

LOCAL ACCOMMODATION AS AN ECOSYSTEM FOR THE REGENERATION OF RURAL TERRITORIES: THE MUNICIPALITY OF VILA DE REI

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Abstract:

In Portugal, tourism has established itself as a strategic sector of the economy, playing a significant role in diversifying supply, creating jobs, and enhancing heritage value. Local Accommodation (AL) has contributed to housing regeneration, particularly in municipalities with low population density. This research analyzes AL as an ecosystem for the regeneration of rural territories, highlighting responsible practices that benefit local communities. The study focuses on the municipality of Vila de Rei (Central Region of Portugal) as a representative case where AL has driven new forms of hospitality and heritage enhancement. A mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) was adopted, using structured questionnaires applied to AL agents and semi-structured interviews with municipal tourism technicians, as well as a literature review. The results show that AL establishments, when framed within responsible tourism practices, play a structuring role in territorial development, contributing to economic dynamism through income diversification, stimulation of local commerce, strengthening of social cohesion, and preservation of cultural landscapes. However, collaborative governance mechanisms are not yet fully consolidated. It is concluded that Local Accommodation constitutes an effective ecosystem for territorial regeneration in rural contexts. The study offers an integrated analytical framework that articulates territorial regeneration, hospitality, and responsible tourism, providing a guiding basis for public policies and strategic management of Local Accommodation.

Keywords: rural territories; hospitality; ecosystem; territorial regeneration; local accommodation

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ALOJAMENTO LOCAL COMO ECOSSISTEMA DE REGENERAÇÃO DOS TERRITÓRIOS RURAIS: O CONCELHO DE VILA DE REI

Resumo:

Em Portugal, o turismo tem-se afirmado como um setor estratégico da economia, desempenhando um papel relevante na diversificação da oferta, criação de emprego e valorização do património. O Alojamento Local (AL) tem contribuído para a regeneração habitacional, em particular em concelhos de baixa densidade populacional. A presente investigação analisa o AL enquanto ecossistema de regeneração dos territórios rurais, ressaltando práticas responsáveis que beneficiem as comunidades locais. O estudo centra-se no concelho de Vila de Rei (Região Centro de Portugal) como caso representativo onde o AL tem impulsionado novas formas de hospitalidade e valorização patrimonial. Adotou-se uma metodologia mista (qualitativa e quantitativa), recorrendo a questionários estruturados aplicados a agentes de AL e entrevistas semiestruturadas a técnicos municipais de turismo e revisão de literatura. Os resultados evidenciam que os estabelecimentos de AL, quando enquadrados em práticas de turismo responsável, assumem papel estruturante no desenvolvimento territorial, contribuindo para dinamização económica através da diversificação de rendimentos, estímulo ao comércio de proximidade, reforço da coesão social e preservação das paisagens culturais. Contudo, mecanismos de governança colaborativa ainda não estão plenamente consolidados. Conclui-se que o AL constitui um ecossistema efetivo de regeneração territorial em contextos rurais. O estudo oferece um quadro analítico integrador que articula regeneração territorial, hospitalidade e turismo responsável, fornecendo base orientadora para políticas públicas e gestão estratégica do AL.

Palavras-chave: territórios rurais; hospitalidade; ecossistema; regeneração territorial; alojamento local

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Portugal has established itself as one of the most dynamic and strategic sectors of the national economy, playing a key role in the creation of skilled jobs, in boosting different sectors of economic activity, and in enhancing its cultural and natural heritage that characterizes the Portuguese territory. The sector's strategic vision clearly recognizes tourism as an engine for integrated territorial development, positioning Portugal among the most competitive and sustainable destinations worldwide (Turismo de Portugal, 2021).

According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, tourism represents a significant part of the national Gross Domestic Product and total exports, confirming its status as a structuring economic activity (OECD, 2023). The most recent data from the National Institute of Statistics shows consistent growth in tourism demand, with guest and overnight stay figures exceeding pre-pandemic levels, the majority of which correspond to non-resident tourists (INE, 2024). These figures not only demonstrate the sector's resilience in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but also reinforce Portugal's position as a leading European

destination, recognized for the diversity of its offerings, the authenticity of its experiences, and the quality of its hospitality.

One of the most significant phenomena that has marked the recent evolution of the Portuguese tourism sector is the expressive growth of Local Accommodation (AL), a modality that has a long tradition rooted in the ancestral practice of hospitality, where families made part of their homes available to receive visitors in exchange for compensation. With the emergence of digital intermediation platforms and the growth in demand for authentic, as well as personalized, experiences, this practice has leveraged itself as an alternative and strategic approach to conventional hotel models, simultaneously offering economic accessibility, cultural authenticity, and appreciation of real estate assets. The number of establishments registered in the National Register of Local Accommodation (RNAL) has registered exponential growth since the publication of the autonomous legal regime in 2014, confirming the structural relevance of AL in the national tourism landscape (Turismo de Portugal, 2024).

This growth, while representing an unequivocal opportunity for the diversification of the tourism offer and for the economic revitalization of inland territories, has given rise to important debates about the need for a balance between tourism development and territorial sustainability. Analysis of municipal indicators reveals significant asymmetries in the geographical distribution of short-term rental supply, with a strong concentration in metropolitan and coastal regions, contrasting with the underutilized potential of emerging destinations in the interior of the country. In this context, it becomes imperative to develop positioning strategies that allow short-term rentals to effectively contribute to territorial cohesion, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the promotion of a more balanced, inclusive, and sustainable tourism model, capable of generating added value for local communities and visitors, without compromising the quality of life of residents or the integrity of territorial resources.

2. POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND RECONFIGURATION OF TOURIST FLOWS

In the European context, tourism has proven to be one of the most resilient sectors of the economy, recovering more quickly than other sectors after the pandemic crisis. According to Eurostat data, the number of tourist overnight stays in the European Union recorded a significant recovery, exceeding pre-pandemic levels in some countries and confirming the resumption of activity (Eurostat, 2024). This performance was particularly relevant in countries with a strong dependence on tourism, such as Portugal, Spain, Greece and Croatia, where the sector contributed decisively to the economic recovery (European Travel Commission, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for structural transformations in tourist behaviors and preferences, accelerating trends that were already emerging in the pre-pandemic period. Recent studies show that the pandemic crisis reinforced the demand for less congested destinations, outdoor experiences and more sustainable and conscious forms of tourism (Gössling et al., 2021; Zenker & Kock, 2020). This reorientation of demand particularly benefited rural and nature destinations, which recorded higher growth rates than traditional urban and coastal destinations (UNWTO, 2022). In the Portuguese case, data from the National Institute of Statistics show that inland municipalities presented, in 2022 and 2023, significantly higher growth rates in tourist

overnight stays than the national average, suggesting a redistribution of tourist flows towards previously peripheral territories (INE, 2023). This trend is particularly visible in the Local Accommodation segment, which, due to its small scale, authenticity and strong territorial integration, responds more effectively to the expectations of new tourist profiles, oriented towards genuine experiences and direct contact with local communities (Guttentag, 2019; Gunter & Önder, 2018).

Alongside this quantitative recovery, a qualitative reconfiguration of tourism consumption patterns is observed, with changes in source markets, visitor profiles, and seasonality patterns. The literature has shown that seasonality has decreased, with a gradual shift from the traditional summer months to periods of lower tourist pressure, a phenomenon explained by climatic factors, demographic transformations, and changes in consumer preferences (Boto-García & Leoni, 2021; European Travel Commission, 2024).

This reduction in seasonality constitutes a particularly relevant strategic opportunity for territories with low population density, allowing for the mitigation of pressures on urban infrastructure and contributing to the expansion of the tourism activity cycle in rural regions. It is in this context of a growing search for authentic, sustainable, and nature-connected experiences that rural territories have come to occupy a strategic position in the national tourism system, aligned with the European trend of valuing low-density areas. Rural tourism is internationally recognized for its potential to stimulate local economic growth, create new income opportunities, and promote social cohesion in rural communities (UNWTO, 2023; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL ACCOMMODATION AND REGENERATION OF RURAL TERRITORIES

The legal framework for Local Accommodation began with Decree-Law No. 39/2008, of March 7, which aimed to regulate the provision of temporary accommodation services in properties that did not meet the requirements to be considered tourist establishments. The growing importance of the sector led to the publication of Decree-Law No.

The subsequent legislative evolution reflects the need to balance the growth of the sector with concerns for social and territorial sustainability. Law No. 62/2018, of August 22, introduced substantive changes, giving local authorities the power to delimit "containment areas" in territories with strong urban and housing pressure, where the registration of new units became subject to limitations (Assembly of the Republic, 2018). More recently, the "More Housing" legislative package (Law No. 56/2023) introduced additional restrictive measures in high-density tourist areas, while Decree-Law No. 76/2024 made regulatory adjustments aimed at greater flexibility and proportionality in the regulation of the sector (Assembly of the Republic, 2023; Government of Portugal, 2024).

This legislative trajectory shows that short-term rentals have consolidated as a strategic sector in the Portuguese tourism landscape, albeit with geographically asymmetrical developments. Growth has been predominantly concentrated in high-density tourist urban areas, where it has generated significant tensions related to real estate pressure and the loss of residential function of historic neighborhoods, phenomena widely documented in the academic literature (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Mendes, 2017). In

contrast, rural territories have experienced more moderate growth, but potentially more beneficial from the point of view of territorial regeneration.

In contrast to the challenges found in urban contexts with high tourist pressure, short-term rentals in rural areas with low population density present a concrete opportunity for economic diversification, territorial regeneration, and population retention. In these regions, marked by high rates of demographic aging, persistent population decline, scarcity of employment opportunities, and desertification of public services, short-term rentals can act as a catalyst for regeneration processes, contributing to reversing cycles of abandonment and socioeconomic marginalization (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Silva & Leal, 2015).

Academic research has shown that short-term rentals in rural contexts have positive multidimensional impacts. Economically, it allows for the diversification of income sources for resident families, who no longer depend exclusively on traditional activities linked to the primary sector, and begin to integrate the tourism sector as an essential complement. This diversification extends to multiplier effects on the local economy, notably through the stimulation of local commerce, traditional restaurants, handicrafts, and the provision of complementary tourist entertainment services (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Ribeiro & Marques, 2020).

Socially, short-term rentals contribute to strengthening community cohesion, promoting interactions between residents and visitors, and valuing traditional knowledge and cultural practices that would otherwise tend to disappear. The presence of visitors can stimulate the self-esteem of local communities and the recognition of the value of their traditions (Kastenholz et al., 2014). In terms of heritage, short-term rentals are frequently associated with the rehabilitation of built heritage, contributing to the recovery of derelict buildings and traditional houses that, in the absence of intervention, would tend towards ruin (Carvalho & Alves, 2018).

It is important, however, to recognize that these positive effects are not automatic. Realizing the regenerative potential of short-term rentals in rural areas critically depends on the implementation of responsible tourism practices, participatory governance models that actively involve local communities, and the strategic integration of short-term rentals into coherent policies for sustainable territorial development (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; OECD, 2020).

4. HOSPITALITY AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Hospitality is a central and distinctive dimension of local accommodation, especially in small rural settings, where the reduced scale of the establishments and the physical and relational proximity between hosts and guests intensify the dynamics of social and cultural interaction (Figure 1). As an ancestral practice deeply rooted in human civilizations, hospitality has evolved from the simple welcoming of travelers to the organized structures of contemporary tourism, while maintaining its relational and ethical essence (Lashley, 2015).

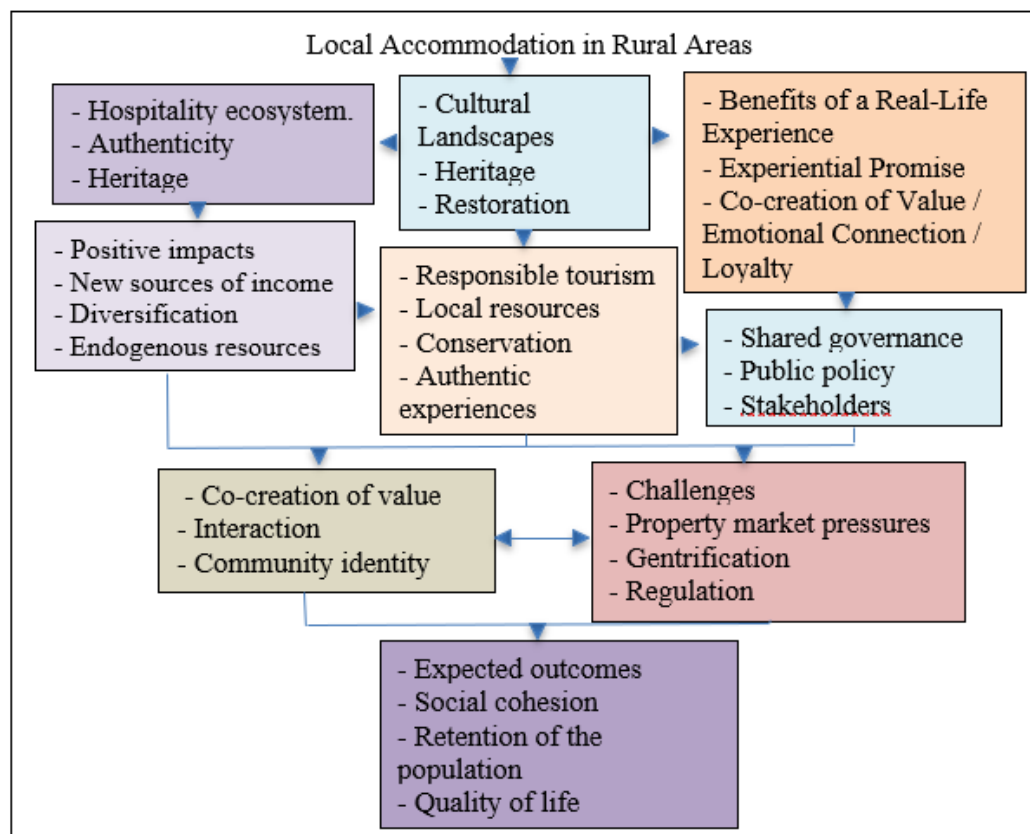
In the specific context of local accommodation in rural areas, hospitality transcends the mere functional provision of lodging services, configuring itself as a profound relational and cultural experience, where genuine welcome, human proximity, personalized care, and the sharing of local knowledge and traditions translate into

symbolic and economic value, constituting a critical factor of competitive differentiation (Hemmington, 2007; Richards & Wilson, 2006). The small size of the units allows for a high degree of service personalization, adapted to the individual needs of each guest. Local hosts act as cultural mediators, sharing knowledge about heritage, facilitating access to authentic experiences, and establishing lasting emotional connections with visitors.

Contemporary hospitality also incorporates technological components that complement the human dimension. Digital tools such as reservation management systems, automated communication, and data analysis contribute to operational efficiency and service personalization, without replacing the human element that remains central to the tourist experience (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). This articulation between human capital and technology has been conceptualized in the context of smart tourism destinations, promoting co-creation processes between visitors, hosts, and local communities (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019).

The success of tourism in rural territories is thus measured not only by visitor flows or generated revenue, but by the ability to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among residents, visitors, and local agents, while simultaneously preserving territorial authenticity and the social cohesion of host communities (UNWTO, 2022). It is within this framework that Local Accommodation (LA) asserts itself as a strategic ecosystem of territorial hospitality, fostering local economies and regeneration in low-density areas.

Figure 1. Local Accommodation in Rural Areas



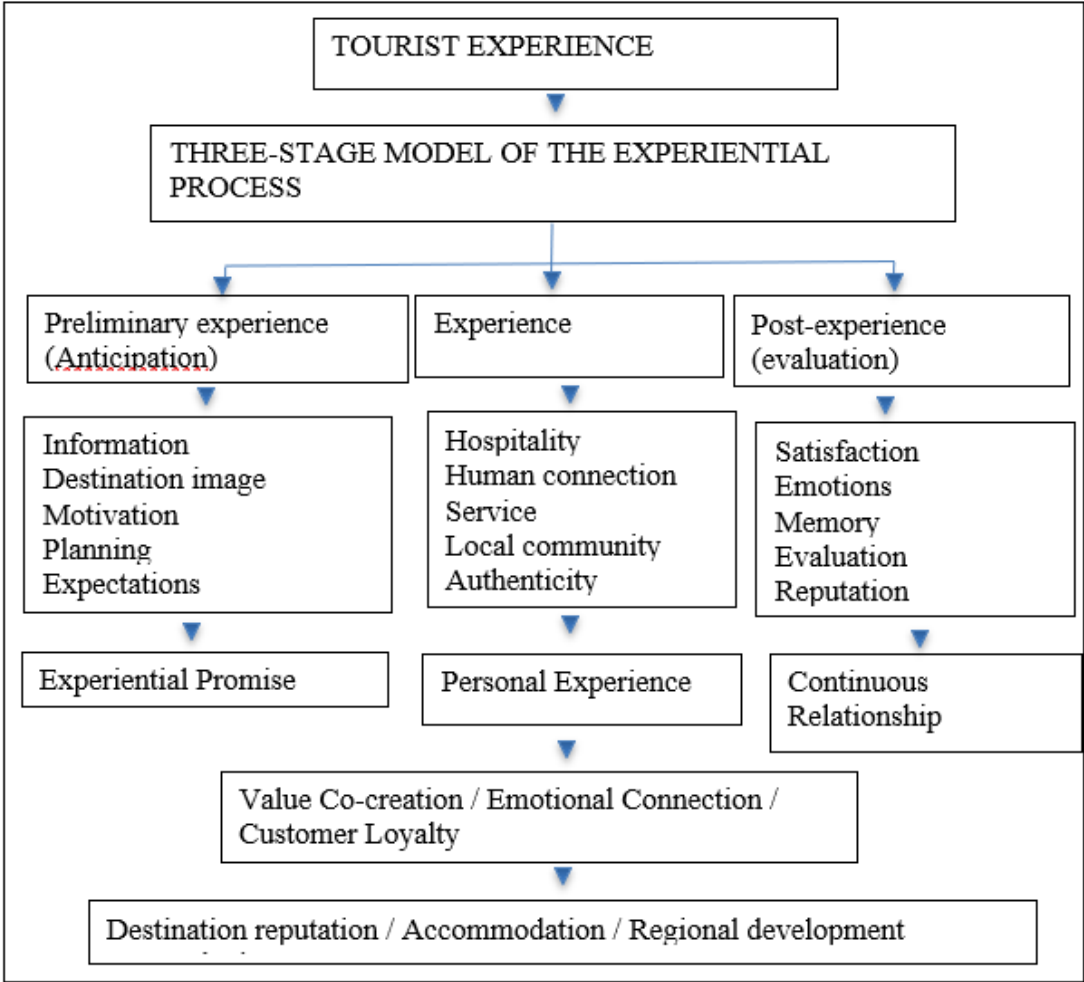
Source: authors

The systemic conceptualization of Local Accommodation in rural areas, illustrated in Figure 1, highlights the multidimensionality of this form of hospitality, integrating tangible components (infrastructure, equipment) and intangible components (human relations, cultural authenticity). This approach recognizes that Local Accommodation constitutes a complex system of interactions between territorial resources, host communities, and visitors (Kastenholz & Carneiro, 2016).

The effectiveness of this system depends on the ability to transform these components into memorable experiences, a process that requires an understanding of the temporal and emotional dimensions of the tourist experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Tussyadiah, 2014).

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model that breaks down the experiential process into three sequential stages, reflecting the temporal evolution of the experience from initial conception to post-consumption effects.

Figure 2. Three-Step Model of the Experiential Process in Tourism and Hospitality



Source: authors

Private accommodation (PA) in rural áreas goes beyond simply providing overnight stays, constituting a complex and multifaceted system that acts as a driver of development. This system incorporates tangible components, such as infrastructure and buildings, and intangible ones, such as human relationships, cultural authenticity and social interactions. According to Kastenholz et al. (2012), rural tourism can act as a catalyst for multiplier effects in the local economy, stimulating local trade and traditional restaurants.

In light of the three-stage model of the experiential process in tourism and hospitality, the traveller's experience is divided into sequential phases, focusing on the creation of value, memories and satisfaction (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Tussyadiah, 2014).

When guided by principles of sustainability and social responsibility, AL proves to be an effective ecosystem for territorial regeneration. This model contributes significantly to heritage rehabilitation, economic diversification, the strengthening of social cohesion, and the promotion of tourism. Hospitality, based on relational closeness and the sharing of local knowledge, emerges as a distinctive factor that transcends the mere function of accommodation (Hemmington, 2007; Richards & Wilson, 2006).

However, for the regenerative potential of the AL to be fully realised, it is crucial to develop shared management mechanisms that ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and the active involvement of local communities. With its distinctive heritage resources and preserved social fabric, it has the potential to establish itself as a benchmark for best practice in sustainable rural tourism, demonstrating that it is possible to reconcile tourism growth with territorial authenticity and social cohesion.

5. TERRITORIAL FRAMEWORK AND TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF VILA E REI

This study focuses on the municipality of Vila de Rei, located in the district of Castelo Branco, within the NUTS III region of the Central Region, sub-region of Beira Baixa, as a representative case study of a low-density rural territorial ecosystem where the growth of short-term rentals has driven new forms of hospitality, urban regeneration, and the enhancement of heritage resources. The municipality occupies an area of approximately 192 km², with a resident population of about 3,400 inhabitants (2021 Census), resulting in a population density of less than 18 inhabitants per square kilometer, a value characteristic of low-density rural territories.

The territory is characterized by a predominantly rugged and mountainous relief, highlighting the Serra da Melriça, where Picoto da Melriça is located, officially recognized as the Geodetic Center of Continental Portugal. This geographical point has been strategically mobilized as a distinctive element of territorial identity, attracting visitors interested in unique experiences associated with the central position of the Portuguese territory.

In terms of natural resources, the municipality is crossed by the Zêzere River and its proximity to the Castelo de Bode Reservoir, water resources that offer potential for recreational and nautical tourism activities, constituting central elements of the differentiated tourism offer. In addition, the territory is crossed by National Road 2 (EN2), a representative road that extends for hundreds of kilometers between the north and south

of Portugal, functioning simultaneously as a connectivity axis and tourist resource, attracting visitors interested in road tourism experiences and the discovery of the interior.

In terms of accessibility, Vila de Rei benefits from good connectivity via the A23 motorway and the Complementary Itinerary 8, being located at reasonable distances from the main urban centers (Lisbon, Coimbra, Porto) and relevant tourist destinations (Tomar, Fátima) (Table 1).

Table 1. Distances and Main Road Axes Accessing Vila de Rei from the Main Urban Centers

Origin		Distance (km)	Main Route
Lisboa		165 km	Lisboa (A1 Norte) – Torres Novas (A23) – Abrantes (EN 2)
Porto		219 km	Porto (A1 Sul) – Condeixa/Coimbra (A13) – Figueiró dos Vinhos (IC8) – Sertã (EN 2)
Coimbra		95 km	Coimbra (A13) – Avelar (IC8) – Sertã (EN 2)
Fátima		70 km	Fátima (IC9) – Ferreira do Zêzere (ER 348)
Castelo Branco		87 km	Castelo Branco (A23) – Vila Velha de Ródão (IC8) – Sertã (EN 2)
Tomar		40 km	Tomar (A13) – Ferreira do Zêzere (ER 348)
Figueira da Foz		130 km	Figueira da Foz (A14) – Condeixa-a-Nova (A13) – Ferreira do Zêzere (ER 348)

Source: <https://www.cm-viladerei.pt/index.php/visitar/como-chegar>

Recent data show a significant growth in local accommodation in the municipality, confirming the dynamic role of this type of accommodation in attracting tourist flows to the interior of the country (INE, 2024). This growth, although modest in absolute terms when compared to urban or coastal destinations, takes on particular relevance when contextualized in the reality of a demographically fragile territory that has been historically marginalized in public policies for tourism development.

Diversifying the local economic base through tourism represents a fundamental strategy to counteract the trends of depopulation and demographic aging that affect Portuguese rural territories (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Silva & Leal, 2015). The local accommodation model, due to its reduced scale and integration into the existing urban structure, allows for the mobilization of underutilized endogenous resources, namely

traditional built heritage, local knowledge, and cultural landscapes, transforming them into tourist assets that generate economic and symbolic value (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). This territorial enhancement through tourism is not limited to the creation of direct revenue, extending to multiplier effects on the local economy, including the revitalization of traditional commerce, crafts, gastronomy, and complementary services, contributing to population retention and socioeconomic revitalization (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

Recent data show a significant growth in local accommodation in the municipality, confirming the dynamic role of this modality in attracting tourist flows to the interior of the country (INE, 2024). This growth, although modest in absolute terms when compared to urban or coastal destinations, takes on particular relevance when contextualized in the reality of a demographically fragile territory that has historically been marginalized in public tourism development policies.

6. METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of this study is to understand the importance of Local Accommodation (LA) as an ecosystem for the regeneration of rural territories, through a case study of the municipality of Vila de Rei, in central Portugal. The starting question is: How does LA, framed within responsible tourism practices, contribute to territorial regeneration and the sustainable development of Vila de Rei?

A mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) was chosen, as it results from the combination of complementary techniques and instruments. The study adopts a single case study strategy, with Vila de Rei as the unit of analysis.

Data collection was based on Quivy & Campenhoudt (2013), obtaining information through specific techniques: documentary research (legislation, statistical data from INE, RNAL and Turismo de Portugal); bibliographic research on local accommodation, territorial regeneration and responsible tourism; semi-structured questionnaires applied to LA owners, guests and residents; and semi-structured interviews with key informants (municipal managers, local entrepreneurs and associations).

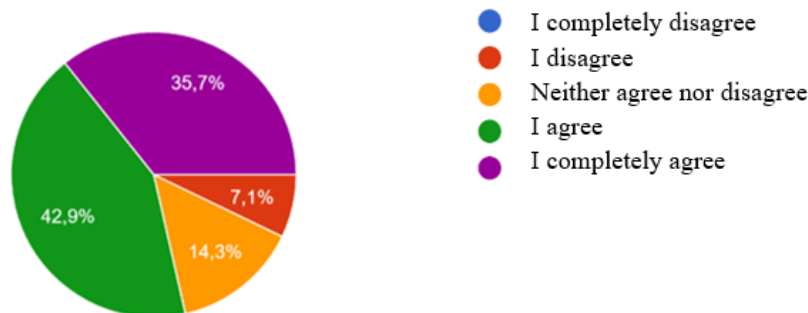
A structured questionnaire was applied to Local Accommodation agents and the municipal tourism technician of the municipality of Vila de Rei, addressing topics related to hospitality practices, sustainability, socioeconomic impacts, and perceptions about local development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of the results is organized into two sections, one for Local Accommodation agents (i) and the other for municipal technicians (ii). This structure allows for an integrated analysis of the role of Local Accommodation as a territorial regeneration ecosystem in the municipality of Vila de Rei.

- (i) Local Accommodation Agents in the municipality of Vila de Rei.

Figure 3. Has short-let accommodation helped to restore and enhance the value of old houses and buildings in the rural areas of Vila de Rei?

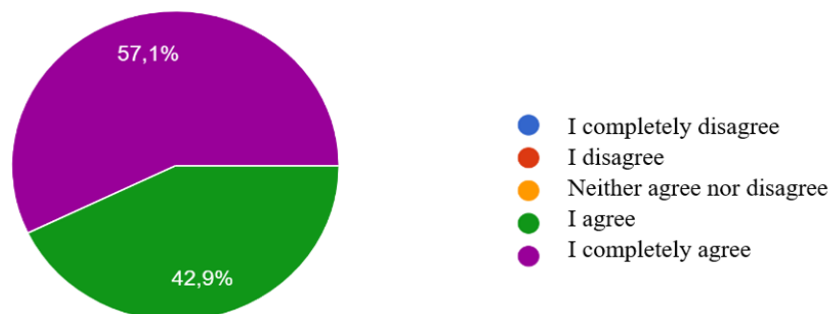


Source: Authors

Regarding the perception of Local Accommodation agents about the contribution of this activity to the recovery and enhancement of old houses and buildings in the rural areas of the municipality of Vila de Rei, the results show a clearly positive trend. It is found that 42.9% of participants agree that Local Accommodation has contributed to the recovery and enhancement of built heritage, while 35.7% fully agree with this statement. Thus, in total, 78.6% of respondents express a favorable perception regarding the impact of Local Accommodation on the rehabilitation of old buildings in the territory. On the other hand, 14.3% of participants indicate a neutral position, stating that they do not agree or disagree with the statement presented. Only 7.1% of respondents disagree (Figure 3).

These results suggest that, in the perception of local stakeholders, short-term rentals have played a relevant role in the rehabilitation of housing stock and the revitalization of existing buildings, a phenomenon that is particularly significant in rural areas with low population density, as is the case in the municipality of Vila de Rei. The conversion of traditional housing for tourism purposes contributes not only to preventing the degradation of the built heritage, but also to reinforcing tourist attractiveness and enhancing the value of the territory.

Figure 4. Does the existence of local accommodation help to enhance the appeal of the Vila de Rei area and strengthen its image as a tourist destination?

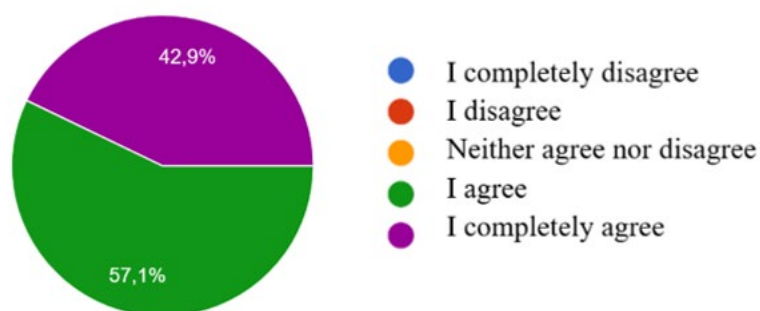


Source: Authors

It is observed that 57.1% of participants fully agree with the statement presented, while 42.9% agree with it. Thus, it is verified that 100% of those interviewed express a favorable perception regarding the impact of Local Accommodation on the valorization of the territory and the promotion of its tourist image (Figure 4).

These results suggest that Local Accommodation is perceived as a relevant instrument for territorial valorization, contributing to reinforcing the visibility of the municipality of Vila de Rei as a tourist destination and to enhancing its attractiveness among visitors. In this context, Local Accommodation is assumed as a strategic element in the structure of the local tourism offer, and can play an important role in consolidating the identity of the destination and in boosting tourism in rural areas.

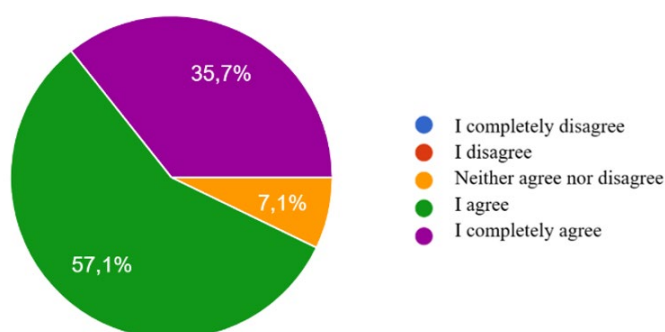
Figure 5. Does the private accommodation sector have a positive impact on the local economy, particularly on local shops and services?



Source: Authors

It was found that 57.1% of participants agreed with the statement presented, while 42.9% fully agreed that Local Accommodation activity has a positive impact on the local economy. Thus, it was found that 100% of respondents expressed a favorable perception regarding the contribution of Local Accommodation to the economic development of the territory. (Figure 5).

Figure 6. Does private accommodation provide a significant source of income generation or diversification for local stakeholders and the region?



Source: Authors

It was found that 57.1% of participants agree that Local Accommodation constitutes a relevant source of income creation or diversification, while 35.7% fully agree with this

statement. Thus, in total, 92.8% of respondents express a favorable perception of the economic contribution of this activity. On the other hand, 7.1% of participants indicate a neutral position, reporting that they do not agree or disagree with the statement presented (Figure 6).

These results suggest that Local Accommodation is perceived by agents as an activity capable of generating additional income and diversifying existing income sources, assuming particular relevance in rural and low-population-density territories. In this context, this activity can contribute to the economic sustainability of families and to the dynamization of the territory, constituting an opportunity to value existing resources and promote local development.

(ii) Tourism Technician for the Municipality of Vila e Rei.

Figure 7. Has private accommodation (AL) contributed to housing regeneration, particularly in municipalities with low population density, such as Vila de Rei?



Source: Authors

It can be seen that 100% of participants agree that Local Accommodation has contributed to housing regeneration in these territories. (Figure 7).

Figure 8. Does AL, as an ecosystem for the regeneration of rural areas, incorporate responsible practices that benefit the communities in which they are implemented?



Source: Authors

It is found that 100% of participants agree with the statement that Local Accommodation integrates responsible practices that contribute to benefiting the community where it is developed (Figure 8). This result shows a consensus among

municipal technicians regarding the potential of Local Accommodation to contribute to more sustainable and responsible practices in the territory. In rural and low-density population contexts, the development of Local Accommodation can favor the enhancement of local resources, the revitalization of the local economy, and the strengthening of relations between visitors and the resident community.

Figure 9. Has the growth of the AL driven new forms of hospitality and contributed to the regeneration and enhancement of Vila de Rei’s heritage assets?



Source: Authors

It is observed that 100% of the participants agree with the statement presented, indicating that the development of Local Accommodation has driven new forms of hospitality and contributed to the appreciation of local heritage (Figure 9).

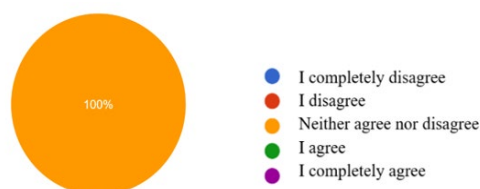
This result demonstrates a consensus among municipal technicians regarding the role of Local Accommodation in transforming the dynamics of hospitality in rural areas. The growth of this type of accommodation has favored more personalized hospitality models, based on the proximity between hosts and visitors, as well as the appreciation of the cultural and heritage specificities of the territory. In this context, Local Accommodation can be understood as a catalyst for new forms of hospitality, which combine authenticity, proximity and appreciation of local resources. At the same time, the reuse of traditional buildings for tourism purposes contributes to the preservation and appreciation of cultural and architectural heritage, reinforcing the identity of the territory and the attractiveness of the tourist destination.

Figure 10. Does the development of the AL help to strengthen social cohesion and foster positive interactions between residents and visitors?



Source: Authors

Figure 11. Is the management of private accommodation in Vila de Rei carried out proactively, through cooperation between the local council, private accommodation providers and other local stakeholders such as associations and business owners?



Source: Authors

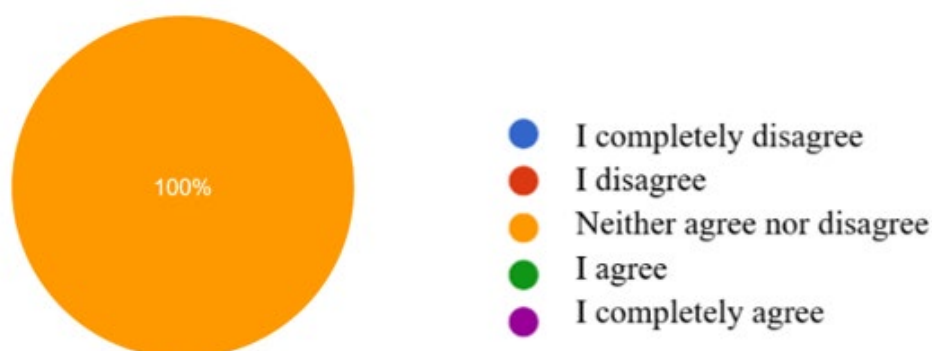
It is observed that 100% of participants agree with the statement that the development of Local Accommodation contributes to strengthening social cohesion in the territory. (Figure 10)

The same happens with the "neither agree nor disagree" option in relation to the statement presented. This result suggests that Local Accommodation is perceived as a facilitator of social interaction, promoting contacts and relationships between visitors and the local community. In rural and sparsely populated areas, these interactions can contribute to strengthening the feeling of belonging, boosting social relations, and valuing local cultural identities. In this context, Local Accommodation can play a relevant role in promoting closer and more participatory hospitality dynamics, favoring tourist experiences based on authenticity and proximity between hosts and visitors. Consequently, this activity can contribute to strengthening social cohesion and the appreciation of local communities, while simultaneously reinforcing the tourist attractiveness of the territory (Figure 11).

This result may indicate that, in the perception of municipal technicians, institutional cooperation and collaborative management of Local Accommodation are not yet fully consolidated in the territory. The absence of positive or negative responses could reflect the existence of specific collaborative initiatives, but which do not yet constitute a structured model of collaborative tourism governance.

In rural areas with low population density, such as Vila de Rei, the coordination between the different actors in the tourism system, including municipalities, businesses, local associations, and the resident community, is frequently cited in the literature as an essential factor in promoting integrated and sustainable tourism management models. In this sense, the results obtained suggest that there is room to strengthen cooperation mechanisms and collaborative governance strategies capable of enhancing the role of Local Accommodation in territorial development.

Figure 12. Are there mechanisms in place to help ensure that the benefits of the Free Trade Agreement are shared fairly among residents, visitors and businesses?



Source: Authors

It is observed that 100% of respondents selected the option "neither agree nor disagree," not registering responses in the categories of agreement or disagreement. This result may indicate that, in the perception of municipal technicians, there are still no clearly defined or consolidated instruments that ensure a balanced distribution of the benefits generated by Local Accommodation in the territory. The neutrality in the responses may also reflect an initial phase of development of this type of mechanism or an absence of specific policies oriented towards this objective (Figure 12).

In rural and low-population-density territories, the literature on sustainable tourism development highlights the importance of governance models that promote a balanced distribution of the benefits of tourism, ensuring that the positive impacts of tourism activity are reflected not only in the economic agents directly involved, but also in the local community in general. In this context, the results obtained suggest the existence of opportunities to develop more structured tourism planning and management instruments, capable of promoting a more equitable distribution of the benefits associated with Local Accommodation.

5. CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand how Local Accommodation (LA), framed within responsible tourism practices, contributes to territorial regeneration and sustainable development in the municipality of Vila de Rei, a rural territory with low population density in the Central Region of Portugal.

The results obtained show a widespread consensus regarding the regenerative role of LA in the municipality. It was found that 78.6% of LA agents consider that this activity has effectively contributed to the recovery and enhancement of urban heritage. The unanimity recorded (100%) regarding the contribution of LA to territorial enhancement and promotion of the tourist image constitutes a robust indicator of the strategic role of this modality in establishing Vila de Rei as an inland tourist destination.

On the economic level, 92.8% of agents recognize LA as a relevant source of income diversification, confirming the potential of this activity to mitigate exclusive dependence on the primary sector and promote the economic sustainability of resident families. This result corroborates the thesis that rural tourism can act as a catalyst for multiplier effects

on the local economy, stimulating local commerce and traditional restaurants (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

The institutional perspective, represented by municipal tourism technicians, reveals absolute consensus (100%) regarding the contribution of Local Accommodation (LA) to housing regeneration, integration of responsible practices, and strengthening of social cohesion. However, regarding collaborative governance mechanisms and equitable distribution of benefits, they expressed a neutral position, indicating that these instruments are not yet fully consolidated, suggesting room for improvement in participatory management models.

The main contribution of this research lies in the construction of an integrative analytical framework that articulates territorial regeneration, hospitality, and responsible tourism in rural contexts. This framework allows us to understand LA as a territorial hospitality ecosystem, combining economic (income diversification), social (community cohesion), heritage (building rehabilitation), and cultural (preservation of traditions) dimensions. Unlike the challenges observed in urban contexts, where LA has generated social tensions and gentrification (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Mendes, 2017), the results demonstrate that, in rural territories, this modality presents a clearly positive balance.

In conclusion, Local Accommodation in Vila de Rei, when guided by principles of sustainability and social responsibility, constitutes an effective ecosystem for territorial regeneration, contributing to heritage rehabilitation, economic diversification, strengthening social cohesion, and tourism promotion. Hospitality, based on relational proximity and the sharing of local knowledge, emerges as a distinctive factor that transcends the mere function of lodging. However, the full realization of this potential requires the development of more structured governance instruments capable of ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits and the active involvement of local communities. Vila de Rei, with its distinctive heritage resources and preserved social fabric, has the conditions to establish itself as a benchmark for good practices in sustainable rural tourism, demonstrating that it is possible to reconcile tourism growth with territorial authenticity and social cohesion.

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