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## Pilgrimage Routes as Opportunities for Local Development: Case Study of the Way of St James in the Alto Minho Region, Portugal

Mariana Oliveira

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Portugal, catia.oliveira@estg.ipv.pt*

Goretti Silva

*Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Portugal, goretti@estg.ipv.pt*

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# Pilgrimage Routes as Opportunities for Local Development: Case Study of the Way of St James in the Alto Minho Region, Portugal

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## Mariana Oliveira

Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, Portugal  
catia.oliveira@estg.ipvc.pt

## Goretti Silva

CITUR, Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, Portugal  
goretti@estg.ipvc.pt

The policies implemented by the Member States of the Council of Europe have as their main purpose to protect and realise the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitate economic and social development (Statute, 1949). The Council of Europe considers cultural itineraries, including pilgrimage routes, which make a significant contribution to the cultural tourism sector, and a key role in territorial development policies, in economic, social, and cultural terms.

The Way of St James (Camino de Santiago), one of the main pilgrimage routes in the world, was the first Cultural Route certified by the Council of Europe in October 1987. Nowadays, the importance and impact of the routes are widely acknowledged, since there are thousands of people, travelling every day towards Santiago, departing from various points of Europe and motivated by different reasons.

The present paper aims at highlighting the economic and social impacts of the Way of St James crossing the Alto Minho Region (Camino Central and Camino da Costa), in Portugal. Employment opportunities and the overall economic growth of local communities are perceived by local businesses as examples of direct and indirect benefits, and the routes as an integral part of the territorial tourist development. Data were collected through the collation of secondary data, fieldwork, and questionnaires. Comparisons and analyses of differences and similarities between the different approaches are discussed.

Results support the existence of opportunities for small business creation and strengthening; Despite the pandemic situation, and the inherent reduction of pilgrims, particularly during lockdowns, the Way recovered faster than other tourism products, and are perceived as contributing to the development of tourism businesses and related services at a regional level. The increases in jobs and economic gains contribute to the wealth and well-being of local communities.

**Key Words:** cultural tourism, pilgrimage routes, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Way of St James, local economic development

## Introduction

Cultural Itineraries, including pilgrimage routes, are believed to significantly contribute to territorial policies and play a key role in regional development through tourism. Contributions to local economies, as well as in social and cultural terms are widely acknowledged (Blas *et al.*, 2011; Faria, 2021; Leira López *et al.*, 2010; Maak, 2009; Meyer, 2004; Torre *et al.*, 2010). These advantages are aligned with the aim of the Council of Europe to achieve a greater unity among its members to safeguard and realise the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitate their economic and social progress (Statute, 1949).

The Council of Europe Program recognises cultural routes as a strategic transnational network, acting as channels for intercultural dialogue and promoting better knowledge and understanding of the common European heritage. Cultural Routes and their heritage are also considered a resource that can support the construction of territories and landscapes and often become driving forces in the initiation of economic activities in these territories (Council of Europe, 2015). Their ability to create networks that involve local, and regional stakeholders (hotels, restaurants, tour operators, tourism offices, transport networks), and institutions that deal with art and culture (museums, bookstores, cultural

**Figure 1: Portuguese Routes (Caminho Português)**

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese\\_Way#/media/File:Camino\\_Santiago\\_actuales\\_Portugal.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_Way#/media/File:Camino_Santiago_actuales_Portugal.svg)

centres) or associations and public bodies and training institutes (schools, universities, research centres); as well as national and international tourism organisations, tour operators and tourist agencies partners is widely acknowledged. These players are engaged in the implementation of activities and projects aimed at satisfying specific priority actions. Often associated with innovative approaches and joint strategies, all these organisations contribute to the enhancement of memory, history, and European heritage, cultural and educational exchanges for young Europeans, contemporary cultural and artistic practice, cultural tourism, and sustainable cultural development (Council of Europe, 2017).

The Way of St James (Camino de Santiago), one of the main pilgrimage routes in the world, was the first European Cultural Route certified by the Council of Europe in October 1987. Nowadays, the importance and impact of the Way of St James are widely acknowledged, since thousands of people travel daily towards Santiago, departing from various points of Europe, and motivated by different reasons.

The present paper aims to highlight the economic and social impacts of the Way of St James crossing the Alto Minho region, in Portugal, and emphasises the direct and indirect benefits, which can lead to employment and economic growth of local communities, an integral part of the territorial tourist development.

The Alto Minho region is crossed by two secular routes: the interior (Central Route) and the coast (Coastal Route) (Figure 1). The central route passes through Ponte de Lima to Valença. The coastal route is a variant of the central route, which starts in Porto and follows the coastline north, linking the towns of Vila do Conde, Póvoa de Varzim, Esposende, Viana do Castelo, Caminha, Vila Nova de Cerveira and Valença. However, alternative connections to Galicia, crossing the Minho River, in Caminha or Vila Nova de Cerveira, exist. The Way then goes towards Redondela and links up with the Way that comes via Tui (Cardoso & Almeida, 2005).

This paper is the result of two different studies, conducted by the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC), at two different moments, the first before the COVID-19 pandemic (2018) and the second during COVID-19 (2021), aiming at understanding the perception of local businesses about the economic impact of the Way.

## Literature Review

According to Karina (2009), pilgrims in medieval times went on pilgrimage for various reasons: devotion, request (related to health or forgiveness, for example), thanksgiving, on behalf of another who could not do it, or punishment (this was a penalty that had to be served by arsonists, murderers, and rapists), to absolve sins. Thus, besides all the physical effort, the pilgrimage included a departure from home, small comforts, and various dangers that could risk the pilgrim's safety, such as accidents, illnesses, robberies, and animal attacks. On the other hand, in more modern times, several authors state that there has been a change in what concerns the pilgrims and the reasons that drive them, often not spiritual but culture, ecology, and sports-related (Poyatos *et al.*, 2011).

Economic, social, and cultural changes in society have led to a diversification of motivations and a decrease

in the relative weight of the pilgrimage in terms of trips to sacred places. The very change in patterns of religious behaviour, in general, namely the decrease in the frequency of Sunday practice, and the weakening of the sense of belonging to a religion, among others, are responsible for new paradigms in this domain, globally qualifying within the scope of religious tourism (Santos, 2008; Griffin & Raj, 2017). As such, the increase in other types of motivations, besides the religious (leisure, cultural, ...), often involving more consumerist behaviours are also believed to bring more revenue to local businesses (e.g., hotels, restaurants, ...) and will help to sustain the public and private investments made (Santos, 2008).

Thus, it is fundamental to understand the motivations, needs, and expectations of visitors, which go beyond the spiritual and religious aspects of the sacred place in order to ensure that services are made available throughout the routes. Currently, pilgrimages are often still individual journeys but are also taken in groups. In order to facilitate the walk, pilgrims are often accompanied by support cars, they use reserved accommodation, and partake of other facilities. In order to meet the market needs, and maintain position as attractive destinations, territories offering pilgrimage routes need to assure both the necessary diversity and expected quality, enhancing the experience of visitors (Ochoa, 2016).

According to the official statistics made available by the diocese of Santiago de Compostela, with data collected in the 'Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino', the number of pilgrims has increased over the years, with major peaks in the Holy years. However, the data available only covers people who request the Compostela, the accreditation of the pilgrimage to the Tomb of St James. In 2019, a total of 347,578 pilgrims received their Compostela (Oficina del Peregrino | Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, 2019). The actual number of pilgrims, however, is much higher, as not everybody asks for the Compostela, and not everybody gets to Santiago when deciding to walk portions of the Way. Often pilgrims do the Way in several stages, as it comprises hundreds of kilometres and takes several days or even weeks to get there. Nonetheless, 2019 numbers are the highest volume of pilgrims on the Way of St James in centuries and directly reflect its increasing popularity.

The Portuguese Way of St James are currently the second most travelled Jacobean routes, second only to the French Way. Since 2016, the Coastal Route began to gain prominence in the statistics, and in 2019, it was the third most travelled way (6.41%) (Oficina del Peregrino | Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, 2019).

Demand for the Way is considered seasonal as climate-related factors are relevant to the planning of the Way. Numbers vary in a moderate sense, and the months of higher demand start in April and go beyond the summer months, until October. In terms of motivation, 'non-religious' motivations have been increasing while 'religious' motives have been fluctuating, and this has impact on the pilgrims' level and pattern of consumption (Fernandes *et al.*, 2012; Oliveira *et al.*, 2018).

### Pandemic and Pilgrimages

In 2020, the tourism and hospitality sector was greatly affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, due to the nature of the businesses, dependent on travel and the movement of people. With the closure of borders, closure / decrease in accommodation capacity, and the inhibition of free movement of people, the number of pilgrims reduced drastically.

Travel behaviour changed, due to concerns over health and well-being and it is understood that this is linked to an increased popularity of pilgrimages. Pilgrims typically travel in more isolated / solitary patterns or in small groups (Lopez & Lois González, 2021). The confines of COVID-19 have shown us that outdoor activity, the sense of community, and human connection are very important. There was a growing demand throughout the pandemic for walking activities associated with emotional well-being, spirituality, and connection with nature or cultural heritage (Ambrósio & Fernandes, 2021).

The fact that 2022 was a Jacobean / Holy Year<sup>1</sup> also represented an opportunity to recover. The importance of the Jacobean year (Compostela Jubilee Year or Holy Year) as a mark of tourism promotion and in the consolidation of Santiago de Compostela as an international destination is unquestionable.

1 A Jacobean Holy Year, also known as a Compostela Holy Year, occurs in the years where 25 July, the Feast of Saint James, falls on a Sunday.

Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage are substantial motives for a global movement of people. Even if this travel is for purely religious motives or pilgrimage it is also influenced by some secular desires. Situations where the journey is undertaken for entirely religious or profane motives, are not discussed in this reflection. The main issue being highlighted here is the fact that pilgrimage routes can represent a considerable opportunity for regional and local development, namely in the strengthening of local identity, in the territories that routes pass through (Olsen & Timothy, 2006), producing economic, physical, environmental and socio-cultural impacts (Pérez, 2009).

### St James Way and Economic Impacts

The evolution of the Way into a religious and cultural tourism product is widely acknowledged to have increased the visitor flows it originates (Silva & Borges, 2019). Pilgrimages and the respective places of worship are essential for the development of tourism (Lois González *et al.*, 2014). Over time, pilgrimage cities have enriched their tourism products based on cultural and natural heritage resources. Nearby, museums and other complementary services appear, which provide alternative activities in order to increase the period of stay of pilgrims, in these places. (Duarte, 2016). In this way, the Way has demonstrated that it can be a suitable catalyst for development, particularly in rural and low-density areas (Blas & Fabeiro, 2014). Artisan activities (Torre *et al.*, 2010), as well as ethnographic resources, are activated or reactivated, and public authorities make more significant efforts in relation to historical monumental resources, natural resources, and historical archaeological resource preservation and valorization (Blas *et al.*, 2011). These initiatives are not aimed at direct economic benefits, but rather at creating conditions for better positioning the territory as a tourist destination, with diffuse impacts through visits to other markets and subsequent visits by pilgrims, as well as contributing to an improvement in environmental quality (humanised environments) and the lives of local populations.

Some of the most often discussed impacts of the Way are related to expenditure on accommodation, commerce, gastronomy, and leisure (Dias & Silveira, 2003; Santos, 2006; Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Blas *et al.*, 2011), reinforcing the activity of existing businesses or the

creation of new ones (small and micro enterprises) along the route, with some evidence of concentration near sanctuaries (museum visits, tours, souvenirs) (Torre *et al.*, 2010). Employment opportunities are associated with new and existing businesses (Maak, 2009).

However, despite the recognition by several studies of the contribution of the paths to local development (Fernandes *et al.*, 2012; Blas & Fabeiro, 2014), some authors suggest that this contribution may be more perceptual than actual (e.g., Gonçalves de Freitas *et al.*, 2021). Sound research strategies, focused on local stakeholders' perceptions about the impact of the Way on their businesses are thus required. A detailed assessment of the impacts of tourism on the economy, both at the local, regional, and national levels is an essential tool, not only for tourism policies (marketing infrastructure or investment plans) but also within the broader context of development plans, where tourism can play a relevant role, in interconnection with other economic sectors (Faria, 2021).

This paper aims to present the results of and discuss the economic impacts of the Way of St James crossing the Alto Minho region, based on two different moments of data collection and looking at the underlying changes and evolution, as well as the commonalities.

### The Research Context - Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, within a pragmatic perspective (Pansiri, 2005), combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, conducted at different moments between 2018 and 2021. Qualitative methods include content analysis of websites and fieldwork (observation), whereas quantitative data were collected through a survey based on questionnaires completed by businesses located along the Way. In a preliminary phase, secondary data analysis was also conducted in order to establish the state of the art concerning the underlying topic: the Way and economic impacts.

Regarding content analysis, an online search was conducted about tourist operators who offer religious and cultural tourism programs, with a focus on the Way of St James as a tourist product. In total, 20 tour operators were identified offering different package solutions for

**Table 1: Sample of International Tour Operators Offering Packages for Portuguese Routes**

Name	Website	Head Offices
CaminoWays	<a href="https://caminoways.com/">https://caminoways.com/</a>	Ireland (headquarter)
		Spain
		France
		EUA
		England
		Italy
		Australia
SantiagoWays	<a href="https://santiagoways.com/en/">https://santiagoways.com/en/</a>	Spain
Ultreya Tours	<a href="https://www.ultreyatours.com/">https://www.ultreyatours.com/</a>	Spain
Tee-Travel	<a href="https://www.tee-travel.com/">https://www.tee-travel.com/</a>	Spain
Pelgrimroutes	<a href="https://www.pelgrimroutes.nl/">https://www.pelgrimroutes.nl/</a>	The Netherlands
Mundiplus	<a href="https://www.mundiplus.com/">https://www.mundiplus.com/</a>	Spain
Il Mestiere di Viaggiare	<a href="https://www.ilmestierediviaggiare.com/">https://www.ilmestierediviaggiare.com/</a>	Italy
Galicia Incoming	<a href="https://www.galiciaincoming.com/">https://www.galiciaincoming.com/</a>	Spain
Follow the Camino	<a href="https://followthecamino.com/en/">https://followthecamino.com/en/</a>	Ireland
Walk the Camino	<a href="https://walkthecamino.com/">https://walkthecamino.com/</a>	Scotland, UK
TourRadar	<a href="https://www.tourradar.com/">https://www.tourradar.com/</a>	Canada
		Australia
		Austria
Art Natura	<a href="https://www.artnaturagalicia.com/en">https://www.artnaturagalicia.com/en</a>	Spain
Galiwonders	<a href="https://galiwonders.com/">https://galiwonders.com/</a>	Spain
Turigrino	<a href="https://www.turigrino.com/">https://www.turigrino.com/</a>	Spain
Camino Travel Center	<a href="https://caminotravelcenter.com/">https://caminotravelcenter.com/</a>	Spain
Siente Galicia	<a href="https://www.sientegalicia.com/">https://www.sientegalicia.com/</a>	Spain
Cntravel	<a href="https://cntravel.es/">https://cntravel.es/</a>	Spain
Pilgrim	<a href="https://www.Caminodesantiago.com.pt/">https://www.Caminodesantiago.com.pt/</a>	Spain
Portugal GreenWalks	<a href="https://www.portugalgreenwalks.com/">https://www.portugalgreenwalks.com/</a>	Portugal
DescubraMinho	<a href="https://www.descubraminho.com/">https://www.descubraminho.com/</a>	Portugal

pilgrims / visitors from different countries, aiming to walk the Way, particularly those crossing the Alto Minho. Packages made available include a mix of services, often pre-established but also tailor-made, adapting to each customer / client's needs, ranging from accommodation to transfer services, restaurants, and some additional visits / experiences in the region.

The two questionnaire surveys were undertaken with stakeholders, aiming to identify the opportunities for businesses' income and employment, to understand the economic impacts associated with the Way of St James in the Alto Minho region. Data collection took place at two different moments. In the first iteration, in 2018, this was undertaken as part of the Cult-RInG project - 220 questionnaires were administered to businesses that are on the way and around, within a buffer zone of 1km from the Way. A stratified sample was defined per municipality. In addition to these questionnaires, a new study was conducted in 2021, specifically in the city of Valença, in

which an additional round of data collection took place, on a smaller sample of businesses, in order to identify changes in the perception of business owners, especially given the context of COVID-19. Although the pandemic affected the performance of the study, twenty-seven face-to-face questionnaires were filled out in Valença, one of the municipalities where pilgrims from both routes crossing the Alto Minho converge (central and coast). As for the type of business, both surveys included a stratified sample with accommodation units, restaurants, cafés, similar establishments, and shops.

## Findings

As a result of heightened interest, partially fuelled by the media and influencers, there has been a surge in businesses that offer all-inclusive or tailor-made experiences, ranging from low-cost to higher-end demand. Packages include very efficient networks of hostels, restaurants, and shops to cater to the needs of

pilgrims, making the Camino a popular tourist product. Through an online search, it was possible to identify 20 international tour operators offering packages along the Portuguese routes, specifically crossing the study area, the Alto Minho region. Offers include packages covering all aspects of logistics and tour planning, handling of the trip and all the services associated with the pilgrimage. As seen from Table 1, most operators have their official headquarters in Spain, as they are the main 'interested parties' in marketing the product concerned. However, it is also notable that some are based in countries such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Canada showing that the reach of the Way goes far beyond the Spanish borders. The economic impacts can be felt not only within the countries and regions crossed by the Way - in this case Portugal and the Alto Minho region - but also where the operators are based or in the issuing countries.

Packages made available include a mix of services, often pre-established but also tailor-made, adapting to each customer / client's needs, ranging from accommodation, transfer services, restaurants, and additional visits and experiences in the region. The number of companies that are associated with these operators and operate the experiences in the field is very large and diverse. Some are concentrated along the Camino, but also in the surrounding localities, where some of the experiences that are part of the packages involve getting further away from the Camino, with the intermediaries providing transport to and from those places.

The importance of the economic impact is highly perceived by companies that aim to respond to the different motivations and profiles of pilgrims, offering personalised comforts and services, as in the example of offers for people with reduced mobility.

Two of the identified tour operators are Portuguese and based in the Alto Minho region:

'*Portugal Green Walks*' has 12 different offers between one day and three weeks. Programs can range from walking or cycling activities to religion, spirituality, or even gastronomic-oriented experiences, through the Coastal Route, the Central Route, or even the Finisterre Route;

'*Descubra Minho*', is a smaller, family-run business, which specialised in ecotourism, which has two packages available related with the routes: the Portuguese Coastal Route carried out by bicycle, for solo travellers, pairs or groups, with or without a guide.

The activity of these tour operators is grounded on the existence of businesses that operate locally, providing a range of services that enables them to meet the needs of pilgrims.

As mentioned above, questionnaire surveys were applied to the owners / managers of businesses at two different moments. Both studies suggest these perceive the impacts of the growing pilgrim movement as essentially positive. While the effect is more significant on businesses located near the Way, businesses within a 1km area with relevant natural and cultural resources can be attractive and motivate the deviation of pilgrims if distances are considered short enough.

The perceived impacts are primarily positive and refer to the increase in customers and the profit generated by pilgrim consumption. Perceptions include benefits that go beyond economic ones and are far more than the consumption of pilgrims. Respondents highlight the opportunity to meet and socialise with pilgrims and contact with different cultures, something that seems to be highly appreciated.

Another aspect worthy of mention is that pilgrims contribute to mitigating seasonality in these territories, as they walk the Way throughout the year, being particularly more intense in the months between April and October. This aspect was mentioned mainly by respondents related to accommodation businesses. Also mentioned by several respondents is the fact that many pilgrims return to the territory, or even to a particular means of accommodation, as a result of the positive experience they have had, namely because of the quality of the service.

Regarding job opportunities, in both studies the majority do not feel the need to hire employees and those who think that there is a need to hire usually deal with more than 250 pilgrims per year. This need to hire is essentially limited to the summer season, which reflects the

seasonality of pilgrimages, even if not very pronounced, as they usually start in April / May and go as far as October. Another positive aspect is that most businesses contract local suppliers, namely for hygiene / cleaning services and products, amenities, and laundry services. All the restaurants stated that they have local suppliers of products / services, which is a very beneficial factor for the local economy.

## Conclusion

The results of the research work underlying this article and other similar studies identified and quoted throughout the text lead to the conclusion that the Way of St James make an essential contribution to the local economy and the dynamics of the small and medium enterprises. This is particularly relevant to businesses located along the Camino, but its influence is noticed in neighbouring locations, where it exerts its influence. The Caminos are widely acknowledged for reducing seasonality and consolidating their operations throughout the year. The increases in jobs and economic gains contribute to the wealth and well-being of local communities.

Indirect benefits, such as positioning the region as a tourist destination, are also highly valued. The most significant impact of pilgrimage will probably be in the industries closely related to tourism (accommodation, restaurants, transport, and food and beverages products), and directly connected to the Caminos.

The number of tour operators selling experiences associated with the Camino worldwide indicates the popularity of the route, but also the existence of a solid base on the ground made up of tourist services in sufficient quantity and diversity to contribute to its recognition as a destination for religious tourism and pilgrimage.

On top of the benefits for already established businesses, results also suggest opportunities for other small business creation and strengthening. Despite the pandemic situation, which is still visible, and the inherent reduction of pilgrims, particularly in the moment of lockdowns, the Caminos recovered faster than other tourism products

and are perceived as contributing to developing tourism businesses and related services at a regional level. Although the effects of the pandemic on travel and tourism, in particular, are beginning to diminish, they are still far from disappearing. They are believed to have long-term impacts on society and the economy worldwide. Religion plays a prominent role in establishing people's inner peace in moments like these as more travellers than ever are embarking on pilgrimages, a trend that is believed to last, as people look for a chance to reconnect with the world. Moreover, travellers are simultaneously and increasingly more conscious of the need for responsible travel and the impact of their choices on attaining these goals. Religious sites and pilgrim routes may offer these target groups, opportunities to move away from short-haul city breaks toward taking less flights and longer trips with a sense of purpose.

The results presented here and the related discussion has highlighted some negative aspects of the downsides of the development of the Camino as a marketplace and a tourist product. As the research has focused on the perception of businesses, a greater emphasis has been placed on consumption and economic benefits, as a consequence of the increases in commodification and 'touristification' of the services provided to pilgrims. Some negative impacts such as discomforts felt by local communities and pilgrims alike are likely to take place as identified in the literature. These can include increases in prices (e.g., Soares *et al.*, 2021), or even risks associated with loss of authenticity, both from the perspective of pilgrims and the local community (e.g., Overall, 2019) and these impacts should not be disregarded.

However, pilgrimages are becoming an attractive market in the travel and tourist industry, while the line between a pilgrim and a tourist has become increasingly blurred. Businesses and tour operators focus on creating comfortable experiences, evidencing the complex relationship between religion and consumerism. Although relevant, these topics are out of the scope of this paper, remaining as priorities among the suggestions for further research.



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