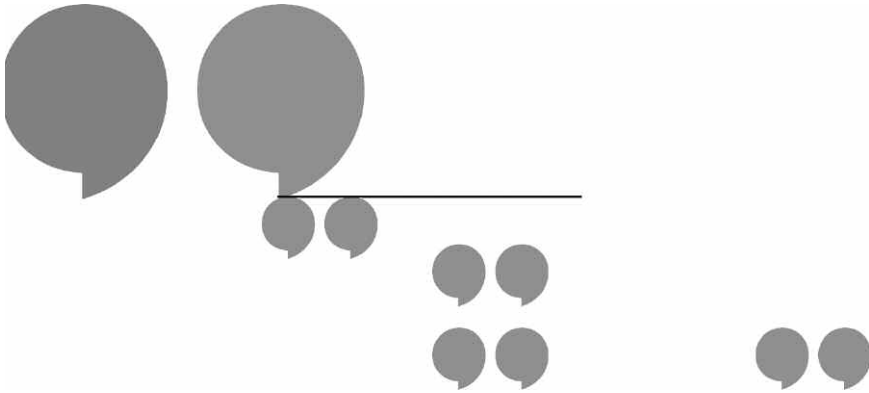


Extended abstract

*Territorial Impact of COVID-19
on Tourism. An Opportunity
for Rural Development in Spain*



Beatriz Benítez-Aurioles
Universidad de Málaga, Spain

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2022.12

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Highlights:

1. Rural tourism can mitigate the problems of sparsely populated areas.
2. Rural tourism demand reached historical figures in certain phases of the pandemic.
3. Rural tourism demand was, in general terms, greater than the urban.
4. The main demanders of rural tourism in the regions are their own residents.

Abstract: The interest in knowing how tourism demand has behaved in rural areas during the pandemic is justified by the role that tourism can play in mitigating the problems suffered by sparsely populated areas. The objective is to identify, on solid statistical basis, the features that have characterized the recent evolution of the demand for rural tourism. The Spanish case suggests, on the one hand, that rural tourism has had a more favourable dynamic than urban tourism during the pandemic. On the other hand, the evidence confirms that, during the months of July, August and September 2020 and 2021, when some of the measures to try to contain the spread of the virus were relaxed, rural tourism demand reached historical levels due to the impulse of residents who directed, to a large extent, their tourist demand towards their own regions. Consequently, there is an opportunity for sustainable rural development based on tourism through the implementation of strategies in the private sphere that build loyalty of demand and, in the public sphere, improving accessibility and articulating promotional campaigns by the Autonomous Communities themselves, especially aimed at their residents.

Keywords: Pandemic; rural tourism; tourist demand.

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

If the COVID-19 crisis has driven tourist demand towards areas with lower population density, where it is easier to maintain social distance, then this justifies the relevance of performing an analysis to determine to what extent the pandemic presents an opportunity for rural development based on tourism. To this end, the following question must first be answered: has the demand for rural tourism increased during the pandemic? On this basis, if what is intended is the promotion of rural tourism in a specific territory or area, it is also necessary to know where the tourists it receives come from.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The objective is to identify, on solid statistical bases, the features that have characterized the demand for rural tourism during the pandemic to verify whether it has, in fact, performed relatively more favorably than the demand for urban tourism. The case study will be Spain.

Most of the data comes from the *Rural Tourism Accommodation Occupancy Survey* published by the National Institute of Statistics (INE), which offers an acceptable degree of disaggregation. Likewise, we use the results of the *Hotel Occupancy Survey*. The time frame chosen is the period 2018-2021, although, on occasions, it is extended or narrowed down to reinforce the arguments.

Regarding the methodology, on the one hand, elementary descriptive statistics are used to present the main results. On the other hand, based on proposals that have been previously tested, a matrix is constructed that allows rural tourism flows between Spanish regions to be classified according to their specialization (that is, if region i attracts more tourists from region j than it would have attracted had it followed the same pattern as the national level) and its competitive advantage (i.e. if the growth of overnight stays of i coming from j is greater than the growth of overnight stays of j at the national level).

3. Results

Comparing the figures for the summer of 2019, the year before the pandemic, with those of 2021, it can be seen that only in 3 provincial capitals (Cádiz, Oviedo and Soria), of the 42 with available information, the number of overnight stays in hotels in the summer months of 2021 was higher than in 2019. However, in 26 provinces the number of overnight stays in rural accommodation was higher in the summer of 2021 compared to the summer of 2019.

From a regional point of view, comparing the data from 2021 with that of 2019, it can be seen that, probably due to the restrictions that still existed in the second year of the pandemic, the annual and total figures for rural tourism demand in Spain as a whole had not recovered the pre-pandemic level. However, some Communities did exceed these levels. In this context, two facts stand out. The first is that each Autonomous Community had, before the pandemic, its main rural tourism issuing market in its own residents, with the exceptions of Madrid and the Basque Country. The second noteworthy fact is that, frequently, in addition to their own market, the regions are specialized in attracting tourists who reside in other neighboring regions. These two facts help explain the dynamics of the demand for rural accommodation during the pandemic.

4. Discussion

The results suggest, first of all, that when the restrictive measures to contain the pandemic were relaxed, interest in rural accommodation grew. This potential demand translated, in the case of Spain, into effective demand during the summers of 2020 and 2021 to the point that the figures for overnight stays in rural accommodation reached historical levels, never surpassed before. The evidence, therefore, supports the thesis that, on the one hand, the tourism sector, despite the shock caused by the pandemic, has a high growth potential in rural areas.

The leading role that rural tourism has attained compared to urban tourism is reinforced when overnight stays in hotel accommodation in the provincial capitals are compared with overnight stays in rural tourism accommodation in the province as a whole. The data confirm, in general terms, the greater dynamism of rural tourism compared to urban tourism, at least, in the months of high season (July, August and September) during the years of the pandemic.

However, apart from the specific results of our analysis, the discussion on the opportunities that are opening up for the promotion of rural development through tourism in Spain requires a broader perspective. In particular, the fact that, despite the legislative and financial instruments used to stimulate rural tourism, the problem of depopulation of rural areas has not been resolved suggests the limitations that tourism has in reaching a comprehensive development of these areas. In any case, what our analysis has shown is that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered tourist flows, opening up new possibilities for the development of rural tourism in Spain.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic has driven changes in tourist demand which, due to the restrictions established on international travel and the health risk posed by the most saturated areas, has been oriented towards destinations close to their places of origin and, in particular, towards rural areas. In fact, in the case of Spain, rural tourism demand reached, during certain phases of the pandemic, levels that had never been reached before, and in general terms showed greater dynamism than urban tourism demand.

Naturally, we cannot know if what happened during the pandemic will mean a definitive change in the patterns that had characterized until then the tourist demand that, traditionally, had been oriented towards the coast and towards certain cities. In any case, the results of the analysis carried out lead us to the conclusion that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to exploit the development potential of rural tourism. To this end, actions both in the private and public spheres seem appropriate.

The pandemic has incorporated sanitary conditions as a key variable determining tourism demand, both urban and rural. The satisfaction of these needs corresponds, to a great extent, to companies. In particular, both tourist and hotel accommodation establishments in rural areas could not only satisfy the needs of tourists, but also design loyalty strategies that consolidate demand.

For their part, it is up to the public authorities to guarantee adequate accessibility to the rural environment as well as to seek a legislative framework that guarantees the adequate exploitation and sustainability of the natural, landscape, architectural resources, etc., of the areas visited, making them compatible with the development and creation of opportunities for the resident population.

6. Future directions

There are specific references to the role that tourism can play in promoting local culture and products and reducing inequalities by creating employment opportunities in disadvantaged areas. This is where the convenience of promoting sustainable tourism in rural areas arises, based on the preservation of natural resources and traditional ways of life, and, in this way, combat their depopulation.

Our analysis seems to confirm that the COVID-19 crisis has had less of an impact in rural areas than in urban areas. However, perhaps, it is still early to say that there has been a definitive change in the orientation of tourist demand. In fact, there is evidence that points to a rapid recovery of urban tourism and it cannot be ruled out that, once the pandemic is over, destinations located on the coast and cities will once again suffer from tourist pressure. In this sense, the public sector can play an important role with actions in rural areas that favor territorial balance through tourism, such as improving connectivity or supporting business initiatives.

The public actions that, in the short term, have been implemented to try to overcome or, at least, cushion the crisis caused by COVID-19 in the tourism sector have focused, fundamentally, on providing tax advantages and financial support to companies and, especially, to small and medium-sized ones, as well as to maintain the income and employment of workers. However, in the long term it seems appropriate to pay attention to sustainable tourism development in rural areas.