

# ***THE AGRICULTURAL LINKS, THE UNDERLYING WEALTH TO THE NEW MAJOR TOURIST PROJECTS IN THE PORTUGUESE RURAL SPACE – THE CASE OF ALENTEJO<sup>9</sup>***

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## **1) Main theoretical framework and contextualization of the research problem**

The research focuses on the emergence of new tourist practices (Boyer, 2000, Béni, 2006) in a rural context, marked by innovation and difference, corresponding to a “niche tourism”. This is, increasingly, an expression of the singularity, sophistication and differentiation of the tourist who constantly seeks to fulfil the desire to travel, meet, participate, learn, and remember (Cavaco and Simões, 2009). It’s a complex phenomenon, characterized by a flexible offering, often small-scale (intimate), corresponding to an extremely segmented market and integrated management and distribution, supported by the increasing use of new technologies (Douglas *et al.* 2001). According to Luís Ignarra (2003), niche markets represent a different offer of tourism as an activity and a service. The wine tourism is emerging in contemporary society, especially in Portugal and the Alentejo region. This form of tourism is associated with the use of wine resources from a given region, where interest in wine is not only reflected in the knowledge of this product but also in the region and the context in which the wine is produced (Inácio, 2009). Wine tourism combines culture, lifestyles and territory. This final aspect can even be described as a tourist resource: it’s in a “niche” (Cavaco and Simões, 2009), with specific geographical features, that the tourist practice is justified.

This research aims to evaluate the integration of new tourist services in the environment where they occur, and its contribution to local development. In this context, it’s interesting to perceive the synergies between agriculture and tourism. This is relevant given the temporal and spatial configuration that characterize these new tourism projects anchored in the food and agriculture industry in general and in the production of wine in particular. The important aspect in the configuration of these projects is their “logic of enclave” (Salgueiro, 1999 and 2002). The establishments have a timely nature and add a brisk difference to their surroundings, which denotes that there is no continuity between the enterprises and the environment where they occur. Thus, it’s important to discuss how these tourist projects shape the arrival of spatial fragmentation (Salgueiro, 1999) to the rural space. The increased mobility, diversity and fragmentation of the social structure justify the emergence of “several spatial plots” (Salgueiro, 2002), characterised by different forms of use of space but also in various forms of organisation and dynamism of companies based in rural areas.

## **2) Research problem and main aims of the paper**

The current emergence of new tourist options in the national rural space is characterized by the connection with the farming and food production resources of the big farms where these options can be found. This new model differs from the traditional rural tourism in small units scattered throughout the territory, which was disseminated in the framework of the rural development policies of Portugal engendered by the European programs LEADER and PRODER. Based on the example of Alentejo, this paper deals with the relationship between recent changes occurred in the rural environment and the sustainability of these new tourist units within this setting.

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