

The Best Practices Guides and the Rural Tourism: The Case of Madeira's Country Homes

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Abstract

This paper debates rural tourism, mainly the Country Homes in Madeira Island, centring on the link between the management of these tourism enterprises and the quality of services provided. Through the recognition of the owners', of the Country Homes, profile it was our purpose to establish the relevance of the fulfilment of a Best Practices Guide for a better management of these enterprises, due to the reduced training/experience of their owners/guardians.

In the quest of our goals we have applied the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in the absence of studies of this nature on the island of Madeira, such as the release of questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, field work and bibliographical and documentary research.

This research enabled us to conclude that the application of a Best Practices Guide, which main role is to adjust the tourist practice, with the ultimate goal of promoting the quality of services provided by these tourist enterprises, will be helpful and will concur for the tourism development of the Country Homes in Madeira.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Best Practices Guide, Quality of Services, Madeira Island

JEL Classification: Z 39

1. Introduction

Rural tourism is very recent in Portugal and, in particular, in the Madeira Archipelago. In contemporary decades rural tourism has been present in the country's development policies, counting among its main targets, the revitalization of rural societies' economic and political fabric.

The studies that have been done concerning rural tourism in mainland Portugal have exposed that this tourist segment has not yet reached its desired levels. In Madeira Archipelago and despite a later implementation, the efforts have shown more positive effects, but slightly distant from the initially expected.

In this paper we expect to recognise some weaknesses of this tourist segment in Madeira, in the perspective of discovering solutions that contribute to sustainable development on the island, from the tourist, economic, social and cultural point of view.

Following these principles, we have selected to identify the profile of the owners and the pertinence of the implementation of a best practices guide on the management of the Country Homes in Madeira, given their reduced training/professional experience in the tourism industry and the emergent need for improving the quality of services provided.

The theme for this option was based, among other reasons, in the relative lack of studies in this area and in our strong belief that rural tourism, although its very recent roots on the Island, is an area with strong future potential for sustainable development in the tourist sector of Madeira.

2. Literature Review

The literature review included different analyses on the subject, which focused in the areas of rural tourism, in the management of tourism enterprises and in particular, in the area of services.

According to Luigi Cabrini, Regional Representative of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) for Europe, the term "rural tourism" is used especially when "rural culture" is the key component of the tourism product offered by that region (WTO, 2004, p. 9). In his opinion, what differentiates the remaining tourism products from rural tourism "is the wish to give visitors a personalized contact, a taste of the physical and human environment of the countryside and, as far as possible, allow them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people" (WTO, 2004, p. 9).

In Portugal, and in strictly legal terms, rural tourism is the one that is practiced in establishments located in rural areas and designed to provide "accommodation services to tourists, while preserving, restoring and enhancing the architectural, historic, natural and landscape aspects of the several places and regions where they are located, through reconstruction, rehabilitation or expansion of existing buildings, in order to guarantee its integration in the surroundings." (Decree-Law n° 15/2014, section 1, article 18). Moreover, according to the same law, some of these establishments, among them, those classified as Country Homes, are "buildings located in villages and rural areas that are integrated, by its design, building materials and other characteristics, in the typical local architecture" (Decree-Law n° 15/2014, section 4, article 18).

Both in the European as in the Portuguese concepts, the idea of a deep interconnection coexists between rural tourism and the region's heritage, which allows us to conclude that the quality of services provided to tourists, especially in the field of the information to be provided about the locality is one of the priority factors.

Rural tourism has been the subject of some studies, especially in the European context and despite the WTO considering it a potential market, it has not been deeply studied to date (WTO, 2004, p. 9). In Portugal there have been few studies, most of them are of an exploratory nature and many are already outdated in view of the recent changes to the Portuguese legislative framework.

We have found some studies in Portugal, with themes associated with the sector, particularly in the context of regional development, EU policy, geographical expression, sociology, anthropology and information systems (Batista, 2008; Batouxas, 1998; Casqueira, 1992; Cavaco, 1999, 2004, 2006; Cravidão, 2004, 2012; Cunha, 1986, 1988; Ferreira, 2004; Figueira, 1998; Leal, 2001; Lopes, 2005; Lawrence 2005; Marques, 2005; Melo, 2003; Mesquita, 2009; Pereira, 2002; Pinto, 2004; Caldas & Portela, 2003; Grasses, 2006; Smith, 2009; Sousa, 2006). Most of these studies are not published, are masters or doctoral thesis, accessible at the National Library of Portugal. Through this framework, it is possible to conclude that Portugal's knowledge of rural tourism is still very incomplete, especially in the Autonomous Region of Madeira.

Regarding the studies related to this subject about Madeira Island, we found no publication or doctoral thesis. As far as we know in the University of Minho, Daniela Alvares was going to develop a doctoral thesis under the guidance of the Assistant Professor Julia Lawrence, entitled "Model of Tourism Life Cycle: A Tool for Rural Tourism Management Applied to Madeira Island" (Alvares & Lourenço, 2007).

According to the WTO, rural tourism allows a wide diversification in rural economies, through the preservation of cultural and natural heritage that might otherwise disappear, apart from that its sustainable development can create jobs, develop agriculture, preserve the landscapes and crafts, improve the environment and allow greater involvement by women (WTO, 2004, pp. 9-10).

On the other hand, Manuela Ribeiro (2003) confronts "the markedly favourable views on rural tourism-development binomial" which recently are spread throughout Europe, with studies that challenge and reveal the "the excessive optimism that" (pp. 202-203). This view is also expressed through the studies of Cravidão & Fernandes (2004) who question the multiplier effect of this activity, especially regarding the NW Portuguese: "To an expensive offer correspond weak occupancy rates, still marked by seasonality, which creates difficulties in job and capital creation. On the other hand, at least in this case, the number of families

directly involved in this activity is low, because entrepreneurship comes from a narrow and elitist set of local actors" (p. 427).

The last decades have witnessed changes in the tourists' profile, more and more knowledgeable and informed seek to complement and enrich their travel experience by combining different attractions, from the natural to the cultural heritage, trying to uncover and enjoy in a sophisticated way, the area which they are in. To meet the expectations of these visitors, the tourist markets have created special services and tourism products aimed primarily to niche markets (WTO, 1997, p. 117).

These circumstances favour the development of rural tourism on the island of Madeira. Given the territorial area of the island, we believe fair to assume that Madeira has a rich natural heritage, where we can distinguish the Laurel Forest, consecrated in 1999 by the UNESCO as World Heritage, a significant historical and cultural heritage, with a focus on monuments, traditions, crafts, wines, regional gastronomy and some cultural activities of traditional character, especially suitable for this tourism sector. A key condition to compete successfully in this sector is to ensure competitive advantages, being considered as fundamental "the experience of a way of life and environment that offer a Sharp contrast to life in the modern city" (WTO, 1997, p. 122). According to the same source, rural tourism is one of the tourist segments, which features are most likely to meet the principles of sustainability. According to the World Tourism Organization, the development of rural tourism is one of the three main ways that are associated almost immediately to the definition of sustainable development in tourism (WTO, 2007b, p.79).

Future opportunities for sustainable development of rural tourism in Madeira face additional challenges: endogenous and exogenous constraints hindering its growth as well as competitiveness with the hotel industry in general, similar to those that have occurred in Portugal:

"The rural tourism was structured in rural housing and attractions that make up the rural areas, natural and cultural, becoming, at present, as an offer of alternative accommodation but far from the global values of traditional hotels. Nevertheless, given the quality accommodation shortages in these areas, rural tourism represents a significant bulwark between the existing supply. We do not doubt that, if we had not made the effort of three decades in the existing architectural heritage recovery within the country, including solar and rural houses, the development gap would be much higher" (Ferreira, 2004, p. 480).

At the heart of the constraints we must emphasize the small size of these companies, the absence of associative spirit, the high cost of factors of production due to geographical isolation, the lack of skilled labour and the weak technology competence.

According to Jorge Osorio (2001), President of the Region of Tourism South Douro, strengthening development strategies in rural areas continued to be a priority in Portugal:

"It seems to me, therefore, that the Rural Tourism in Portugal, although with some limited adjustments, should continue its evolution, be structured, taking into account the following: The accommodation, The Animation, The Organization of the Supply, including: Training, Promotion" (p. 140).

In Madeira, there is no strategic plan for the development of rural tourism and, in addition these companies require an effective regional competitiveness policy, therefore the organizations should start by eliminating their endogenous constraints. One of the measures introduced in this paper is to improve the quality of their services.

The European Commission (EC) prepared a document primarily directed to the local authorities and other organizations responsible for tourism, "Towards quality rural tourism - Integrated quality management (IQM) of rural tourist destinations". Although the document contains recommendations and principles specifically targeted to an integrated management policy, the best practice recommendations also apply to small businesses, including the Country Homes, since they belong to the total set (EC, 2000, p. 14).

Since we think that this situation has future implications in getting a greater number of visitors, part of the solution is to implement a conduit of best practices to be followed by the Country Homes and also since the Portuguese Norm for "Rural Tourism - Requirements of Service and Features" (IPQ, 2010) was recently published, one of the aims of this paper was to present the relevance of a Best Practices Guide for Country Homes in Madeira offering them a set of guidelines to help these enterprises to fight effectively by checking out their own route on the path of sustainable rural development. According to Eunice Fernandes and Guilherme Guerra (2008), "it appears that a higher academic literature on the subject is necessary, because it

is of the utmost importance for tourism, given the benefits that the implementation of quality management systems can bring to companies and tourist cities" (p. 49).

Our literature review was also supplemented by literature's analysis of Hospitality (Marques, 2006, 2007), as well as some books about best practice in Hotel Management, one from the "Tourism of Portugal, I.P." and other one from the "United Nations Environment Programme" (UNEP, 2003), in order to analyse which were the most relevant topics of the best practices guides, to orient our research. In the absence of an internationally accepted model, we have chosen to follow the model of Portuguese Norm for "Rural Tourism" (IPQ, 2010), introducing some changes and considering some criteria set by the WTO for incorporation by organizations and bodies in an attempt to create a general definition of the product "Rural Accommodation" (WTO, 2007b, p. 187), in order to offer a specific model of best practices guide for Madeira's Country Homes. Although the Portuguese legislation does not cover all these criteria and there are still some components to improve, we believe that in the near future, on the island of Madeira, we can watch the following:

"Rural Accommodation [will be] understood as a small-scale hospitality service which combines personal attention, quiet and peaceful setting, and assured quality standards with good conservation of environment, human and cultural authenticity in connection with the local community and its traditions, products, gastronomy, and heritage, under the limits of security and safeguarding the [local] resources" (WTO, 2007b, p.187)..

3. Methodology

Results from a larger study were used in the present paper, concerning the sustainable development of rural tourism in Madeira, focusing on the Country Homes, seeking to contribute to a more profound knowledge concerning the development of the Island's rural tourism and the delineation of future strategies. The theme of this paper focused on rural tourism, with a special emphasis on the management of tourism enterprises and the quality of services provided.

In this perspective and in general terms, the following objectives were set, in the elaboration of this paper:

- Identifying the profile of the owners of rural tourism enterprises in Madeira;
- Demonstrating the relevance of the implementation of a Best Practices Guide in the management of these tourist enterprises, given the sparse professional training of owners / leaders of Madeira's Country Homes and the growing need to improve the quality of services provided.
- Proposing a specific model of Best Practices Guide, to be tested, for Madeira's Country Homes. In order to pursue our purposes, a bibliographical research on the theme and concepts implicated was conducted. To that effect we resorted to primary and secondary sources.

The non-existence of studies concerning rural tourism in Madeira, confronted us with the need to elaborate semi-structured interviews and questionnaires extensively conducted to many informers, in particular to businessmen and tourists. This supplied us with valuable data through the information gathered which allowed us to fulfil our objectives.

From the 34 Country Homes existing in Madeira 16 of them agreed to collaborate in the present study, which ensured a good representation of the sample (47%), in relation to the number of ventures and geographical localization, as with the number of replies to the interviews, in relation with the universe in question.

We chose to conduct the interviews to the owners or representatives of the Country Homes, between the months of June and October of 2012.

The present study was supplemented by the investigator's visit to the collaborative Country Homes, this aimed to deepen his knowledge about the facilities and its surroundings. These visits allowed us to compare what we had observed and the knowledge acquired previously, as well as to make relevant conclusions that aided our description and interpretation of the reality in question.

4. Results and Discussion

The Owners' Profile of the Country Homes in Madeira

In the interviews conducted to the owners/representatives of the Country Homes, we found some data that allowed us to understand the current scenario of these enterprises in Madeira.

It was not intended in this paper to characterize exhaustively the owners' profile of the Country Homes in Madeira. It seemed, however, essential to draw some of the main characteristics, because by getting to know them better, we can better understand their opinions, basic motivations and the type of management practiced in their Country Homes.

The average age of owners/representatives shows a high participation especially for the age group above 50 years of age. In the field of occupation, except for two cases who were already retired, the other owners/representatives besides having this occupation, played other major activities, with a strong presence in liberal professions or related to teaching and management of companies. This scenario differs for some studies carried out in mainland Portugal and in our opinion contributes to the existence of different attitudes. In Manuela Ribeiro's view, rural tourism owners reveal a rather different profile:

“Sustained by insurance income from pensions and other sources, these owners are in fact a significant segment of rural tourism, offering major talents: knowledge about the history, culture ethnography of its regions; great time available for the personalized service of its customers; capacity and social relationship skills cleared over decades of years of professional experience, etc.” (Ribeiro, 2003, p. 211).

Regarding the basic motivation for the development of this professional activity, we asked three questions to the owners. The first, how they had become building owners; the second, what was the motivation to explore the building as rural tourism – Country Home and the third, if they held prior work experience in the tourism industry.

By analysing the answers to the first question, we hold true that 7 buildings had been acquired (44%), while 9 buildings (56%) had been inherited. Of the purchased, five (31%) were initially purchased as holiday houses and only two buildings (12%) were actually acquired for the purpose of investing in rural tourism.

In the second question, the owners were unanimous in their answers to the “Rural Tourism – Country Home” option, which justified stating that the property type and its location offered the ideal conditions for this type of activity. As for the reason that motivated them to explore the building, 13 owners (81%) stated that the decision was related with a profitable way to keep the “House” and only three owners (19%) stated that the decision was associated with the motivation for the sector.

As for the third question, from the 16 respondents only five (31%) confirmed to have previous experience in the tourism industry.

The answers to those two questions may not seem very relevant in a first analysis, however this situation will become responsible for lower or higher quality of services, for the best or worst management and promotion of the establishment and in a final stage, by the low demand of this type of tourism, as already referenced in several studies, including:

“The farmer and the head of the agricultural family turns into an innkeeper, serves meals at his house, shows the farm and the work that takes place there, sells its products, provides information on the area and on the local culture, constitutes himself as the public relations of the space in which he appears and the very image of the destination to which he belongs, but does not pursue a policy of employing professionals with the necessary qualification, because payable wages are high, the activity is seasonal and small scale, so he chooses to move employees from rural activities for support activities to tourists, or seasonal employees ..., an attitude that does not allow to maintain a service whose quality level is expected by the upper middle and middle class tourists who visit rural areas” (Ferreira, 2004, p. 65).

In the quote above, Ferreira (2004) showed us the scenario “the farmer” who became an innkeeper, a situation with greater connection to agritourism than actually to Country Homes, although this picture is

broadly similar in the modality under study. Another study reveals that most promoters enjoy other sources of income, including retirement checks and that "the reception of tourists is seen as a certain 'hobby' that will give some income (to keep the house)" (Jesus, Kastenzholz and Figueiredo, 2008, p. 13).

In the conclusions of the "I Conference on Tourism, Heritage and Environment» of Silves, among the set of principles and factors to improve, training was also mentioned, "whether of qualified technicians who contribute to enhance Rural Tourism, [...] or of retail investors and people already installed, in order to qualify the offer of services and support management" (AAVV, 2000, p. 66).

The authors cited above reveal the importance of vocational training in rural tourism in Portugal. This debate is not new, in fact the Seminar on "Social Exclusion and Rural Tourism", held in Almeida, in 1992, among the conclusions reached by the working groups, the importance of professionalism was highlighted, specially by launching training programs aimed at tour operators and owners of rural tourism enterprises, whose training activities should focus "in the following plans: technical - recovery equipment, management, etc.; reception of tourists; [...] professionalize the actors in the rural areas (owners, craftsmen) in the activities related to tourism "(AAVV, 1993, pp. 25-33).

The scenario found in Madeira, related to the owners of these businesses, is not very different from the studies carried out in Portugal, especially the already referenced throughout this investigation, so based on these and the responses received we can conclude that for the majority of the owners of these Country Homes, the investment was the result of the need to economically maintain a building that they had originally purchased for their own use or that had been inherited and not as a result of a strong motivation for the tourism sector or previous experience in the tourism industry, which will be reflected in project management, quality of services, and consequently in the demand of rural tourism, as well as the economic and socio-cultural impact of it in rural areas.

Portuguese legislation, till 2011, required a "professional card" to the hotel directors, deputy directors and assistant directors of hotel establishments to exercise the respective profession, which was granted only in the compliance of certain requirements. By the Decree-Law n° 49/2011 of 8 April, those requirements were eliminated, since that did not fit the guiding principles for the regulation of professions - reform of vocational training, approved by Resolution of the Council of Ministers n° 173/2007 of 7 November. However in the above Decree-Law is safeguarded the need for specific skills for this profession:

"In addition, in a comparative law analysis, it appears that most of the member states of the European Union opt for free access to the profession. It is not intended to remove the need for qualification of human resources in the tourism sector, particularly those in positions of director of hotel functions, verifying, rather, that it should not be for the State to ensure that qualification, for such being the normal functioning of the labour market enough, with employers to seek, at all times, human resources enabled with the right skills to the desired profile for the performance of their duties" (Decree-Law n° 49/2011 of 8 April).

As we could see, the owners/representatives of Country Homes, are not "empowered with the right skills for the desired profile required to perform their duties" and in accordance with the legal diploma it is understood that "normal functioning of the market" can determine the success or the failure of the enterprise in the business perspective and in the sustainable development of rural tourism in Madeira.

According to the legal framework for installing, operating and running tourist developments, the owners or their representatives may or may not reside in the venture. Although not required for this type of rural tourism, it is appropriate that the owner or his representative dwell in the enterprise or in the vicinity thereof so that he could more effectively offer the visitor the "family nature environment" and the frequent contact between the owner and visitor, characteristic of this type of tourism. In interviews conducted we found out that none of the owners/representatives lived in the venture, except for two owners (12%), who confirmed that they resided close to the tourist establishment.

This scenario clearly reflects the scant training/experience of the owners/representatives of Country Homes in Madeira and the possible consequences for the quality of services provided, as evidenced by the results of the questionnaires hand out to visitors, shown in the following section.

The Relevance of Applying a Best Practices Guide in Madeira's Country Homes

Since we think that the situation described above has future implications in attracting a greater number of visitors, that part of the solution is to implement a conduit of best practices preconized by the Country Homes and that recently was published the Portuguese Standard for Rural Tourism - Conditions of service and features "(IPQ, 2010), one of the aims of this paper is to demonstrate the need for this requirement, which might offer the Country Homes in Madeira a set of guidelines to help these enterprises make their own route in the path of sustainable rural development. According to Eunice Fernandes and Guilherme Guerra (2008), "it appears that a higher academic literature on the subject is necessary, because it is of the utmost importance for tourism, given the benefits that the implementation of quality management systems can bring to companies and tourist cities" (p. 49).

To enable the reader to gain a more solid idea about the current situation of these enterprises in a perspective of the offer quality, we will begin by showing, in a detailed way, some results of the visitor surveys, which reflect the degree of satisfaction of visitants in the assessment of the accommodation units.

Table 1. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Personal Treatment – Professionalism

Classification (1 - 10 points)	N	%	% Valid	
Valid	1	3	1,8%	1,9%
	2	1	0,6%	0,6%
	3	4	2,4%	2,5%
	4	6	3,7%	3,7%
	5	6	3,7%	3,7%
	6	16	9,8%	9,9%
	7	32	19,5%	19,8%
	8	30	18,3%	18,5%
	9	28	17,1%	17,3%
	10	36	22,0%	22,2%
	Total	162	98,8%	100,0%
No Reply	2	1,2%		
Total	164	100,0%		

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

According to "Table 1 - Guest Satisfaction Degree (GSD) - Accommodation: Personal Treatment – Professionalism" on the variable "Personal treatment – professionalism", despite the mode had been 10 points, there was only 22.2% of respondents attributing this maximum rating. The second largest percentage of responses, 19.5% covered the 7 points and 22% of the responses focused on ratings equal to or less than 6 points, beyond which there were two respondents who chose to not assign any classification.

The immediate reflection induced by these data is the lack of professionalism in personal treatment of the visitors, in about half of the Country Homes of the sample. According to António Ferreira (2004) one of the constraints of rural areas comes from the "lack of technical and scientific preparation of the human resources, in particular from those which have the task of providing tourist information" (p. 482). In this field, we remind the reader that in most of the Country Homes of Madeira, the owner/representative of the enterprise has the job to meet the guest and provide tourist information, so we agree with the opinion of António Ferreira (2004) when he says the following:

"It is crucial that the functions in question are carried out by professionals with adequate technical and scientific preparation, with a higher level, so that their skills can acquire new dynamics, especially in terms of knowledge of the fundamentals of tourism as a science. The pragmatic response to requests from increasingly complex and qualified order should be the posture of human resources in tourism" (p.482).

Table 2. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Meals

Classification (1 - 10 points)		N	%	% Valid
Valid	1	10	6,1%	14,5%
	2	0	0,0%	0,0%
	3	1	0,6%	1,4%
	4	3	1,8%	4,3%
	5	2	1,2%	2,9%
	6	7	4,3%	10,1%
	7	5	3,0%	7,2%
	8	14	8,5%	20,3%
	9	8	4,9%	11,6%
	10	19	11,6%	27,5%
	Total	69	42,1%	100,0%
No Reply		95	57,9%	
Total		164	100,0%	

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

As we can see from the analysis of "Table 2 - GSD - Accommodation: Meals", in what concerns the meals, despite the mode is situated in 10 points, it is urgent to point out that all the three best ratings reached 25% of total respondents and 57,9% of respondents chose not to grant any classification of this variable. According to the Portuguese law, the Country Homes are not required to serve main meals, provided there are restaurants within 5 Km from the property, however breakfast is a service that should be included in the accommodation price. Throughout our study, we found that only five enterprises (31%) met this legal requirement. Therefore we understand that the majority of respondents could not classify something they did not have access to, a situation that should undergo a major restructuring in the future.

Table 3. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Animation

Classification (1 a-10 points)		N	%	% Valid
Valid	1	9	5,5%	19,1%
	2	6	3,7%	12,8%
	3	3	1,8%	6,4%
	4	0	0,0%	0,0%
	5	1	0,6%	2,1%
	6	4	2,4%	8,5%
	7	8	4,9%	17,0%
	8	6	3,7%	12,8%
	9	3	1,8%	6,4%
	10	7	4,3%	14,9%
Total		47	28,7%	100,0%
No Reply		117	71,3%	
Total		164	100,0%	

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

According to "Table 3 - GSD - Accommodation: Animation", the mode of the variable "Animation", reflects the reality, it stood on the lowest rating: 1 (one) point. This variable presents a more deficit scenario than that of the "Meals". In this particular case 71,3% of respondents chose not to answer and the set of the three best ratings obtained only 9,8% of the responses. These results confirm the findings of the interviews made to the owners/representatives of the establishments in relation to additional planned activities services provided by the Country Homes. In fact 14 establishments (88%) confirmed that there was no offer made to their guests in terms of animation, while two establishments (12%) testified that their guests were invited to participate in agricultural labours.

In our opinion the component "Animation" goes beyond the boundaries of acceptable contexts. As Ferreira (2004) notes: "Animation is central to the development of tourism and regions, it allows the integration and retaining of the visitors, therefore, to study the tourists and the opinions of those who attend a given area is one of the primary missions of tourist destinations" (p. 485).

Table 4. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Sustainability/Concern for the Environment

Classification (1 - 10 points)		N	%	% Valid
Valid	1	1	0,6%	0,7%
	2	2	1,2%	1,3%
	3	5	3,0%	3,3%
	4	8	4,9%	5,3%
	5	14	8,5%	9,3%
	6	17	10,4%	11,3%
	7	24	14,6%	15,9%
	8	26	15,9%	17,2%
	9	26	15,9%	17,2%
	10	28	17,1%	18,5%
	Total	151	92,1%	100,0%
No Reply		13	7,9%	
Total		164	100,0%	

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

By analysing the “Table 4 - GSD - Accommodation: Sustainability/Concern for the Environment”, the variable of sustainability, we verified that despite the mode displayed the highest score, it only reflects the responses of 17,1% of the respondents, so the results illustrate that this is one of the variables with strong improvement need and that the Country Homes could have greater benefits if they tried to offer a more sustainable tourism: «while seeking long term profitability, they should be concerned about their corporate image, the relationship with their staff, and their impact on the global environment and that immediately around them» (WTO, 2007a, p. 12).

Table 5. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Quality/Services/Price Ratio

Classification (1 a-10 points)		N	%	% Valid
Valid	1	2	1,2%	1,3%
	2	0	0,0%	0,0%
	3	4	2,4%	2,5%
	4	6	3,7%	3,8%
	5	6	3,7%	3,8%
	6	18	11,0%	11,3%
	7	22	13,4%	13,8%
	8	41	25,0%	25,8%
	9	40	24,4%	25,2%
	10	20	12,2%	12,6%
	Total	159	97,0%	100,0%
No Reply		5	3,0%	
Total		164	100,0%	

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

According to "Table 5 - GSD - Accommodation: Quality/Services/Price Ratio", the connexion "Quality/Services/Price Ratio" analysed by the visitors reflects, mostly, the situation of the variables that we have been presenting. First of all, 3% of respondents chose not to answer, which immediately allows us to think that they failed to assign a rating to this variable. The reasons may have been diverse, but according to the foregoing thought, we can assume that behind this attitude lies a total disagreement in the correspondence between the quality of services provided and the price charged. Second, only 12,2% of respondents gave a rating of around 10 points and the mode of responses stood at 8 points, with 25% of responses. Third, the answers in equal ratings or below 6 points represented 12% of respondents.

Opposing to what one of the owners said during the interviews, supporting that their guests while searching for a Country Home, aspired to feel a "pure environment, conducive to meditation" and did not want to be bothered, so the Internet access in the establishments was unnecessary, the results of visitor surveys point to a divergent reality.

Table 6. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Access to New technologies

Classification (1 - 10 points)		N	%	% Valid
Valid	1	6	3,7%	4,2%
	2	5	3,0%	3,5%
	3	8	4,9%	5,6%
	4	11	6,7%	7,7%
	5	9	5,5%	6,3%
	6	18	11,0%	12,7%
	7	21	12,8%	14,8%
	8	31	18,9%	21,8%
	9	22	13,4%	15,5%
	10	11	6,7%	7,7%
	Total	142	86,6%	100,0%
No Reply		22	13,4%	
Total		164	100,0%	

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

Under the Access to new technologies, the mode of the responses in "Table 6 - GSD - Accommodation: Access to New Technologies", of around 8 points, which, as in previous cases, does not give us a clear idea of the results of this variable. First, 13,4% of respondents chose not to answer this question. Second, only 6,7% of the visitors gave the maximum score (10 points). Third, the answers in equal ratings or below 6 points represented 35,8% of respondents, while the set of the three highest rates comprised 39% of the responses, which allows us to conclude that in the future, this is one of the aspects not to be overlooked by the Country Homes in Madeira.

Concerning the "Information about the area" provided by Country Homes in Madeira besides being scarce and lacking in detail, we confirmed that it did not comply with legal requirements. This reality is perfectly reflected in the results of the surveys answered by the visitors.

Table 7. - Guest Satisfaction Degree - Accommodation: Information about the area

Classification (1 - 10 points)	N	%	% Valid	
Valid	1	4	2,4%	2,7%
	2	6	3,7%	4,1%
	3	7	4,3%	4,8%
	4	6	3,7%	4,1%
	5	12	7,3%	8,2%
	6	17	10,4%	11,6%
	7	21	12,8%	14,3%
	8	33	20,1%	22,4%
	9	25	15,2%	17,0%
	10	16	9,8%	10,9%
	Total	147	89,6%	100,0%
No Reply	17	10,4%		
Total	164	100,0%		

N= Frequency

Source: Author's own study on the basis of data provided through the Country Homes' Visitor's questionnaires (2012).

Analysing the results of "Table 7 - GSD- Accommodation: Information about the Area", despite the mode being 8 points, we found out that 10,4% of respondents chose not to answer the question; only 9,8% gave a maximum score (10 points) and the answers in the same classifications or less than 6 points, accounted for 31,8% of respondents, while the set of the three highest rates covered only 45,1% of the responses.

To complete this framework, we must add that the second most frequent suggestion of the visitors fell on the information provided by the establishments about the locality or region (15 references in a total of 53 responses). According to Ferreira (2004) the "weaknesses lie at the level of care and supervision of tourists and even more, in the fact that a fundamental aspect to stimulate the activity and performance of the region was neglected, which was the information on the supply of the surrounding areas of the houses. An essential attitude for the economic development of tourism spaces" (p. 485).

Finally, we analysed the sequence of variables treated previously and which denoted the greatest needs in the sphere of a future improvement. Based on the percentage of response of the three highest rates (10, 9 and 8 points) obtained in each variable, the fields that we assessed as High Priority in future improvement plan were essentially, and in descending order of importance, the "Animation", the "Meals", the "Access to New Technologies", the "Information about the Area" and the "Sustainability/Concern for the Environment". In the Medium Priority, we went with "Personal treatment – professionalism" and "Quality/Services/Price Ratio".

This scenario can be completed with the results of another question asked to visitors about the possibility of return or if they recommended the establishment. Of all the respondents, 21,3% did not retain a favourable image of the tourism unit. Since they didn't plan to "recommend" the establishment to anyone, we looked at that as a relatively high number, which could be unfavourable to some tourist units, since today we are fully aware that tourists «are seeking a high quality experience in safe and attractive environments, in which they can appreciate different cultures or simply enjoy different climates. Tourists are becoming more aware of the

impacts of their travelling, while not willing to renounce to it, but rather becoming more selective about their choice of destinations» (WTO, 2007a, p. 12).

4. Implementation

From the previous discussion it is clear that Madeira's Country Homes, in order to mark a distinctive position in a highly competitive market, should offer the visitor a service marked by competence, efficiency, innovation and dynamism, that is, «they should innovate in terms of products and their marketing in order to achieve a possibly unique profile, based on their own recourses and strengths» (Hummelbrunner, 1993, p. 131), ultimately a quality service, a primary element in any competitiveness and sustainability strategy. According to Francesco Frangialli, a region's tourism policy should reflect «the twin and related needs of competitiveness and sustainability» (WTO, 2007a, p. 2).

Following this guideline, we chose to present a model, in current testing, for a Best Practices Guide directed specifically to Madeira's Country Homes (Table 8). As previously mentioned, we carried out an extensive bibliographical research and due to the inexistence of a internationally accepted model, we chose to introduce some alterations to the Portuguese Norm's model for «Rural and Housing Tourism» (IPQ, 2010), highlighting three fundamental principles. The first, that the host's conduct be guided by «warmth, friendliness, availability, empathy and professionalism»; the second, that it is offered to the guests a scenario characterized by «familiar environment, comfort, safety, tranquillity, privacy and animation, as they wish»; the third, that the house offers an appropriate set of conditions: «access, mobility, condition, functionality, decoration coherency, cleanliness and safety» (IPQ, 2010, p. 5). The employed methodology integrated all the developed analysis, considering the study we conducted on Madeira Island's Country Homes, the legislation's applicable content to this kind of touristic enterprise and the need to meet the expectations and needs of the guests.

We have tried to highlight some of the key elements of the current situation of Country Homes in the island of Madeira. But the commitment and goodwill of the owners may suffice, therefore, initially, the relevance of the application by the owners/representatives of a Best Practices Guide in the management of their establishments is duly justified, which can help provide a quality rural tourism experience to the visitors and at a later stage, the eventual recognition of the establishment's quality through a quality certification.

5. Conclusions and Implications for Rural Tourism

In fact, during the interviews to the owners/representatives of the Country Homes and during our visits to the establishments of the sample, we witnessed a number of situations that did not fit with the applicable legislation, nor with the quality service that should meet the expectations of visitors. Moreover, the results of the surveys answered by the visitors corroborated this reality and support the need of the existence of a best practices guide that contributes to sustainable development of this tourism sector.

Amid the numerous circumstances to report, we considered pertinent to remark, among others, the convenience in a more professional service; the importance of a quality certification or environmental; the relevance of the information provided by tourist unit about the locality or region, particularly at the level of events and cultural attractions; the access to new technologies, especially the "Internet"; the range of entertainment to guests focused on cultural resources of Madeira, as well as the compliance with the applicable legislation.

Agreeing with Albano Marques (2006), management "is the process through which one uses what one has to do, what one wants (or what is needed). What we have are the resources, what we want (or what that is needed) is to achieve the company's objectives and targets" (p. 283). Therefore it's justified to claim that with limited resources, one of the major management challenges is how to use them to achieve the desired goals. In the Country Homes this responsibility is attributed to the owner, who may delegate it to a legal representative who should have the knowledge and skills to execute it.

Our model of the best practices guide pretends to enrol principles and recommendations, being its main function to lead the tourist practice, with the ultimate objective of promoting the quality of services provided by these tourist enterprises, that despite having a tiny accommodation capacity, can achieve a strong relevance in the development of tourism: "A small inn on the roadside with ten rooms, four or five

employees, diligent and knowledgeable owners and aware, can be as important for tourism as the Palace of a big city, which serves 30,000 people a year, with 400 employees and super luxurious facilities” (Marques, 2006, p. 31).

With the effective and efficient implementation of a best practices guide in the Country Homes in Madeira, we think that is reasonable to assume several great achievements. It could alleviate seasonality and yield important social and financial benefits for the owners of these tourist enterprises and thus contribute to the sustainable development of the rural tourism modality, with progressive impacts on the economy, as well as in aspects related to society, culture and environment.

Further than the urgent need to implement a best practices guide, bearing in mind the profile of the owners and that many of them are essentially investors who want to capitalize their capital/real estate, one of the main conclusions that rose from this paper, regarding the management of these enterprises, was the following: Whenever an owner does not have knowledge and skills in management of tourism businesses, he should deliver the management of the establishment to a qualified professional technician.

It is hoped that the outcome of this paper, opens the door to future research opportunities in the tourism field, looking for improvements and new approaches, such as in rural areas that can serve to boost the development of this tourism sector, taking into account the different synergies that can trigger, at various levels, economies and rural societies.

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