

What is the role of gastronomy for UNESCO World Heritage Sites' tourists? The case of Évora, Alentejo

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Purpose – UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) have a unique identity and a distinctive brand, acting as icons to attract visitors seeking to learn about and experience cultural (ancient/traditional) heritage. Gastronomy, as cultural heritage and a tourism resource, reinforces the cultural and social identity of a destination.

The small city of Évora, classified by UNESCO since 1986 as a WHS, is integrated in a predominantly rural region of Portugal (Alentejo) and presents very distinctive particularities not only regarding built heritage, but also intangible heritage, with strong rural links, such as the gastronomic resources. In this context, the present article aims to identify the importance that visitors give to gastronomy for visiting the city of Évora, a UNESCO WHS, and to identify differences in terms of profile and travel behaviour of the gastronomic visitors.

Design/Methodology/Approach - A questionnaire was applied to the visitors of the historic city centre of Évora, using a direct, personal administration approach, during April-August of 2017, when there is the greatest number of guests in hotel establishments in Évora (INE, 2019). A multi-step cluster-sampling approach was undertaken and the questionnaire was administered during the week and at the weekend, near to the most visited monuments of the city. A total of 465 valid questionnaires were obtained, both from daily visitors (46%) and tourists (54%), as well as Portuguese (37%) and foreign (63%) visitors.

Findings - Results show that for all visitors, gastronomy was the main pull factor motivating the visit to Évora, with the “UNESCO WHS brand” appearing as the fifth most important pull factor. The results raise the discussion on the implicit destination attributes and the declared motivational factors that evidence more variability (Nicolau & Más, 2006).

The visitors who were most motivated by gastronomy (the majority of the Évora’s visitors), were slightly older, in repeated visit, had higher levels of satisfaction with the destination and spent almost 3 times more on meals than the others. They were also those whose push motives were more related with interpersonal needs, like socialization (with the travel group or at the destination) and status/prestige.

Research limitations/implications – It would be interesting for future research, to study in-depth the tourists with stronger gastronomic motivation at this kind of destinations, to address the central issues that shape their positive experiences. For a more complete picture, it seems important to develop studies that may reveal and evaluate the existing supply at the destination and its level of adequacy to this market segment.

Results also seem to indicate that, in a WHS, gastronomy can be a complementary tool to deepen socialization at the destination, but also for visitors to experience the destination's heritage through their senses, increasing the intensity of the lived experience. The development of local gastronomic products, enhancement of typical food products and dissemination of more co-created and innovative food-related products are some of the proposals that may increase the attractiveness of the destination and support more successful sustainable tourism development strategies for the destination.

Originality/value - Destinations' marketing strategy should always enhance the overall sustainable development goals of the destination, which are a particularly sensitive matter since the COVID-19 pandemic and in small cultural destinations. Select and characterize the tourist' segments of a destination may be a decisive step in the success of its sustainable marketing strategy. This study is expected to bring insights into how WHS' destinations may, more effectively, explore beyond their implicit cultural material heritage attributes, contributing to their sustainable development as a tourism destination. This study specifically contributes to deepening the knowledge on gastronomic visitors, that may be very interesting to explore as a market segment, particularly for a WHS.

References

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