

Article

Assessing Rural Tourism Experiences: What Can We Learn from the Azores Region?

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Abstract: This research paper focused on tourists' experiences after engaging in a rural tourism experience, the activities developed during that period, and the relevant factors they considered when planning the holidays. We collected data in the Azores, a region known to implement rural tourism. Therefore, the collected data were analyzed using mainly summary statistics, graphical representations, and exploratory data analysis methods, including the nonlinear (categorical) principal component analysis (CatPCA). The CatPCA's objective is the same as that of the principal component analysis (PCA). We found that the landscape, adventure-related activities, and local gastronomy were some of the reasons tourists choose the Azores as a destination. The rural living experience and the local population's welcoming traits were mentioned as factors that make tourists want to return to the Azores on holidays. Moreover, rural tourism in the Azores offers a unique opportunity to connect with the region's rich cultural heritage. The islands have a long history shaped by centuries of settlement and the blending of various cultures, resulting in a distinct Azorean identity.

Keywords: cultural heritage; rural tourism; tourists perceptions; regional studies; sustainable tourism planning



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1. Introduction

Rural tourism is presented as a sustainable alternative to traditional tourism [1,2], allowing tourists to meet their preferences through a differentiating and genuine experience [3–6]. This form of tourism also allows tourists to immerse themselves in the rural tourism experience [7,8].

Additionally, the general thematic literature tells us that rural tourism involves visiting rural areas outside urban centers to experience and engage with the local culture, traditions, and natural environment. It allows tourists to connect with nature, explore agricultural activities, and experience the slower pace of rural life. Contextually, we can name some: (a) natural environment—allowing the visitors to experience and appreciate the beauty and tranquility of rural areas; (b) agricultural activities—enabling visitors to participate in farming activities such as harvesting crops, milking cows, or feeding livestock; (c) cultural immersion—here, visitors can learn about local customs, traditions, and folklore, as well as taste traditional cuisine; and (d) authentic experiences—permits a closer connection with the local environment and people, fostering a deeper understanding of the rural way of life [1,3–7].

In this regard, it is possible to provide a brief comparison between rural tourism and other types of tourism, as is the case of the following: (a) ecotourism—aiming to minimize the impact on the environment and promote sustainability; in fact, rural tourism, on the other hand, encompasses a broader scope, including cultural immersion and agricultural activities alongside nature-based experiences; (b) cultural tourism—involving visiting museums, historical sites, monuments, and attending cultural performances. So, even if rural tourism can incorporate cultural elements, it strongly emphasizes rural life, traditions, and interaction with local communities; (c) adventure tourism—applies to engaging in thrilling and physically challenging activities (trekking, mountaineering, or rafting are just a few examples). In contrast, rural tourism may offer some adventure activities like hiking or cycling, but its primary focus is on the rural environment, local culture, and agricultural experiences; (d) wellness tourism—revolves around promoting health and well-being through activities like spa retreats, yoga, meditation, and natural therapies. While some rural areas may offer wellness-focused activities, rural tourism is not solely dedicated to wellness; thus, it encompasses a broader range of experiences related to rural life, nature, and culture [3–8].

Contextually, the Azores, an archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean, offer a unique and beautiful setting for rural tourism. With stunning landscapes, volcanic formations, lush green fields, and a rich cultural heritage, the Azores became increasingly popular among travelers seeking an authentic and immersive rural experience.

The touristic experience is a complex psychological process that takes place and is initiated by the tourists themselves [9]. Individuals build their experience according to their preferences and their idealized scenario [10], whether it be a sports experience, a rustic experience, a gastronomic experience, or a mix of different relevant activities for the individuals linked to that specific rural area [11–13].

Enhancing tourist experiences enable rural areas to surpass social and economic frailties and enhance progress using the unique resources these regions have to offer [14]. Rural areas faced increasing touristic demand as urban life is full of stress, and tourists are searching for activities that solve such problems [2,5,15].

This paper aims to analyze the types of rural tourism experiences tourists have. It also explores the relevance of the activities developed during the holidays and how it relates to the planning of those holidays.

Furthermore, even if the authors exhaustively studied this issue in the last few years [16,17], this study could be seen as differentiated once not only because the data presented are new (the outcomes of the questionnaire) but also, the novelty lies in its combination of unique destination characteristics, cultural heritage, and sustainability focus. Thereby, by examining these aspects, the researchers can contribute to the knowledge base of rural tourism development, sustainability practices, and the preservation of cultural heritage in similar destinations.

2. Materials and Methods

Our research was based on data collected related to Azores tourists' opinions of their holiday planning, holiday experience, and activities developed during their stay to access their perceptions and develop guidelines for improving the sustainable development of rural tourism.

The methodological approach comprised four main stages: questionnaire design, non-probabilistic data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of outcomes, including the discussion of the results.

Thereby, we selected a case study research method that offered a practical approach to understanding this specific regional tourism phenomenon. In fact, we believe that through this method, it was possible to obtain the intricacies and complexities of the particular case. Moreover, it was considered an indispensable tool in various academic and professional disciplines due to its multidisciplinary application.

The target population was anyone 18 years old or older who has had at least one rural tourism experience in the Azores (Figure 1). The sample comprised 125 participants who fulfilled these conditions. Data were gathered from September 2019 to September 2021.

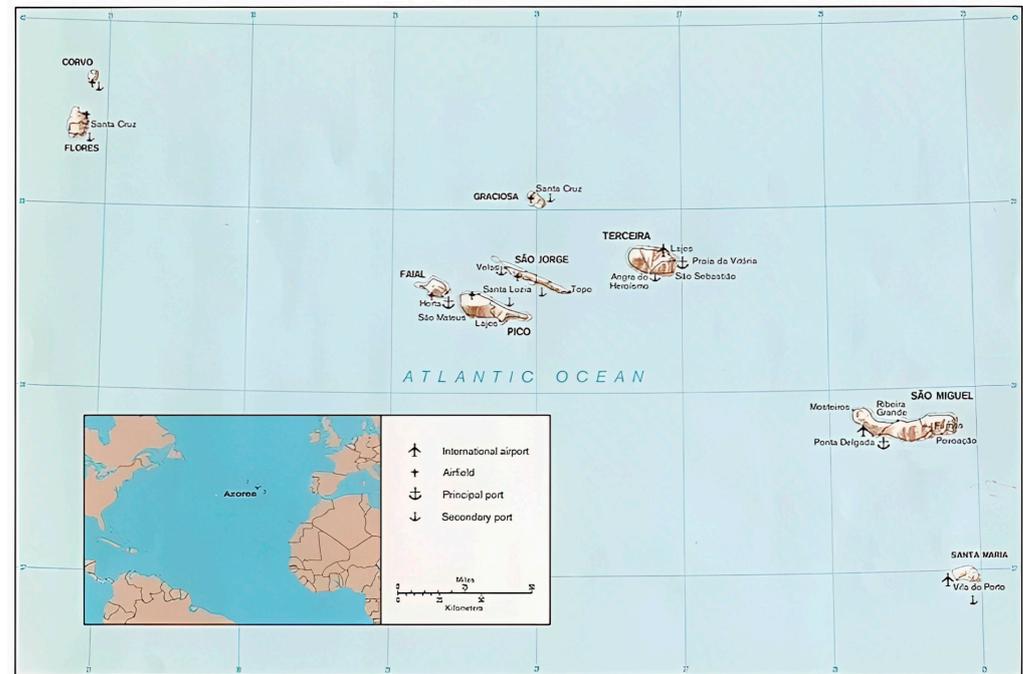


Figure 1. Geographic location of the Azores Islands [18].

Moreover, the surveys were designed acknowledging the necessity to conduct web interviews. This type of interview was chosen considering the social distancing requirements of the ongoing pandemic.

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to age group. The majority (56.0%) were relatively young (18 to 35 years old). Most respondents did not live in the Azores (87.2%). In addition, 70.4% were employed and had at least a bachelor's degree (46.4%; Table 2). In terms of nationality, 48.6% were Portuguese and 51.4% had a foreign nationality, with most coming from the United States or Canada (Table 3).

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the participants (I).

Gender	%	Age Group	%	Resident of the Azores	%
Female	43.2	18–35	56.0	No	87.2
Male	56.8	36–50	29.6	Yes	12.8
Total	100.0	50–65	12.8	Total	100.0
		+65	1.6		
		Total	100.0		

Table 2. Sociodemographic data of the participants (II).

Education	%	Professional Situation	%
Bachelor's degree	46.4	Employed	70.4
Basic Education (9th grade)	6.4	Other	2.4
Master's degree	13.6	Retired	4.8
Ph.D.	8.8	Student	16.8
High School	24.8	Unemployed	5.6
Total	100.0	Total	100.0

Table 3. Nationality of the participants.

Nationality	%
Portuguese	48.6
USA and Canada	11.4
French	8.8
German	8.0
Spanish	6.4
Polish	4.0
United Kingdom	2.4
Cape Verde	2.4
Dutch	2.4
Other European Mediterranean Countries	2.4
Chinese	1.6
Russian	0.8
Brazil	0.8
Total	100.0

Data were analyzed using mainly summary statistics, graphical representations, and exploratory data analysis methods, including the nonlinear (categorical) principal component analysis (CatPCA). The CatPCA's objective is the same as that of the principal component analysis (PCA)—namely, to reduce the dimensionality of the data set to a smaller number of variables that are uncorrelated (called principal components) that still represent the information in the original data [19]. The PCA and CatPCA methods all differ because the PCA only reveals linear relationships, whereas CatPCA can also reveal nonlinear relationships by means of quantifying categorical or nonlinearly related variables in a statistical optimal sense [19,20]. In the current study, we applied the CatPCA using the optimal scaling procedure [21] included in IBM SPSS Statistics to assign numerical quantifications to the categories of each categorical variable. We did not apply hypothesis testing, as such an approach is not recommended when using a non-probabilistic sample that does not allow for the generalization of the conclusions to the population.

3. Results

3.1. The Tourists Experience

Table 4 presents the activities considered most important (i.e., most valued) by the study participants in the context of rural tourism. Such activities are: (i) “activities like cycling, climbing, horse riding, etc.”; (ii) “B & B in a rural context”; and (iii) “countryside”. Participants considered these activities to be important or very important: 83.2%, 84.8%, and 81.6%, respectively.

Table 4. Assessment levels of the relevance of activities in the context of rural tourism for the participants (%).

Activities \ Relevance	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
Activities like cycling, climbing, horse riding, etc.	4.8	12.0	46.4	36.8
B and B in a rural context	5.6	9.6	45.6	39.2
A country house	8.8	18.4	38.4	34.4
A farm with animals	10.4	24.0	36.8	28.8
Rural Hotel or Guest House	6.4	22.4	36.8	34.4
Countryside	6.4	12.0	33.6	48.0
Other(s)	55.2	11.2	21.6	12.0

As shown in Table 5, for most respondents (68.0%), this was their first visit to the Azores; 87.2% traveled there by plane. The majority (80.0%) of the respondents declared that they had a rural tourism experience(s) with friends or family. In addition, in many cases, this was not their first rural tourism experience.

Table 5. Closed-up questions (%).

First Visit to the Azores?	%	How Did You Travel for the Rural Tourism Experience in the Azores?	%	How Did You Perform the Rural Tourism Experience in the Azores?	%	Was This Your First Experience in Rural Tourism?	%
No	32.0	Airplane	87.2	With friends	45.6	No	45.6
Yes	68.0	Boat/Cruise	9.6	With family	34.4	Yes	42.4
Total	100.0	Own vehicle	1.6	Alone	12.8	Do not know/Do not answer	12.0
		Other(s)	0.8	Other(s)	7.2	Total	100.0
		Total	100.0	Total	100.0		

Rural tourism experiences took place mainly on the island of São Miguel, the largest island in the Azores that is also known as the green island (39.9%). However, respondents also had at least one such experience on Terceira Island (13.4%), Pico Island (10.4%), or Santa Maria Island (9.7% of respondents; see Table 6).

Table 6. Island or Islands of the Azores Archipelago where the participants carried out their rural tourism experience(s).

Island	%
São Miguel	39.9
Terceira	13.4
Pico	10.4
Santa Maria	9.7
Faial	7.7
São Jorge	5.7
Graciosa	5.4
Flores	4.4
Corvo	3.4
Total	100.0

According to respondents, the three most important reasons for choosing the Azores as a destination for rural tourism were (i) “landscape” (noted by an overwhelming majority of 92.0%), (ii) “adventure activities” (76.0%), and (iii) “gastronomy” (72.8%; see Table 7).

Table 7. Options for the selection of Azores as a destination for rural tourism experience.

Options	Yes (%)	No (%)
Landscape	92.0	8.0
Adventure activities	76.0	24.0
Gastronomy	72.8	27.2
By recommendation/Based on the experiences of others	53.6	46.4
Culture	56.0	44.0
Destination classification on the Internet in/books/guides	57.6	42.4
Weather	57.6	42.4
Other	21.6	78.4

Contextually, the three primary sources of information respondents used were (i) “social media” (24.5%), (ii) “tourism events and websites” (21.4%), and (iii) “guides, flyers, or tourism literature” (13.1%; see Table 8).

Table 8. Types of information sources.

Options	%
Social media	24.5
Tourism Events and Websites	21.4
Guides, flyers, or Tourism Literature	13.1
Customer feedback	11.6
Travel agency	11.1
Tourism events (Fairs, exhibitions, etc.)	9.0
Other sources	9.3
Total	100.0

Figure 2 shows the main types of tourism experienced during holidays in the Azores: (i) “nature-based tourism” (91.2%), (ii) “gastronomy” (82.4%), (iii) “adventure” (78.4%), (iv) “cultural tourism” (64.8%), and (v) “ecotourism” (51.2%).

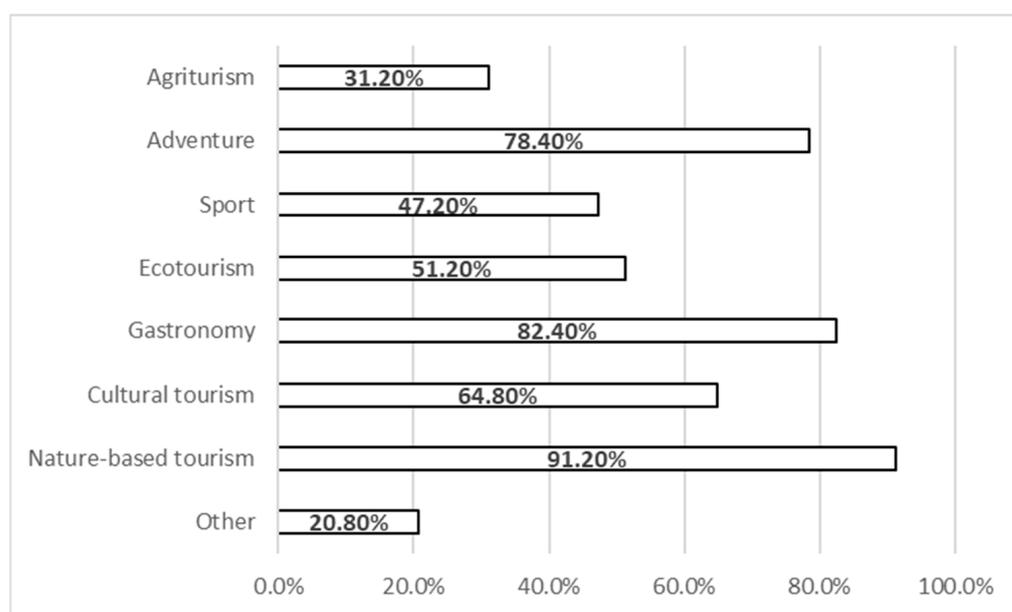


Figure 2. Types of rural tourism experienced during the holidays in the Azores.

Table 9 shows the respondents’ responses to the question: “What relevance has the following aspects when planning a vacation?”, for which 18 items were listed. The main aspects respondents considered most relevant when planning their vacations were (i) “attractive landscape”; (ii) “comfort in rooms and/or home”; (iii) “easy, safe, and transparent booking process”; (iv) “good location of the accommodations”; and (v) “good telephone and internet coverage” (mode = 4, P25 = 3, P50 = 4, P75 = 4), where 4 corresponded to “very important”.

Categorical Principal Component Analysis (CatPCA)

The application of the CatPCA to the data sub-matrix that contained the respondents’ answers regarding the 18 items on a 4-point ordinal scale (1: not important, 2: somewhat important, 3: important, 4: very important) allowed the retention/extraction of six principal components (dimensions), which globally explained approximately 71.2% of the total variance of the data (Table 10 and Appendix A). Furthermore, the most critical variables for the first principal component were items 9, 15, 16, and 17. Thus, this component

can be called “accessibility/location”. The most relevant items for the second principal component were items 1, 2, and 10; this component was named “reputation and quiet and peaceful location”. The items most correlated with the third principal component were 11 and 12. Thus, this component/dimension was called “landscape and booking process”. The essential items for the fourth main component were items 4, 7, 13, and 14, which is why this component was called “knowledge of English and the existence of sports facilities”. The main items for the fifth main component were items 5 and 6; this component was named “comfort and telephone and internet coverage”. The items most associated with the sixth main component were items 3, 8, and 18, and this component was called “cultural attractions/events/tourist entertainment”.

Table 9. The most relevant aspects to plan a vacation—in the perception of the participants (%).

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
1. Certified accommodation and/or related with a brand	9.6	23.2	41.6	25.6
2. Location or region well known for tourism	2.4	13.6	44.8	39.2
3. Nearby cultural attractions	0.8	19.2	48.0	32.0
4. Good location of the accommodations	0.8	3.2	37.6	58.4
5. Good telephone and internet coverage	4.0	13.6	29.6	52.8
6. Comfort in rooms and/or home	0.8	2.4	34.4	62.4
7. Knowledge of English by the local population	13.6	24.8	32.0	29.6
8. Events taking place during my stay	5.6	33.6	44.8	16.0
9. Easy access from the nearest public transport and the place to stay	18.4	16.0	34.4	31.2
10. Quiet and peaceful location and surroundings	1.6	18.4	36.8	43.2
11. Attractive landscape	0.8	1.6	30.4	67.2
12. Easy, safe, and transparent booking process	0.8	1.6	36.8	60.8
13. Proximity to sports facilities	32.8	28.0	28.0	11.2
14. Proximity to places of entertainment (bars, clubs, etc.)	20.0	22.4	32.8	24.8
15. Recommendations from friends, colleagues, family, or other tourists	12.8	16.0	44.8	26.4
16. Health services available nearby	11.2	22.4	36.8	29.6
17. Value	4.8	12.8	43.2	39.2
18. Other	64.8	16.8	12.0	6.4

Table 10. Values of the Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient, eigenvalues, and variance accounted for across these components (Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization).

Dimension	Cronbach’s Alpha	Variance Accounted for Total (Eigenvalue)	Variance Accounted for % of Variance
1	0.756	3.013	16.740
2	0.629	2.145	11.918
3	0.586	2.143	11.906
4	0.595	1.887	10.481
5	0.601	1.849	10.270
6	0.639	1.784	9.909
Total	0.976	12.820	71.224

Participants believed that the three most important aspects of the first impression of a rural tourism experience were (i) “accommodation and surroundings well maintained aesthetically and healthily” (mode = 4, P25 = 3, P50 = 4, P75 = 4); (ii) “easy and fast check-in” (mode = 4, P25 = 3, P50 = 4, P75 = 4); and (iii) “warm welcome by the host” (mode = 4, P25 = 3, P50 = 3, P75 = 4). These three aspects were considered very important by 60.8%, 54.4%, and 48.0% of the participants (Table 11).

Table 11. The most relevant aspects in the “first impression” in a rural tourism experience (%).

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
1. Accommodation and surroundings well maintained aesthetically and healthily	0.8	2.4	36.0	60.8
2. Accommodation exactly as it was announced	0.0	4.8	48.0	47.2
3. Easy to find accommodation	0.8	6.4	48.0	44.8
4. Easy and fast check-in	0.8	5.6	39.2	54.4
5. Place carefully decorated, the state of the equipment and the building	8.0	7.2	46.4	38.4
6. Parking facility	7.2	19.2	32.0	41.6
7. Ease to get information	2.4	7.2	48.8	41.6
8. Warm welcome by the host	1.6	15.2	35.2	48.0
9. Views from the accommodation	3.2	12.0	42.4	42.4
10. Other	62.4	12.8	12.8	12.0

CatPCA, using the Varimax rotation method with Kaiser normalization, was applied to the data sub-matrix containing respondents’ responses for the 10 items in Table 11. The percentage of variance accounted for (PVAF) by the three main components extracted was 74.4% of the data’s total variance; all these components had eigenvalues above 1. The first principal component had good internal consistency, and the two retained components had an acceptable internal consistency (Table 12).

Table 12. Rotated component loadings of the three-component solution (first impression in a rural tourism experience).

Items	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3
1. Accommodation and surroundings well maintained aesthetically and healthily	0.987	0.021	−0.052
2. Accommodation exactly as it was announced	0.411	0.472	0.237
3. Easy to find accommodation	0.988	0.020	−0.044
4. Check-in easy and fast	0.988	0.022	−0.039
5. Place carefully decorated, the state of the equipment and the building	−0.084	0.695	0.510
6. Parking facility	0.065	0.218	0.766
7. Ease to get information	0.549	0.579	0.197
8. Warm welcome by the host	−0.073	0.878	−0.173
9. Views from the accommodation	0.496	0.279	0.556
10. Other	−0.252	−0.283	0.641
Eigenvalue (VAF)	3.724	2.019	1.697
Percentage accounted (PVAF)	37.237	20.188	16.970
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.823	0.649	0.529

Variable Principal Normalization.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

- Most important items for the first principal component: 1, 3, and 4—accommodation and easy and fast check-in;
- Most important items for the second principal component: 2, 5, 7, and 8—customer service/attention (including decoration);
- Most important items for the third principal component: 6, 9, and 10—other aspects (e.g., parking facilities, views).

Regarding booking preferences, half of the participants (50.4%) preferred using booking websites (Figure 3). The majority (57.6%) rated their rural tourism experience as excellent (Figure 4).

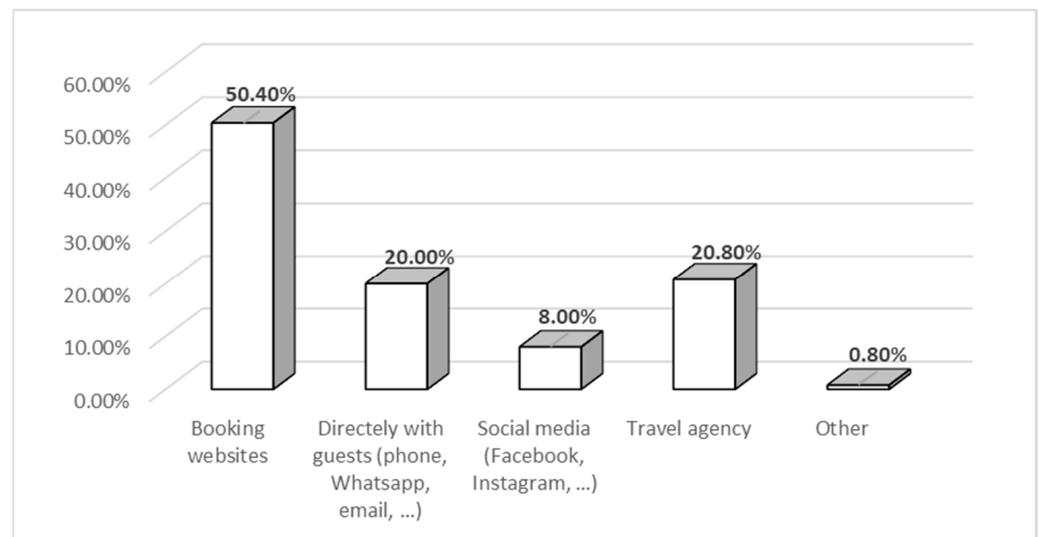


Figure 3. Distribution of participants according to booking preferences (%).

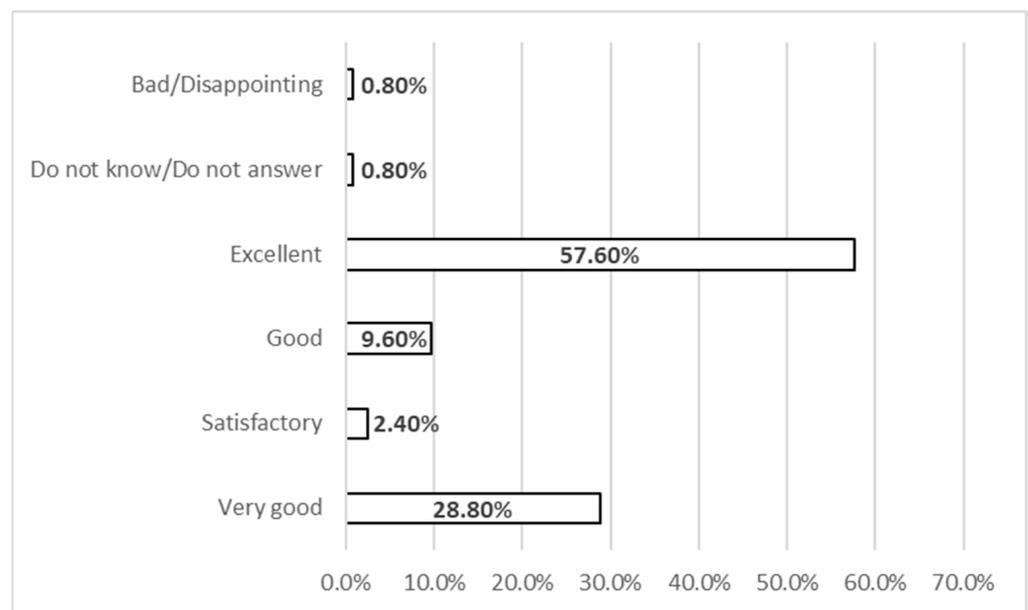


Figure 4. Tourists rating of their rural tourism experience in the Azores (%).

3.2. Agreement Levels

Regarding the agreement levels I (Table 13), the majority (76.8%) of the participants fully or partially agreed with the statement corresponding to item 1, “The marketing around my experience of rural tourism was important”. Nevertheless, it appears that there was still room for improvement at this level (e.g., marketing) (mode = P25 = P50 = P75 = 4, which corresponds to the answer option “agree”). Only 33.6% of respondents agreed, in part or entirely, with the statement that their “rural tourism experience was too expensive” (mode = P25 = P50 = P75 = 3 (neutral); P75 = 4 (agree); see Table 14).

Table 13. Agreement levels (I) (%).

	1 (Totally Disagree)	2	3	4	5 (Totally Agree)
1. The Marketing around my experience of Rural Tourism was important.	0.8	4.0	18.4	52.8	24.0
2. My experience of Rural Tourism was very expensive.	4.8	16.0	45.6	28.8	4.8
3. Through my experience of Rural Tourism, I believe that the Autonomous Region of the Azores is sustainable.	0.0	3.2	18.4	46.4	32.0

Table 14. Agreement levels (I)—mode and percentiles.

	Valid N	Missing	Mode	Percentile 25	Percentile 50	Percentile 75
1. The Marketing around my experience of Rural Tourism was important	125	0	4	4	4	4
2. My experience of Rural Tourism was very expensive	125	0	3	3	3	4
3. Through my experience of Rural Tourism, I believe that the Autonomous Region of the Azores is sustainable	125	0	4	4	4	5

Furthermore, most participants (78.4%) fully or partially agreed with the statement corresponding to item 3 in Table 13: “Through my experience of rural tourism, I believe that the Autonomous Region of the Azores is sustainable” (mode = P25 = P50 = 4 (Agree); P75 = 5 (Totally agree); see Table 14). Thus, the Azores were perceived as a sustainable tourist destination. However, it is necessary to focus on maintaining the archipelago’s environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

As Table 15 (agreement levels II) indicates, the participants expressed higher levels of agreement with statements referring to item 1 “I had contact with people, local life, and customs”; item 5 “I felt that the Azores were an authentic place”; item 6 “I felt that the population was welcoming”; item 7 “I felt safe”; item 8 “I enjoyed the local cuisine”; item 11 “I performed activities in nature”; item 16 “I noticed that natural green landscapes predominate on a large scale over built landscapes”; and item 19 “I observed the local fauna and flora”. These data suggest that these areas are the strengths of the Azores in terms of tourist attractiveness. In fact, most participants strongly agreed with the statements underlying these items (55.2%, 75.2%, 58.4%, 74.4%, 64.8%, 67.2%, 52.0%, and 59.2%, respectively). The lowest levels of agreement were related to statements associated with item 13 “I rode a horse”, item 14 “I played paintball”, and item 15 “I realized that tourism was not the dominant economic activity in the area.”

CatPCA, using the Varimax rotation method with Kaiser normalization, was applied to the data sub-matrix that contained the respondents’ answers regarding the 19 items in Table 15. The PVAF by the five main components extracted was 65.2% of the data’s total variance. Appendix B shows that all these components (dimensions) had eigenvalues above 1, and the corresponding internal consistency of the individual items was acceptable. The most important items for each of the dimensions and the corresponding designations are presented in Table 16.

Regarding agreement levels III (Table 17), most respondents strongly agreed with the following statements: “I created happy memories” (77.6%), “I want to revisit the Azores in the context of rural tourism” (64.8%), and “I had a story to tell friends/family” (76.0%). The most frequent response to these three items was 5 (totally agree), which indicated that the rural tourism experience(s) provided memorable moments.

Table 15. Agreement levels (II) (%).

During My Experience of Rural Tourism in the Azores ...	1	2	3	4	5
	(Totally Disagree)				(Totally Agree)
1. I had contact with people, local life, and customs	1.6	5.6	2.4	35.2	55.2
2. I met new people and created new friendships	13.6	12.0	8.8	25.6	40.0
3. The accommodation had spacious rooms and common areas	3.2	3.2	20.0	43.2	30.4
4. The staff of the accommodation conveyed confidence	0.8	4.0	16.0	36.0	43.2
5. I felt that the Azores were an authentic place	0.0	0.8	7.2	16.8	75.2
6. I felt that the population was welcoming	0.8	4.0	11.2	25.6	58.4
7. I felt safe	0.0	0.8	5.6	19.2	74.4
8. I enjoyed the local cuisine	1.6	0.8	10.4	22.4	64.8
9. I bought local products	15.2	4.0	8.8	21.6	50.4
10. I felt that there were many activities/places of interest	6.4	6.4	15.2	32.8	39.2
11. I performed activities in nature	2.4	1.6	6.4	22.4	67.2
12. I performed activities at sea (e.g., Fishing, boating, other)	21.6	3.2	11.2	20.0	44.0
13. I rode a horse	62.4	6.4	6.4	7.2	17.6
14. I played paintball	83.2	4.0	3.2	4.0	5.6
15. I realized that tourism was not the dominant economic activity in the area	31.2	27.2	19.2	15.2	7.2
16. I noticed that natural green landscapes predominate on a large scale over built landscapes	0.8	2.4	9.6	35.2	52.0
17. I was not bothered by any noise or pollution	0.8	8.0	18.4	29.6	43.2
18. I absorbed the characteristics of regional architecture	4.0	10.4	22.4	30.4	32.8
19. I observed the local fauna and flora	1.6	2.4	7.2	29.6	59.2

Table 16. Principal Component Designation.

Principal Component	Items	Component/Dimension Designation
1	1, 5, 8, 15 and 16	Authenticity/typicality of the destination of the Azores destination
2	7, 11 and 19	Safety and contact with nature
3	3, 4, and 14	Accommodation
4	2, 6, 17 and 18	Friendliness of the local people
5	9, 10, 12 and 13	Local products, activities (e.g., activities at sea), and places

Table 17. Agreement levels (III) (%).

After Returning from My Experience of Rural Tourism in the Azores, I Felt That ...	1	2	3	4	5
	(Totally Disagree)				(Totally Agree)
1. I created happy memories	0.8	0.0	3.2	18.4	77.6
2. I want to revisit the Azores in the context of rural tourism	0.8	3.2	10.4	20.8	64.8
3. I had a story to tell friends/family	0.8	0.8	3.2	19.2	76.0

3.3. Open-Ended Questions

Participants were asked what could have made the experience of rural tourism in the Azores more positive. As this question was open-ended and short, nine options were created due to the considerable quantity of answers (Table 18). In this regard, the most frequent answer was “nothing to add” (30.7%), followed by “improve accessibility and infrastructures” (18.2%), and “diversify the touristic offer” (15.3%).

Table 18. Open-ended question (I).

Options	%
Have more time for the experience	5.7
Convert the Azores into a less expensive destination	13.0
Improve accessibility and infrastructures	18.2
Break language barriers	1.9
Increase Natives Warmness	6.7
Better cleaning of urban areas and trails	2.8
Nothing to add	30.7
Diversify the touristic offer	15.3
Others	5.7
Total	100.0

Another question was asked about the three most remarkable rural tourism experiences in the Azores. This question generated seven options (see Table 19). Contextually, the most frequent answer was “natural beauties and outside activities” (43.3%), followed by “traditions and gastronomy” (19.3%) and “sea-related activities” (16.3%).

Table 19. Open-ended question (II).

Options	%
Thermal Waters	10.9
Camping	0.9
Natural Beauties and Outside Activities	43.3
Traditions and Gastronomy	19.3
Sea related activities	16.3
Interaction with Locals	4.8
Others	4.5
Total	100.0

4. Discussion

This paper described, once more, the significant differences between rural tourism and how it could be differentiated from other types of tourism differ from ecological, cultural, and others. Moreover, these types of tourism are not mutually exclusive and can overlap. In fact, many rural tourism destinations incorporate elements of ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, or wellness tourism to provide visitors with a diverse and enriching experience.

Through this exploratory research, it was possible to analyze tourists’ perceptions regarding their rural tourism experience and the activities in which they participated during the holidays. The data gathered suggested that tourists chose the Azores because of the landscape, the adventure-related activities, and the local gastronomy, as mentioned in the literature [3–5,11]. The most relevant rural tourism experiences were based on the nature of the islands, adventure-like and cultural activities, and ecotourism. These were in line with the relevance/attractiveness of rural tourism, as it allowed tourists to have an immersive experience with the day-to-day life of rural populations as well as to escape from the stress and anxiety of city life by engaging in cultural, nature and adventure activities [2,6,22].

It was also possible to determine that positive rural tourism experiences were related to the characteristics of the population and their welcoming characteristics, the security of

the location, and the authenticity of the experience [4,5,23–28]. All these features enabled tourists to create memorable memories, have stories that they want to tell their family and friends, and develop a desire to revisit the Azores, although rural tourism experiences were considered expensive.

Another factor to take into consideration is the geographical location of the Azores itself. In fact, it plays a significant role in developing rural tourism in the region and dramatically influences its potential and appeal. This remote location has several implications for rural tourism in the following ways: natural environment, biodiversity and endemic species, authenticity and cultural heritage, adventure tourism, sustainability and conservation, or accessibility challenges. Thereby, the Azores' geographical location is paramount for developing rural tourism in the region. The archipelago's remote and isolated positioning, exceptional natural beauty, diverse ecosystems, cultural heritage, and sustainability efforts make it an attractive destination for those seeking authentic and environmentally conscious rural tourism experiences.

Thus, rural tourism in the Azores offers a unique opportunity to connect with the region's rich cultural heritage [29–33]. The islands have a long history shaped by centuries of settlement and the blending of various cultures, resulting in a distinct Azorean identity. In this regard, it is possible to highlight some of the most relevant points about the relationship between Azorean rural tourism and cultural heritage [33–36]:

- **Traditional Architecture:** Rural areas in the Azores often showcase traditional architecture, including stone houses with white-washed walls and red or black volcanic rock details. These architectural styles reflect the islanders' historical way of life and their ability to adapt to the local environment. Staying in rural accommodations allows visitors to experience and appreciate these unique architectural elements firsthand [37,38].
- **Local Communities:** Rural tourism in the Azores provides opportunities to interact with local communities and learn about their customs and traditions. Islanders are known for their warm hospitality; visitors can engage in cultural exchanges, attend local festivals, and participate in community activities. This firsthand interaction with locals allows for a deeper understanding of Azorean traditions and ways of life [39,40].
- **Traditional Crafts and Skills:** Rural areas of the Azores are often centers for traditional crafts and skills passed down through generations. Visitors can learn about and even participate in pottery-making, weaving, lacework, and basketry. This engagement with traditional arts helps preserve these valuable cultural practices and supports local artisans [41,42].
- **Gastronomy and Culinary Traditions:** Azorean cuisine is deeply rooted in the region's cultural heritage. Rural tourism offers the opportunity to savor traditional dishes made from locally sourced ingredients. Visitors can try Azorean cheeses, fresh seafood, traditional stews, and unique desserts. Exploring local markets, participating in cooking workshops, or dining with local families can provide insights into Azorean cuisine's culinary traditions and cultural significance [43].
- **Folklore and Traditions:** Rural areas of the Azores often showcase vibrant folklore and traditions. Visitors can witness traditional music and dance performances, such as the energetic folk dances called "bailing" or the haunting melodies of traditional Azorean instruments like the "viola da terra". Festivals and religious processions also offer glimpses into the region's cultural practices and beliefs [44,45].

5. Conclusions

Contextually, by engaging in rural tourism experiences, visitors can actively participate in and contribute to preserving and promoting the Azores' cultural heritage. These interactions foster an appreciation for the islanders' customs, traditions, and skills while also supporting local communities and ensuring the continuation of their cultural legacy.

Additionally, it should consider the issues related to tourism development in rural areas: the high demand among tourists for good telephone and internet coverage. The case

of the Azores Archipelago is not an exception. In this regard, what previous experiences and the thematic literature tell us could be applied to this territory. Thus, it is known that rural destinations and tourism authorities invested in improving telephone and internet coverage, recognizing the importance of good communication infrastructure. However, it is worth noting that some rural areas may still need more connectivity due to geographical challenges or underdeveloped infrastructure. It is always advisable for tourists to research and plan accordingly, considering the availability and quality of communication services when visiting rural destinations.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the tourism industry worldwide, including rural tourism destinations such as the Azores. The perception of rural tourism in the Azores may have been affected in several ways. For example, a shift towards nature and outdoor activities and looking for more safety and social distancing were observed; territorial resilience and sustainability were shown—we should bear in mind that the Azores are known for their commitment to sustainable tourism and its efforts to protect its natural environment—so, it may have benefitted from this shift in perception; in the economic impact.

Nevertheless, we should emphasize that perceptions can vary among different groups of tourists, and the specific impact of COVID-19 on the perception of Azores' rural tourism may differ based on individual experiences and preferences. Even so, it was noticed that once the Azores were a low-density region, it was one of the most interesting destinations in the COVID-19 period and a trend for the post-pandemic period.

If we compare the unique rural tourism destination of the Azores Islands with other rural destinations, it can help illustrate its distinctive characteristics. For example, we can think about the Scottish Highlands and the Azores (once another popular rural tourism destination). While the Azores and the Scottish Highlands offer exceptional rural tourism experiences, the Azores stand out with their unique volcanic landscapes, diverse marine life, and distinct Portuguese–European culture. These factors make the Azores a genuinely exceptional and different rural tourism destination.

In closing, this research allowed us to conclude that the tourism strategy developed for the Azores region is in line with the importance attributed to rural tourism as a tool to improve the lives and the income of rural populations [1,8,22,26,28]. This study also provided some insights about the importance of social media and websites to expand awareness of the Azores as a rural tourism region.

This study was not without limitations, such as the non-probabilistic sample and the application of concepts to a single region that limited the generalization of findings. Additional research should be carried out to better understand the relevance of rural tourism, especially in what concerns the local population's perceptions about its influence in their way of living.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Rotated component loadings of the 6-component solution: Vacation planning.

Items/Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Certified accommodation and/or related with a brand	−0.079	0.816	−0.073	−0.068	0.125	0.049
2. Location or region well known for tourism	0.170	0.840	−0.021	−0.032	0.070	0.117
3. Nearby cultural attractions	0.287	0.242	0.076	−0.132	−0.169	0.713
4. Good location of the accommodation	0.214	0.224	0.162	−0.643	0.335	0.111
5. Good telephone and internet coverage	0.055	0.209	0.131	0.040	0.792	−0.162
6. Comfort in rooms and/or home	−0.195	0.037	−0.079	−0.143	0.804	0.091
7. Knowledge of English by the local population	−0.111	0.548	−0.003	0.586	0.144	0.013
8. Events taking place during my stay	0.098	0.031	0.016	0.259	0.267	0.702
9. Easy access from the nearest public transport and the place to stay	0.611	−0.062	−0.008	0.336	−0.286	0.339
10. Quiet and peaceful location and surroundings]	−0.282	0.462	−0.122	0.028	0.451	0.130
11. Attractive landscape	0.033	−0.066	0.978	−0.045	−0.005	−0.038
12. Easy, safe, and transparent booking process	−0.034	−0.052	0.980	−0.043	0.002	−0.052
13. Proximity to sports facilities	0.328	0.037	−0.020	0.717	0.019	0.265
14. Proximity to places of entertainment (bars, clubs, etc.)	0.574	−0.098	−0.023	0.584	−0.025	0.200
15. Recommendations from friends, colleagues, family, or other tourists	0.777	−0.217	−0.042	−0.053	−0.104	0.283
16. Health services available nearby	0.788	0.022	−0.030	0.136	−0.091	0.152
17. Value	0.817	0.182	−0.015	−0.088	0.064	−0.137
18. Other	0.053	0.048	−0.383	0.129	−0.105	0.592

Variable Principal Normalization.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Appendix B

Table A2. Rotated component loadings of the 5-component solution (regarding Table 15 answers).

Items/Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5
1. I had contact with people, local life, and customs	0.794	−0.036	−0.015	0.156	0.051
2. I met new people and created new friendships	0.158	−0.244	−0.185	0.493	0.177
3. The accommodation had spacious rooms and common areas	0.465	−0.045	0.707	−0.110	0.101
4. The staff of the accommodation conveyed confidence	−0.071	−0.066	0.739	0.157	0.190
5. I felt that the Azores were an authentic place	0.963	0.000	0.073	0.072	0.083
6. I felt that the population was welcoming	−0.109	0.107	0.112	0.661	−0.202
7. I felt safe	0.033	0.936	−0.019	0.038	0.065
8. I enjoyed the local cuisine	0.695	0.655	0.030	0.023	0.144
9. I bought local products	0.052	0.137	0.001	0.442	0.478
10. I felt that there were many activities/places of interest	0.220	0.044	0.387	0.118	0.647
11. Performed activities in nature	−0.081	0.606	0.010	0.070	0.504
12. Performed activities at sea (e.g., Fishing, boating, other)	0.131	0.115	−0.092	0.132	0.661
13. I rode a horse	−0.125	−0.086	−0.549	−0.151	0.555
14. I played paintball	0.059	−0.006	−0.796	0.068	0.179
15. I realized that tourism was not the dominant economic activity in the area	−0.438	0.028	0.002	0.217	0.001
16. I noticed that natural green landscapes predominate on a large scale over landscapes built	0.962	0.034	0.075	0.078	0.094
17. I was not bothered by any noise or pollution.	0.017	0.129	−0.026	0.786	0.125
18. I absorbed the characteristics of regional architecture.	0.035	0.130	0.134	0.681	0.255
19. I observed the local fauna and flora.	−0.031	0.857	−0.052	0.182	0.004
Eigenvalue (VAF)	3.513	2.564	2.220	2.176	1.920
Percentage accounted (PVAf)	18.490	13.495	11.685	11.452	10.104
Cronbach's Alpha	0.773	0.683	0.604	0.632	0.623

Variable Principal Normalization.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

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