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## **CREATIVE TOURISM IN THE ALENTEJO (PORTUGAL): THE CREATOUR PROJECT EXPERIENCE**

*TURISMO CRIATIVO NO ALENTEJO (PORTUGAL): O PROJETO CREATOUR*

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**ABSTRACT:** Creative tourism has contributed greatly to the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage in many places. The Alentejo region's offer of creative tourism is associated with the unique characteristics of each territory. The main objective of this article is to characterize the creative offer of public and private organizations in the Alentejo region that are part of the CREATOUR project (to develop creative tourism destinations in small towns and rural areas) and also to describe the involvement of participants in some creative activities. Qualitative techniques and non-participant observation were used as a methodology. **Keywords:** Creative Tourism, Heritage, Creative Tourists, Development, Sustainability.

**RESUMO:** O turismo criativo tem contribuído fortemente para a preservação e valorização do património cultural e natural em muitas localidades. A oferta do turismo criativo na região Alentejo está associada às características singulares de cada território. O presente artigo tem como objetivo principal caracterizar a oferta criativa das organizações públicas e privadas da região Alentejo que integraram o projeto CREATOUR (desenvolver destinos de turismo criativo em cidades de pequena dimensão e em áreas rurais) e, também, descrever o envolvimento de participantes em algumas atividades criativas. Como Metodologia usou-se a qualitativa e a técnica da observação não-participante. **Palavras-chave:** Turismo Criativo, Património, Turistas Criativos, Desenvolvimento, Sustentabilidade.

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## INTRODUCTION

In many places, creativity is central to tourism development strategies (Richards & Wilson, 2006). The Alentejo's creative tourism offer is associated with the specific characteristics of each territory (Marujo, Borges & Serra, 2020). For these authors, creative tourism in the Alentejo has an essential role to play in local development as it diversifies and preserves culture, contributes to job creation and develops cultural and creative industries.

Creative tourism can also be an effective tool for increasing the average length of stay in destinations, since it should be undertaken in a way that implies that tourists stay at least overnight in the destination. Therefore, it can be an engine for the economic development of many territories and also a driver of attractiveness for tourists whose profile includes being more interested in learning, as well as interaction with the context of their visit (Carvalho, Lima & Kastenholz, 2014).

The Alentejo's creative cultural offer is mainly related to the cultural heritage found in the various municipalities in the region. It should be noted that the creative cultural products of a destination, which offer unique and enriching experiences for tourists, are a way for local communities to show their ways or customs to a globalized society (Marujo et al., 2020). The aim of this article is to characterize the tourist offer of the 10 regional organizations that are part of the CREATOUR project (Developing Creative Tourism Destinations in Small Cities and Rural Areas). By means of non-participant observation, it also aims to describe the involvement of tourists/visitors in some creative activities.

## CREATIVE TOURISM

In the literature, most definitions of the concept of 'creative tourism' imply tourists actively participating in dynamic and authentic activities related to the local territories, and also having significant contact between tourists and residents (Blapp & Mitas, 2018). According to Richards and Raymond (2000, p. 18), creative tourism "offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in learning experiences which are characteristic of the holiday destination where they are undertaken".

In a study by Raymond (2007, p. 145), it was concluded that creative tourism functions as "a more sustainable form of tourism that provides an authentic feel for a local culture through informal, hands-on workshops and creative experiences". According to this author, creative workshops take place in small groups at the producers' homes or at their places of work, and therefore tourists can explore their creativity during the process while becoming closer to the local community. Richards (2011) states that there are common elements in all definitions of creative tourism: participatory and authentic experiences that allow tourists to develop their creative potential and skills through contact with the local population and their culture.

Richards (2011) states that creative tourism arises as a process of action between the creativity of a community and tourists who seek authentic cultural activities. On the other hand, tourists seek out engaging and practical experiences that allow tourist distinction and for tourists to be immersed in the destination's way of life (Carvalho, Costa & Ferreira, 2019).



Creative tourists are co-creators of their experiences (Richards & Raymond, 2000; Richards & Wilson, 2006; Tan, Kung & Luh, 2013). It should be noted that the concept of co-creation means that tourists have a central role in the production process of a creative activity (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Prebensen, Kim & Uysal, 2016). Creative tourists seek authentic experiences that enhance their active understanding of the specific cultural characteristics of a destination (Landry, 2008). They seek authenticity in the creative cultural offering.

## METHODOLOGY

In tourism research, the researcher must choose the research method and techniques that he/she considers most appropriate for his/her object of study (Marujo, 2012). For the present study, a qualitative methodology based on non-participant observation was used. It should be noted that observation helps to generate theories and ideas for further research (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008). It involves collecting impressions about the research universe, that is, systematically and intentionally using all the senses, particularly looking and listening, to learn about a phenomenon that interests the researcher (McKechnie, 2008).

Non-participant observation is a technique in which the researcher is not included in the context he observes. For Sousa (2005), his role is essentially that of an impartial spectator. In other words, he limits himself to witnessing the facts, but does not participate or allow himself to be involved in them. The non-participant observation in this study was applied to the following activities: 'Saídas de Mestre' (Masterclass Outings); 'Mãos de Cá' (Hands from Here) and 'Oleiro por um Dia' (Potter for a Day).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CREATOUR PROJECT IN THE ALENTEJO REGION

The CREATOUR project defines creative tourism as sustainable small-scale tourism with the capacity to provide visitors and tourists with an active experience combining immersion in the local culture with a process of creation and learning (Duxbury and Silva, 2020). According to these authors, the CREATOUR perspective on creative tourism encompasses four dimensions: active participation, learning, creative self-expression, and community involvement. CREATOUR essentially focuses on dynamic creative activities that are conceived and implemented by local residents, drawing inspiration from the endogenous resources of the territories (Duxbury, 2020).

The Alentejo region was part of the CREATOUR project<sup>4</sup> in 2017. Ten regional organizations (public and private) were selected to join this project, which developed and implemented pilot creative tourism initiatives between 2017/18 and 2020 (Table 1).

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<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of the Alentejo region in CREATOUR was done through the Interdisciplinary Research Centre for History, Cultures and Societies (CIDEHUS) of the University of Évora, which worked in close collaboration with the project's coordinating entity (CES) and with other project partners (CIEO, DINÂMIA'CET-IUL and Lab2PT).

**Table 1** – Pilot Organizations of the CREATOUR Project in the Alentejo

Organization / Pilot project	Joined	Context of the organization	Location
CECHAP   Rota do Mármore do Anticlinal de Estremoz (Marble Route of the Estremoz Anticline)	2017	Not-for-profit cultural association	Estremoz
Nova Tradição   Oficinas Têxteis Artesanais (Artisanal Textile Workshops)	2017	Atelier	Viana do Alentejo
Beja Municipal Council   BEJA CRIARTE	2017	Municipal council	Beja
Mértola Municipal Council   Caminhadas Criativas (Creative Walks)	2017	Municipal council	Mértola
Reguengos de Monsaraz Municipal Council   Casa do Barro – ‘Oleiro por um Dia’ (Potter for a Day)	2017	Municipal council	Reguengos de Monsaraz
MARCA ADL   Saídas de Mestre (Masterclass Outings)	2018	Not-for-profit cultural association	Montemor-o-Novo
João Cutileiro Atelier   Stone +	2018	Atelier	Évora
VAGAR Walking Tours   Play Évora	2018	Tourist recreation company	Évora
CACO   Mãos de Cá (Hands from Here)	2018	Artisans’ association	Odemira
Genuine Alentejo   Portugal’s Remarkable Tourist Experiences	2018	Tourist recreation company	Évora

**Source:** Own elaboration

The initiatives undertaken were monitored by the CREATOUR project research team. Data for the monitoring process were collected through forms filled in by the organizations; questionnaires applied to participants in creative initiatives; conducting field visits (participant and non-participant observation and field notes); preparation of informative content in the so-called “Project Diaries” (ePortfolio); conducting interviews; carrying out focus groups; and discussions/reflections on regional and national initiatives promoted by the research team.

The ten organizations in the Alentejo region that were part of the CREATOUR project have different organizational profiles. The typology of creative cultural activities they carry out is also diverse and mostly based on the endogenous resources of the municipalities where they are located. Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 briefly present the creative activities that each organization carried out within the scope of the CREATOUR Project.

**Table 2** – Description of the creative activities offered by the municipal councils

Beja Municipal Council	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
<i>Beja CRIARTE Experience</i>	It offers a unique opportunity to experience the more traditional local culture in the region of Beja and elsewhere in the Baixo Alentejo, particularly through creative interactive activities that offer learning opportunities: arts and crafts (wicker workshop), traditional music (afternoons music), traditional cuisine (traditional cookery workshop), traditional tales (Tell a Tale) and baking methods (breadmaking workshop).
Reguengos de Monsaraz Municipal Council	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
'Oleiro por um Dia' (Potter for a Day)	Its aim is to disseminate and promote its people and traditions, especially providing all visitors with an interactive experience based on knowledge and learning about pottery and clay. It is organized by Casa do Barro (Centre Interpretativo da Olaria de São Pedro do Corval), under the supervision of the Reguengos de Monsaraz Municipal Council. Its aim is to promote the pottery of the town of São Pedro do Corval, with the objective of ensuring its sustainability and preserving an important part of the culture and history of the municipal area.
Mértola Municipal Council	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
Caminhadas Criativas (Creative Walks)	The intention is to create a set of tourist tours composed of walking itineraries (with a guide) associated with creative experiences. Tours can focus on the walking dimension (Creative Walks Tour – Experienced Walks) or on the creativity dimension (Creative Residences – Walking Experiences). The walking dimension finds support in the geographical and landscape identity of the territory. The creativity dimension is based on the elements of its cultural identity (products, goods, experiences, values, history, arts and crafts).

Source: Own elaboration

Municipal councils have an important role in developing tourism in a locality. Therefore, not only do creative cultural activities promoted by municipal councils contribute to preserving cultural heritage, but they also promote the development of sustainable tourism (Ferreira, Gonzalez & Liberato, 2018).

As can be seen in Table 2, the aforementioned municipal councils carry out creative activities in the areas of intangible cultural heritage and cultural landscape heritage. Table 3 describes the creative offer of the tourist recreation companies.

**Table 3** – Description of the creative activities offered by the recreation companies

Genuine Alentejo company	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
<i>Portugal's Remarkable Tourist Experiences</i>	The service is based on intermediation between the company and visitors/tourists who are looking for memorable creative tourism experiences. It is a facilitatory service that helps tourists identify organizations that offer creative tourism activities according to their expectations and needs.
Vagar Walking Tours	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
Play Évora	Its main objective is to promote the heritage culture of Alentejo through personalized, individual or group visits. The cultural activities available allow the tourist/visitor to discover a region which is still little known in Portugal in a personalized way, with no timetable or formal presentations. Visits are guided by experts who are passionate about the history and culture of the Alentejo region.

Source: Own elaboration

Tourist recreation companies play a key role in promoting a region’s tangible and intangible heritage (Marujo, 2020). For some authors, tourist recreation can enhance and differentiate a destination’s tourist offer. Moreover, it can attract and retain tourists and visitors whose motivation is to have memorable experiences (Esteves, Fernandes and Cardoso, 2013).

Tourist recreation companies can make excellent intermediaries for creative tourism and, in a way, can provide greater participation and involvement of tourists in active experiences. Table 4 presents the creative activities offered by local and cultural development associations.

**Table 4** – Description of the creative activities offered by the associations

MARCA – ADL – Local Development Association	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
<i>Saídas de Mestre</i> (Masterclass Outings)	This consists of a set of creative workshops based on local knowledge. They are carried out in partnership with local entities that combine art, heritage and the environment.
CACO –Municipality of Odemira Artisans’ Association	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
Mãos de Cá (Hands from Here)	The main objective is to attract new visitors to the locality and introduce sustainability and innovation in traditional arts and crafts. The initiative consists of carrying out creative activities for the production and/or creation of products in the CRIAR Arts and Crafts Centre’s weaving, sewing, jewellery, pottery and carpentry workshops.

Source: Own elaboration

The involvement of local associations in creative tourism is crucial, particularly due to their statutory vocation for undertaking their projects and also the role they usually play in their territory of influence, as they involve the community in valuing and preserving material and immaterial cultural heritage (Marujo et al., 2020).

By offering creative tourism, local development associations can contribute to the sustainable development of territories. It should be noted, for example, that the creative initiative 'Masterclass Outings' establishes a relationship between artistic practice, traditional knowledge and environmental issues. It is a creative tourism proposal that also involves contact with culture and nature. On the other hand, the creative initiative 'Hands from Here' is an essential pillar for the preservation of handicrafts, but also as a tourist attraction. The activity enables social and cultural interaction between artisans, residents and tourists. Table 5 describes the creative offer of the workshops and study centres that are part of CREATOUR.

**Table 5** – Description of the creative activities offered by the study centres and ateliers

CECHAP –Culture, History, Art and Heritage Study Centre	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
Rota do Mármore do Anticlinal de Estremoz (Marble Route of the Estremoz Anticline)	This is a tourist recreation offer in an industrial environment, providing visitors with a unique experience of learning about the different heritage related to the marble industry, be it geological, urban, technical, landscape or other. It offers visits to quarrying and processing industry, stonemasonry workshops, artisans, monuments and architectural heritage, and a chance to experience the region's gastronomy.
LOOM New.Tradition	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
<i>Textile Workshops Based on Handicrafts</i>	The aim is to foster the intersection between more contemporary approaches (such as design, video, multimedia, sound, etc.) and artisanal traditions. Craft tradition and contemporary design have come together and created a combination based on the values of sustainability and the concept of quality over quantity, so-called slow fashion. In this sense, not only because of the rich historical resources, but also because the textile activities based on Alentejo's artisanal background are at risk of disappearing, LOOM decided on this initiative to promote artisanal workshops with local agents who carry on these activities, especially with the aim of awakening local and international interest in them.
João Cutileiro Atelier	
Creative Initiative	Description of the Activity
Stone +	The intention is to hold workshops for professional and amateur artists with some knowledge of stoneworking techniques. Visitors can use artist João Cutileiro's heritage of stone carving machines in his own atelier.

Source: Own elaboration

In Table 5 it can be seen that industrial heritage in the Alentejo region can also contribute to creative tourism and, in this way, it can enhance territories.

## CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY: 'OLEIRO POR UM DIA' (POTTER FOR A DAY)

In this activity, tourists gain experience in the art of working with clay. They can make their own piece and take it away with them as a souvenir. For many participants, the art of pottery seems to be a very simple activity to perform, but as Read (1973, p. 32) says, "pottery is, at once, the simplest and most difficult of all the arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract".

In the non-participant observation, it could be seen that after experiencing the activity, the participants realized the enormous complexity of making a clay piece on the potter's wheel. It is an art that requires concentration and a little magic in one's hands. For Fernandes (2003, p. 19), the charm of pottery lies in the "magic of its creation" and so it is this kind of charm that motivates many tourists to participate in creative pottery workshops.



### **ACTIVITY: 'MÃOS DE CÁ' (HANDS FROM HERE)**

In the Hands from Here initiative, especially with the 'be a weaver' programme, tourists or visitors have the opportunity embark on a process of learning about a traditional craft (weaving) related to the community. This activity does not only offer authentic experiences to tourists; it also promotes the development of new skills (knowledge of artisanal techniques) for tourists who participate in it.

This handicraft activity requires the involvement of artisans. It should be noted that tourists want to embark on creative learning processes with people who belong to the community. Therefore, it is in this interaction that they become consumers of their own creative experience.

### **ACTIVITY: SAÍDAS DE MESTRE' (MASTERCLASS OUTINGS)**

In the activity 'Masterclass Outings', non-participant observation was directed towards the initiative of 'making sock dolls', where participants make sock dolls with natural fillers (wool, herbs, etc.) from the Alentejo region. It is an enriching experience for tourists/visitors and also for the community itself, as the initiative enables social and cultural interaction.

First, the activity begins by explaining to the participants about the materials that will be used. Then, community members teach how to go about making the sock dolls. After a demonstration, participants can be hands-on with the materials they will use. Finally, they start to make the sock dolls, always with the support of community members. The imagination and creativity of the participants lead to unique and memorable experiences. Indeed, the activity offers participants emotional, sensory and cognitive experiences.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The CREATOUR project enabled a group of public and private organizations in the Alentejo to create a set of activities for the purpose of creative tourism. These activities are particularly associated with the particularities of the cultural and natural heritage of the territories where the organizations are located.

The creative cultural offer developed by the ten organizations that were involved in the CREATOUR project can contribute to the development of tourism and also make the destination more sustainable. Furthermore, gastronomy, clay and handicrafts are cultural products that, if well planned for creative tourism, can attract more tourists to the Alentejo region.

In the non-participant observation, it was found that in many cases the creative offer allows very rich social and cultural interaction between tourists and residents. For residents, promoting their cultural products through learning processes is a way of valuing and preserving their traditions and their cultural heritage. For tourists, they are memorable learning experiences that contribute somewhat to their personal development. Note that it is the uniqueness of the creative activities that make the experiences particularly memorable (Hung, Lee & Hunag, 2016). On the other hand, it is the memorable experience of the activity in which tourists participated that prompts them return to the destination (Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Hung et al., 2016).





Discovering new destinations that offer active cultural experiences is increasingly a requirement for many tourists. In the CREATOUR project, it was concluded that the Alentejo region has the potential to be a creative cultural destination, where tourists can have experiences using the five senses. They can immerse themselves in local cultures that are rooted in the different communities of the region, and they can take back home memories, cultural enrichment, new learning about intangible cultural heritage and, in some cases, bonds of friendship.

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