

"I came to look around, but I couldn't leave what I found": Residential tourists and lifestyle migrants in Central Portugal

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Keywords | Tourists, central portugal, inter-community connectedness, intra-community connectedness, development, lifestyle migration.

Objectives | The objectives of this research are to look at the characteristics, settlement patterns and socialisation strategies adopted by residential tourists and lifestyle migrants in two particular sub-regions of Central Portugal: Pinhal Interior Norte (Interior Woodlands North) and Médio Tejo (Medium Tagus). Through in-depth interviews, participant observation as well as through internet blogs and cyber forum debate analysis, the research looks at individuals and families that, upon the first contact with central Portugal were nothing more than traditional tourists but once they 'discovered' the Portuguese Interior, became residential tourists and lifestyle migrants, having invested and taken up residency in the Portuguese interior. The objectives of the research are three-fold: first, to observe the impact these individuals and families have upon local communities and landscapes; second, how they perceive their own integration and acceptance and formulate relations with local populations (inter-community connectedness); and thirdly, how they construct and maintain intra-community relation and support patterns, which include social, cultural and information network building at a transnational level.

Methodology | In order to analyse similarities, patterns and differences in the information collected, a process of data triangulation (multi-method data collection) was undertaken as a means to deepening and, in some cases, validating our understanding. Thus, in order to reach conclusions, the study relies on results gathered from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and internet blog, cyber forum debate analysis and through the monitoring of media forms.

Concerning the carrying out of interviews, one primary source has been utilised as an intermediary between the researcher and the interviewees: the socialisation network Portugal Friends. Lead by a husband and wife team, Portugal Friends organises social functions in locations throughout Central Portugal and, above all, in communities across the Pinhal Interior Norte and Médio Tejo sub-regions, namely: Tomar, Torres Novas, Ansião and Lousã. One primary form of interviewee recruitment was accomplished via contacts made at the social events organised by this informal network.

Interviews are guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Beyond face-to-face conversations, some interviewees further supplied information, thoughts and reflections via an online questionnaire, a technique chosen for in order to give the interviewees time to reflect on their answers. Also, in addition to this qualitative method, participant observation was a second utilised research technique. Beyond carrying out this action at the social gatherings organised by Portugal Friends, I also drew attention to research carried during the monthly car boot sale in the town of Miranda do Corvo which brings together large concentrations of expatriates residing in Central Portugal. This monthly event has been a privileged location to gather information, make contacts with interviewees and observe the individuals under study.

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Lastly, the screening of expatriate internet blogs, debates on cyber forums created for and maintained by the migrants, as well as the monitoring of expatriate media, has, on one hand, provided secondary views on specific issues; and on the other, in the case of specific expatriate bloggers, provided an avenue to follow certain migrant life paths and experiences. A number of key blogs and forums have thus been followed.

Main results and contributions | Concerning the residential tourist/lifestyle migrant that opts for Central Portugal as the preferred geographical location to achieve their dreams of a better lifestyle, we found a group of individuals who value rural comfort, living in an environment where solitude and tradition are particularly valued. For these migrants, 'the rural' offers them the possibility of self-transformation and personal renewal, not to mention the possibility of being close to an authentic side of Portugal via its historic, rural and traditional past. Thus, for many of these migrants, by presenting themselves as adhering to the moral principles of rural, traditional living, mainly through community involvement and social integration, they distinguish themselves from other lifestyle migrants in other settings in Portugal (namely Algarve) where beach-going and sun-worshipping are the primary variables pursued.

Furthermore, migration to rural spaces may bring the revitalised and dreamed self, however, for the inhabited area it may also bring the possibility of reviving traditional practices, culture, gastronomic traditions, among other, often leading to the (re)designing of activities often better fitted for securing the socio-economic revitalization of these rural areas. This may include a return to traditional arts and crafts, the conservation of nature and local economies (agricultural-based and other-wise), the recuperation of historical heritage, as well as the dissemination and practice of traditional activities such as festivities, folklore, gastronomy, among others. This can very well be said of Portugal's central interior where the incoming of foreigners interested in the regional offerings may contribute to the regeneration of these recently neglected rural areas.

Limitations | The research focuses on coined residential tourists or lifestyle migrants, centering on their lives and their perspectives. Given the limited scope of the research, it is limited in the sense that the observations of local populations are not taken into account, although it is worth noting the importance of such perspectives as well. Furthermore, even within the two defined groups (residential tourists and lifestyle migrants), we are in the midst of individuals with very distinct lifestyles and motivations for choosing Central Portugal that deserve further scrutiny. Lastly, due to the lack of statistical information, it is not possible to analyse certain variables such as economic impact according to nationality, in specific sub-regions in the interior, nor is it possible to calculate an exact number when it comes to these individuals, considering the fact that many live pendular lives between two or more locations.

Conclusions | The lifestyle-seeking migrants show their interest in willing to contribute to regional socio-cultural preservation, often contributing via their regional development endeavors as well as hobby activities, for example. Dealing with the local culture and its people becomes an obvious part of the daily lives of these expats in the new destination. Lifestyles, following the migration process, involve the (re)negotiation of the work-life balance and lifestyle alterations according to local habits. It is also through these strategies of reorientation that the residential tourists/lifestyle migrants seek greater good in life. Of course the support system one may require in a search is equally important, a system that may be pre-defined before mobility and found to be different in the post-migration. The inter- and intra-community connectedness (or lack thereof) is very much key to this support system as the residential tourist/lifestyle migrant will equally measure the extent to which his/her lifestyle is truly the one most sought-after according to the facilitations and personal desires to integrate and relate to others – the Portuguese and other residential tourists/lifestyle migrants.