

# Exploring the **tourist experience at the museum**

## – An holistic approach at the Portuguese Southern Museums

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**Keywords** | Tourist Experience, Museum Management and Tourism, Holistic Approach, Quality of the Tourist Museum Experience (determinants).

**Objectives** | The communication aims:

- To identify the main opportunities resulting from the relationship between tourism and museums.
- To understand the influence of museum management as determinant of the quality of the tourist experience.
- To better know the different kinds of determinants of the tourist experience at the museum.
- To present and discuss development proposals of museums as tourist attraction poles.

**Methodology** | The research methods used both qualitative and quantitative techniques for data gathering and analysis, in what is usually called a triangulation of methods. The methodology included: a round table between museum and tourism professionals on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 2008 at the Communications Museum (Lisbon); 21 face to face interviews with the museum directors and eleven others answered by mail and fax (October 2007 to April 2008); and a visitor survey at 21 of the total museums (from July to September 2008). In what concerns the Audience Survey Sample, it was a non probabilistic sample, for convenience.

The museums sample included all the 32 southern museums registered at the Portuguese Museums Network - RPM (including the capital, Lisbon).

**Main results and contributions** | Recent research shows that the post-modern tourist values and demands aspects such as: interactivity, authenticity, multi-sensorial experiences and emotional engagement at the places they visit. Today the post-modern society evidences new ways of living. That is why we need new perspectives for leisure time, new ways of offering a visitor experience that answers to four main dimensions: Education, Entertainment, Emotion and Experimentation. Our results show that there are some negative and positive aspects concerning the present relationship between museums and tourism. From the data gathered we can emphasize that the management model is mainly traditional and less visitor centred, that community projects are inclusive programmes oriented to communities with social exclusion problems; others

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aimed at young people and children (and more recently included disabled people). Other questions can be pointed out: there is a general absence of directional signposting to get to the museums; the guided tours and human interaction are centred on school visits. The audiovisual and information supports (signs, leaflets, interpretation panels) are the most used supports to the visitors. The seldom guided tours are usually mediated by museum staff but require previous booking, and are more frequently offered to scholar groups in an undifferentiated way.

Understanding the visitor experience memories and the ways that physical determinants and communication disposals affect the results of the tourist experience was one of our research interests. Museums are mainly regarded as places to learn and perceived as an educational and cultural leisure offer.

**Limitations** | This kind of interrelation study between museums and tourism is not very common on the research available, because traditionally museums were seen as “temples of culture”, “guardians of the past”, “non-profit organizations”, with the main purpose of research, study and education. Nowadays, museums need to find new ways to support those traditional functions.

New kind of visitors emerged: more educated, wanting to experiment new emotions and new ways of learning (edutainment). Museum management is moving forward from a business and marketing approach to an experience based offer.

In Portugal this kind of research finds several kinds of constraints, namely: there is a lack of standardized data about museum visitors; visiting museums is one of the less frequent leisure practices between the Portuguese population; lack of strategic vision, confused with the museum cultural and social mission; lack of communication and promotion strategies, and human resources; absence of continued research and study on museum publics and projects; assumption that satisfaction is inherent to the museum visit; legislation seen as an obstacle to innovation; lost of collections specificity and differentiation due to the integration of new objects and new heritage types; lack of an integrated planning and vision to the museum visitor services; lack of joint promotion and programming with other cultural equipments or local attractions; 60% of the museums are from public authorities (40% from local municipalities); insufficient technologies; about 52% of the museums have no educational department (2002); many have no promotion or information leaflet, or even a welcome desk (2002) insufficient investment on communication and interpretation services; general problem of linguistic competences among the museum personnel; guided tours mainly promoted to scholar groups and needing pre-booking; growing number of museums closed: bad conservation of the building; reorganization process going on; collections redistribution; some difficulties in guaranteeing the conditions necessary to the official process of classification as Museum. Other results will be further developed in future presentations.

**Conclusions** | The relation between the tourism and the management of the cultural inheritance has been typified as a competition by the use of the same resource, instead of being characterized as a cooperation to reach mutual benefits. When a negative result occurs an excessive attention is given to the promises of conservation made by the tourism sector.

One of the main questions has to do with making museums more “tourist friendly”. Even at those non-profit organizations – such as museums – it is necessary to adopt a strategic thinking that enables the approach and answer to different publics, but also the cooperation between museum and tourism professionals.

Museums should become privileged spaces for creativity, for interactivity and for new learning opportunities. We need to add value and memories to the cultural experience and museum visitation. It is necessary to generate different levels of interactivity when visiting museums and exhibitions. Setting evaluation methods and assessing impacts are important ways of measuring results of the actions being promoted.

Tourism should be integrated as an active element of the museums plans and strategies. It will be very important to promote regular “visitor surveys” to better know the visitors. Other relevant questions to museum development as tourist resource have to do with: the reorganization of the tourist circuits to benefit of a more balanced distribution of the tourist flows; the joint promotion of cultural and patrimonial attractions; the development of new forms of evaluation and control of the initiatives carried out; giving answer to the needs of information to get to the place and at the place; participation in cooperation networks; definition of strategic plans and of the components of the marketing – mix. The creation of multidisciplinary teams seems to be a need so museums can adapt its discourses to different publics.