

## The Border as a Tourist Resource. Possibilities of Bajo/Baixo Guadiana

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the area of integration of the European Union the borders still persist, now without the difficulties and barriers of yesteryear, but maintaining numerous symbols and elements of the cultural heritage that continue to make a difference. They are "dividing lines" and, at the same time, strips of transitional territories with an important natural and cultural heritage that now become attractive resources for novel tourist demands. Therefore, border tourism is already being studied as a new product where the border and history resource is the main attraction and destination, although in a complementary way to other tourism resources and products.

It is also a new research topic that is awakening the curiosity of some researchers, although the bibliographic and statistical production is far from the attention that other touristic segments have deserved. This is explained by the recent time of its appearance and also by the lack of definition of this tourist segment or product that is very transversal to others.

Thus, along with other well-known tourism products (rural tourism, ecotourism, agro tourism, gastronomical tourism, etc.) that may occur in the border territories, a new one that has been called "frontier tourism", "cross-border tourism" or "Tourism on the border" and that satisfies a very diverse demand, eager to consume the history and heritage of the border territories.

In contrast to other tourism products, the novelty is that the destination "border" is the true link between activities and territories. It would be something like a "leit motiv" for the potential traveller and tourist and for the staff of tourism agencies, who would have a longitudinal screenplay on the border around which to draw activities and points of interest to visit.

In some way, the border is a route that runs parallel to the political dividing line and that tourists can follow or cross looking for their heritage and, at the same time, taking advantage of other resources: monuments, landscape, gastronomy, cultural events,



sports practices, etc. In a certain way, the frontier territory could act or become analogous to other well-known itineraries or tourist-cultural routes: historical roads, pilgrimage routes, routes of heritage cities, etc. This situation described here can be developed in integrated borders, which is the case of the European Union. And within the same, in the case of the Iberian “Raya” (Spain-Portugal) there is the peculiarity of being an itinerary that for many centuries has been a political barrier and that only in recent years has been able to permeate for the transit of its inhabitants and travellers, becoming an integrated border.

Until now, a group of researchers (many of them gathered in the TURFRONT project) are also working to formalize this product or typology called "frontier tourism", motivated by the desire to be assumed by different tourism policies and programs at regional and local scales. This new concept would encompass as such the movements of travellers and tourists and the tourist products that are supported as a destination mainly on the border, its history and heritage.

In any case, this new tourism product could serve as a revulsive for the recovery and revalorization of natural and cultural heritage and, thereby, empower some weak local economies. But achieving that goal is not easy and especially from rural areas, which is the case of the Iberian “Raya”, with little capacity to influence the business decisions of agencies and tour operators to insert themselves as attractive tourist routes and destinations.

## **2. OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESES, METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF STUDY**

### **2.1. OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY**

This contribution aims to reflect on the capacity of border tourism as a catalyst for socioeconomic and environmental processes that are capable of achieving the conservation of a heritage and economic improvement.

Our main hypothesis is that the new possibilities of tourism development (which is border tourism) in the Bajo/Baixo Guadiana territory could be able to activate their local economies and assert their interesting natural and cultural heritage, and thereby stop their depopulation that also affected a large part of the remaining Portuguese-Spanish Raya. We believe that, in these small-sized spaces in demography and economy, border tourism could have an impact that is very relevant at the local level.

In this work we are dealing, therefore, with:

- Analyze the geographical, natural and cultural heritage of this cross-border area, with a brief profile of its population and cooperation policies on accessibility and tourism infrastructures.
- diagnose this novel tourist product for this particular territory,
- and make proposals capable of promoting this tourist activity.

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For this, the information derived from the knowledge of the territory (field work and direct observation) has been fundamental, as well as the consultation of cooperation projects and the use of different bibliographies, statistics and cartographies. The mapping of geographic information has been intended to turn especially georeferenced maps and treated through a Geographic Information System (GIS).

## **2.2. SCOPE OF STUDY**

Our research concern focuses on the Portuguese-Spanish border, the “Raya” or “Raia”, at its southern end, in the Lower Guadiana, in spaces that participate in the Algarve, Baixo Alentejo and Huelva. In this territory are combined tourist destinations (Algarve and West Coast of Huelva) with a very close interior and unknown to most tourists staying on that coastal edge, just a few tens of kilometres.

However, in recent years, an incipient tourist space seems to open up inland (and waters) from the coast. The Guadiana estuary acts as a gateway to an interior rich in resources and historical-artistic and natural heritage and that could benefit from border tourism.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Although the breakdown of the frontier has advanced favourably in the last 25 years, thanks to the combined thrust of the investment processes fostered by European funds and programs and the cooperation effort of public administrations (MINHAP, 2016), the advances and improvements are insufficient to reverse the productive deactivation and change the fate of the peripheral situation of most of the Iberian Raya.

Two issues are addressed for this territorial area: cooperation policies, mainly from the European Union, leading to infrastructure improvements and cooperation in tourism. The sum of different funding channels, community and other, have been creating a suitable breeding ground to host, accompany and even directly finance entrepreneurs interested in establishing themselves in the area and for the formation of local development structures. And in this sense, rural and interior tourism, border territories and many other rural areas has served as an economic complement, has slowed down its demographic bleeding and has contributed to the recovery and revalorization of its cultural and environmental heritage. This territory has remarkable and diverse natural, landscape and territorial resources existing in this portuguese-andalusian border territory for its tourist development. As a great element of linear and vertebrate character, an unknown international section of the Guadiana River appears. We are, without a doubt, facing a space that aspires to a tourist model different from the nearby coast, with landscapes and heritage that throw potentials still untapped touristy, far from being even an emerging destination.

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But in order to propose the existence of a "border" tourist destination, there is still a lot to be done and, above all, there is still time for its consolidation. Therefore, a SWOT diagnosis is made for this tourism product of border and territorial scope that concerns us.

#### **4. PROPOSALS AND CONCLUSIONS**

We cannot speak yet of this border area of Bajo Guadiana as a tourist destination. However, it has resources and a potential to host a unique, quality tourism that, without being massive, could be very relevant for the local economy.

To its potential attractions, it should be noted that there have been significant improvements in accessibility and cross-border connectivity. Now it is in a position to create or promote a tourist itinerary border, longitudinal and transversal at the same time, and allowing the traveller to travel and cross this part of the Iberian border enjoying its resources and attractions.

More concretely, some proposals have been pointed out for the promotion of frontier tourism and for this portuguese-andalusian border area.

The big bet must be, to give uniformity and an axis to structure the offer, the border fact itself. From the Guadiana estuary as a backbone, also linked to the improvement of communications, an interior territory rich in natural and cultural resources is opened. It could serve as a complementary offer for the massive sun and beach tourism of the coast, but also for a tourism that seeks new experiences in little-known destinations, the traveller who flees from the overcrowding of the coast and seeks experiences based on authenticity, and new tastes around tourist typologies linked to rural, heritage and history.

This would open up new possibilities for a territory, Bajo/Baixo Guadiana, whose political, business and local associational leaders want to make use of its interesting natural and cultural heritage and to stop the phenomenon of rural depopulation that plague most of the Portuguese-Spanish border (the so-called Raya/Raia). A new tourism product transverse to others, in a new awakening: frontier tourism.

