents expressed a significant interest in personalized experiences aimed at deepening their comprehension of the esthetic dimension of the rural destination. This dimension emerges as the most impactful factor influencing the satisfaction, arousal, and memory of PwVD in the context of their rural tourism experiences. The visits carried out by PwVD to Vilarinho de São Roque corroborated these claims. While the visitor using a guide-dog showed a greater level of independence in navigating the rural destination, the visitor accompanied by a personal assistant had a better understanding of the village. All three visitors felt like a personalized experience with human interaction and description of the space will improve their absorption and immersion in the rural involvement.

**Limitations** | Given the difficulty in approaching the market segment, the sample size is reduced, constricting the results from this research. Additional research with a wider sample could allow for collection of quantitative data could prove useful to better understand this market segment.

**Conclusions** | This study addresses a research gap and sheds light on the engagement of PwVD in rural tourism, particularly within the realm of the dimensions of the rural experience. The investigation explores the esthetic dimension of the tourism experience and its influence on satisfaction, memory, and arousal of PwVD, introducing the concept of independence of esthetics from visual cues. PwVD describe rural tourism as strongly esthetic, resorting to sensorial stimuli present in nature to passively immerse themselves in the experience. To enhance this dimension of rural tourism, PwVD look for human interaction and personalized activities involving a description of surroundings and scenery. The study's insights offer practical implications for the development of accessible and inclusive rural tourism destinations, emphasizing the importance of addressing structural barriers and incorporating personalized elements to enhance the overall experience for individuals with visual disabilities, hence providing valuable insights for policymakers, tourism professionals, and destination managers.

## References

- Gomes, A. & Eusébio, C. (2023) Empowering people with visual disabilities through rural tourism: the benefits of nature activities and how the various travel constraints can be overcome, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 48(6), 940-954.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2221071>

- Kastenholz, E., Carneiro, M. J., Marques, C. P., & Loureiro, S. M. C. (2018). The dimensions of rural tourism experience: impacts on arousal, memory, and satisfaction. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 35(2), 189–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2017.1350617>
- Pine, J., & Gilmore, J. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(4), 97–105