




CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION: SHEDDING LIGHT ON OVERLOOKED DESTINATIONS

Abstract

 **Maria Carmen PARDO**, PhD, Assistant Professor
Instituto Politécnico Viana do Castelo (IPVC):
Centre for Research, Development and
Innovation in Tourism (CITUR),
E-mail: marialopez@estg.ipv.pt

 **Sofia ALMEIDA**, PhD, Associate Professor
(Corresponding Author)
Universidade Europeia; CETRAD, Universidade
de Trás os Montes e Alto Douro
E-mail: salmeida@universidadeeuropeia.pt

 **Ana Cláudia CAMPOS**, PhD, Assistant Professor
Faculty of Economics; CinTurs, Universidade
do Algarve
E-mail: acalves@ualg.pt

Purpose – The aim of this investigation is to explore opportunities for advancing cross-border tourism in the Iberian Peninsula.

Methodology/Design/Approach – In this study, focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted to both public and private stakeholders in the cross-border regions.

Findings – Findings indicate that the cross-border areas in Portugal and Spain are perceived by stakeholders from both countries as familiar territories and also that there are signs of transnational cooperation. This indicates there is significant potential for the advancement of cross-border tourism in the Iberian Peninsula. Nonetheless, the study concludes that more initiatives are required, beginning with the creation of an adequate organization to build the cross-border destination.

Originality of the research – The research delivers managerial insights to assist public and private actors in developing this cross-border destination, such as the need to curtail contextual expenses or accentuate the public sector's role in stimulating private sector's involvement in the process.

Keywords inland destination; regional development; cross-border territory; cross border tourism; intelligent specialization.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic crisis brought several impacts to the tourism sector, namely, economic, financial, operational, organizational and technological, as previously noted by Almeida et al. (2022) and others. In the critical context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and under the assumption of tourism as an asset of first emotional need (Fortuna, 2013; Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020), two new characteristics of the tourist profile in the medium term are emerging. The first is the search for proximity to home residence and the second is the increase of rural tourism (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022; Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020; Lebrun et al., 2021). Cross-border tourism, by combining the need for proximity travel and the rural experience, presents potential for development of tourism following the COVID-19 international crisis (UNWTO, 2019). However, cross-border tourism remains an underdeveloped area of research within tourism studies (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019; Livandovschi, 2017; Sofield, 2006). Data collection took place before the COVID-19; however, data were analysed during and after the pandemic. This seemed the appropriate context to examine and discuss the theme of cross border tourism development in particular taking into account the increase of domestic tourism in inland areas during this pandemic period, which in both Portugal and Spain coincided with proximity to border areas.

The border has always been a line of separation between two different, if not opposed, cultural and political realities (Sofield, 2006; Timothy, 2000), performing as barrier to people and goods movement (Liberato et al., 2018), most often hindering human interaction (Timothy, 2000). Additionally, it has played the role of political and sovereign affirmation of a state over a given territory (López-Davalillo, 2016). The contact between the peoples that inhabited these regions was historically greater or lesser according to the porosity of the border and the control of the state, with collaboration for the development of tourism ranging from alienation to integration (Martinez, 1994; Timothy, 2000). Moreover, border regions have traditionally been peripheral spaces (Guia et al., 2022; Poulaki et al., 2022) far from decision-making centers, characterized by deficient accessibility and inter-modality, development structures, such as transportation infrastructures and services (Poulaki, et al., 2017; Poulaki et al., 2022), and reduced economic capacity (Sofield, 2006). But even though they are important for territorial delimitation, they have not been considered priority territories in terms of policy and social cohesion development (López-Davalillo, 2016).

As tourism is an activity deeply connected to mobility (Hall, 2005; La Rocca, 2015; Poulaki et al., 2022), states use regulatory and legislative powers that facilitate or otherwise obstruct tourism, and borders become by these areas of people inclusion or exclusion (Sofield, 2006). Border areas have been described as lacking political and economic control over decisions affecting their well-being, suffering from a sense of alienation due to isolation and lack of power, incurring in higher transportation and communications costs, but with high potential for tourism collaboration and development (Timothy, 2000) because of distinctive relatively untouched natural and cultural assets (Hall, 2005; Livandovschi, 2017; Sofield, 2006). Border territories

position as attractions for many reasons (Timothy, 2000). Some of them hold negative value (Clark & Nyaupane, 2023). However, they are also considered positive attractions due to the narratives elicited by their cultural amalgamation (Poulaki et al., 2022) or their inherent natural and cultural values (Clark & Nyaupane, 2023). They present a twofold construction of space, one based on the physical/geographical space, and the other on the social characters of the territories, which involve tangible (e.g., built heritage) and intangible elements (national identities, norms, values, ideologies, technologies, etc.), which interact closely in the framing of interpretation and the tourist experience (Sofield, 2006). In many cases, cross-border areas have the same historical and cultural traditions and share natural landscapes (Livandovschi, 2017), making it easier to collaborate with a view to sustainable tourism development (Liberato et al., 2018; Timothy, 2000). In fact, these areas, by being home to partnerships which develop into clusters, fit into integrated model of governance (Blasco et al., 2014; Guia et al., 2022). Despite the promising arrangements for trans-frontier tourism destination governance, obstacles to success are recognized (Liberato et al., 2018). Interpretation of border areas vary widely (Timothy, 2000), depending on the shared past of the communities and respective states, and accordingly, on how these represent openness or exclusion of the other party. Cordial relationships among border communities facilitate mobility and decision-making concerning the promotion of a single territory, the development of competitive cooperation projects and partnerships, thus impacting (1) the development of tourism-based facilities and services, (2) the area's attractiveness (Liberato et al., 2018), and ultimately (3) cross-border tourists' experiences (Blasco et al., 2014; Sofield, 2006). Accordingly, it has been argued that cross-border areas should potentially evolve into tourist destinations depending on tourist consumption patterns, and not on conventional administrative boundaries (Blasco et al., 2014).

In tourism, cross-border destinations are viewed as a distinctive type of destination (Livandovschi, 2017). Prior research has shown that these areas suffer from specific conditions and problems because of limited infrastructure and services critical to the development of touristic activity (Butler, 2002). However, common historical and cultural background linked to novelty and unexplored heritage are reasons invoked to promote tourism in these areas (Hernández-Ramírez, 2017). Past studies have also shown that cross-border cooperation for tourism is well perceived by public and service provision actors, and tourism as a tool for developing these areas (Cuadra *et al.*, 2016; Del Río *et al.*, 2017).

Conceptually, what counts as cross-border tourism or cross-border tourists is contentious, as definitions present conceptual delimitation and measurement difficulties. In general, border tourism is considered "the temporary displacement of people to the dividing line between two countries contiguous areas" (Del Río *et al.*, 2017) or "the temporary displacement of people from their usual place of residence to the border between two adjacent countries, caused by leisure, entertainment, health, business, visits to relatives and/or friends, religion, social events or shopping, among other reasons, and whose stay does not exceed one year and that you spend at least one night in the place visited" (Bringas, 2004, p.8). Despite these definitions, the question of whether a tourist is considered a cross-border tourist if only visits and stays on one side of the border remains open to debate.

Portugal and Spain are neighbor countries sharing a borderline of approximately 1200 km and both have registered increase of rural tourism in the last years (Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020). In addition, it is expected the growth of domestic tourism in both countries compared to the summer of 2019 (Eurostat, 2020). Despite promising prospects, there is lack of economic growth and dynamics as large cities are absent from border areas (Pardo *et al.*, 2018). However, border tourism is claimed to benefit the territories' stakeholders (Poulaki *et al.*, 2022). When considering the binomial *tourist development vs multiregional economic development and cross-border regions with shared endogenous resources*, tourism appears precisely as an opportunity to contribute to the reduction of these territorial inequalities that the border has generated (Medeiros, 2011). On the other hand, tourism becomes a differentiating element when considering resource richness of both countries in a single destination (Pardo *et al.*, 2018).

Overall, this study aims to uncover the potential of tourism as an instrument for regional development in cross-border areas of Portugal and Spain due to the direct positive effects of cooperation on them (Livandovschi, 2017). Accordingly, an empirical study has been conducted to private and public actors from Portugal and Spain using interviews and focus groups. Aligned with the overall goal of the research, specific objectives were to (1) unveil these actors' perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of tourism supply and demand in the cross-border territories, and (2) to identify the priority strategic lines of action for developing Portuguese-Spanish tourism across the borders. In the end, results of this study are presented and discussed.

1. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE STUDY

1.1. Contextualization of cross-border cooperation at the Spanish-Portuguese border

At the European level, there is evidence of good practices tackling the implementation and consolidation of cross-border tourism (Hardi *et al.*, 2021; Moral *et al.*, 2019). Concerning built heritage, cross-border tourism is acknowledged to help in its preservation and enhancement, acting as a means of overcoming historical traumatic events. An example of this is the Bärnau-Tachov Historical Park, an archeopark that displays the life of people in the early and high Middle Ages living in an early medieval Slavic village, a fortress from the 11th century and a settlement from the Middle Age (Guimerà, *et al.*, 2018). In turn, intangible heritage has been the focus of the Carpathian Culinary Heritage Network, created with the aim of unifying the potential of local traditional food and the efforts of tourism-related stakeholders throughout the Carpathian Regions to promote

the widely diverse styles and products. Additionally, the Network assisted in building capacity, and sustainable supply chains for the various producers and the public to meet the challenges and requirements of present-day needs (Guimerà et al., 2018). As a result, the different Carpathian regions offer their shared culinary traditions as a tourism product. As to natural heritage, the joint development of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) caves of Aggtelek (Hungary) and the Slovak karst deserve particular attention. This tourism product joins improvement of nature and biodiversity protection with the tourism attractiveness of the UNESCO World Heritage site. Annually, more than 200.000 visitors come to see this cross-border cave system, which has an appropriate entrance on both sides of the border (Guimierà, A. et al, 2018). Many other examples qualify as showcases of cross-border areas with the potential to boost successful and sustainable tourism, including the *Danube Area* (Bjeljac & Ćurčić, 2006; Kádár & Gede, 2021; Silvanska et al., 2018), the *Alpine Region* (AlpNet, 2018), the *Greece-Turkey Border* (Katsoni et al., 2016; Kozak & Buhalis, 2019), the *Slovak-Hungarian Border* (Hardi et al., 2021), or the *Cerdanya Valley* Spanish-French Border (Ferrer-Roca, Guia & Blasco, 2020).

As to the countries pertaining to the Iberian Peninsula, the initial phase of border deactivation between Spain and Portugal started with the fall of the dictatorships and the emergence of fledgling democracies (Jurado et al., 2020). From those days, Spanish-Portuguese borders are mainly and still to this day depopulated areas showing signs of economic recession. Most often the main economic activity of border areas was agriculture smuggling. Emigration flows turned these territories into heritage centers, places of tourist attraction for urbanites (Navas, 2020) with travelers to the regions exploring the inheritance (Godinho, 2015). However, flows of fishermen between both banks of the rivers Minho, Douro, Tagus, and Guadiana, which stimulated cross-border traffic, are still active to this day: the Portuguese provided sailors and workers for the canning industries, composed of temporary or permanent emigrants to Spanish towns. In turn, from the side of Spain, people enrolled in Portuguese ships (Cáceres Feria & Corbacho Gandullo, 2013). The Spanish-Portuguese borders, as parted from the traditional daily activities, lost their economic utility and attractiveness, however subsequently gained hedonic and recreational value (Godinho, 2015). With the joint arrival to the then *European Economic Community*, cooperation between the countries is reactivated taking on the spirit of borders cessation (Calderón, 2015).

Cross-border cooperation between Spain and Portugal is a complex phenomenon derived from diversity and plurality of agents involved (Medina-García, 2021). Despite this, awareness of unique tangible and intangible heritage (Albuquerque, 2022) encompassing natural values, own ways of life and culture, as well as specific systems of agricultural and forestry use (Fernandes, 2020) has provided the rationale for the launch of a cross-border tourism destination project for the Spanish-Portuguese borders (Pardo et al., 2018). After the entry of Spain and Portugal to the European Economic Community (EEC), a new context of dissolution of the border brings up an opportunity (enhanced by European Union financing) for a quicker long-term development, growth consolidation and job creation through cross-border cooperation (Soeiro et al, 2016). The main objective is the generation of the needed critical mass not only that can justify (making viable their maintenance) the investment on infrastructures at all levels (health, culture, economy or social), but also to support and to increase the intensity of flows and relationships between communities and local stakeholders of the border territories (Soeiro et al., 2016). The intensity of the cooperation is not the same along the border, being the Galicia-North of Portugal border the most permeable part of the frontier due to historic reasons. The similarity between the Galician and the Portuguese is still today an important permeability factor (Guimerà et al., 2018). Following Timothy's (2000) model for cross-border tourism partnerships, tourism cooperation between Portugal and Spain has surpassed the cooperative partnerships stage; however, it cannot be said that it describes a perfect collaboration model, because bi-national relations are not perfectly stable and joint efforts are not constantly and impeccably implemented and consolidated between the parties.

The border regions have always assumed a peripheral position in both countries, in the geographic, political and social dimensions (Anderson et al., 2002). This perception became more acute when the most southern cross border areas in Europe integrated the European Union. With political and economic action stimulated by cooperation funds, the Portuguese-Spanish border converged with the more developed regions of both countries in GDP *per capita* from 2000 to 2018 (Viegas et al., 2023). However, being a border region increases the probability of having above average growth; moreover, having lower initial GDP was also associated with higher growth rates, revealing a negative relationship between economic and demographic growth. Here lies the opportunity for cross border tourism, an instrument for development in terms of employment generation and population fixation to the territory (Pardo et al., 2018). This is even more so in the context of rural regions following a global pandemic (Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020).

The cross-border cooperation area, with this specific regional variation, is predominantly rural, less populated, more aged, and poorer (Guimerà et al., 2018). It is also characterized by the absence of natural/physical elements which could prevent to cross it (the opposite is true, as it can be crossed by foot almost in its all extension). On the one hand, the main barriers to cooperation (the remaining border condition) are the bureaucratic/administrative, especially in what concerns taxes and labour markets that work under different conditions (Ojeda, 2019). On the other hand, the main enhancer factor of cross-border cooperation is local authorities and civil society institutions collaboration, which developed since 1999, supported by regional authorities of both countries through the "cross-border working communities" (Guimerà et al., 2018), currently named as EGCTs (European grouping of territorial cooperation). Despite efforts and support given by the European operation program for Spain-Portugal border (of around 1.380 million euros of ERDF) (Guimerà et al., 2018) cross-border territories remain the least aligned with the European average (Eurostat, 2020).

If the lack of consistent planning and strategies for the border development partially accounts for this result, the fact is that true border municipalities are only taking advantage of a small percentage of the funds allocated to disperse the border and structure their developments, as most of the financing of the development policies has prioritized cities and urban centers, and not rural territories or small villages which are the reality of this border (Jurado & Pazos, 2016; Shepherd & Loannides, 2020). A good part of these community policies or other co-financing policies addressed tourism directly or indirectly, but the offer and promotion of the border have little or nothing to do with the existence of the border (Ojeda, 2019). This aspect deserves highlighting because it is coincident along the entire border. Expectedly, there is in the popular imagination of both Spanish and Portuguese people the idea of the border as an area just to cross, not stay (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Despite this, it is argued that the territory has resources and the potential to host a unique, not overloaded, and above all authentic tourism experiences (Jurado & Pazos, 2018). The *Iberian Border Eurocities*, through a second-generation border cooperation initiative along the Portuguese-Spanish border, enhanced cross-border collaboration, fostering sustainable regional development (Jurado et al., 2020).

The analysis of Spain and Portugal's Duero River borderlands involved employing ethnography, local spatial knowledge, and remote sensing to track landscape changes over time (Jurado & Pazos, 2018). Hearn (2021) underscores the significance of community engagement and local wisdom in landscape management and conservation. A more recent study by Viegas et al., (2023) discusses cross-border collaboration as a critical action in surmounting national barriers and emphasizes the demand for enhanced policies to foster sustainable borderland development. Several studies focus on the cooperation opportunities along the Spanish and Portuguese border, particularly considering land use and management, and the local economies. Some of the areas studied in this context include the border areas of *Chaves-Verín*, *Elvas-Badajoz*, *Tui-Valença*, *Douro-Duero* or *the Lower Guadiana Region* (Cabero Díez et al., 1995; Castanho et al., 2023; Castanho, 2017; Trigal et al., 1997; Vulevic et al., 2020). Recently, Liberato et al. (2018) have addressed the specifics and dynamics of the Galicia-North Portugal Euroregion.

1.2. Potential for the launch of Destino Fronte(i)ra (Cross Border Destination) as an instrument for regional development

The opportunity to launch this new concept of cross-border destination for Portugal and Spain is born from an excellent context for tourism development in both countries, as they share visitors, a fertile ground for exploration under an innovative and differentiating claim: *the frontier as a destination*. Substantiating this claim, the Spanish-Portuguese border, named *Raia*, counts as the basis of majestic landscape and environmental resources, of unique traditional cultural practices, waters, and wines (Pardo et al., 2018).

Moreover, trade activities no longer existing but that allow for its re-creation into events of different types (dramatizations, for instance) and built from a distinctive heritage in "non-frontier" territories are some of the dimensions that help developing the cross-border area. The new tourist profile is concerned with social and environmental sustainability (Pardo et al., 2018), as well as with appealing and immersive co-creative tourism experiences (Campos et al., 2018). Tourists seek to absorb local culture and get involved with authentic destinations (Pardo et al., 2018), an opportunity emerged from the COVID -19 pandemic itself. A volume of "captive" tourists affected by high-risk perception in certain periods, unavailability of long-haul travel, and financial crisis are in search of non-massified, authentic, natural, outdoor destinations, among others (Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020).

Challenges ahead would happen mainly in the following dimensions, which are intrinsic to the territory and the tourism sector: (i) a territory with several autonomous communities (and provinces) on the Spanish side and with several NUTS (and districts) on the Portuguese side (Pardo et al., 2018); (ii) the different cultural, administrative, historical, linguistic contexts, and therefore the need to know all the factors common to each region and make the most of their potential. But also, (iii) the definition of global actions for the entire territory, and, if applicable, specific and non-replicable actions throughout, or even discrete or repeatable but not continuous, (e.g. for the product *Rota das Camélias* of the Euroregion Galicia-Norte de Portugal in the first case or the extension to Andalusia of *Via Algarviana* in the previous case); and (iv) the generation of tourist demand without, in the first stage, requiring large private investment, so that flows themselves are the argument for attracting entrepreneurs to work in other areas of economic activity (Pardo et al., 2018).

According to some sources (Pardo et al., 2018), in order not to fall into a theoretical and unexecuted document, feasibility of planning should integrate a reflection about (v) the challenge of economic viability. Additionally, (vi) accessibility of the execution from the administrative-political perspective is critical, since it must be a bottom-up process, and municipalities and local governments in Spain have less competences and power of decision making than Portuguese ones. Also, (vii) strictly tourist activities, at most, with a cultural approach. Additional recommendations include: (viii) preference for the endogenous, authentic, and distinctive resources of the territories (intelligent specialization); (ix) non-mandatory geographical continuity in the territory. The aim is for actors to discuss the border destination, with proposals for continuous action in the more than 1,200 km that comprise it. And lastly, (x) primacy for activities that generate employment and / or a better quality of life and / or that preserve the environment.

Table 1: Interviewees' characterization

Interviewee	Institution/Firm	Description (if applicable)
Municipality vice-president	Câmara Municipal de Castro Marim	Portuguese border municipality
Professor/Researcher	Universidade do Algarve	Portuguese University
Project director	Via Algarviana	300 kms pedestrian route, that cross inland Algarve
CEO	Proactivetur	Algarve-based company specialized in ecotourism and creative tourism
Professor/Researcher	Universidad de Vigo	Spanish University
Professor/Researcher	Instituto Politécnico Bragança	Portuguese polytechnic institute
CEO	Around Europe advisors	Portuguese consultant firm specialized in European projects & tourism
Marketing director	Região Turismo do Algarve	Public entity responsible for regional promotion.

Source: Authors elaboration

2. METHODOLOGY

The field work here presented derives from *the Strategic Plan for the Development of Border Tourism in Spain-Portugal* (Pardo *et al.*, 2018). The exploratory research adopts a qualitative research design, wherein in-depth discussions conducted in person serve as the cornerstone for engaging with a diverse array of actors within the sphere of tourism (Ghisoiu *et al.*, 2017). According to the qualitative research paradigm, the grasping of multiple perspectives on phenomena is important (Neuman, 2012). The qualitative paradigm fits well the study of tourism, as tourism is multidimensional and comprehends complex phenomena in which many actors intervene (Wilson *et al.*, 2020). Some of these actors represent the wide spectrum of businesses closely aligned with the tourism industry. The in-depth discussions reported in this research took two forms: focus groups and in-depth interviews. The latter have been performed for those participants unable to take part in focus groups discussions. Thus, focus group sessions and in-depth interviews were conducted to a total of 114 public and industry representatives of both countries, 67 from Spain and 47 from Portugal (Pardo *et al.*, 2018)¹. All data collection instruments were duplicated in their own language for the two countries.

2.1. Data collection

2.1.1. Focus Groups

Focus groups are arranged and prepared conversations between people using an informal approach and tone concerning a topic of discussion which progress with the assistance of a moderator (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009; Richard *et al.*, 2021). Despite acknowledged limitations of focus groups discussions as a research method, they are considered an appropriate vehicle to stimulate public participation in research processes (Bloor *et al.*, 2001), particularly if implemented procedures adhere to guiding principles aimed at ensuring scientific rigor (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). Focus groups are also widely applied in tourism and hospitality research (Richard *et al.*, 2021).

The focus group methodology was implemented based on guidelines extracted from Onwuegbuzie *et al.*'s (2009, according to which the planning and organization of the focus groups precedes implementation. So the following stages were followed to ensure that the adequate procedures were taken to collect relevant information: (1) after settling the study's research question and design (qualitative), the characteristics of participants were discussed and consensualized (tourism experts or related to tourism were also settled; (2) then questions were considered for discussion, with two main areas of interest: tourism supply and tourism demand related issues for both countries in what concerns border areas; in this respect, both the literature review and the study's objectives guided question formulation; (3) implementation of the focus groups sessions, as described in the subsequent paragraph; (4) data analysis approach considerations and decisions were made, with the group as the unit of analysis and content analysis as the main strategy to analyze the data; the broad discussion themes were pre-defined, however emergent themes were expected to follow from the discussions. Additionally, it was consensualized to pay particular attention to keywords or phrases.

As to the implementation stage, 6 focus sessions, in a total of 12 meetings, were held between February and May 2018 with a total of 96 participants representing the public and the private sector from sub-regions of both Portugal and Spain. Public sector representatives included association members, public administration officials related to policy and tourism management,

¹ Acknowledgments to *Eixo Atlântico del Noroeste Peninsular*, owner of the work, for the permission to use data produced.

political leaders in the areas of cooperation and/or tourism in the different public administrations, experts and consultants, and tourism education professionals and higher education actors with research interests in cooperation and/or tourism. In turn, private sector participants included managers from different sub-sectors, tourist entertainment companies, incoming agencies, accommodation establishments, among others. Concurrently, number of participants per group (size), and expected duration of sessions accommodation, events, or travel agencies).

The sessions had the objective of discussing tourism supply and demand, addressing tourist profile, the context of data accessibility, opportunities, obstacles, public support, and common will for the development of cross border tourism and the actions required for it. More specifically, to discuss the supply side, questions were asked about the perception of the area competitiveness, deficiencies to be corrected, accessibility, past experiences of cross-border cooperation, resources, or products to be shared or increased on the other side of the border. To probe into the demand side, participants were asked about tourist profile, marketing orientation, need or interest in working with companies across the border, seasonality, previous experiences of collaboration, and support from institution.

These group dynamics consisted of a common trunk of explanation of the project, questions about the destination (due to the lack of secondary data) and validation of ideas about potential actions to be developed. Each session took 2 hours in average and the number of participants varied between 2 and a maximum of 16. The constitution of different groups is presented below.

2.1.2 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are considered a method adequate to probe into issues for which personal experiences and perspectives are considered of critical importance to the purpose of the study (Lincoln & Guba: 1985). They are also characterized as providing rich and insightful data, assuming participants account for their own perceptions, experiences and meanings (Finn et al., 2000). However, it is recognized that this benefit comes at the expenses of data generalizability (Gubrium et al., 2012). According to Dworkin's (2012), it is suggested that a minimum sample size of 25-30 interviews be employed, as this threshold typically denotes the attainment of saturation and redundancy. Consequently, once this point is reached, it obviates the necessity for further data collection processes. However, for this research only 8 in-depth interviews were conducted to facilitate the participation in the study of participants of interest and with know-how on the subject that were unavailable to take part in the focus group sessions. They were conducted to stakeholders from both countries, three researchers from higher education institutions, two public officials representing the border destination from the Portuguese side, two CEO to tourism-related firms, and one project director, also from the Portuguese side. Interviews took place between June and July 2018 for approximately 1 to 2 hours and were conducted at the work environment of interviewees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' permission. Topics covered were the same as the ones addressed in the focus groups sessions.

Table 2: Challenges ahead for the development of a cross-border destination for Portugal and Spain

Dimensions	Challenges
1. territory administration	To build a territory composed of several autonomous communities (and provinces) on the Spanish side and with several NUTS (and districts) on the Portuguese side
2. territory communalities	To face the different cultural, administrative, historical, and linguistic contexts
3. future global action for the territory	To define global actions for the entire territory, and, if applicable, specific and non-replicable actions throughout, or even discrete or repeatable but not continuous
4. tourism demand for the territory	To generate tourism demand without large private investment
5. economic viability of the territory	To devise economic viable options and solutions
6. decision-making processes in the territory	To implement bottom-up processes, however municipalities and local governments in Spain have less competences and power of decision making than Portuguese ones
7. cultural activities in the territory	To ensure tourism-related activities are to adopt a cultural approach
8. authenticity of resources of the territory	To identify the endogenous, authentic, and distinctive resources of the territories
9. geography of the territory	To adhere to non-mandatory geographical continuity in the territory
10. sustainable activities in the territory	To stimulate activities that generate employment and/or a better quality of life and/or that preserve the environment

Source: Authors' own

Interviewee D added:

There is a lack of support for cross-border cooperation for it to work well in the 'real world'.

Interviewee E said:

It is essential to define axes of joint action between the national bodies responsible for tourism (Turismo de Portugal and Turespaña). It is very difficult to carry out collaborative projects in universities; I've seen very little success between border universities with POCTEP. But cross-border academic cooperation in the field of tourism would be very interesting.

Additionally, seasonality, acknowledged as one major weakness of Portuguese-Spanish border areas, is seen as the result of demand's country of origin, which is mainly domestic. Due to seasonality, tourism services and additional offerings to visitors are poor. Participants considered that institutional coordination from both sides and communication are still insufficient to bring cross-border tourism to its full potential [Interviewee H]. Other participants mentioned the poor performance of cross-border academic institutions so far in joint development projects, despite common interest showed in cross-border academic cooperation [Interviewee G].

3.3. Legal obstacles

Diverse programs which affect tourism development and management are applied to one side of the border only, requiring this way a new approach and management of legal systems adopted in both countries [Interviewee A], that should evolve to a facilitating framework for business creation in the cross-border areas [Interviewee B]. For instance, one said:

International natural parks, as managed by Portugal and Spain, should abide by the same regulations, that should be as homogeneous as possible. [Interviewee D]

3.4. Infrastructure deficits

Shortage of public cross-border transportation services is identified as one major obstacle to the development of cross-border tourism; one interviewee said that in addition to infrastructure, there is need of resources (financial and human) to maintain its use.

3.5. Marketing weaknesses

These refer mostly to poor cross-border destination promotion from both parties and insufficient joint product development integrating both territories' environmental and cultural values and tourism services. In terms of promotion and communication, it was found critical the building of the image of the cross-border area as the end destination [Interviewee B], and Interviewee A suggested in this regard the creation of a single cultural, leisure and events calendar aggregating the cross-border destination's highlights. One participant claimed that:

The absence of a cross-border communication and information platform connecting entrepreneurs, tourism operators and other stakeholders is a major flaw in this respect [Interviewee H].

In turn, Interviewee D added that

There is a general lack of promotion of the concept of cross-border tourism and the need for better infrastructure and equipment.

Interviewee C acknowledged the important role of associations and joint programs when saying:

The European Union must also promote the destination of the border and increase investment and aid for cross-border projects. Positive discrimination is essential. [Interviewee C]

Current tourist accommodation is seen as a weakness of these cross-border areas [Interviewee F]. In line with this view, Interviewee G recommended the creation of a youth hostel network connected to *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*' cultural heritage. Another one emphasized that pedestrian routes that already exist linking the two countries should evolve into a proper itinerary for birdwatching [Interviewee D]. Also, identification of heritage of interest to proximity visitors could develop into distinctive cross-border offerings through exploration of re-enactments of historic events, appealing to storytelling and tourist role-play [Interviewee G]. And Interviewee B proposed linking South Portugal with South Spain using the already existing *Via Algarviana* to expand to Andalusian Spain. Also, Interviewee F suggested that:

It is essential to create a team of professionals permanently dedicated to communication, promotion and structuring the cross-border tourist offer, who will work on producing and updating tourist content online and offline [Interviewee F],

Despite acknowledging obstacles and different types of constraints preventing working on a common project for the Portuguese-Spanish borders, participants considered the development of joint initiatives a promise for a more sustainable future for tourism. In this respect, constructive perceptions were aimed at specific strengths of the parties to develop cross-border tourism.

3.6. Major strengths

Positive aspects have been identified that create expectations towards a promising collaboration between the two countries. Participants considered ICT tools capacity play a critical role in the development of Portuguese-Spanish border tourism, as they can be used as powerful communication tools with domestic and international markets and within the industry. Specifically, the southern areas of the Iberian Peninsula, encompassing the Algarve region and Andalusia, share territorial traits and cultural heritage identity that can be used to promote the region as a single destination. This means to improve accessibility across this region, as transportation services remain highly expensive and not yet meeting the needs of demand. According to the participants, the Algarve region is strong in reaching international markets, particularly in the senior segments, and the Spanish side of the border can benefit from this demand.

3.7. Strategic lines for action

Data collected additionally highlighted major lines for action to develop border tourism linking Portugal and Spain. These included:

Creation and design of new tourism products

This line of action relies on the assumption that development of border tourism requires the transformation of natural and cultural resources into tourism attractions shared by both countries. In line with current concerns for sustainable development, nature would serve as basis to maintain as well as enhance the quality of ecosystems through nautical, ornithological and wildlife tourism; *Doñana National Park* in Andalusia is an established tourist attraction for visitors interested in wildlife experiences, and is home to the Iberian Lynx, an endangered wild cat species that is also found in Portugal. Joint efforts to protect the species through sustainable tourism action are considered important to the design of an itinerary crossing Portuguese and Spanish borders.

The river Guadiana defines a long stretch of the Portugal-Spanish border and its potential for touristic activity is recognized by most participants. Current awareness is that as a natural attraction to visitors to both countries, tourism experiences and events should be a result of joint action from Portuguese and Spanish businesses and public authorities. Going upriver was in the past a spontaneous activity that has changed into an organized cross-border event. This however is seen as an opportunity to develop sport and recreational tourism, requiring more investment in temporary facilities and venues to host events.

As Portugal and Spain have shared in the past (as they still do today) an extensive border line, smuggling activities were common to both sides, contributing to a shared cultural identity. The tourism industry is already introducing this heritage to visitors to the Portuguese side (in Alcoutim) and the Spanish side (in Sanlúcar de Guadiana), however separately; joint efforts are expected in the future that further explore cross-border itineraries around the smuggling activity, characters, and their stories. As commented by two participants:

Guadiana River is probably the least used river from a tourist point of view, but as a border river it is the oldest (800 years old) and has enormous potential. [Interviewee A]

Guadiana Nautical Activities Center should be taken into account as well as the Loulé Dam (the largest in the Algarve) [Interviewee B].

Lastly, another participant said:

A greater involvement of Portuguese nautical companies is necessary. There are numerous Spanish charter companies based in Ayamonte that use the Guadiana. The majority of boats for tourist use that are in the Algarve are Spanish, but soon there is no cooperation between companies on both sides to offer a composite and more attractive product [Interviewee C].

Concerning cultural assets and resources, shared heritage during the Age of the Discoveries led by the Portuguese and Spanish in the 15th to the 17th centuries is also seen as a promising line for developing new tourism products.

Reaching new tourism markets

The Algarve region in Portugal is perceived as particularly successful in reducing traditional weaknesses brought by the high seasonality of the 3S tourism (sun, sand and sea). This destination's success in capturing high income segments through the year is identified as a stimulus for engaging in cross-border marketing efforts. More specifically, the senior segment is considered an appealing investment for the future of cross-border tourism (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019).

Joint promotion of cross border areas

About the joint promotion of cross border areas item, a participant said:

I wouldn't create much new... but I would propose expanding and consolidating events; events like the "Sabores e Saberes" (Flavors and Knowledge) fair and other gastronomic fairs that exist in Portugal could be complemented with

the current cultural offer in Castilla y León. Or, for a border area, there is an event that is organized every Friday the 13th, which could be complemented since in Galicia the world of witches and sorceresses is something very traditional as well [Interviewee G].

And another participant added:

It is essential to establish lines of cooperation between agents on both sides of the border in order to promote the creation of joint/ cross-border tourist packages (in the Chaves-Verin eurocity there were some interesting tourist packages, but these have not been maintained or developed) This establishment of synergies could identify new business opportunities [Interviewee F].

This line of action has been emphasized by most participants, that consider steady joint promotion as a win-win strategy for both sides of the border. In particular, strong tourism regions as those observed in the south of the Iberian Peninsula (Algarve and Andaluzia), joint promotion of the destination as part of the DMO promotion strategy will benefit businesses as well as visitors, able to enjoy the opportunity to visit two countries in a single travel.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

New opportunities for innovating tourism at the destination level emerge following the COVID -19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2022) Cross-border tourism is one such opportunity. Prior research shows the contribution of tourism as a driver of regional development (Makkonen & Williams, 2024; Saarinen, 2003), and border areas are expected to benefit from touristic activity, however, if there is transnational cooperation between regions (Bjeljac & Ćurčić, 2006; Cuadra et al., 2016; Hernández-Ramírez, 2017; Liberato et al., 2018; Livandovschi, 2017). Border areas are easily neglected when thinking of tourism development and more research is needed to claim these territories as spaces for creating innovative, sustainable, and competitive tourism in which accessibility structures and services, such as airports, catchment areas and intermodal accesses, play a major role (Poulaki et al., 2017). There is evidence across Europe of thriving tourism in many border areas that endorse the vision of sustainable development and stakeholder engagement with a focus on both tangible (natural and built) and intangible heritage (Bjeljac & Ćurčić, 2006; Guimierà et al, 2018; Silvana et al., 2018). In fact, tourism is found to act as catalyst for increased cross-border contact and interaction (Makkonen & Williams, 2024). Despite this, cross-border tourism is not as widespread as it could be. Moreover, research is still lacking in support of successful approaches to planning, managing, and marketing cross-border destinations. Up to the present, more substantial efforts must be made that address cross-border tourism in the case of Portugal and Spain, as countries that share for centuries a long border. However, there is awareness of the territories' potential for tourism development based on endogenous resources, able to encompass a single and distinctive selling proposition (Fortuna, 2013; Hernández-Ramírez, 2017; Liberato et al., 2018; Pardo et al., 2018; Schafranski, 2018).

Additionally, evidence also points to the intelligent specialization of resources that are shared by these border countries (Soeiro et al, 2016; Pardo et al, 2018). This factor performs as a competitive advantage of neighbor regions, as they combine to make travel "abroad" easier by exploring what is beyond the border. This facet of adjacent territories enhances the interest of proximity markets (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). In turn, for long-distance markets, border territories can present a unique opportunity of a memorable visit (Pardo et al., 2018). Currently, cross-border destinations seem to be attractive for two main target groups: proximity markets, as the neighbor countries are perceived as familiar territories (Dornier & Mauri, 2018; Jelincic et al., 2019) and long-distance markets, as they are perceived as one single destination (Pardo et al., 2018). Nevertheless, a cross-border destination needs to be planned and structured as a single proposition created around common goals and heritage values (Hardi et al., 2021; Kozak & Buhalis, 2019), and tourism experiences should be made available based on cross-border cooperation between tourism stakeholders of the regions, making mandatory the identification of opportunities, complementarities, and strengths of both parties.

The short-term future for tourism points to a preference for non-crowded, authentic, natural destinations, converging with mainstream beliefs towards border territories (Butler, 2002; Katsoni et al., 2016; López-Davalillo, 2016). Borders can become a distinctive touristic value for adjacent territories with social, cultural and environmental resources critical to the building of unique tourism destinations and experiences. In fact, they act as pull factors of travel for many reasons, such as prestige or the experience of entering a different political realm (Timothy, 2000), however they are also an attraction to those visitors that want to explore more than one country/one reality/one culture/one way of living in the same trip (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). This multiple meaning of borders should inform the planning and the management and marketing strategies and activities.

Cross-border tourism can also be a way of enlarging the portfolio of tourism entrepreneurs due to the new opportunities for introducing new experiences (products and/or services) based on a multinational/multicultural/multi-language approach, which will allow visitors to explore the similarities and the differences between regions whose identity was shaped by the border that divide and unite the communities. However, it demands from destination managers and public decision makers joint vision and development strategies (Guia et al., 2022), that not only ensure the coordination of territories and communities, but also the sustainability of resources' exploration by stakeholders of both sides of the border. Vision and strategy, though informed by market dynamics, require the adoption of an 'industrial-cluster logic' connecting different level administrations, actors, and networks,

without which barriers to collaboration persist (Guia et al., 2022). Additionally, the development of cross-border tourism initiatives and projects is a learning opportunity for both sides in dimensions recognized as less developed (Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022). For public administrations, cross-border tourism represents an especially relevant opportunity to jointly address the preservation of heritage values and traditions, which then can be further conveyed as a narrative of mixed cultures (Poulaki et al., 2022).

In this study, participants in focus groups and interviews have highlighted weaknesses and strengths concerning the development of Portugal-Spain cross-border tourism. Major strengths have been linked to similar territorial traits and cultural heritage identity. As to weaknesses, institutional, legal, and marketing were considered critical and in need of greater commitment from stakeholders. Institutional and legal concerns are perceived as sensitive to both sides, as well as urgent; and bureaucratic constraints were indicated as hindering innovation efforts and responsiveness to market needs. These findings are consistent with those observed in the study by Liberato et al. (2018). Such constraints have been noted in previous studies (Blasco et al., 2014), which acknowledge the institutional divides observed in cross-border tourism destinations adding to those already existing at the sectorial level. From prior research, recommendations to overcome these constraints include cooperation arrangements combining vertical and horizontal approaches (Morata & Noferini, 2014). Communication between public and private stakeholders needs improvement, especially among businesses and entrepreneurs, which still perform poorly in terms of cross-borders tourism companies. As claimed by participants in this study, cross-border businesses position as best drivers of innovation of tourism experiences and services at border destinations. Boosting innovation and competitiveness requires, from their perspective, creation of an extensive knowledge base of regional territories (based on data collection system, mapping resources, identifying massification level or seasonality patterns), actors (networking and information capability) and markets (segments and profiles), leading to infrastructure and facilities improvement, effective market strategies and targeting, and experiential propositions matching visitors' current needs for safety, sustainability, and memorability around nature (water sports, birdwatching) and heritage (monuments, traditions and gastronomy). These perceptions are in line with research that asserts the critical relation between knowledge and knowledge mobility with innovation and competitiveness (Makkonen & Williams, 2024). These stages in the development of cross-border destinations ultimately provide the basis for the creation of a single value proposition (Guia et al., 2022) for the cross-border destination to be promoted nationally and internationally. Table 3 presents the main strengths and weakness of Portugal and Spain.

Table 3: Major weaknesses and strengths in Portugal-Spain cross-border tourism

Strengths	Weaknesses
Territorial traits	Bureaucracy
Cultural heritage identity	Stakeholder communication
	Knowledge base (territories, actors, and markets)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

General awareness of potential to develop cross-border tourism in Portugal and Spain and consensus around the joint conception of feasible proposals to implement initiatives (Liberato et al., 2018) are two of the major contributions from this research. Further studies reaching a greater number of participants from both countries representing other actors of the public sector, the private sector, the local communities, and visitors would contribute to a more comprehensive vision of the desired future of tourism for these border areas. As the border which connects and separates Portugal and Spain is long, regional differences are expected to surface concerning public engagement, actors' entrepreneurship, resources, marketing strategies, and product development.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the conceptualization of cross-border tourism by delving into the complexities of defining and understanding the phenomenon of cross-border tourism. The examination of existing definitions and the open debate regarding tourists who stay predominantly on one side of the border adds nuance to the conceptualization of cross-border tourism, enriching academic discourse in the field. Also, it contributes to the body research of border regions as tourism spaces which exist and develop beyond administrative and political constraints. The research extends theoretical understanding by portraying border regions not only as historically contested areas but as distinctive tourism spaces with the potential for unique narratives and cultural amalgamation able to drive demand in search of destination uniqueness and authenticity. It emphasizes the twofold construction of space, incorporating physical/geographical elements and social characters, thus providing a comprehensive theoretical foundation for interpreting tourist experiences in cross-border areas.

Managerially, the study offers practical value by providing specific insights and recommendations for both public and private actors involved in the tourism sector in cross-border regions of Portugal and Spain. These recommendations, derived from empirical data and stakeholder perspectives, serve as actionable guidelines for policymakers, helping them shape and implement effective strategies for fostering cross-border collaboration in tourism development. Also, the research contributes practically by identifying priority strategic action lines for developing Portuguese-Spanish tourism across borders. This information is particularly valuable for practitioners, including destination management organizations, businesses, and local authorities. The study's emphasis on actionable strategies equips practitioners with a roadmap for addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities in cross-border tourism, thereby facilitating more informed decision-making.

Accordingly, additional research with a quantitative focus is still needed to uncover the regional specificities with the potential to accelerate tourism development in Portugal-Spain border areas. So, beside the fact that authors used two qualitative techniques, quantitative information is needed to substantiate the presented results. Two more limitations identified are the sample size and generalizability. The relatively small sample size of participants may not provide a comprehensive representation of the entire population or accurately reflect the diversity of cross-border collaboration in tourism development. Moreover, the findings and conclusions drawn from the research may have limited generalizability, as they are based on a specific set of overlooked destinations. The outcomes may not be applicable to other regions or destinations with different characteristics or development contexts, even if the analyzed context are country borders.

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