

In paradise lies...more of the same: On the touristic ordering of a Portuguese insular village

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Objectives | This proposal approaches the touristic ordering (Franklin, 2008) of Culatra and its effects over its residents' everyday lives and the perceived destination image (Gartner, 1993) of its visitors. Focusing on the workings of photography across the touristic imaginaries (Amirou, 2007) of these social actors, we'll explore situated embodied experiences regarding the image these social actors formed of this insular place as a touristic space to unpack the links and the splits between living and imagining as two complementary ways of being 'in the world'. Departing from work in progress on the uses of photography in the touristic imaginary of the Portuguese Coastline¹, we will question notions of 'paradise' and 'authenticity' colloquially attributed to islands (Diegues, 1998) and how Culatra is framed as a touristic destination (Carvalho & Oliveira, 2021) vis-à-vis the recent trajectory of its village as a human settlement (Coutinho, 2008).

Context | The Ria Formosa Natural Park is a nature reserve with almost 18.000 hectares located in the Algarve – the southernmost region of mainland Portugal – and in it lies Culatra, an island inhabited by roughly one thousand people (Culatra 2030 / Clean Energy for EU Islands Secretariat, 2019), most of whom reside in the seaside village of Culatra. One can reach Culatra by boarding the ferry which departs year-round from the city of Olhão and during the summer from the city of Faro as well, but also by hiring a water taxi, by enrolling in one of the maritime tours that stop on the island – usually for lunch – or by using a private boat. The seasonal presence of visitors in Culatra dates back to the early 20th century (Silveira, 2021), being tourism a part of its residents' private lives – renting visitors a spare room at home helps residents in balancing the household economy. It's also an increasingly greater part of their public lives – figuring out the adequate time to go out for a meal or to board the ferry is a necessary skill to hone so as to avoid the hordes of visitors – and of the overall social life on the island – the schedule of the ferries is extended in the summer to accommodate the seasonal demand for sun, sand and sea. Furthermore, on the village

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we find signs written in both English and Portuguese, indicating for instance the name and price of meals, the phone number of water taxis drivers and the correct way to the beach. As for the touristic imaginary of Culatra, *Região de Turismo do Algarve* – the Algarve regional tourism board – speaks of the islands of Ria Formosa as a paradise (2018a) with wide, fine sand beaches surrounded by clear waters that allow vacationers to have a relaxed experience. Concurrently, the photographs commissioned by this organization (*Id.*, 2018b) portray it as featuring (mostly) empty beaches bathed by a turquoise Atlantic Ocean, thus reinforcing idyllic discourses about these insular territories. In parallel, the “reputation” (Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 36) of the village of Culatra echoed by visitors and residents alike is one of authenticity due to its everyday socio-spatial dynamics of occupation of use – visitors spread between the village and the beach while most residents stick to the former for work and/or leisure. Grocery stores, cafés and restaurants located on the village uphold fixed working hours and days-off even in the summer, and the historical relationship of its residents with seafaring activities is made visible in the photographs displayed in commercial establishments, personified by those who live off the sea and materialized on the maritime memorabilia found on the streets of Culatra.

Methodology | Over the course of two years (2022/2023) ethnography was conducted intermittently in Culatra from a constructivist grounded theory standpoint, mobilizing participant observation met with photography, archival research and semi-structured interviews. We sought to understand regimes of mobility (global fluxes of visitors and of touristic discourses) and visibility (what images – namely photographs – were made on and about it as a place of tourism and why), and its articulation with the ongoing place-making process of this insular village (the multiscale development of its landscapes vis-à-vis emergent touristic motivations of occupation and use) in light of its recent (re)discovery as a touristic space.

Main results and contributions | As this proposal is part of a research in progress, we still haven't determined any definitive results, thus instead, we'll share provisional results. On the one hand, using photography as a way to collect data during the fieldwork proved fruitful to access key informant and new venues of research, namely, to understand the evolution of the *milieu* as a touristic space on a longitudinal scale. On the other hand, by having focused on photography as a dimension of our object of study we were able to delve further on its hidden dimensions (Hall, 1986) of how and why we perceive vis-à-vis how we experience places as touristic spaces. As such, we hope to contribute to the “revalorization of visibility” (Sampaio, 2013, p. 181) in tourism studies, inviting researchers to use photography to study tourism but also to consider it a central dimension of the touristic experience as a whole and thus, to be approached and discussed as such.

Limitations | No trips were made to Culatra during the Autumn/Winter months, so the view from the field outlined in this proposal is a seasonally situated one as well as the product of an individual perspective – the researcher's – regarding our social reality, mainly focused on the symbolic and interactional dimensions of tourism as a social phenomenon.

Conclusions | We can better understand how social actors occupy and think about places as touristic spaces by looking further into how photography is used to frame them as such and also into the photographs themselves to pinpoint their socio-historical context. Thus, this proposal contributes to produce clearer pictures of the impacts of tourism across our social reality, both regarding its concrete as well as its imagined dimensions.

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