

# The Evolution of Rural Tourism in Spain

Gemma Canoves

Department of Geography,  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Gerda K. Priestley

Department of Geography,  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to analyse the evolution of Rural Tourism (RT) in Spain within a European context. The first step is to examine the development of different types of RT and trace the evolution of RT in Europe. This is followed by a study of the development of tourist products and services in rural Spain since the 1980s, as diversification of the traditional 3S tourist economy is sought. The analysis stresses the consequences of the activity for the economy of rural areas. The purpose is to identify differences in the pattern of evolution between Spain and more northern European countries, understand their causes and briefly outline the problems that ensue as a result of the late development of rural tourism in Spain and the difficulties that RT is currently facing in the country.

**Keywords:** Spain, Rural Tourism, European context, supply, demand.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the main characteristics of Rural Tourism (RT) in Spain, and compare its development with the trend of the activity in the European Union. In order to set the analysis in context, the evolution of RT in Europe is traced and stages in its development are established. It is in this framework that RT in Spain is examined, in order to identify differences in the pattern of its evolution when compared with more northern European countries and explain the origin of these differences. Present supply and demand is also analysed and the paper concludes by identifying some of the problems facing RT in Spain and by formulating recommendations for future development. This analysis of Spanish RT is based on the results of an on-going research project on rural tourism (<http://seneca.uab.es/ter>).

## Rural Tourism in a European context

Rural Tourism in Europe has a long tradition, although its widespread popularity dates from the nineteen-sixties. The hosting of tourists in farm houses originated in the Tyrol and in rural England at the beginning of the twentieth century. It gradually spread throughout Europe, first gaining ground in mountain zones in response to increasing interest in climbing and trekking, especially in the Alps. Since the sixties, rural tourism has expanded rapidly, especially in the Benelux countries, France and Italy, as both the number of farmers participating and

demand rose. At government and municipal levels, it was encouraged as a good solution and, in some cases, a universal remedy for the crisis in family agriculture in Europe during the 1980s, as a means of developing and diversifying economic activities in rural areas. However, enthusiasm soon gave way to disappointment, as rural tourism experienced difficulties intrinsic to a growing sector, when the pioneers found that the benefits did not live up to expectations. Demand also fell, as tourists were tempted to more exotic destinations in natural surroundings, the market became more competitive and consumers more demanding in terms of infrastructures and services. The re-launching of RT and the recovery of demand in recent years may be attributed to changing patterns of leisure time, the segmentation of holidays and the development of "long weekends. Therefore, with new parameters, ranging from higher quality premises and services, and the maintenance of competitive prices to simultaneous provision of attractive and imaginative complementary leisure activities, it could be said that a new tourist product was created in the 1990s, similar to traditional ones, but which encompasses the entire extent of Europe. These new demands have implied the selection of farmers who are committed to rural tourism, others who continue to provide only lodgings, and others who specialize in quality food or complementary activities, in harmony with their specific areas. As a result, rural tourism today has become a major complement to the farming industry, accentuated by the reduction in incomes derived from both crop and pastoral farming. It does, however, remain a heterogeneous activity, differentiated by the characteristics of the rural areas and the people involved, and the aims of each local, regional and national administration.

Within the European Union, strategic documents related to the implementation of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have highly recommended the integration of alternative and/or complementary activities on the agricultural scene (Commission of the European Communities, 1985; 1988). Objective 5b and Leader programmes show that rural tourism is considered crucial to agricultural policy, as they aim to restructure and to create or maintain jobs in rural areas. Innovation is encouraged in two ways: by widening the scale and scope of tourist products based on rural resources; and at community level by shifting the accent towards leisure-orientated production. Nevertheless recent studies have shown that marketing of RT products is still highly fragmented, uncoordinated and inefficient (Hjalager, A.M., 1996).

In spite of the growth of RT, statistics show that RT is still a minor activity in comparison with agriculture in Europe (Martin-Cruz, 1991; Béteille, 1996b). About 20% of Swedish farms receive paying guests, Austria only 10%, the UK 7% (Butler et al., 1998), Belgium and Germany 5% and less than 2% in France (Béteille, 1996a; Moinet, 1996). Even so, in absolute terms, the European countries of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Austria currently dominate the global vacation farm industry with 20,000-30,000 enterprises in each (Weaver and

Fennel, 1997a). However, in recent years, rural tourism has been expanding in most countries and, in many cases, has changed from being a supplementary commercial activity to developing into a sector in its own right (Busby & Rendle, 2000: 640).

### An evolutionary typology of RT

From the outset, RT has been based on offering more or less permanent accommodation in rural houses, although the formula in Europe is not homogeneous. At an early stage RT was based almost exclusively on lodgings: rooms rented in the owner's private home, independent lodgings, or rural campsites, although under different labels, such as "Bed & Breakfast", or "Cottage" in the UK, "*Zimmer Frei*" in Germany, *Gîtes* in France. The purpose of these activities was to complement incomes from agriculture which does not represent a threat to the main agricultural activity.

Diversification is the key-note of a second stage. The product evolved from simple accommodation to more specialized structures, following a strategy to capture a more diverse and demanding clientele and encourage repeat visits. Hence many proprietors provide a number of activities related to nature and rural activities (horse-riding, fishing, hunting, trekking excursions, rafting, educational courses, therapy treatment, fruit-picking, etc.); more sophisticated local products (gourmet food, sale of country products) all with unmistakably commercial objectives, without forgetting that guests wish to maintain contact with the farming family. Innumerable formulae exist in Europe and each country or region places emphasis on one or more specialities. However, they can be classified in accordance with the stage of RT development reached.

It is now quite common for this group to abandon agricultural activities, because they are less profitable, and also because it is difficult to manage both businesses. In France 36% of the farms and 45% in UK (Ardillier-Carras, 1999; Dehoorne, 1999) are substituting agricultural activities for tourism in rural houses. This is therefore a growing phenomenon, especially in areas where agriculture is not economically competitive. Another form of diversification is the substitution of animal husbandry by a "leisure farm". These alternatives are quite well developed in France, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands; where agricultural lands are now permanent campsites, riding schools or leisure parks (like pet zoos, agricultural mazes, tractor rides). In some cases, the new activities compete directly with identical ones which are not, however, of an agricultural nature, as is the case of theme parks. Another form of specialization associated with rural houses is to offer attractions related to specialized agricultural products. Examples include the vineyards of the Douro valley in Portugal for the production of Port wine, agriculture in the Périgord region of France, producing gastronomic delicacies, such as "*foie gras*" and "*confits*", or the more recent development of cheese, shellfish and wine in Galicia (NW Spain).

The trend towards specialization is already consolidated in the UK and the Netherlands, but has emerged more recently in France and Italy. It marks a clear path towards a higher degree of "tourist professionalism" which farmers claim as an image of quality in the eyes of their clients. This case could be said to denote a **third phase, the maturity of RT**. This gives rise to the question of category. Is it a new, specific activity, a form of agricultural diversification or a commercial activity? In France, conflicts have occurred between agro-tourism owners and hoteliers who rent out rooms in Rural Tourist Homes, Hotels and "*fermes auberges*" as well as restaurants. In Germany and Belgium, RT is regulated by a special fiscal enactment, which recognises its peculiarities and its limited accommodation capacity.

Nevertheless, not all areas within any country are at the same stage of development. The increasing mobility of tourists together with the trend towards the fractioning of holiday periods has encouraged the establishment of RT accommodation on site in the proximity of major, fast communication networks. An adequate balance of access and accessibility is therefore an important factor influencing demand. Finally, in countries with sharp climatic differences between regions some destinations can be favoured over others.

The combination of these factors introduces an initial disparity in demand among specific destinations, rural areas and regions, as they lead to sharp seasonal contrasts on the one hand and variations in the frequency of visits on the other. In fact, occupancy in the majority of rural areas is concentrated over a period of 8 to 10 weeks (principally July and August). In areas around the Mediterranean, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal the season extends for up to 12 to 14 weeks (from mid June to the end of September). Some farmers and areas increase their occupancy up to about 30 weeks where a winter season also exists. The different potential of each area is paralleled by corresponding differences in the economic results for individual enterprises, farmers and obviously the impact on the development of each rural area. As a result, RT can be considered "sporadic" in distant rural areas, isolated from large urban nuclei, able only to attract short and irregular tourist stays and where the implantation of farmhouse accommodation is incipient. These areas include the UK periphery, the centre of France and the central south of Spain and Portugal (Ramos & Marengo, 1999). At the opposite end of the spectrum are the "intensive" RT destinations, where occupancy is spread throughout the year, and clients come regularly for weekends or short vacations, thanks to the proximity of large urban agglomerations and rapid access, as occurs, for example, in rural areas close to London (the Cotswolds and Chilterns) and Lisbon (the Douro valley).

### Rural Tourism in Spain

The late development of RT in Spain is understandable, as mass migration from rural to urban areas, focusing on Madrid and Barcelona, came much later than

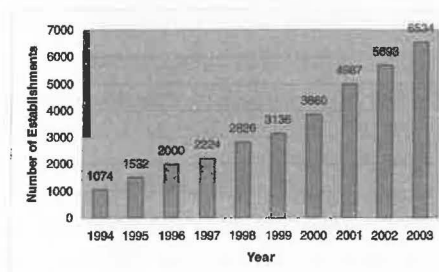
## THE EVOLUTION OF RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN

in most industrialised European countries, covering the period from the mid-fifties to the eighties. Hence, until recently, rural areas were associated with poverty and backwardness rather than idyllic, peaceful landscapes, and, apart from industrial farms, by and large other agricultural enterprises were considered residual. Moreover, the rural exodus more or less coincided with the upsurge of the “sun cult” and consequent mass occupation of the coastal areas for hotel and second home development. It is only over the last two decades that new generations of urbanites, born and bred in the large cities, have come to appreciate the positive imagery of the countryside and a return to the values of nature – *Naturophilia*. As Urry (1990) argues, a “new consumer” has emerged, that has lost his/her roots.

Farmhouse holidays did exist in the 1960s, and some grants to adapt and renovate premises in order to improve the quality for the guests were awarded (Villarino & Cánoves, 2000). However, RT in Spain has only experienced considerable growth over the last 20 years (see Figure 1) and more especially over the last ten – much later than in most of Europe- although the dearth of documentation makes it difficult to trace this process.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of factors have contributed to this growth. Once introduced, the activity was rapidly accepted in Spain, because of the need to sustain population levels in rural areas in the face of rapid depopulation. The new rural economy was based on family businesses and, as in the rest of Europe, constituted a strategy for the diversification of farm activities and rural economies. A second reason, perhaps more unique to Spain, was the increasing ecological and environmental awareness prompted by a consciousness of the negative effects of mass tourism and its consequences on the landscape and land use, on the part of the expanding urban middle class population recently separated from its rural roots. There is documented evidence that over the last two decades and more so in the 90s, RT has achieved its objectives of mitigating emigration from rural areas, (Paniagua, 2002), and of generating benefits by diversifying the economy, through the cultural exchange which developed between urban and rural areas, and by adding new value to rural life (Yagüe, 2002; Beteille, 1996a; Dernoï, 1991). This new

Figure 1: Rural Tourism Establishments in Spain, 1994 - 2003



Source: INE, 2001-2003 & *Guía de Alojamiento en Casas Rurales de España*, El País Aguilar, 1994-2000.

tourism, totally different from the traditional 3S forms, has encouraged a better-balanced economy in the marginal, underdeveloped and even neglected and depopulated areas, that are not as well known as the coastal areas and that have not been affected by mass tourism. It could therefore be said that the earliest stage of RT, based almost exclusively on lodgings, developed at the beginning of the 1980s in Spain, related to the strategy for the survival of small family farms, by specializing in new products, or adding complementary activities such as RT. At this stage it was the female members of the family who welcomed the guests into rural homes, promoted the values of the local culture and organized food and accommodation. (Cánoves, 1997; Cánoves & Villarino, 2000a; 2000 b; Caballé, 1999).

The second stage identified, involving diversification by providing a variety of activities is still incipient in Spain, due to the late development of RT, and began only in the 1990s. Although variations are encountered within regions, it can be asserted that the most developed regions are those where RT started earliest, namely Navarra, Asturias, Catalonia and Galicia, where more sophisticated products can be found as well as more attempts to enhance the product offered. Examples include: "Art and Nature" in the Catalan Pyrenees; "The Romanic Route" in the Vall de Boí (Catalonia) which was recently declared a World Heritage Area; planned routes through the vineyard regions of Galicia where natural landscapes combine with visits to important architectural sites, wine cellars, the sampling and purchase of products, and in some cases excursions into Portugal, by crossing the Miño river (the border between the two countries). Various Autonomous Communities along the Cantabrian coast -Galicia, Asturias, and the Basque country- have joined forces to promote a product that extends beyond each individual region. This is the case of the "Green Spain" product, which includes a classification of the rural houses by quality levels. The difference in the level of development of these new activities between much of Europe and Spain lies in the fact that, whilst in the UK or France, many farmers have trained as horse-riding monitors, hikers or mountain guides, experts in salmon fishing or going down gorges, cross-country skiing or cycle-tourism, in Spain, activities other than those directly linked to board and lodging, are not undertaken by the farmer, thus causing problems of coordination. This situation is related to the recentness of RT in Spain, and for the moment farmers are more inclined to simply host tourists at home.

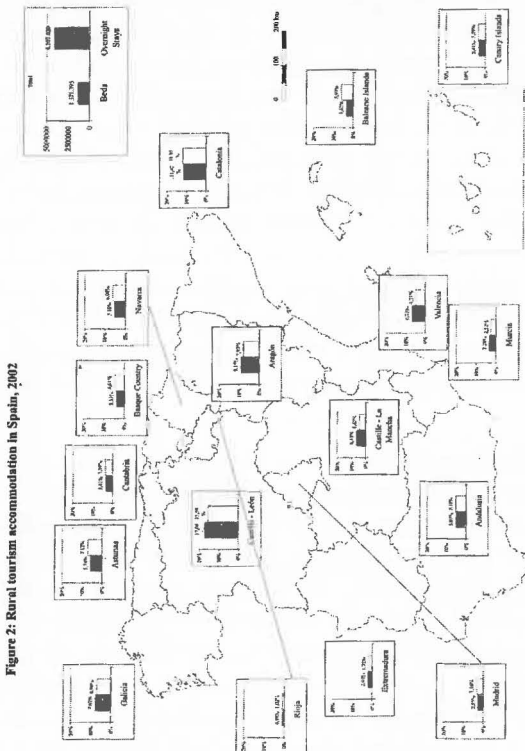
The third stage identified -that of maturity- has not been reached in Spain. Nevertheless, the question of classification has arisen, for the autonomous governments have just become aware of the problem, and as each is responsible for its own legislation, there is no uniform policy. In some regions RT is regulated as an agricultural activity, in others as a tourist activity. No definitive solutions have been found and, in most cases, they are still classified as agricultural activities. Taxes, policy regulations related to capacity and marketing are also

## THE EVOLUTION OF RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN

different in each case, due to the functional independence of each region and because RT is still in its early stages. The low level of penetration of RT in Spanish rural society is therefore understandable and it is quite insignificant in statistical terms: only 1.6% of farms are involved (INE, 2001).

### Analysis of RT supply and demand in Spain

There are 6007 RT establishments in Spain, providing 51,072 beds and giving employment to 9653 persons (see Figure 2 and Table 1). This supply is concentrated in certain regions, especially Castilla-León, Catalonia, Aragón and Galicia, which together account for 45% of all accommodation. However, the unequal size of the various Autonomous Communities must be borne in mind when identifying the density of supply, which is shown to be highest in northern Spain -Cantabria, Asturias, Navarra and the Basque Country- and in the island archipelagos -Balearic and Canary Islands- with Catalonia at a somewhat lower level. It is significant that the principal destination regions for coastal tourism are also among those that are developing RT products, together with the picturesque northern communities. The average size of establishments is 8.5 beds, but considerable variations are encountered: the largest units are concentrated in the Balearic Islands, Madrid and Cantabria.



Source: INE, Statistical Institute of Spain, 2003

Table 1: Rural Tourism supply in Spain by Autonomous Communities, 2002

Autonomous Community	Establishments (estimated)		Beds (estimated)		Number of establishments / 100 km <sup>2</sup>	Number of beds / 100 km <sup>2</sup>	Average number of beds / establishment
	Total number	%	Total number	%			
TOTAL	6,007	100.00%	51,072	100.00%	1.19	10.09	8.50
Andalusia	329	5.48%	2,568	5.03%	0.38	2.93	7.80
Aragón	621	10.33%	4,674	9.15%	1.30	9.79	7.53
Asturias	500	8.33%	2,934	5.74%	4.72	27.67	5.87
Balearic Islands	104	1.74%	1,745	3.42%	2.09	34.95	16.71
Basque Country	187	3.11%	1,802	3.53%	2.58	24.90	9.65
Canary Islands	383	6.38%	1,742	3.41%	5.14	23.39	4.55
Cantabria	209	3.47%	3,305	6.47%	3.92	62.12	15.84
Castille - León	1,006	16.75%	8,715	17.06%	1.07	9.25	8.66
Castille - La Mancha	442	7.35%	3,285	6.43%	0.56	4.13	7.44
Catalonia	679	11.31%	5,832	11.42%	2.11	18.16	8.59
Extremadura	105	1.75%	1,035	2.03%	0.25	2.49	9.84
Galicia	341	5.67%	3,917	7.67%	1.15	13.24	11.49
Madrid	79	1.31%	1,303	2.55%	0.98	16.23	16.51
Murcia	244	4.06%	1,673	3.28%	2.15	14.79	6.87
Navarra	398	6.63%	2,606	5.10%	3.83	25.08	6.54
Rioja	59	0.98%	499	0.98%	1.17	9.89	8.47
Valencia	321	5.35%	3,437	6.73%	1.38	14.78	10.89

Source: INE, 2003

In 2002, there were over 1.37 million guests, generating over 4.1 million overnight stays (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Castille-León accounts for almost 20% of all demand, Catalonia for 12%, while the northern Communities of Galicia, Cantabria, Aragón, Basque Country, Navarra and Asturias (in descending order) together account for 40% of the demand. The predominance of Castille-León and Catalonia are due to the proximity of Madrid and Barcelona respectively and the existence of two high seasons, especially in the mountainous regions (Sierra in the former and the Pyrenees in the latter). In fact, demand is maintained throughout the year. In spite of the proximity of the “meseta” areas of Castille-La Mancha and Extremadura to Madrid, they could be considered “peripheral”, as access and activities are less well developed and they have a low RT profile. In Catalonia, in addition to the Pyrenees, distinctive attractive regions such as Alt Empordà, Garrotxa and the River Ebro delta are within less than three hours’ reach of Barcelona.

The predominance of the domestic market is overwhelming, as almost 90% of the visitors in 2002 were Spanish residents, a figure that is indicative of the low level of international market penetration of the product. Nevertheless foreign visitors accounted for 16% of total overnight stays, which is understandable, as a large proportion of Spanish residents use rural accommodation at weekends throughout the year, whilst foreign visitors stay for longer holidays. The close correlation between traditional international tourist destinations and foreign demand is further proof that, for foreigners, rural tourism often constitutes an alternative form of accommodation within well-known destination regions. This trend is particularly significant in the Balearic Islands (26.09% of visitors and



30.73% of overnight stays), but also in the Canary Islands (8.48% and 16.34% respectively) and to a lesser extent in Catalonia and Andalusia.

The average length of stay is 2.99 nights, corresponding to a long weekend, a typical source of demand. Many of the communities with easy access from Madrid, especially those that are less well developed, together with some other inland regions, register below average lengths of stay. By way of contrast, the longest stays are made in the Canary Islands, where distance makes it logical to stay for a full week; the Balearic Islands, where foreigners predominate; and Asturias, where RT—including complementary activities— is well developed. Nevertheless, average occupation rates reach only 21.74%. It is only in the Balearic Islands that significantly higher rates are achieved (38.31%), while rates in the upper twenties are registered in the Basque Country, the region of Madrid (with potentially large urban markets nearby) and the regions of Asturias, Navarra and Cantabria, where the product is relatively well developed.

### **Problems facing rural tourism in Spain**

Many of the difficulties facing RT in Spain can be attributed to the recentness of its development, although, on the other hand, this should provide the opportunity to correct possible errors that have arisen in other countries where the activity has long been established, such as France and the UK. Perhaps the greatest problem for marketing RT at present is the lack of uniformity in the denominations, as a consequence of the fact that the various Autonomous Communities are responsible for tourism legislation which means that there is no regulation of the different categories of rural accommodation at a nationwide scale (see Table 3). It is absolutely essential for the regional administrations in collaboration with the national tourist authority to adopt a unified category system to denote quality, be it ears of corn, stars, shells, different colored apples (or whatever!) and also to adopt easily understood terminology to identify the different products offered under the generic label of RT. Otherwise, RT will run the risk of falling into a state of confusion and find itself competing with other types of hotel establishments, as appears to be the case in the Balearic Islands, where tourist enterprises in rural areas are mostly small, professionally run, luxurious hotels with little or no connection to the farming community. This lack of uniformity makes it impossible to list RT products in clearly defined categories and clients' "word of mouth" is probably a more widespread system for communicating opinion and image (on aspects such as quality, attractiveness, complementary activities) than the existing guide books, which often only reproduce a picture of the site.

As a result, no clear image of the product has really been created so far. The common denominator is not even that of "accommodation on farms", as town houses in small rural settlements are also authorized to provide accommodation in some Autonomous Communities. However, in general, RT maintains the

GEMMA CANOVES & GERDA K. PRIESTLEY

Table 3 Legislation & denomination of RT in Spain's Autonomous Communities

Autonomous Community	Legislation	Denomination
Andalusia	Decree 94 of 1995	Casa rural ( <i>Rural House</i> ) Hotel rural ( <i>Rural Hotel</i> )
Aragon	Decree of 1986 Decree 69/1997	Vivienda de turismo rural ( <i>Rural tourism residence</i> )
Asturias	Decree 26/91. 20 <sup>th</sup> February. 1991 Resolution of 1993 Decree 69 of 1994	Casa de aldea ( <i>Village house</i> ) Casona asturiana ( <i>Asturian country house</i> )
Balearic Islands	Decree 13/10 of 1995	Hotel rural ( <i>Rural Hotel</i> ) Allotgament de turisme d'interior ( <i>Inland tourism house</i> )
Basque Country	Decree of 1988	Alojamiento turístico agrícola ( <i>Agritourism</i> )
Canary Islands	Law of 1995	Establecimiento de turismo rural ( <i>Rural tourism establishment</i> )
Cantabria	Decree of 1989  Decree 31/1997. 23 <sup>th</sup> April	Posada en casa de labranza ( <i>Farmhouse inn</i> ) Posada ( <i>Inn</i> ) Vivienda vacacional ( <i>Recreational house</i> ) Palacio y casona cántabra ( <i>Cantabrian mansion and country house</i> ) Posada de Cantabria ( <i>Cantabrian inn</i> ) Casa de labranza ( <i>Farmhouse</i> ) Vivienda rural ( <i>Rural dwelling</i> )
Castille - León	Decree of 1993  Decree 84/1995. 11 <sup>th</sup> May	Casa rural ( <i>Rural house</i> ) Posada ( <i>Inn</i> ) Centro de Turismo Rural ( <i>Rural tourism centre</i> )
Castille – La Mancha	Decree 43/1994	Casa rural de alojamiento compartido ( <i>Rural house with on-farm lodging</i> ) Casa rural de alquiler ( <i>Rural house to Rent</i> ) Casa de labranza ( <i>Farmhouse</i> )
Catalonia	Decree of 1983 Decree 214 of 1995	Residència casa de pagès ( <i>Farmer's residence</i> ) Gîte de Catalunya ( <i>Catalonian Gite</i> )
Extremadura	Decree 120/1998. 6 <sup>th</sup> October  Decree 4/200. 25 <sup>th</sup> January	Casa rural ( <i>Rural house</i> ) Agroturismo ( <i>Agritourism</i> )  Apartamento turístico Rural ( <i>Rural tourism apartment</i> ) Hotel rural ( <i>Rural hotel</i> )
Galicia	Regulation of 1995  1997 Law of tourist promotion	Pazo ( <i>Mansion</i> )  Casa de aldea ( <i>Village house</i> ) Casa de labranza ( <i>Farmhouse</i> )
Madrid	There is no specific legislation	Apartamento turístico ( <i>Tourist apartment</i> )
Murcia	Decree 79.10 <sup>th</sup> September.1992	Alojamiento turístico especial en zona de interior ( <i>Special tourist accommodation in inland area</i> )
Navarra	"Foral" decree of 1991 "Foral" decree of 1993 "Foral" decree of 1995	Casa rural ( <i>Rural house</i> )
La Rioja	Decree 8 of 1995 Decree 26/2000. 19 <sup>th</sup> May	Casa rural ( <i>Rural house</i> )
Valencian Community	Decree 253 of 1994 Modified Decree 207/1999. 9 <sup>th</sup> November Decree 4/2000. 25 <sup>th</sup> January	Casa rural ( <i>Rural house</i> ) Albergue turístico ( <i>Tourist hostal</i> )  Apartamento de Turismo Rural ( <i>Rural tourism apartment</i> ) Hotel rural ( <i>Rural hotel</i> )

Source: Authors, based on current legislation

symbiosis between agricultural production and the conservation of a more humanized rural environment. Strong support from RT administrative authorities for the provision of a high quality product appears necessary, and more so, when competition in this market tends towards higher quality and less massification. This is understandable in a country where the power of attraction of leisure and vacation resorts on the coast is omnipresent.

Certainly some initiatives already exist. For example, in Catalonia a product known as "*Gîtes de Catalunya*" has been created, consisting of elegant country houses in harmony with their surroundings, with a variety of accommodation options, marketed in different categories by different numbers of ears of corn (as in France). The aim is to offer a higher quality product, focused potentially on foreign clients. The initiative dates from 1995 and a total of 45 *Gîtes* had been established by 1999. Advantage has been taken of an image already existing just over the border in France, even though the product is not identical.<sup>2</sup> Another initiative already mentioned is that of "Green Spain", which embraces the Autonomous Communities along the northern coast of Spain. This is a conscious and significant attempt to counteract the fragmentation of the product as a result of the administrative fragmentation of the country, by developing a territorial unit called "Green Spain", to promote a wide range of tourism units in rural areas. The programme guarantees a quality mark for the associated houses, in which the category of each establishment is denoted by apples (instead of ears of corn as in the case of "*Gîtes*"). The image which is transmitted is one of a continuum of attractive green landscapes, a total contrast from the better known images of Spain.

Another problem observed in this type of tourism is that of seasonality and the consequently low occupation rates, as demand is concentrated at weekends and traditional holiday periods. To counteract this, imaginative initiatives are essential. Encouraging special offers for different types of clients is a successful formula to compensate the variations created by gaps between peaks. Elderly people are possible clients for this type of tourism, which is restful and relaxed, while groups of schoolchildren, company meetings and scientific gatherings can also be potential clients. However, commercialization by individual enterprises would not be satisfactory. Central reservation systems or even smaller organizations must be developed to facilitate access by consumers to the product according to the targeted area. Thus, it is logical to think that, while amateur enthusiasm provided the initial impetus to the project, the time has come to develop the activity in a much more professional manner. Nevertheless, the specific structure and dynamics of rural areas should be taken into account; it is necessary to count on local people able to coordinate activities and local administrations (town halls, cooperatives and associations), for they are possibly those best prepared to do so, as they know the people and the land. However, as previously mentioned, the atomization of the various local protagonists makes coordination more difficult.

The uneven spread of RT constitutes an additional problem, as development and demand is greatest in areas adjacent to established coastal tourist destinations. In these cases, it can be interpreted as an alternative or even a complementary product within the general tourism structure. It is only in northern Spain that RT has developed as a clearly identified, independent sub-sector, whilst in the more depressed rural areas of central Spain, where economically viable alternatives to agriculture are most needed, as a general rule both development and demand are sadly more limited.

### Final Reflections

Tourism in rural areas has been actively promoted as a panacea for the economic problems of the rural population. However, research in various European countries has shown that RT is not the solution for the problems facing the agricultural community, although it certainly can contribute to diversify farm incomes in family farms, inject additional benefits into the rural economy, counteract emigration from rural areas, encourage an increase in cultural exchange between urban and rural areas, and enhance the values inherent to rural life, as well as contribute to the general diversification of the economy.

The success of RT depends upon establishing a balance between the maintenance of economic activities and safeguarding the attractiveness of the rural environment. In order to achieve this balance management by the local community and constraints on visitor numbers are implied, for tourism development must guarantee not to detract from landscape quality and reduce the attractiveness of the resource upon which it depends. The development of endogenous rural initiatives is beneficial, for it has been shown that the provision of leisure activities on site or locally enhance the characteristics of the landscape and/or culture, and this generates greater demand and satisfaction. The objective should be to promote improvement and diversification, thus reducing uniformity in the use of the environment. From this perspective, space consumption implies the appreciation of the idiosyncrasies of each space and RT areas are especially rich in culture, landscape variation, gastronomy and traditions. It is evident that RT offers increasingly varied options for advanced societies looking for enjoyment from a wide range of leisure pursuits.

This article has revealed certain differences in the development of RT in Spain and other advanced economies in Europe. The underlying cause is the later introduction of the activity in Spain, which means that it is at an earlier stage of development, and the product is therefore less evenly spread and less well structured. This situation is accentuated, moreover, by the fact that major development occurred after the transfer of responsibility for tourism from the central government to the regional legislative bodies. As a result, there is considerable disparity in legislation, while commercialization and marketing are highly fragmented, leading to considerable confusion among potential consumers,

## THE EVOLUTION OF RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN

Nevertheless, important challenges still confront Spanish RT. In addition to the need for consensus on legislation, in order to introduce greater clarity and more uniformity, professionalization of this relatively new activity is urgent, to improve, above all, management and marketing. Notwithstanding the contribution of farming women, young people in particular must become the driving force of these initiatives by promoting ideas from within. They consider RT a more attractive and socially a more highly valued activity than agriculture and will be willing to invest in it. Creating job opportunities in the rural world is not easy, but what could be better than offering people the possibility of remaining in their place of origin, if they wish to? If those involved in RT in Spain do not find solutions for these challenges, RT may regretfully fall into oblivion and become little more than a mirage.

### References

- ARDILLIER-CARRAS. F. (1999) Espace rural et tourisme: mirage ou opportunité? Reflexion autour d'un ensemble regional entre Poitou et Limousin. In: Violier. P. L'espace local et les acteurs du tourisme. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes.
- BÉTEILLE. R. (1996a) L'agrotourisme dans les espaces ruraux européens. *Annales de Geography* 592, 584-602.
- BÉTEILLE. R. (1996b) *Le tourisme vert*. PUF, Paris.
- BUSBY. G., RENDLE. S. (2000) The transition from tourism on farms to farm tourism. *Tourism Management* 21, 635-642.
- BUTLER. R., HALL. C. M., JENKINS. J. (1998) *Tourism and recreation in rural areas*. Wiley, London.
- CABALLÉ. A. (1999) L'agrotourisme a l'État espanyol: Anàlisi de l'oferta des d'una perspectiva de gènere. UAB, Barcelona.
- CÁNOVES. G. (1997) The multiadaptive rural woman: Is tourism the solution? Paper presented at the Gender. Tourism. Fun Conference. University of Davis. CA-USA.
- CÁNOVES. G., VILLARINO. M. (2000\*) Turismo rural en Portugal. Las mujeres piezas clave para "recibir y servir". In: Garcia Ramon. M. D., Baylina. M. (Eds). *El nuevo papel de las mujeres en el desarrollo rural*. Oikos-Tau, Vilassar de Mar, Barcelona.
- CANOVES. G., VILLARINO. M. (2000b) Turismo en espacio rural en España: actrices e imaginario colectivo. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica (UAB)*. Barcelona. 37, 51-77.
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1985) *Tourism In The European Community*. European file 11/85. Commission of the European Communities, Brussels.
- COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1988) *The Future Of Rural Society*. Document COM 7957788. Commission of the European Communities, Brussels.
- DERNOI. L. A. (1991) About rural & farm tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research* 16 (1), 3-6.
- HJALAGER. A.M. (1996) Agricultural diversification into tourism. Evidence of a European Community development programme. *Tourism Management* 17, 103-111.
- INE - INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADISTICA (2001/02/03) Encuesta de Ocupación hotelera en acampamentos turísticos. en apartamentos turísticos y en alojamientos de turismo rural. INE, Madrid.
- MARTÍN-CRUZ. J. A. (1991) L'agrotourisme dans la CEE: utopie et réalité. Bureau Européen du Tourisme, Brussels.

- MOINET. F. (1996) *Le tourisme rural en France*. France Agricole, Paris.
- PANIAGUA. A. (2002) Urban-rural migration, tourism entrepreneurs and rural restructuring in Spain. *Tourism Geographies* 4 (4), 349-371.
- RAMOS. A., MARENGO. R. (1999) Le rôle des acteurs locaux dans le développement touristique: Une approche du tourisme intérieur au Portugal. In: Violier. P. *L'espace local et les acteurs du tourisme*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes. Rennes.
- URRY. J. (1990) *The tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies*. Sage Publications, London.
- VILLARINO. M., CÁNOVES. G. (2000) Turismo rural en Galicia: Sin mujeres imposible. In: García Ramon. M. D., Baylina, M. (Eds) *El nuevo papel de las mujeres en el desarrollo rural*. Oikos-Tau, Vilasar de Mar, Barcelona.
- WEAVER. D.B., FENNEL. D.A. (1997) The vacation farm sector in Saskatchewan: a profile of operations. *Tourism Management* 18 (6), 357-365.
- YAGÜE. R.M. (2002) Rural Tourism in Spain. *Annals of Tourism Research* 29 (4), 1101-1110.

<sup>1</sup> Detailed statistical information has been obtained from the INE (National Statistical Institute) monthly survey of RT occupation (*Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural*) since 2001. Prior to this date some Autonomous Communities had been keeping records (though only since 1994) and information limited basically to the number of establishments can also be gleaned from RT guide books.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the use of the same terminology could lead to confusion, as the product in Catalonia is intended as an elite label, unlike its French counterpart.

### *About the Author*

---

**Gemma Canoves** is Assistant Professor of Geography at the Autonomus University of Barcelona, Spain. She has wide experience researching rural development, gender studies and recently rural tourism in Spain and Portugal. Has published in *Sociologia Ruralis*, *Geoforum*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, and academic journals in Spanish.

**Gerda K. Priestley** is Assistant Professor of Geograpy at the Autonomus University of Barcelona, Spain. She teaches tourism geography in The Autonomous School of Tourism.