

CULTURAL TOURISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PORTUGAL

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The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic represented a significant break with previous patterns of cultural consumption, effectively halting the growth of “mass cultural tourism” driven by cheap flights and collaborative economy accommodation. Surveys conducted by the ATLAS Cultural Tourism Group in Portugal were used to develop a detailed picture of cultural tourism consumption during the pandemic. In 2020 and early 2021 surveys were conducted at different locations in the country, generating over 500 responses. The research shows that COVID-19 had significant impacts on the profile and activities of cultural tourists in Portugal, with much more domestic tourism at most sites, and fewer visitors staying away from home. Levels of satisfaction and intention to return remained high, as did perceived authenticity. There was a significant drop in touring holidays, with visitors more likely to stay in a single location. Those tourists visiting cultural attractions during the pandemic had a positive experience, despite the challenging conditions. Levels of satisfaction increased compared with previous surveys in Portugal in 2004, but there were also fluctuations in levels of satisfaction during the pandemic period, correlated with levels of COVID-19 infections. Some indications of emerging alternative forms of cultural tourism include an increased proclivity for rural locations and inland areas, away from destinations usually associated with mass (cultural) tourism. The article concludes by considering a number of implications for the development of cultural tourism in Portugal and other destinations in the postpandemic era.

Key words: Cultural tourism; COVID-19; Cultural experiences; Tourist profiles; Authenticity

Introduction

Cultural tourism is a key element of the global tourism industry, estimated to account for almost 40% of international tourism arrivals (UNWTO, 2018). In

recent years, there has also been growing recognition of the synergies between culture, creativity, and tourism (OECD, 2009, 2014). The cultural and creative industries benefit from the growth of tourism through the new markets that this creates for culture,

and the tourism industry needs culture as a means of enriching and diversifying tourism experiences. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had disastrous consequences for the tourism, cultural, and creative sectors, which all rely heavily on travel and physical copresence for their operations. In addition to the extensive travel bans adopted at various stages of the pandemic, cultural and arts venues and events were subject to closures and restrictions in most countries. This created significant challenges for cultural tourism, which effectively disappeared completely at the height of the pandemic.

It is therefore interesting to consider in more detail how the pandemic impacted cultural tourism production and consumption. This article, therefore, addresses the following research questions: What is the profile of tourists visiting cultural sites and events in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic? How was the cultural tourism experience affected by the pandemic? How did the cultural tourism experience during the pandemic affect visit outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, recommendation, and intention to return)? In addressing these questions, we first develop a review of relevant literature, including the recent development of cultural tourism and analyses of cultural tourism profiles, paying particular attention to the cultural tourism market in Portugal. We also briefly review other studies related to cultural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Cultural tourism has been consistently identified as one of the most important segments of global tourism. According to the UNWTO (2017), cultural tourism is:

A type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions.

The wide range of activities that fall under this definition accounted for just under 40% of

international tourism trips in 2017, according to the UNWTO (2018). Cultural tourism has also been seen as a high spending form of tourism, making it particularly important in supporting both cultural and economic development (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2016). In the past, cultural tourism has been particularly focused on sites with important "high culture" resources, such as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and other designated cultural attractions. Therefore, cultural tourists also tended to be highly educated individuals with the cultural capital necessary to consume art and culture (Richards, 1996; Tighe, 1985). These tourists also tended to have higher incomes and were sought after by destinations eager to attract high-spending tourists (Smith & Richards, 2013).

In recent years, however, cultural tourism practices have expanded and diversified, with more emphasis on the consumption of intangible and "everyday" culture (Richards, 2021). The broadening of cultural objects of tourism coupled with increasing education levels and the democratization of culture has led to the growth of "mass cultural tourism," which has also been linked to issues of "overtourism" in some destinations (Frey & Briviba, 2021). In this sense, cultural tourism has passed from being a "good" form of tourism to being an increasingly problematic one (Richards, 2021). Calls for better management of cultural tourism and the spreading of tourism flows underline the need for better knowledge of cultural tourism demand, motivation, and behavior (Alvarez-Sousa, 2018).

In Portugal, cultural tourism has long been seen as an important market to develop, particularly to provide a counterweight to the historic development of beach tourism. Portugal has long struggled to attract culturally motivated visitors, who were more likely to head for the cultural hubs of Italy, France, and Spain. A pioneering study by C. Carvalho (1996) pointed out that the relative lack of iconic monuments in Portugal led to a policy of promoting popular culture, on "the assumption that this would help to strengthen national identity and the Portuguese character as well as extracting economic profits from foreign tourists" (p. 251). In addition, C. Carvalho noted that "ameliorating the problems of spatial and seasonal concentration of tourism is a major incentive to develop cultural tourism" (p. 253). Considerable investments were

made in the conservation of heritage resources following the accession of Portugal to the EU in 1986. This in turn provided the impetus for developing tourism training, including cultural tourism, and specific cultural tourism marketing campaigns. By the mid-1990s, therefore, cultural tourism was firmly established as a growing area of demand and an important policy tool (Fernandes & Silva, 2007).

The growth of tourism to Portugal in the 21st century has seen significant tourism flows develop to cities like Lisbon and Porto, producing an urban tourism boom linked to the development of new cultural attractions and the growth of events. Cultural tourism has also expanded in rural areas and small cities with the expansion of local accommodation and experiences linked to rural culture and gastronomy. The expansion of cultural tourism has also seen the growth of important niches, including religious tourism, gastronomic tourism, literary tourism, and creative tourism (R. Carvalho et al., 2016; Duxbury et al., 2019; Fernandes & Richards, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2008; Marques & Cunha, 2013).

Cultural tourism is particularly important in Portugal because it challenges the predominant coastal and metropolitan orientation of tourism and is capable of generating tourism streams to the interior (Guedes & Jiménez, 2015). Cultural tourism has also become a diversification strategy for destinations in the popular Algarve region, where culture provides an added dimension to beach tourism (Valle et al., 2011). The Algarve has also been at the forefront of the development of creative tourism in Portugal, where the town of Loulé has developed an extensive program of creative activities for tourists (Santos & Silva, 2016).

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, cultural tourism, along with other sectors of the tourism industry and the cultural sector as a whole, was shut down. Almost overnight, popular cultural tourism destinations went “from overtourism to no tourism” (Richards, 2020) as lockdowns and travel restrictions were introduced, and many businesses had to close. Hotels were not forced to close, although many services they offer—such as hairdressing, spa, swimming pools, and spaces for events—had to be suspended due to social distancing rules. Even so, the lack of tourist demand eventually forced the closure of hundreds of accommodation units. Museums, monuments,

gyms, sports venues, cinemas, and concert halls were closed, and all events, including religious ones, were suspended. This period of more severe restrictions on mobility and economic freedom lasted in Portugal until May 4, 2020. By May 18, restaurants, cafés, and pastry shops were able to serve customers again (with half the capacity and reduced hours) and museums, monuments, and art galleries reopened. Finally, cinemas, theaters, and concert halls were able to resume activity on June 1, albeit with reduced capacity and physical distancing. However, the fact that the doors reopened did not mean that tourist activity had returned: in the museums, in the first month after reopening, admissions were only 10% of those registered in the same period of 2019 (Martins, 2020).

Portugal initially did well in containing the spread of COVID-19 in the first part of 2020 and managed to stimulate domestic and international tourism in the summer of that year as restrictions eased. However, the shape of the tourism market shifted, as fewer international tourists were able to travel, and Portuguese tourists were mainly forced to holiday at home. In order to instill confidence in potential tourists, Portugal introduced the “Clean and Safe” program in April 2020, with staff training, hygiene certificates, and inspections. This covered accommodation and attractions, including “Museums, Palaces, Monuments and Archaeological Sites, and Performing venues” related to cultural tourism. Portugal was just one of the many destinations around the world trying to restart tourism in 2020 and 2021 (see Gómez, 2021, for Spanish examples). The tourism market recovered slightly in the summer of 2020 as restrictions eased, but restrictions were reintroduced in the autumn of 2020 as cases rose again. By mid-October the Government had declared a “state of calamity” due to a surge in new cases, and on January 15, 2021 a nationwide lockdown was reinstated. The opening up of public services and businesses began again on March 15. This provided a challenging environment for tourism enterprises, with the high unpredictability of infection rates and Government measures adding to the problems of the decline in tourist numbers.

National tourism statistics indicated that 6.5 million international tourists were visiting Portugal in 2020, a decrease of 73.7% compared to 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021). Overnight stays

fell by 60%, indicating an increase in the average length of stay by those able to travel. Domestic tourism also fell, with 13.6 million overnight stays, a drop of 35.4% compared to 2019. The length of domestic trips rose (4.7 nights, compared with 3.6 nights in 2019) and there was also a shift towards staying with friends and relatives in 2020. This may have been related to safety concerns, but it also reflects the fact that there was a 23.6% reduction in accommodation establishments open in 2020. Domestic demand eventually recovered well in 2020, with a reduction of only 1.55% in overnight stays from Portuguese residents in August 2020 compared to the same month of 2019, underlining the replacement of international trips by domestic tourism.

The shift to domestic tourism in Portugal was also reflected elsewhere thanks to COVID-19 restrictions. Research by Toerisme Vlaanderen in Belgium in 2020 indicated that the pandemic had stimulated more people to travel domestically, and also to be “tourists in their own city” (Richards, 2017, p. 8). Surveys of residents in Genk, for example (Toerisme Vlaanderen, 2021), found that almost 60% of residents agreed that they had started to discover their own region more during the lockdown. At the same time, almost half the residents indicated they missed having visitors in the region, underlining the swift transition from “overtourism” to “no tourism.”

Provisional figures show that there was some tourism recovery in Portugal in 2021 as vaccination rates increased and many travel restrictions were eased (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021). By October 2021, the domestic market had increased by 65.4%, compared with 2020, also showing an increase over the same period in 2019 (+28.2%).

Overnight stays by international tourists tripled when compared to October 2020 (+216.6%) but declined by 26.7% relative to October 2019. These figures indicate the growing importance of domestic tourism in the recovery.

The pandemic also saw important shifts in the geographical distribution of tourism. During the first 9 months of 2021, overnight stays in tourist establishments declined less in Alentejo (−36.1%), the Centre (−50.6%), and the North (−56.5%), while the main tourist regions—the Lisbon metropolitan area (−69.1%) and the Algarve (−60.8%) saw much bigger declines. This was attributed to the high dependence of Lisbon and the Algarve on tourists from abroad (77.5% of overnight stays in 2019 were by nonresidents), but also because of a shift to rural areas, particularly in the interior (Brito-Henriques et al., 2020).

The impact of the pandemic on cultural tourism attractions was reflected in museum admissions, Table 1 shows that there was a significant decline in visitor numbers at museums nationally in 2020, with a fall of 43% compared to 2012. Interestingly, the share of foreign visitation to museums remained relatively stable (32% of museum visits in 2021, 36% in 2020), and foreign museum visitors in the Algarve region actually increased slightly in 2020 compared with 2012.

However, as the pandemic proceeded, museum visitation continued to fall, with a decline of almost 69% across Portugal as a whole in the first half of 2021 (Diário de Notícias, 2021).

In Portugal as elsewhere, therefore, the “digital pivot,” or shift from physical to virtual experiences, has been important for many cultural attractions, particularly museums. Museums have already been using digital platforms to support cultural tourism

Table 1
Visits to Museums in Portugal, 2012 and 2020

	Total		Students		Foreigners	
	2012	2020	2012	2020	2012	2020
Portugal	10,066,934	5,735,532	1,540,966	430,113	3,211,124	2,037,544
Tras os montes	90,688	48,101	18,009	5,971	17,062	10,200
Algarve	230,340	159,743	16,137	6,741	104,573	112,823

Note. Source: Direção-Geral do Património Cultural (<https://www.patrimoniocultural.gov.pt/en/quem-somos/>).

for some time (Pascoal et al., 2020), but this took off at the start of the pandemic as cultural institutions tried to find ways to reach audiences trapped at home.

As the pandemic has unfolded, there has also been a flood of academic papers on the effects of COVID-19. As Filep et al. (2022) noted:

While the ultimate effects of the pandemic remain uncertain, a scholarly rush to collect new data has been observed. Earlier research predictions seem unlikely to materialise. Taken collectively, the reflections suggest that researchers should slow down and allow for collection of more research data over extended time periods to generate stronger theoretical contributions.

De Matos (2020) also noted that Portuguese tourists reacted to the pandemic by taking holidays in destinations with greater possibilities for social distancing. In rural areas of Northern Portugal, for example, the 2020 summer was “excellent,” according to hoteliers. There were also an increasing number of “staycations,” with people staying in their own homes, or second homes. This trend stimulated an increase in demand for second homes and contributed to a sharp rise in real estate demand (and prices) in Portugal. The growth of domestic tourism also helped to stimulate tourism to the interior of the country, which had been an unrealized aim of successive national tourism plans.

Our review shows the dynamic situation created by the pandemic in Portugal and the differential effects of COVID-19 measures on tourism and cultural institutions. To try and take account of this, the current article provides data on the development of cultural tourism over a substantial period of the pandemic, therefore contributing to the more considered approach suggested by Filep et al. (2022).

Background to the Research

The current study focuses on the development of cultural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal. This work forms part of the ongoing ATLAS Cultural Tourism Research Project (Richards, 2010; www.richardstourism.com/atlas-cultural-tourism-project). The ATLAS Cultural Tourism Research Project was launched in 1991, with the support of the European Commission. The

research focused originally on visitors to cultural attractions in the European Union, but the scope of the research gradually broadened into a global study of cultural tourism. Several waves of consumer research have been undertaken, yielding over 50,000 interviews and surveys on cultural tourism market trends and tourist behavior in different countries. Portugal has been one of the main countries supplying data for the project since 1991, thanks to the active participation of many Portuguese universities and tourism observatories in the project. Data were last collected on a national level in 2004, when a total of 21 sites were surveyed, yielding 2,235 visitor surveys (Fernandes & Silva, 2007).

An adapted version of the basic ATLAS Cultural Tourism Questionnaire (available from www.richardstourism.com/atlas-cultural-tourism-project) was developed for this study, which included questions related to the background of the respondents, details of their visit to the event or attraction, their experience, level of satisfaction, and intention to return. Respondents were also asked to make comments about their experience, which was also an opportunity to identify any specific issues that might be related to COVID-19 and related restrictions.

As part of the ongoing ATLAS research, plans had been made to collect data from a large number of sites in Portugal in 2020. With the onset of the pandemic, however, the research had to be drastically redesigned, and the absence of tourists in many areas meant that it was extremely challenging to collect data. As the survey was already in place when the pandemic started, the research did not specifically address COVID-19-related issues, but rather provides a study of cultural tourism activities during the pandemic.

One of the major adjustments made to the research in 2020 was to shift from face-to-face surveys to web-based surveys conducted via Qualtrics. Data collection took place during the period April 18, 2020 to May 12, 2021, on the basis of online surveys using links given to visitors at cultural attractions and links sent via social media to people who had traveled in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the majority of responses were collected online, reductions in the number of infections and easing of the lockdown in summer 2020 meant that face-to-face interviews could

also be conducted. This was particularly the case in the Algarve region, where at that time the level of infections remained relatively low. A total of 342 responses were collected online, and 165 responses through paper surveys completed by visitors at cultural attractions. Of the total responses collected, 76% came from respondents who had visited permanent attractions, and 24% from visitors to events. Not surprisingly, most visits to events were recorded in the summer of 2020, after the initial lockdown ended. The data were analyzed using SPSS 24 software.

Survey Findings

Respondent Profile

The overall profile of respondents (Table 2) shows a similar pattern to previous ATLAS surveys on cultural tourism in Portugal (Fernandes & Silva, 2007). The age profile of visitors was relatively young, with over 27% in the 20–29 age group. There were also slightly more female than male visitors. The sample had a high education level, with over 68% having at least either a bachelor’s or master’s education. The income levels of the respondents were around the average for Portugal [€18,600 (euros) per capita in 2020], which is considerably less than average for the OECD countries (OECD, 2021). This probably reflects the relatively young age of the sample.

The main locations visited by respondents corresponded closely to the areas in which research partners were active. Responses from the Algarve region in southern Portugal were mainly from the city of Faro, the capital of the region (37% of total responses). This was followed by Vila Real, in the inland Trás-os-Montes region in the north of the country (31%) and Viana do Castelo, a coastal city in the Minho region (6%). Other areas (24%) covered most other parts of the country, mainly visited by respondents sourced from social media.

In terms of the origin of respondents, just over 67% were from Portugal and almost 33% from abroad in 2020/2021. This indicates a dramatic shift compared with previous studies, with the proportions of domestic and international tourists being reversed compared with 2004. The increased level of domestic tourism was also reflected in

Table 2
Profile of Respondents

	<i>n (%)</i>
Age group	
15 or less	3 (0.8%)
16–19	21 (5.4%)
20–29	106 (27.1%)
30–39	54 (13.8%)
40–49	92 (23.5%)
50–59	81 (20.7%)
60 or more	34 (8.7%)
Gender	
Male	183 (48.3%)
Female	196 (51.7%)
Highest education level	
No formal education	11 (2.8%)
Primary	6 (1.5%)
Secondary	68 (17.5%)
Professional	38 (9.8%)
Bachelor	183 (47.2%)
Master/doctorate	82 (21.1%)
Occupational profile	
Professional	91 (29.3%)
Director/manager	60 (19.3%)
Technical profession	60 (19.3%)
Service professional	39 (12.5%)
Administrative	34 (10.9%)
Manual work/crafts	27 (8.7%)
Income group	
€5,000 or less	30 (10.0%)
€5,001–10,000	37 (12.3%)
€10,001–20,000	72 (24.0%)
€20,001–30,000	57 (19.0%)
€30,001–40,000	32 (10.7%)
€40,001–50,000	22 (7.3%)
€50,001–60,000	25 (8.3%)
Over €60,000	25 (8.3%)

an increase in the number of repeat visitors. In 2020/2021, 62% of respondents indicated they had been to the site they were visiting before, compared with 36% in 2004.

The origin countries of international tourists also indicated a change from previous years, with most visitors coming from France (which has a large Portuguese migrant population) and neighboring Spain. These two countries together accounted for over 60% of international tourists responding (compared with a 44% share of 2020 international arrivals to Portugal). Tourists from long-haul markets, such as the US and Brazil, were less common than in previous surveys.

As domestic tourists tend to spend less than international visitors, restrictions on international

travel also had a big impact on average expenditure. The total average spending per respondent in our sample was €617, with foreign visitors spending much more (€971) than their Portuguese counterparts (€444). This compared with an average total spend of €1,117 in 2004, or a fall in absolute terms of 45%, but a much larger fall in real terms, allowing for inflation. Figures on international tourism spending in Portugal for 2020 indicated a fall of more than 60%, while total spending fell by 53%, indicating the increased importance of domestic tourism spending. A significant finding was that respondents taking a cultural holiday spent significantly more (€705 per trip compared with €576 for other visitors). This indicates the importance of cultural tourism in stimulating the local economy, particularly in areas where tourist numbers are usually lower. We also found that first-time visitors spent more (€738 on average) than repeat visitors (€540), even though the latter were likely to spend longer in the destination. This also indicates the advantages of attracting new groups of cultural tourists to new areas.

Travel Motivations and Activities

When asked about their motivation for travel, just under 35% of respondents indicated they were traveling on holiday, a considerable decline compared

with the previous ATLAS survey in 2004 (72%). The level of specific cultural tourism trips (where respondents on holiday indicated this as their primary holiday type) also fell substantially, from 40% of respondents in 2004 to 19% in 2020/2021. This seems to reflect a major shift in the structure of the tourism market during the pandemic, with fewer international guests reducing the emphasis on the coast. The reduction in cultural holidays was compensated by an increase in health/sports holidays, rural tourism, and particularly “other” types of holidays (Fig. 1). The latter category included gastronomic trips and discovering new places. These trends reflect not just a shift towards rural and more “healthy” destinations during the pandemic, but also the growing fragmentation of the cultural tourism market as a whole into a series of niches (Richards, 2021). The proportion of touring holidays also declined significantly during the pandemic, falling from almost 21% in 2004 to under 5% in 2020/2021. Visitors were more likely to be staying in a single location rather than traveling around the country (which was in any case made difficult by travel restrictions), and there was also an increase in domestic tourists staying in their own homes, probably due to the closure of hotels and fear of infection.

The fall in the proportion of cultural holidays also reflected the significant decline in visits to

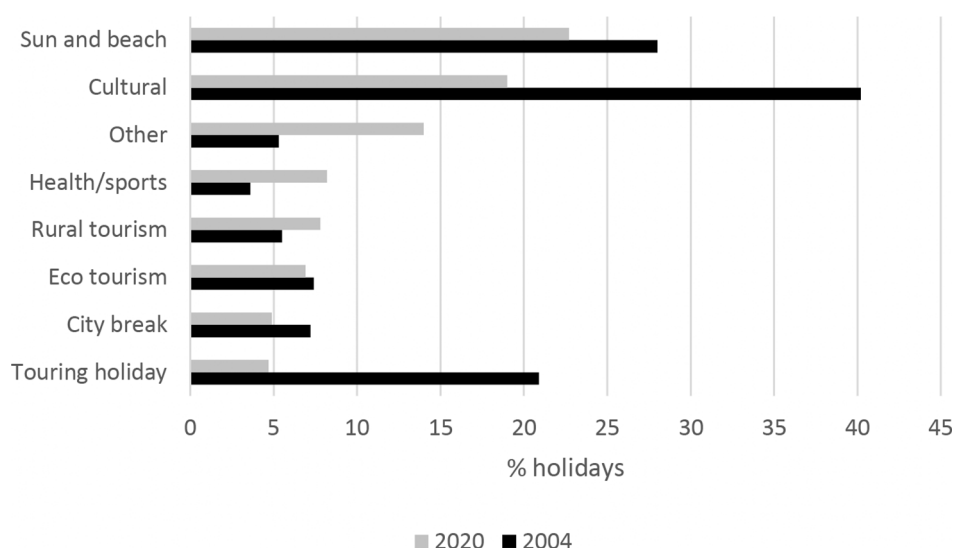


Figure 1. Holiday type 2004 and 2020/2021.

cultural attractions and particularly cultural events during the pandemic (Fig. 2). This fall was particularly notable for the most important cultural attraction categories and traditional festivals. Although cultural facilities were able to open over the summer of 2020, it is clear that those tourists who were able to travel did not visit cultural sites or events very often, as Martins (2020) also reported.

Although the cultural content of the holidays taken during the pandemic may have declined in terms of volume, there was actually a more positive response to the cultural experience questions in the survey when compared to the 2004 data (Fig. 3). This may reflect a long-term growth of the importance of experience to tourists over the intervening period (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). On the other hand, it may also be indicative of the cultural tourism product development undertaken in Portugal over this period.

One notable shift in the sources of information used by visitors during the pandemic was the growing importance of destination websites (Fig. 4). Many of these sites started to provide more specific information about visitor safety, levels of infections, and travel restrictions during the pandemic. Visitors probably found this timely information

more useful, and destination websites that are run by official organizations were also more likely to be seen as trustworthy. Interestingly, the traditional media, such as newspapers or TV were least frequently used, probably because of the relative lack of local information.

The Influence of the Pandemic on Visitor Experience and Outcomes

On average, levels of satisfaction for cultural tourists were higher in 2020/2021 (8.5 on a 10-point scale) than in 2004 (7.1). Although this result might at first seem counterintuitive, it does match results from other locations surveyed during the pandemic. For example, in Prague the average satisfaction level in the summer of 2020 was 8.3. In Albania, ATLAS surveys at cultural attractions in 2018 indicated an average satisfaction score of 8.23, but this rose to 8.70 for surveys completed during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. In Portugal, however, the longitudinal data collected during the course of the pandemic showed a marked decline in satisfaction among survey respondents. In July 2020, for example, the average satisfaction rating was almost 9.7, but by May 2021 this had fallen to

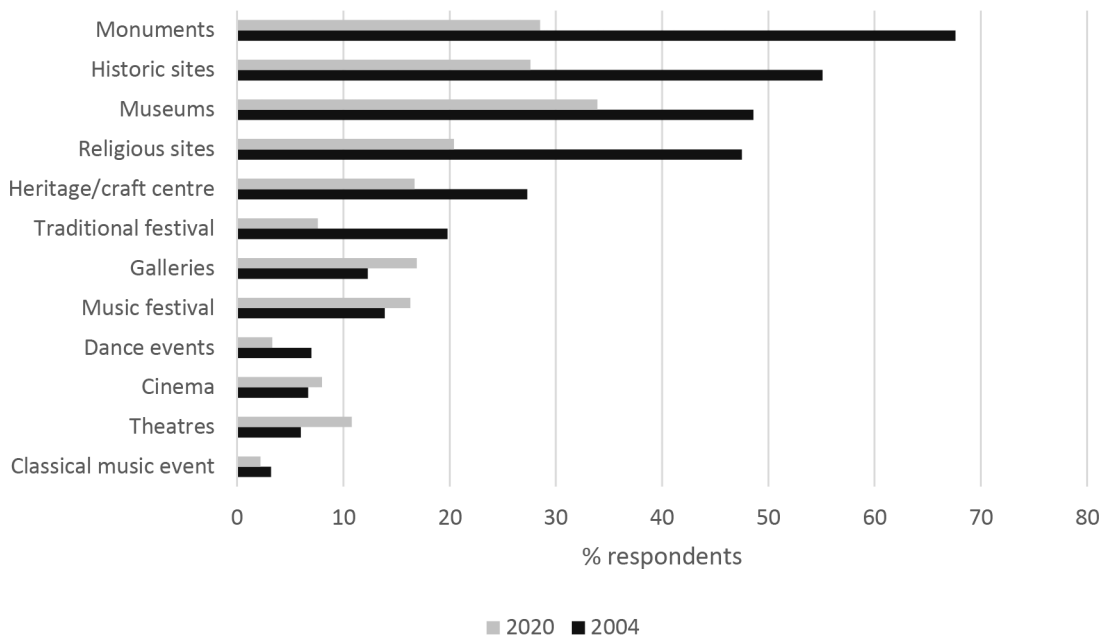


Figure 2. Types of attractions and events visited.

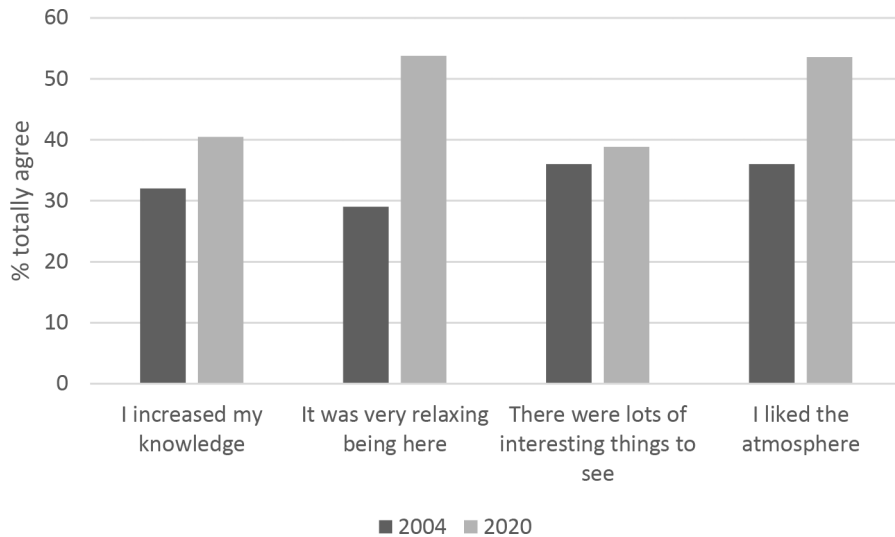


Figure 3. Cultural experience dimensions: 2004 versus 2020 (% totally agree).

7.9. The reduction in satisfaction was fairly steady over the early part of the pandemic, from July to November 2020, but greater variations were seen in February and March 2021. This variability probably relates mainly to the lower numbers of tourists surveyed during this period, but the overall downward trend continued to the end of the survey period in May 2021 (Fig. 5).

There was a negative correlation between levels of satisfaction ($r = -0.43$) and recommendation ($r = -0.28$) and the number of new cases of COVID-19 in Portugal over the study period. As COVID-19 cases rose, so satisfaction and intention to recommend fell. Perceived authenticity of the experience, however, was not related to the course of the pandemic ($r = 0.02$). This suggests

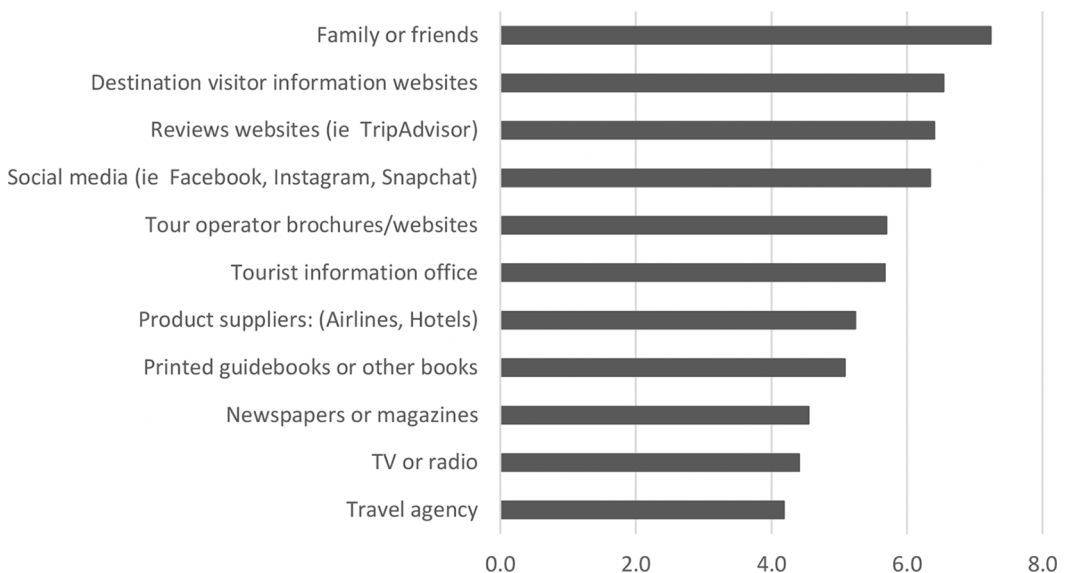


Figure 4. Information sources used to plan trip (importance on a scale of 1 to 10).

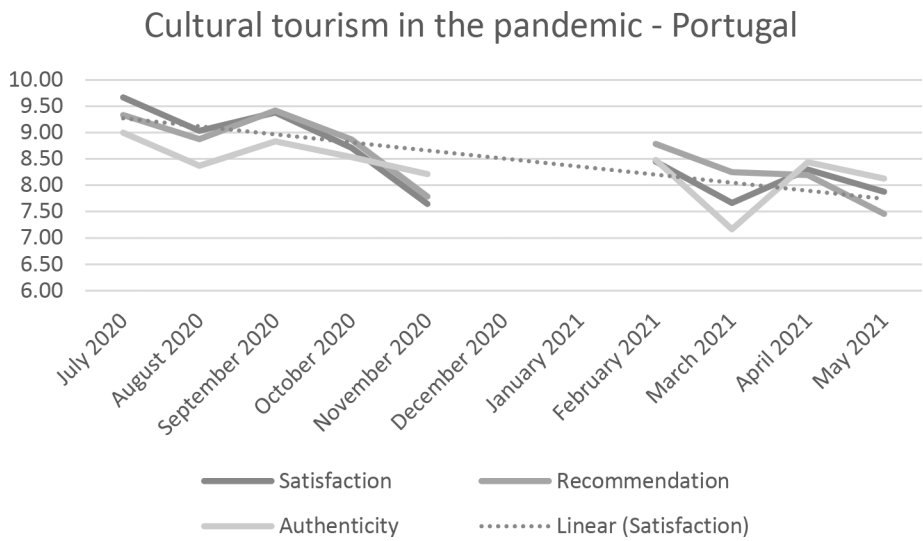


Figure 5. Trends in satisfaction, intention to recommend, and perceived authenticity during the pandemic.

that the development of the pandemic had an effect on traveler intentions, even though the actual cultural experience they had was generally satisfactory and largely perceived as being “authentic.” It seems that the general atmosphere of the pandemic was not conducive to enticing visitors to return or stimulating them to recommend the experience to others.

Analysis of Visitor Comments

Visitor comments proved useful for gathering additional insights into the visitor experience of the pandemic, particularly as the original questionnaire was not specifically designed to cover COVID-19. In response to the open questions asking visitors to comment on their visit, the words “Covid” and “pandemic” did not feature strongly in reactions. Measures taken to ameliorate the dangers posed by COVID-19 were more frequently mentioned, such as “cleanliness” and “hygiene.” Raised awareness of the dangers posed by large numbers of people and the need for social distancing also meant that there were a number of comments related to the level of crowding at the cultural site visited. The most frequent negative aspect of the experience that was noted by respondents related to issues such as “excessive numbers of visitors” and “crowds.” These comments were particularly prevalent in the

Summer and early autumn of 2020. This also corresponded to a period of increased tourism demand as infections were relatively low over the summer. The staging of events during this period probably also added to a perception of increased crowding.

There were also some comments that referred to the lack of visitors at cultural sites. The relative lack of visitors was also reflected in comments relating to “tranquility,” while there were very few comments relating to noise. While some visitors found this unusual situation to provide a more pleasant and less crowded experience, there were also some who saw dangers in the reduced number of visitors. As one remarked: “During the pandemic the diversity of the cultural offer is increasingly threatened and new solutions will need to be found—it is a very sad situation due to the pandemic.” One respondent also noted the lack of a digital tour of an attraction as a negative aspect of their visit, indicating that digital solutions are now in the minds of some visitors. At present, however, relatively few cultural tourism attractions in Portugal have developed digital tours, so this might be a priority for future development of the sector.

Discussion and Conclusions

The dramatic decreases in the number of tourists during the pandemic in Portugal were repeated

in many other destinations around the world. Our research also shows some of the more specific effects of the pandemic on cultural tourism and cultural attractions and events in 2020 and 2021. In particular, the collection of visitor surveys over a period of time indicates that the most dramatic effects were felt at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 when lockdowns forced the closure of cultural attractions and also caused the almost total cessation of tourism activities. As the initial COVID-19 measures were eased from May 2020 onwards, tourism as a whole and also cultural tourism, began to recover in Portugal. However, the rebound of tourism in the summer of 2020 was relatively short-lived, as restrictions were reimposed in autumn.

Our data indicate few changes in the basic profile of cultural tourists during the pandemic, and the majority of visitors conformed to the traditional picture of cultural tourists as relatively well-educated, wealthy individuals. This seems to indicate that in spite of the pandemic, cultural attractions in Portugal have not managed to expand beyond their traditional highly educated audiences. This may indicate that Portuguese cultural attractions and events did not succeed in connecting with new markets to replace the visitors who were missing during the pandemic.

There was, however, a marked shift in cultural tourism from international tourism to domestic tourism, and a move from the popular tourism areas of Lisbon and the Algarve to rural regions of the interior, such as relatively isolated Trás-os-Montes. As suggested by De Matos (2020), the pandemic has been able to modify (cultural) tourism flows in the country after decades of failed government policies. Another positive sign is that levels of satisfaction among cultural tourists in Portugal appear to have increased over the years, suggesting that decades of investment in cultural attractions may be paying off.

On the other hand, surveys conducted over many months of the pandemic seem to indicate steadily falling levels of visitor satisfaction between the early stages of the pandemic and the early months of 2021. This may point to challenges ahead as Portuguese cultural tourism seeks to recover from the pandemic. Lack of investment is likely to be a big problem as cultural budgets come under pressure in the postpandemic period and reduced international

tourism limits opportunities for income generation. There were few signs in our research that cultural attractions had been able to deal innovatively with the challenge of COVID-19.

In conclusion, our research indicates that the pandemic strongly impacted the experience of cultural tourists, and as the pandemic progressed, the levels of satisfaction declined. There was a negative relationship between numbers of COVID-19 infections and levels of satisfaction and intention to return. This may indicate that visitors were becoming increasingly tired of the “Covid experience,” accompanied by mask wearing and social distancing. There were clear indications that visitors were keen to avoid crowded locations, which before the pandemic may have been enjoyed for their “atmosphere.” In essence, however, the core of the cultural tourism product appears to have changed little during the pandemic, with the “authenticity” of the experience seemingly unaffected by growing numbers of infections. In particular, those on cultural holidays had a significantly higher level of intention to recommend and perceived authenticity than other tourists. This may be an indication of a relatively resilient market segment.

The limitations imposed on international tourism created a strong shift to domestic cultural tourism in 2020/2021. This reduced levels of cultural tourism spending, also limiting income for cultural attractions. Our data show attraction admission spending fell in monetary terms in 2020/2021, even though admissions represented a higher proportion of total spending. The limited numbers of tourists and the shift towards lower spending domestic tourists therefore severely limited the income available for cultural events and attractions from tourism. This financial blow also came at a time when cultural sites and events faced added costs due to the need for safety measures and social distancing.

At the same time, the shift in the geographical distribution of tourists towards the interior is a hopeful sign for the future. Portuguese tourists seem to have rediscovered their own country and reached places that do not usually feature high on the cultural tourism agenda. Portuguese respondents also had higher levels of satisfaction and perceived authenticity when visiting areas new to them, which suggests that this trend may continue in future. There were no significant differences in visit outcomes

(satisfaction or intention to recommend) by visit location, which indicates that new cultural tourism destinations can provide experiences that are just as engaging as the more established cultural sites.

This article has some limitations, which also stem from the challenge of conducting research during the pandemic. The number of sites surveyed and therefore the number of respondents was much lower than originally intended, and the results cannot be taken as representative of Portugal as a whole. The need to switch much of the data collection to digital channels also meant that the researchers had less control over the completion of the surveys. In particular, it is impossible to establish when the surveys were completed relative to the actual visit, which can create problems of recall bias. However, these preliminary results provide interesting indications for future research. For example, studying the relationship between visit outcomes and the (hopeful) decline of the pandemic should provide further interesting insights into the effect of COVID-19 on (cultural) tourism experiences. By adding specific questions relating to the effects of COVID-19 (such as social distancing and attitudes to crowding), future studies could also probe the reactions of different visitor groups to such measures as well as the effects of easing restrictions on visitor experience. In terms of the broader Portuguese tourism market, it will be important to see whether the changes in the distribution of tourism observed here is a structural phenomenon, or if the spread of cultural tourism to the interior will be relatively short-lived. Future research could also examine the specific issue of the relative resilience of cultural tourism, which will be of great concern to destinations in the years to come.

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