

VISITOR'S PREFERENCES OF RURAL TOURISM. STUDY IN NAVARRE

Teresa García López de Meneses

Ramo Barrena Figueroa

Universidad Pública de Navarra

tegar@unavarra.es, ramo.barrena@unavarra.es

Rural tourism is a fairly wide concept covering different kinds of tourist activities such as camping and hostelling in rural areas, agrotourism, etc. This type of tourism has been heavily promoted by European rural development policies. The initiatives derived from the Leader Projects are worth noting in this context due to the fact that they have aroused great interest in certain rural areas where they help put a stop to the process of desertification as they contribute to keeping farms viable (Gilbert, 1992; Francès and Mendez, 2001). However, there seems to be a lack of business strategies capable of consolidating the sector and creating new expectations for future visitors. The range of rural tourism programs on offer is highly uniform, the differences particular to each region are not exploited and the consumer is neglected. Moreover, the product offered is designed by the supply sector without regard to the perspective of the demand sector. The study of tourist demand is addressed in the work by Sayadi and Calatrava (2001), Yagüe (2002), García and Grande (2003), Roig, (2005), Aznar and Nicoli (2007) and Beh and Bruyere (2007).

The object of our study is to carry out an analysis of the preferences in rural tourism services on the part of the demand sector in terms of the characteristics of their stays and the sources of information they use to plan them. Furthermore, the level of acceptance of the activity plan offered and tourists' satisfaction is studied by means of their intention of repeating their stay. The study was carried out in the *Comunidad Foral de Navarra*, given that this kind of tourism has a long tradition among its inhabitants.

According to the results of the studies carried out on this sector (Familitur. Various annual reports), the main problems of rural tourism in Navarra are those derived from insufficient knowledge of the range of products it has available and its seasonality. The range of rural tourism products available is very heterogeneous in terms of accommodation, places, activities, etc. and visitors have very different motivations, means and preferences. Tourists come to Navarra attracted by Sanfermines, the Camino de Santiago, to discover hiking trails, climb mountains, etc. Also, visits take place at fixed times in the year, usually in the summer, between May and October, high season being July and August.

The information in this study comes from an ad-hoc personal survey carried out in Pamplona and the neighboring towns i.e. the metropolitan area, by means of a random sample of the general population with proportional allocation to neighborhood-town and age. The field work was carried out in 2011 when a structured questionnaire based on closed questions was administered. Once refined, the sample was made up of 250 elements, with a 6.3% sample error. The data obtained was analyzed with the SPSS statistical analysis programme.

The questionnaire features 6 groups of questions. The first group gives access to the level of knowledge and practice of rural tourism of the interviewees. The following group aims at assessing the level of interest Navarra has amongst its own citizens in relation to rural tourism. Next, questions related to the sources of information interviewees use to find out about the range of rural tourism products available are posed. The fourth and fifth groups aim at finding out the level of acceptance of the activities more frequently offered by rural tourism facilities in Navarra and the degree of satisfaction obtained. Finally, data related to the sociodemographic characteristics of interviewees was collected.

The results show that 90% of the interviewees had at some point done rural tourism and that most of those were 25-45 years old, single or divorced, though none of these population characteristics are statistically significant for rural tourism. These results are totally logical for a region such as Navarra, where, as mentioned before, rural tourism is a widely popular leisure activity.

Rural tourism for the people of Pamplona and its region is mostly a weekend activity they do once or twice a year, especially in spring. Accordingly, Navarran tourists do not have to go far from their homes in order to choose rural tourism accommodation and their preferences are concentrated in Navarra and the neighboring provinces. It is a very popular form of tourism and thus no significant differences appear in terms of the demographic characteristics of rural tourism enthusiasts.

In terms of the sources of information used to find out about rural tourism, information given by friends and family and through the press and the Internet is predominant. Sometimes they are even the exclusive sources of information. Some interviewees explicitly state that they never resort to the Tourist Office for information. Specifically, single and divorced persons prefer getting information through friends, family, the press and the Internet, never at Tourist Offices. Notably, there appear no significant differences in the sources of information no matter whether interviewees were planning to visit a facility in Navarra or outside this region. Likewise, there are also no significant differences in the use of sources of information no matter the frequency with which this type of tourism is done or the time of the year.

Regarding level of satisfaction, measured by means of an intention to repeat stays, only annual visits to a rural tourism facility has significant influence. The importance that a good range of activities available has for tourist satisfaction is worth noting, that is, the decision to repeat stays is significantly associated with the possibility of practicing agriculture and herding and trekking and to familiarity with the region, especially through local crafts. However, visitors explicitly state that they did not participate in these activities, which suggests certain gaps in the marketing program.

The results obtained suggest certain recommendations for the design of a commercial strategy for the sector. First, the communication strategy of private companies and public institutions should consider all sectors of the population and, given the importance of the consultant's role, we suggest taking special care to offer a quality service. The quality of the printed material and the design of thorough, user-friendly web pages are important, and adapting the strategy used by Tourist Offices to the interests of rural tourism enthusiasts is also relevant. Furthermore, given that visitors show a high level of satisfaction when offered complementary activities to do during their stay, activities involving the environment, traditions and cultural riches of the region visited, it seems advisable for the management at this type of tourist accommodation to improve and broaden their offer of such activities.

