# The importance of tourism offices in promoting and building the image of a destination in rural areas: the case of Serra da Estrela

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**Abstract**

Tourism offices, whose mission of promoting and supporting tourism is becoming ever more demanding, are under pressure to readjust in order to integrate themselves into more and more qualified structures of promotion of information to which must be associated a place for experimenting, on an online digital dimension, wherein the information conveyed intersects with local products promoting experiences and tourism facilities and services are made available and the stay is enthralled.

We are witnessing a shift from "physical access" by "digital access" that threatens traditional structures of promotion, which implies that they are (re)functionalized, promoting a socializing contact with tourists, offering services that go beyond information and provide themselves with the means of developing the promotion of the destination.

**Keywords:** Tourist information; Tourism offices; Rural areas; Serra da Estrela; Portugal.

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## 1. Introduction

This study seeks to characterize the tourism offices of destination Serra da Estrela, as defined by the Observatory for Tourism of Serra da Estrela (OTSE) (Roque, Fernandes, Sardo, *et al.*, 2012), inquiring about their roles as promoters of tourism information spaces, especially in rural areas, and assess their skills toward the behaviors and requirements of tourism in the twenty-first century, notably with regard to adapting to new communication paradigms in tourism.

The access to tourist information has been undergoing significant changes, over the past two decades, due to the massive use of the Internet and, in particular, the underlying technologies of Web 2.0. These technologies foster a trend towards qualified demand that envisages achieving online data in composite formats, which facilitate obtaining different and complementary records about tourist destinations. According to Xiang & Gretzel (2010), Fu Tsang te al. (2010) and Jani *et al.* (2011), Internet is currently the most important and relevant source in the search for information by tourists. Tourists consequently try to access to information levels more and more diverse and sophisticated, allowing a prior knowledge of the destination and enable them to collect data allowing the design of their stay and products to be known. The Internet has reshaped how related information to tourism is distributed and how people plan their travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Tourism offices, whose mission of spreading information and support tourism is becoming ever more demanding, are under pressure to readjust in order to integrate themselves into more and more qualified structures of promotion of information to which, on an online digital dimension, a place for experimenting must be associated, wherein the information conveyed intersects with local products promoting experiences and tourism facilities and services are made available and the stay is enthralled. We are witnessing a shift from "physical access" by "digital access" that threatens traditional structures of promotion, which implies that they are (re)functionalized, promoting a socializing contact with tourists, offering services that go beyond information and provide themselves with the means of developing the promotion of the destination. The improvement of tourism offices can be considered very important, even essential, to the overall rural tourism experience and sustainable local community development.

## 2. Tourist information: considerations and trends

Competition between destinations is stronger than ever. If increasing tourist flows from the destination is always a main goal, nowadays, due to several factors, including the financial crisis that affects a considerable number of countries, mainly in Europe, the goal is also to maintain the existing tourist flows (Roque, Fernandes & Raposo, 2012). This fact is even more

relevant when talking about rural and underprivileged areas, such as some Portuguese rural regions. In this sense, one of the requirements and at the same time, one of the most important tasks for the competitiveness of destinations, in order to maintain or even increase the influx of tourists, is to achieve high levels of cooperation and coordination among different stakeholders, which is sometimes difficult due to overlapping and conflicting interests of these (Wang, 2008). However, tourists are not concerned with these issues, but seek more flexible ways to organize their travel and are increasingly more demanding in relation to information provided by destinations (Chen & Sheldon, 1997).

Some authors have shown that the Internet is currently the most important and relevant information source on demand by tourists (Fu Tsang *et al.*, 2010; Jani *et al.*, 2011). The use of social media websites and search engines becomes the major trends to find tourist information on the web (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The social media websites, representing various forms of User Generated Content (UGC), such as blogs, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging and file sharing websites like YouTube[24] and Flickr[25] have gained great popularity due to its use by online tourists (Gretzel, 2006; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). Many of these social media websites allow consumers to post and share their comments, opinions and personal experiences related to travel that will provide information to others (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This supports the theory of Friedman (2007) that "the world is flat" where consumers are gaining more power in determining the production and distribution of information due to the increasing ease of Internet access.

The information is needed to select the destination to visit and to make decisions about their own destiny such as (i) housing, (ii) transportation, (iii) places to visit, among others (Perdue, 1985). During the journey phase, tourists are under pressure to make decisions, because time is short and is consequently very valuable (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004).

The tourist information has been the target of several categorizations. One possible categorization is used by Sheldon (1997, cited by Milheiro (2006)), which characterizes it in three different types: (i) Nature (static or dynamic), (ii) Time horizon (before and during the trip) and (iii) promoting entity (public or private).

Another categorization for the information generated by and for tourism is the one defined by Nascimento & Silva (2008) that categorizes the information into three basic types: (i) information for business management (subsidizes the development of companies' activities related to tourism), (ii) information to promote tourism and (iii) information for tourists (satisfies the information needs of tourists during their stay in the destination) (Gohr *et al.*, 2009).

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[24] http://www.youtube.com/
[25] http://www.flickr.com/

Both classifications of information have common points and so the aim of this study will be based on a combination of both approaches. In the categorization of Nascimento & Silva (2008), the analysis will focus primarily on the latter category, including the information that tourists need during the course of the trip wherein we will integrate the categories defined by Sheldon (1997, cited by Milheiro (2006)), both static and dynamic and the promoting entity, basically public bodies.

## 3.  The importance of information in the context of rural tourism experience and the role of the tourism offices

Information is one of the most important aspects in the promotion of tourism destinations and products, so that it justifies a particular attention by tour operators, through diverse and increasingly sophisticated ways and media, and promotes tourism and creates favorable conditions to reach potential actors. Note that tourist information takes on, in addition to a role in the promotion of tourist destinations, a major influence in the creation of their image (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005), implying that it stands out as a critical factor in qualifying the destination in the way it is promoted and the ability to generate attractiveness.

This is relevant when we are talking about the promotion of tourism destinations in *lato sensu*, however it is rather crucial whenever we think about the promotion of rural tourism destinations.

In this perspective, the increasing incorporation and promotion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) foster a tourist promotion increasingly using more digital media, generating composite information, to help achieve different and complementary records, stimulating their demand and deeper knowledge of the destination. The tourist demands access to levels of information increasingly diverse, allowing a prior knowledge of the destination or enable them to collect data that will enable to establish/draw their stay, activities to be developed and products to be seen.

The tourism industry generates a large amount of information that has strategic value and importance in business tourism. Therefore, the information should be treated as an element of strategy and organizational planning. So that this tourism system can operate, it is increasingly required synergies with the various institutions – public and private – that incorporate and promote information and communication flows, which will satisfy the interests of tourists, within the tourism system.

It appears that tourists tend to request more information, through channels more varied and perceived as more valid (Middleton & Clarke, 2001). As a result, tourism information stand out as a marketing tool that can branch in competitive advantage of a destination (Kiriakou, 2006) and at the same time, create basic conditions suitable for the local authorities plan tourism development and disseminate strategic information to various actors in the tourism system:

hotels, restaurants, leisure, recreation and others. The quality of tourist information and the ability to use the appropriate means promote benefits to businesses in the area and commercial activity, the extension of tourist expenditure, but also a way to promote local and regional development, promoting the attractiveness and consequent expansion of services that can support it (Kiriakou, 2006), with all the implications for the economic and social structure, recognized in tourism. It should be noted that this information must benefit and serve the residents and, simultaneously, provide the basis of knowledge for visitors, who can access to the use of resources and services, to take advantage of tourism products.

Tourism offices, whose mission of disseminating information and supporting tourism, are proving increasingly more demanding, lying on the pressure of their readjustment in order to integrate themselves into structures of information dissemination,  more and more qualified, to which, in terms of promotion through documents (physical and digital), a place of experience should be assigned, wherein the conveyed information comes across products of the region, tourism means and services, which are made available there, captivating permanence.

Tourism offices, in rural areas and particularly in mountain areas, are even more obliged to offer reliable information in order to provide reassurance and qualify the tourist product. These spaces, due to the lower dynamic of tourism promotion that has been observed, compared to urban and coastal spaces, contribute to of tourism offices a greater accountability in the promotion of tourism, their respective operators and different products. According to Fernandes (2012) the promotion of tourism in mountain regions, implies the increased commitment and supportive effort from public and private entities in a constructive process of expansion and upgrade of information on the sector.

Thus, it is considered that the main purpose of these offices is to give the best possible information and be accessible to all, which will facilitate the visit of the tourist destination. As stated by Middleton (2002) tourism is a fully market-based provision of information, which leads tourism offices to influence the formation of tourism product and as such, the stay and return of tourists, as well as the conception that is developed about it - the image of the destination.

It should be noted that the tourism offices are mainly of the responsibility of the public sector and fit into the tourist system as part of the infrastructure that  a destination needs to meet tourists and be able to disseminate local potential (Beni, 2003). It has the responsibility about the information that support tourists and whose main functions are: to promote the destination, to provide tourism promotional material, to promote services, to promote reservations, to arrange tours and itineraries, to promote products, to gather information about the demand, archive material, to structure information for decision support, organize statistics. Thus, these functions of data collection and statistical systematizations can develop critical information and

decision support and policy and tourist investments formulation, according to the tourist profile identified with the trends in demand and with the expressed interests.

For efficient performance of the tourism offices, in their functions, there is a need to incorporate a set of employees who perceive the current characteristics of tourism and promote qualifying and rigorous procedures of working with visitors and responsible people for the planning and tourism development, based on performance criteria and methodologies that enhance                and                promote                the                destination                (
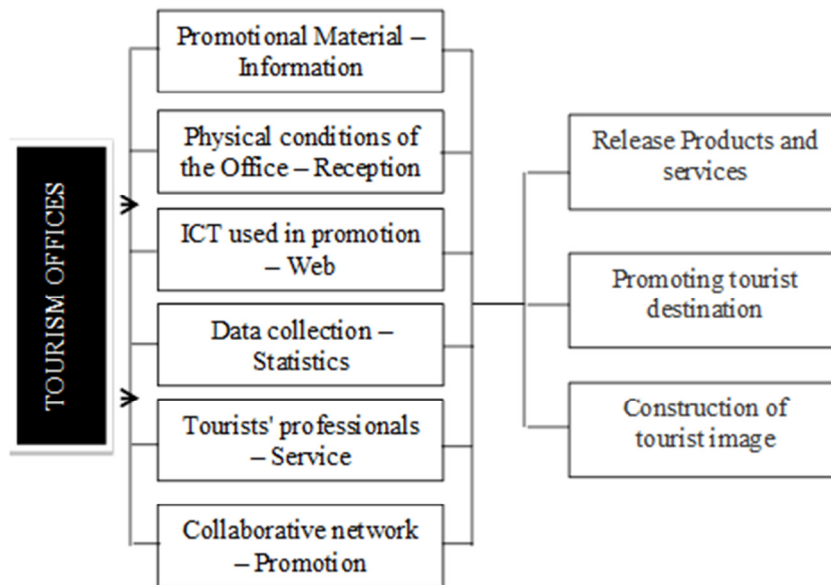


Figure 1). In addition to human resources, other aspects like physical structure, office signaling, the type of information provided, the channels used to disseminate, the experiences available and the technologies used become determining factors.
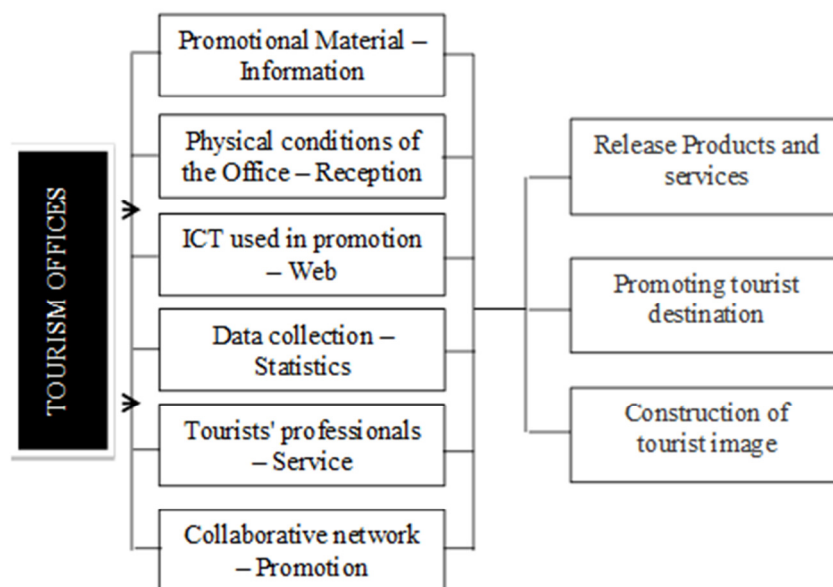


Figure 1. Functional structure of the tourism offices

Source: authors

According to Alén González *et al.* (2009), the existence of qualified professionals is a critical aspect for visitors to have a satisfactory experience within the tourism offices, and so the provision of promotion materials, products, or other items of information, are not enough without human intervention. This consideration has particular implications for the office that have few human resources or which are basically self-managed, a problem that usually arises in rural areas.

The authors highlight the importance of access to information. If the information is not accessible, visitors will not only considerably limit the time they spend in the region, as well as not visit and convey a less qualifying image of the target and its offer. It is noted that the information gathered in tourism offices can influence both the current and future travel options for those who collected them or their social circle. Thus, a publication/document/guide obtained at a tourism office during a trip can be used as a primary source of information to schedule upcoming trips, or even to be used by others when its quality is recognized and the experience obtained was rewarding (Figure 2).
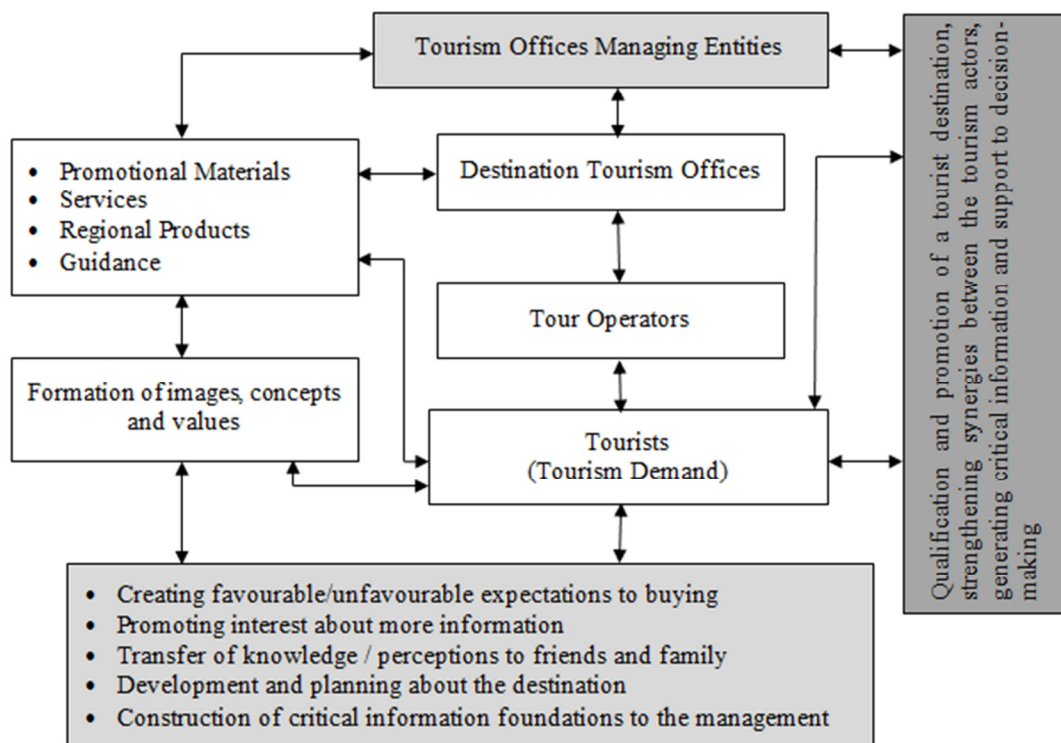


Figure 2. Role of the tourism offices in destination qualification

Source: authors

It also appears that, at the tourism destination level, the use of tourism offices positively affects the duration of the journey, as well as influences future travels.

According to (Buhalis, 2000) the most important criterion is to choose the destination by their image. The image is the set of expectations and perceptions that the potential visitor has on the destination.

The image of the destination and its ability to promote attractiveness, according to Kastenholz (2002), is formed via the acquisition and processing of information with the purpose of, eventually, give priority to an image or change its contents. Image formation is close to the process of perception, and so the quality of information, understood as technical accuracy, visual quality and detail of the explanations are crucial. According to Alén González *et al.* (2009), it is important that the visitor can leave the tourism office with written information, plentiful, well presented and illustrated, with great detail and features and quality on cultural, sportive and recreational activities offer and on areas and spaces of interest, or gastronomic as well as maps and referencing elements of places/services, to enable an easy location and indication of the ways to access them.

The mountain is linked, from the beginning, to the tourism phenomenon, due to its size as a place for recreation and leisure and its natural expression. The presence of a strong ecological component, the different possibilities of occupation throughout the year, the development of sports, the richness of its cultural heritage, the integrity of its forest and water resources and expansion of hotels, sports and recreation equipment's offer have increased its vocation, assuming increasingly as a great alternative to coastal tourism, with special meaning in the winter period (Perlis, 2002).

Serra da Estrela is the most prominent central Lusitanian ridge and the highest and most emblematic mountain of the mainland. With 1993 meters at its highest point and unique per glacial features in the country, it has a unique geomorphological structure, composed by a set of elements whose size, shape and geology establish bioclimatic levels with different types and intensity of occupation. The strong climatic constraints originate a seasonal occupation of traditional activities, but they allow the development of various sports and winter activities associated with the topography and presence of snow. These conditions, related to forests, water resources, rural areas and cultural heritage, lead to a major regional tourist destination position in terms of interior territory currently.

For its territorial delimitation, as a center of interest of the OTSE, it was considered, in addition to the altimeter, the differences of the geographic scope in geomorphological terms, forms of land use, population, population density and productive system, in order to create separations or identities that allow its consistent individualization in relation to neighboring territories, keeping the county as a unit of spatial cohesion.

In practice this definition of the territory of Serra da Estrela, and action territory for the OTSE, was structured based on three factors: the integration of all the counties that are a part of the Natural Park of Serra da Estrela, the inclusion of three municipalities of the NUTS[26] III of Serra da Estrela, the municipalities whose altitude and ways of life establish a relationship of identity with mountainous areas, and, in this case, with Serra da Estrela (
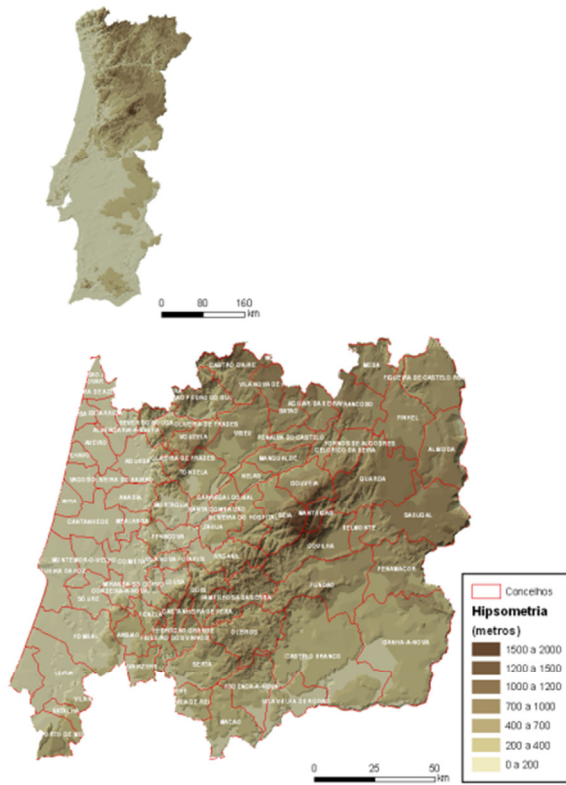


Figure 3). It should be clear that any definition always causes some doubts, which necessarily had to be considered due to the mountain territorial specificity, which, for this matter, considers the geomorphology and proximity to the central massif, the biophysical conditions and ways of life as integrating factors of these municipalities in this approach.

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[26] Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics or NUTS is the nomenclature that defines a sub-regional statistics which divides the territory.
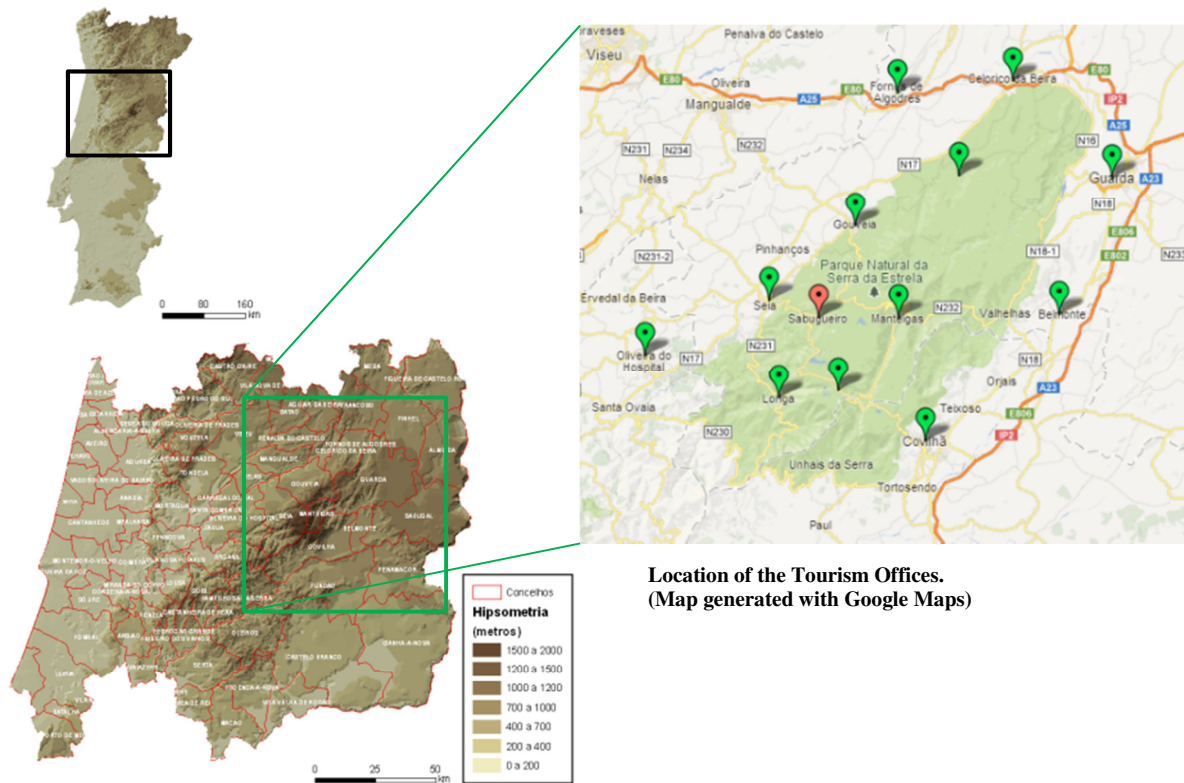
**Location of the Tourism Offices.**
**(Map generated with Google Maps)**

Figure 3. Territory of Serra da Estrela
Source: authors

Thus, the counties of Belmonte, Celorico da Beira, Covilhã, Fornos de Algodres, Gouveia, Guarda, Manteigas, Oliveira do Hospital and Seia have been established as the territory of Serra da Estrela.

## 4. Tourism offices in Serra da Estrela: exploratory analysis

We wanted to obtain information about the tourism offices in the mountain and rural area of the Serra da Estrela, to get a better understanding of how and if they are covering the various factors and conditions related to the mission of promotion of information and support to tourism, currently with such comprehensive and demanding roles and responsibilities as it was previously stated. In order to start to develop an initial characterization of the twelve existing tourism offices within the territory of OTSE, we devised a questionnaire to get information about the location, facilities, contacts, opening hours, human resources, data collecting, own activities program, regional products sale, promotion material and on-line presence.

The survey was conducted in person by the team members from OTSE, in the period between January 28 and February 8, 2013. In all of the twelve tourism offices, comprising the

nine municipalities covered by the study, the questionnaire was responded in full by each tourism office responsible or by someone in whom they delegate.

Through this inquiry process for obtaining data, we sought to understand the conditions of each tourism office, and inquire about the ways and means that are being developed, in terms of the performance of their duties. Thus, we sought to detect the main characteristics of operation, services and skills as well as the weaknesses or shortcomings highlighted in the structure and ways to communicate and promote Serra da Estrela especially as mountainous and rural destination, so that it can contribute to possible ways of implementing improvements.

As a result, we will show the main outcomes of the exploratory analysis of the data obtained via the questionnaire.

Therefore, all the tourism offices are a part of public sector entities, including municipalities (counting councils or municipal companies) and regional tourism, entities such as the Tourism Center Entity and the Serra da Estrela Tourism (
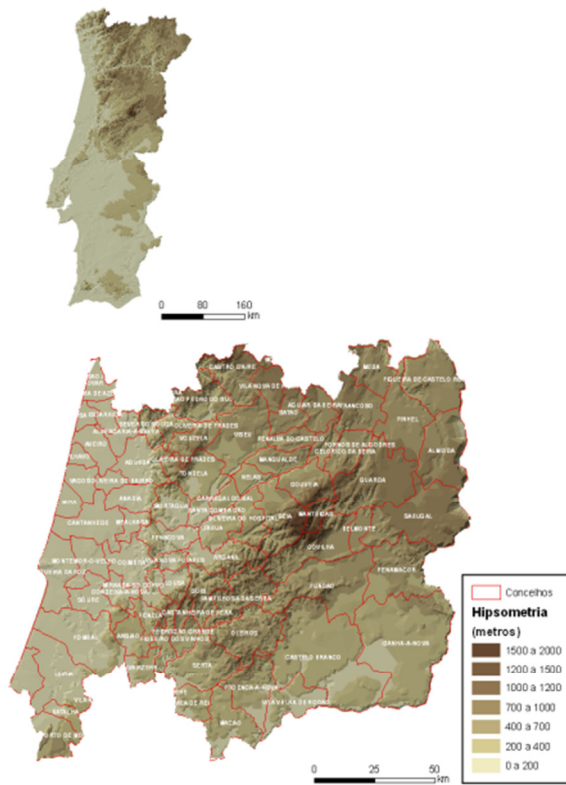
Table 2,



Figure 3).

Table 2. Identification of the tourism offices

| Tourism Office | Promoting Entity | Municipality |
|---|---|---|
| Guarda | Câmara Municipal da Guarda | Guarda |
| Manteigas | Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela | Manteigas |
| Celorico da Beira | Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela | Celorico da Beira |
| Linhares da Beira | Câmara Municipal de Celorico da Beira | Celorico da Beira |
| Gouveia | Empresa Municipal - Desporto, Lazer e Cultura de Gouveia (DLCG) | Gouveia |
| Oliveira do Hospital | Turismo do Centro de Portugal (em parceria com Câmara Municipal de Oliveira do Hospital) | Oliveira do Hospital |
| Fornos de Algodres | Câmara Municipal de Fornos de Algodres | Fornos de Algodres |
| Covilhã | Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela | Covilhã |
| Belmonte | Empresa Municipal de Promoção e Desenvolvimento Social do Concelho de Belmonte (EMPDS) | Belmonte |
| Loriga | Junta de Freguesia de Loriga | Seia |
| Seia | Câmara Municipal de Seia | Seia |
| Torre | Entidade Turismo Serra da Estrela | Seia |
| Sabugueiro (closed) | Câmara Municipal de Seia | Seia |

Source: authors

The buildings where tourism offices are located, are mostly (83%) independent or non-integrated, they are autonomous physical structures without sharing functions with other entities or spaces, It is also noteworthy that only four (33%) of tourism offices have accessibility conditions for people with disabilities. In addition, eight (67%) of tourism offices have parking places, 11 (92%) have identification in the building. Regarding the indication signs and orientation to the tourism office, it is reported by seven (55%) of its existence in its surroundings.

The majority (55%) of tourism offices presents opening hours which, though they are not homogeneous, cover every day of the week, including weekends and some holidays.

In terms of human resources, it was found that 75% of those responsible for tourism offices are also working in the reception.

At the level of knowledge and mastery of foreign languages, we can see that 59% of employees have good or average knowledge in English, 45% in French, 36% in Spanish and only one (5%) in German. Moreover, none of the employees has knowledge of Italian or other foreign language beyond those mentioned.

Another of the key issues in this analysis - data collection - it was found that in 11 (92%) of tourism offices, there is a collection of data about their visitors and 10 (91%) do so in a systematic way. However, the collection is centered essentially at the level of the visitors' origin in eight (80%) of cases, and in two (20%), in one (10%) of the offices information about gender and the age is collected, respectively, and in only three of these offices there is a collection of more than one variable (one of them gender and age, and in the other gender and origin, and

another origin and other). It was also noted that eight (73%) of the offices don't make a public disclosure of the data collected.

A program of activities and promotion of its space was just indicated by four (36%) of the 11 tourism offices that responded, and only three (25%) of the 12 offices are not showing any sales of handicrafts, food products or other.

In tourism offices, rurality is often promoted through handicrafts, local products and some traditions, knowledge and flavors. Consequently, in 83% of the tourism offices, handmade products are regularly sold. In 58% of cases, food products from the region are for sale, many of them typical rural products. In terms of other products for sale, it only occurs in 42% of the twelve tourism offices, especially merchandising, books, CD and DVD. With regard to promotional and informative material available in the 12 tourism offices studied, it appears that they distribute in its entirety or in a very high percentage, maps, flyers, brochures, travel guides and publications in English but also in other foreign languages, with the exception of publications, which appear only in 33% of cases, as can be seen in **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**. These promotional materials appear mostly on paper, but digital versions already begin to have some relevance, highlighting that digital roadmaps are already available in 50% of tourism offices analyzed.

Table 3. Promotional material

| Promotional Material | Portuguese | Foreign language | Paper | Digital |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Flyers* | 100% | 75% | 92% | 33% |
| *Brochures* | 100% | 83% | 92% | 42% |
| *Publications* | 75% | 33% | 75% | 8% |
| *Travel guides* | 92% | 75% | 83% | 50% |
| | | | | |
| *Maps* | 100% | | | |

Source: authors

In terms of ICT, its demonstrated use is still scarce, since only five (42%) indicated that they have a website. However, with the exception of a tourism office, all are associated to a website, although this is not exclusive to the tourism office.

Regarding its presence in social networks, only Facebook[27] and Twitter[28] are mentioned for five (42%) and in only two (17%) tourism offices, and in seven (58%) of the tourism offices indicated, no social network is presented.

With the set of data and information collected and transmitted here, we think to have managed having an overview of tourism offices of OTSE territory and making an exploratory survey that will raise questions, propose actions and clues to future research.

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[27] www.facebook.com
[28] www.twitter.com

## 5. Conclusions

This study has allowed us to make a preliminary global analysis on the tourism offices in the region and, in an exploratory research, to evaluate the operating conditions and performance at a system-level of tourism information and sustainable development. From the results, it appears that in the efforts on the part of tourism public entities and local government in providing a tourist information service, though essentially static in nature and focused on the time horizon corresponding to the trip, forgetting the dynamic nature of information and the time horizon before the trip, there is little involvement of the private sector as well as the concentration of information for tourists. There is, given the results obtained, a way of achieving a better and more qualified information promotion and tourism support, at the destination Serra da Estrela.

In trying to help improving this stride for development, and based on data collected and analyzed, we consider suitable to make some considerations and suggestions. Firstly, and within the action of these tourism offices, we believe it is important to promote the improvement of accessibility for people with physical disabilities, as well as emphasize the need for increased number of signs indicating some of the tourism offices. There is also the need for further extending opening hours, including weekends and holidays. In terms of human resources, which is a key element to the success of the mission and role of tourism offices, the ability and interest in improving the level of education and training of staff, both in general education and in specific terms (languages, statistics, computing ...) should be enhanced, there relying a key role in the partnership with Schools of Tourism and Hospitality Management. We also believe that tourism offices can play a connecting role between the tourists and what is more authentic in the rural areas, promoting culture, traditions, handicraft and local flavors more and better, and enabling the enrichment of the tourist experience. This could be achieved through the implementation of tourism offices own programs of activities and promotion of its space with, for instance, ethnographic exhibitions of rural objects, of photos and/or paintings about traditions or the surrounding landscapes, the presence of local artisans doing they own work live, and also traditional music and/or dance shows. Another way of tourism offices to be engaged with the enhancing of promotion of the rural destinations is by providing in the offices and in the internet quality material about the history, the costumes and traditions and the main cultural potentialities that could capture the tourist attention and desire of know more and stay more time, and even to come another time.

With regard to possible collaborative actions of OTSE with tourism offices, it is pertinent the development and implementation of a standard methodology for the collection and dissemination of statistical data that is meaningful, reliable and useful, enabling to improve information for business management and policy makers, based on the trustworthiness and credibility of the Observatory. Moreover, in the future we intend to implement a qualitative

analysis at the type of promotional material available at the offices and at the programs of activities implemented by some of them. Based in a closer analysis of the presented data and in the referred qualitative study that we want to apply, we will propose to the tourism offices improvements which affect the image of the destination as a rural area, the quality of information and the efficiency of the promotional support.

Finally, we also strongly advocate that it is essential to establish collaborative networks with various local tourism interlocutors (hotel businesses, leisure companies, caterers, town halls, cultural institutions, among others) with training and research institutions, enhancing information flows that enable to qualify the destination and take strategic direction for their sustainability.

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