

Article

Strategies for Creative Tourism Activities in Pandemic Contexts: The Case of the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ Project

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Abstract: The development of creative tourism in small towns in rural areas has been the subject of growing interest and research from different perspectives. As part of the national CREATOUR project, which took place in Portugal over about four years, various organisations with relevant activity in the cultural aspect of creative tourism were analysed, constituting a successful reference at a national and international level. However, since mid-2020, the health crisis owing to the pandemic made it necessary to reflect and work under new circumstances for tourism, in contexts not previously planned for, and at the same time as continuing to champion sustainable development. It is in this context that the present study emerges, the aim of which is to identify organizations’ strategies for adaptation within the scope of creative tourism activities in a pandemic situation. This empirical approach is anchored in the case study of the activities of the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project based on intangible cultural heritage, using in-depth analysis of strategies developed to mitigate the effects of supply and demand constraints. The results show that there was no disintegration of the supply structure, as planned, due to the fact that creative activities are based on the valorisation of the principles of sustainable development and, therefore, depend on endogenous resources and local agents, who remained accessible.

Keywords: creative tourism; holistic experiences; intangible cultural heritage; pandemic contexts; strategies



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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been great tourist demand for experiences based on the consumption of lesser-known aspects of intangible cultural heritage and engaging with locals. This culture has been “transmitted from past generations to present and future generations, and is constantly recreated by several players” [1] (p. 54) (e.g., communities, cultural groups, local associations, tourism companies), and has been shaped by the political and institutional environment, social context, history, nature and financial support, among other circumstances. In this context of dynamics and market trends, the offer of so-called creative tourism is growing and being evaluated, with one objective being to provide tourists with unique creative experiences in the destination they visit. From the point of view of the definition of the operation, addressing the strategies developed within the scope of creative tourism can become an interesting exercise. This is especially the case when considering the diversity of the provider profiles already operating in this domain and the diversity of local and regional-based resources that can be mixed and integrated to create a one-of-a-kind experience, while ensuring a sustainable approach. Considering that creative tourism can be perceived as “tourism directed to an engaged and authentic experience of a place with participative learning in the arts, heritage and special character of a place” [2] (p. 170), it is understandable why the range of experience-based activities that can be developed in this context is very diverse. The approach to creative tourism on this article focuses on the dimension of intangible cultural heritage, understood as

“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” [3] (p. 5).

The impacts of coronavirus pneumonia (COVID-19) on economies and societies requires social research to understand emergency management approaches “to optimize the complex dynamics arising within actors and systems during the outbreak” [4] (p. 1). Additionally, the impacts caused on all geographic scales and at all levels of the cultural tourist activities business, with pressures on the supply and demand sides, have brought new challenges to researchers. It has thus become relevant to urgently analyse and reflect on how the creative tourism sector is reacting to that pressure and how service providers are developing strategies to mitigate the impacts.

Creative tourism is not exclusive to a territorial area, an institutional-organizational domain, a service or tourist market, but it becomes inimitable when it is based on the specificities and singularities of each of these contexts. Thus, in addition to the obvious interest of tourism service agents in having an offer in this area of growing demand, the role that regional and local development associations can play in the provision of creative tourism is also recognized [2,5], mainly due to the proximity to territories, intangible and tangible cultural and natural heritage, endogenous resources and their communities [5]. They are considered to be an important intermediary for the creative industries and can contribute to the sustainable development of territories by offering creative tourism. This is the case of the Portuguese MARCA Local Development Association which, through the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project of creative tourism activities, seeks to enhance intangible heritage in small-scale rural territories. With reference to its role in this exploratory reflective context, it is intended to identify how MARCA, as an experience provider of reference in the Alentejo region of Portugal, reacted to the challenges and constraints imposed by the pandemic situation, and developed adaptive strategies to ensure the continuation of investments that resulted in a project anchored in the ideas of sustainable development. In light of this scope, the specific objectives (SO) of the present study are:

SO1—to describe the typology of creative tourism experiences based on the strategic experiential modules of the Schmitt model;

SO2—to identify adaptation strategies in a pandemic context for creative tourism activities;

SO3—to identify the impacts generated on creative tourism activities in the context of the pandemic.

The recent literature on tourism highlights the great importance of the challenges arising from COVID-19 for all players in tourism industries, but so far it has not been possible to identify several scientific publications in the research area with the focus proposed in this article. It is not yet possible to refer to other published case studies with a similar focus on the field of this research, because it investigates a contemporary phenomenon and various agents were on lay-off. However, it is believed that this article can contribute to enriching/enhancing research in this field of service provision in the reflective context of global and common challenges that all actors in the tourism value chain are facing. One of the main conclusions reached is that, until the moment of the information-gathering work, there was no disintegration of the supply structure due to the fact that creative activities promoted by MARCA are based on the valorisation of the principles of sustainable development and, therefore, depend on endogenous resources and local agents. So, the cultural heritage dimensions explored and analysed in the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project activities kept the kind of experiences it had with minor adjustments but added the necessary sanitary rules in terms of physical distance and cleaning measures to ensure the health of the providers of the activities and to maintain participants’ confidence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Creative Tourism and Experiences

Creative tourism initiatives have been discussed as a successful alternative model to conventional cultural tourism from the perspective of supply and demand [6]. The main objective of creative tourism is to provide tourists with active experiences [6–10]. It “offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through their active participation in courses and learning experiences which are characteristic of the holiday destination where they are undertaken” [11] (p. 19). Creative tourism functions as “a more sustainable form of tourism that offers an authentic feel to the local culture through informal practical workshops and creative experiences” [12] (p. 145). The essence of creative tourism seems to be found in the activities and experiences related to self-fulfilment and self-expression through which creative tourists become co-interpreters and cocreators as they develop their own creative skills [7,13].

Since tourism activity is based on an intention to escape from the routine of daily life, travelling functions as a constructive valuable experience, within which tourists seek internal development and personal enrichment (among others, [14–16]). Starting from this basic theoretic paradox, creative tourism also promotes the tourist experience by exploring the five human senses. But each creative experience is unique and takes on a different meaning for each tourist [17]. It is of note that the creative and memorable experiences that tourists acquire in a destination are personal and nontransferable. The more learning and sensory stimulation are present, the more unique and creative the experience will be [6]. Tourists with cultural and creative motivations want to be involved in genuine experiences associated with the places they visit. They want to use first-hand materials for their creativity and imagination and take away with them unique pieces that they created in the destination they visited [18]. Creativity has a fundamental role in the offer of creative tourism, where the tourist experience depends on the uniqueness and material and immaterial characteristics of the territories and communities involved to be able to provide that opportunity [19]. It should be noted that the involvement of communities in the process of creating creative experiences means that, in a way, they can make a greater contribution to local development and that they can also further develop their own community and artistic skills [20].

Creative tourism is based on direct interaction between visitors and residents fostering a greater local experience, [21] and therefore can also be useful for valuing intangible cultural heritage in small towns. But for it to be sustainable in a region, it must “maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raise their awareness about sustainability issues and promote sustainable practices among them” [22] (p. 84). Therefore, knowledge of how some joint strategies for sustainability have been approached by some cities, destinations, or platforms of creative networks (e.g., UNESCO Creative Cities Network, Creative Tourism Network, Recria, Brazil) is of growing importance in the context of a more complex scenario of managing competitiveness. Furthermore, knowing how individual providers are developing their strategies and planning to achieve their goals allows players to have a better view of the ongoing organizational process in cases of success or failure and to better consider future investments that meet the expectations of increasingly demanding visitors in this market. Currently, the most frequent central question is whether the usual strategies are being readjusted as a result of the pandemic context and, in the case of a positive response, what the main changes and fundamentals are that impact tourists' creative tourism experiences.

2.2. Health and Safety in Creative Tourism Activities: Impacts, Challenges and Strategies

The impacts generated by the pandemic crisis on international tourism are evident; thus, according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals at airports fell by 74% in 2020, a direct consequence of travel restrictions, leading to a sharp drop in international tourist revenues. In Europe the results followed the same downward trend: a 70% reduction in international tourist arrivals at airports in 2020 [23]. Furthermore,

in an international outlook, the UNWTO presents several scenarios for the recovery of international tourism activity, now updated with the introduction of the vaccination plan in effect in various countries. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, it can be noted that in the three scenarios presented, the recovery of the 2019 figures will only be fully achieved in the year 2024, also noting that with this pandemic crisis, figures identical to those of the year 1990 were recorded.

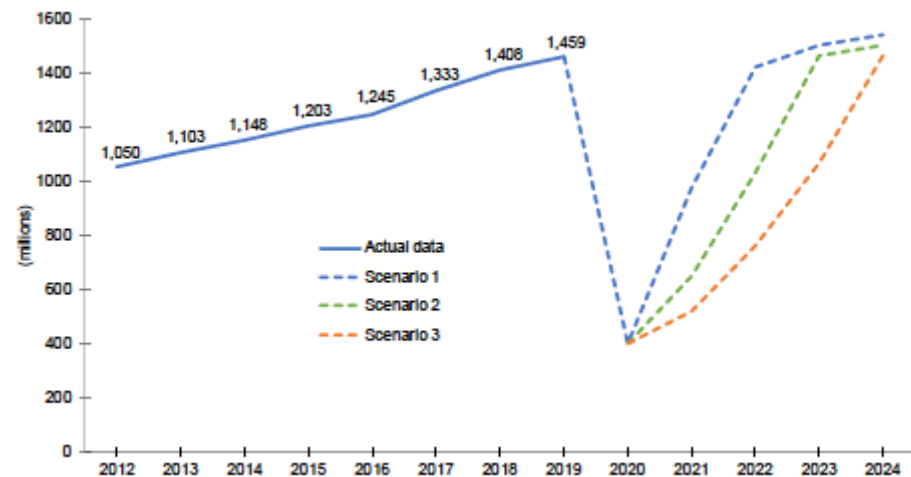


Figure 1. International Tourist Arrivals: Scenarios for 2021–2024 (millions) [23].

In Portugal, this impact is similar when we evaluate the indicator “overnight stays”, for which the numbers continue to indicate a lower drop for residents (−35.4%) compared to nonresidents (−74.9%) in the year 2020 [24]. The Alentejo region had a decrease of 37.4% in the total of overnight stays in 2020. Residents, who accounted for 80.8% of the overall overnight stays, decreased by 23.3%. It should be noted that the Portuguese tourist region that experienced the smallest drop in tourism in 2020 was Alentejo, a situation largely explained by its dependence on the national market and simultaneously by the trend of demand for rural regions in the interior of the country for Portuguese holiday demand. This phenomenon is validated by the behaviour of domestic tourism demand in the summer period (1 June to 15 September 2020), according to the study of the consumption of holidays by the Portuguese in the summer period published by Turismo de Portugal. This study shows that the Alentejo region (where MARCA is located and operates) was one of the few regions in the country that saw a growth (+1%) in ATM purchase operations in tourism services by Portuguese people and foreigners in the summer of 2020 compared to the summer of 2019.

The recent literature on tourism has gained a plethora of published papers on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism (among others, [25–28]). Among this literature, recent papers have developed the perspective of risk management of COVID-19 [29,30], suggesting the need to implement tourism crisis and disaster management plans. In this vein, Yeh [31] underlined the importance of tourism crisis and disaster management plans to mitigate the impact and support postcrisis recovery. In order to meet and recover tourists’ confidence and to ensure a return to normal travel routines, various international and national tourism organizations are enhancing the implementation of health and safety stamps (e.g., Safe & Clean in Portugal or the Safe Travels stamp from the WTTC).

Governments around the world are also adopting various actions in order to support the recovery of the tourism industry, but also to prevent a rise in infections caused by COVID-19. From basic individual safety procedures (e.g., face masks; social distancing, among others), to more global actions (mass vaccination; digital vaccination passports, among others) it is evident that all the effects of the pandemic are pushing consumer behaviour into different patterns of consumption. From these consumer changing patterns, Cheer [32] predicts an effect of human flourishing and tourism transformation on tourist

behaviour caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, he suggested that a “deep shift in values” is imminent and that “the old ways of thinking no longer work” [32] (p. 515, citing [29]).

Ehrenfeld and Hoffman’s [33] paradox, applied to tourism operations, brought the need to rethink how tourism stakeholders should (re)organize tourism experience programmes when lockdowns and social distancing are daily circumstances for every tourist. These COVID-19 restrictions called for new paradox research and in the same vein, new priorities and strategies for practitioners should be adopted [27]. For instance, “Social distancing imposed by COVID-19 includes actions such as, reducing social contact, avoiding crowded places, or minimizing travel. Social distancing can significantly impact how people experience and evaluate leisure and travel activities like hiking, outdoor activities and nature-based tourism or even personal services like spas, dining, and concierge services. Social distancing or better physical distancing may influence tourists’ perceptions of health hazards, insecurity and unpleasant tourism experiences” [27] (p. 316). In addition to these challenges and global actions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector, the literature has brought new insights and case studies. Other authors suggested a method for organizing tourism routes within a destination with the aim of shortening the tourist length of stay, reducing impacts and preventing the concentration of too many tourists in the same place at the same time [34]. Other authors suggested a development model towards sustainable and regenerative tourism by suggesting creative tourism activities, where they exerted the capacity of creative tourism to implement a “framework to develop innovative approaches for a sustainable cultural tourism that is place-responsive and community-engaged” [35] (p. 2) and which promotes a more balanced interest between locals and tourists. In addition to physical distancing requirements, the importance of the component of socialization and interaction of visitors with the local community are specific features of creative tourists [36]. In this vein, Kristina et al. [37] call for tourism industry stakeholders to adopt adaptation strategies and maintain resilient behaviours in order to enhance and promote the continuity of travel consumption behaviours. The results highlight the need to develop adaptive and resilient behaviour in tourism industry players, which will generate community resilience and tourist satisfaction. So, as creative tourism is part of the tourism value chain, it has an important role in this process. This is due to its strong mission in developing and creating experiences embedded in active participation and learning behaviour, promoting involvement between tourists, artisans and other members of the local communities. Considering the recent literature on organizational adaptation, response practices and actions, according to Margherita and Heikkilä [38], “the concepts of business continuity and resilience against emergencies should be extended to small organizations, which face the crisis generated by the pandemic along different and equally significant dimensions” (p. 693). In this context it is important to analyse how creative tourism operators are developing resilient behaviour to face the pandemic constraints and how they implement adaptive strategies.

3. Materials and Methods

The research method used was the case study approach, to explore, describe and understand how the MARCA association developed adaptation strategies for the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project within the scope of creative tourism activities in a global pandemic situation. It was assumed that it would not be easy to identify similar studies and research precedents to compare with the results obtained in the present research. However, among the advantages of the case study approach are flexibility in the research strategy and also the “ability to place people, organizations, events and experiences in their social and historical context” [39] (p. 111). It is considered that the chosen case can be illustrative because it is one of the cases with recognized success at the regional and national level for the work it has been carrying out for over 30 years. A recent milestone in this recognition was its involvement with the national project CREATOUR, within which the project ‘Saídas de Mestre’ was developed. Although the project involves a total of seven activities of

a different nature, only four of them were investigated to identify the solutions found to ensure the defined methodological procedures (e.g., researchers' direct observation and participation in the creative activities). For this reason, it is considered that they can serve as a starting point or reference to observe and investigate other similar activities carried out by similar organizations. There is also a pragmatic reason given that there are close relationships with the institution under study that result from previous research and action-research work [5], as it is a successful reference, as already mentioned. For these reasons, there is great interest in continuing to follow the evolution of the creative tourism activities developed by MARCA.

The type of data collected to satisfy the data needs was qualitative and data gathering techniques include secondary and primary data. In order to collect secondary data, in the first step, content analysis of the institutional documents, informative materials and publications in literature of the activities offered by MARCA was carried out through the project 'Saídas de Mestre' in the last quarter of 2020. Primary data from direct observation through the participation of researchers in four activities was also processed. In the second phase, in January 2021, an in-depth interview (Appendix A) was carried out with the director of the association under study to identify the organization's adaptation strategies within the scope of four creative tourism activities in the context of a pandemic. The interview also sought to identify how the institutional context of MARCA managed to adapt to its strategies in order to promote its activities and attract tourists. Data analysis was based on photos and textual content analysis of all the data compiled.

Grounded in approaches from previous investigations presented in the first section, and based on this case study, this article first explores the holistic experiences provided within the scope of creative tourism, considering the profile of creative tourists [36] according to the new research paradoxes of tourist demand suggested by some authors [27,33,40]. The Schmitt model of customer experience [41–43] was used as a basis to reflect on how holistic experiences were created to involve and engage tourists, and which adaptation strategies were established in the context of a pandemic. Thus, this model, which involves five types of experiences, was applied.

It is considered that the application of strategic experiential modules of the Schmitt model [41–43] allows exploration of the different dimensions of experiences that can be enhanced through creative tourism associated with intangible natural and cultural heritage which is representative of the territories where the activities are developed.

3.1. Characterization of the MARCA Association

MARCA has been a local development association since 1997 and is located in the rural Alentejo region. Its mission is to promote the social and economic development of rural regions. In its activities, it seeks to involve and bring together citizens and institutions in the search for solutions that can promote sustainability and improve the quality of life of populations. In this context, it aims to preserve the environment, enhance natural and built heritage and promote actions in the social and cultural area [5,17,44]. The thematic areas of intervention of MARCA are identified in Table 1, together with a description of its purpose.

Table 1. Areas of intervention of the MARCA Association [44].

Cultural Heritage	Preservation and recovery of cultural practices and traditions, in the preservation and dissemination of the built rural heritage and in the promotion of intergenerational meetings to rescue and communicate tradition, memory and identity.
Social	Promoting social inclusion and civic participation, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of communities and filling perceived needs, in particular at the level of social weaknesses: unemployment, sociodemographic isolation, poor access to information and skills deficits and mismatches.
Environment	Conciliation between the conservation and enhancement of natural resources and socioeconomic development as a strategy for the sustainable future of rural areas.

In the area of intangible cultural heritage, MARCA carries out a set of initiatives to promote local products and resources. The association, in partnership with other local entities, has developed dissemination workshops, particularly in the areas of knowledge of traditional crafts and local gastronomy [5]. It is within the scope of these workshops that the association promotes creative activities for the community and for tourists. The activities of the creative workshops articulate appreciation and promotion of art, heritage and the environment. Thus, tourists have the possibility to experience aspects of cultural heritage and, at the same time, to learn about and have direct contact with the integrated resources of the natural environment of the Alentejo region.

3.2. Characterization of the Project ‘Saídas de Mestre’

The ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project was born out of the CREATOUR national project ‘Developing Creative Tourism Destinations in Small Towns and Rural Areas’. The initiative aims to develop new and creative approaches to the dissemination of local heritage and resources, in a proposal to promote creative and community-based tourism in the Alentejo region [45]. The ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project consists of a set of creative workshops based on local knowledge and fostering partnerships with artists, artisans and local entities. The activities of the workshops combine appreciation and promotion of art, heritage and the environment, including tours and visits that allow the participant to enjoy artistic practice. By creating this opportunity, visitors are given the possibility of immersing themselves in aspects of intangible cultural heritage, while at the same time, they learn about and have direct contact with the integrated resources of Alentejo’s natural environment.

The activities promoted in each workshop are carried out and led by artists and/or artisans who are experts in specific thematic domains and who, as a general rule, reside and/or work in the Alentejo region. Artists and/or artisans lead the workshops, not only clarifying how the art or technique in explanation is applied, but also encouraging the participants to interact, creatively involving them in the dynamics of making and/or developing objects, attitudes and expression of artistic activities, among other modalities, depending on the specific theme of each workshop.

4. Results

Within the scope of the creative tourism offer of the project ‘Saídas de Mestre’ (‘Exits of Master’ in English), to accomplish SO1 (to describe the typology of creative tourism experiences based on the strategic experiential modules of the Schmitt model) four activities were selected and information was analysed: a workshop on the construction of Sock Dolls; Lime Tours; Basketry for Birds; and Field Drawing. The following sections also explore the characteristics of each of the four activities, also called workshops or masterclasses, according to the Schmitt model [41–43], as mentioned above. For a better understanding of the strategies adopted in a pandemic context, and to accomplish SO2 (to identify the adaptation strategies in a pandemic context for creative tourism activities), for each of the different activities of the project, procedures were defined to ensure health and safety, both for the agents who carry out the activities and experiences (artisans and artists) as well as for the participants engaged with others (e.g., tourists and the community).

4.1. ‘Sock Dolls’ Activity

The activity of making sock dolls (named ‘Bonecos de Meia’ in Portuguese), with natural fillings (wool, aromatic herbs), is inspired by traditional Alentejo dolls. In this activity, tourists learn to make their own sock doll, where they give it different shapes through creativity and applied techniques. Table 2 shows the type of experiences that the creative cultural offer of the ‘Sock Dolls’ proposes to the participants.

Table 2. ‘Sock Dolls’ activity: Experiences and adaptation strategies in a pandemic context.

Type of Experiences	Description of Experiences
Sensorial (Sense)	<p>Observation/sight: offers participants the opportunity to watch and see the aromatic herbs and wool used in the creative workshop; understanding the manufacturing and teaching/learning process through observation of the demonstration.</p> <p>Touch: exploring and handling materials and their textures.</p> <p>Smell: exploring aromas from natural elements (e.g., scent of herbs and wool).</p> <p>Hearing/sound: explanation of the process of making a sock puppet, using a storytelling technique.</p> <p>Sharing the experience with other participants and community members.</p>
Affective (Feel)	<p>Connection with the place and with history.</p> <p>Reference to family experiences, past and present.</p> <p>Making the object (sock doll) may have associations with playful childhood experiences, depending on the meaning attributed by the participant to making it.</p>
Cognitive (Think)	<p>Understanding the contribution that the activity makes to the concept of circular economy and ecology, namely through the reuse of materials/objects (reusing no longer used socks) and the use of natural materials from the surrounding environment.</p> <p>Learning about the behaviour of materials and exploring techniques applied to the object, which can be transposed to other contexts/activities.</p>
Physical, behaviours and ways of living (Act)	<p>Deconstructing stereotypes based on gender issues, as the activity can be carried out by all people, regardless of gender.</p> <p>Deconstructing the relationship between textile activity and the female gender, which has a strong cultural connotation.</p>
Social and cultural identity (Relate)	<p>Contextualization of the activity according to the local environmental and social context and the artisanal practices of Alentejo.</p> <p>Combines learning of traditional techniques and use of unused materials (e.g., socks) that form the basis for the proposed activity.</p>
Adaptation strategies in a pandemic context: description of the measures adopted	<p>Sanitization of materials and tools (wool, socks, buttons, needles, thread).</p> <p>Provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format.</p> <p>Carrying out the activity outdoors and in a rural environment.</p> <p>Fewer participants per activity.</p> <p>Social distance maintained between participants.</p> <p>Social distance maintained between the participants and the masters/artisans (social conduct—the form of contact between supply/demand has changed).</p> <p>Mandatory wearing of masks and/or personal protective equipment for artisans and participants (respiratory notice).</p> <p>Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitizer to participants and masters/artisans (e.g., use of disinfectants).</p> <p>Sanitization of the spaces used (tables, benches)</p> <p>No materials/objects to be shared between participants.</p>

According to Table 2, the dynamics associated with the experience itself, it fully promotes and appeals to the participants by having five types of creative tourism experience to make their experience unique and memorable. In fact, the sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioural, social and cultural dimensions were planned to allow and promote a holistic experience. The strategies adopted in a pandemic context follow the general sanitary protection measures adopted transversally by other organisations and sectors. All of these seven general sanitary strategies were also adapted for the other analysed creative tourism activities (Tables 3–5). Specifically, measures such as the sanitization of materials and tools (wool, socks, buttons, needles, thread), provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format and carrying out the activity outdoors and in a rural environment, were tailored to the specificity of the ‘Sock Dolls’ activity.

Table 3. ‘Lime Tours’ activity: Experiences and adaptation strategies in a pandemic context.

Type of Experiences	Description of Experiences
Sensorial (Sense)	Observation/sight: watching the technique and process of lime decanting. Touch: handling materials and using different tools necessary for making sgraffito. Smell: smells associated with the materials used, humidity. Hearing/sound: explanation of the process of making sgraffito and placing the technique in the traditional architecture of Alentejo using a storytelling technique.
Affective (Feel)	Providing a hands-on experience and satisfaction with the results achieved at the end of the activity. The earlier visit to the lime kilns provides a common thread, creating greater meaning in carrying out the practical activity.
Cognitive (Think)	Providing a hands-on experience and satisfaction with the results achieved at the end of the activity. The earlier visit to the lime kilns provides a common thread, creating greater meaning in carrying out the practical activity.
Physical, behaviours and ways of living (Act)	Learning about the use of cheap and ecological materials and techniques in house construction and maintenance. It can contribute to a more ecologically aware lifestyle, and to a reflection for consumers on the origin and choice of materials for various daily uses that respond to people’s needs.
Social and cultural identity (Relate)	The activity links the social context and the identity of the place (cities and villages in Alentejo). Practical experience of a technique used in traditional Alentejo architecture. The visit to the lime kilns allows for an understanding of the origin and process of transformation of this material, creating meaning and connection with the local culture and also contextualizing the creative experience.
Adaptation strategies in a pandemic context: description of the measures adopted	Sanitization of materials/utensils (brushes and spatulas). Provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format. Carrying out the activity outdoors and in a rural environment. Fewer participants per activity. Social distance maintained between participants. Social distance maintained between the participants and the masters/artisans (social conduct—the form of contact between supply/demand has changed). Mandatory wearing of masks and/or personal protective equipment for artisans and participants (respiratory notice). Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitizer to participants and masters/artisans (e.g., use of disinfectants). Sanitization of the spaces used (tables, benches). No materials/objects to be shared between participants.

Table 4. ‘Basketry for Birds’ activity: Experiences and adaptation strategies in a pandemic context.

Type of Experiences	Description of Experiences
Sensorial (Sense)	- Observation/sight: observation of the technique and basic processes of handling the different fibres and weaves. - Touch: exploring, selecting and handling natural fibres to make an object. - Smell: associated with the natural smell of the material (dry and wet wicker). - Hearing/sound: explanation of the use of the technique via storytelling and sharing doubts and experiences in progress with other participants.
Affective (Feel)	- Affective connection to the basketwork master, sharing and telling stories of his life and others. The choice of the place where the activity takes place (nature, plant nursery or the outdoor areas of the former primary school).
Cognitive (Feel)	- Exploring and acquiring knowledge about various fibres used in basketry. Knowledge of the plant species used and where they can be found in nature. Preparation process for the fibres and learning how they behave and about the care to be taken in their use.
Physical, behaviours and ways of living (Act)	- Contact with the basketwork master and with the technique and its relationship with nature, promoting pro-environmental behaviour. “Slow” living, taking one’s time, as the practice of arts and crafts demands.

Table 4. Cont.

Type of Experiences	Description of Experiences
Social and cultural identity (Relate)	- Relation of basket weaving activity with the environmental and social context of the Alentejo region.
Adaptation strategies in a pandemic context: description of the measures adopted	<p>Sanitation of materials (e.g., wicker, water containers, tools).</p> <p>Provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format.</p> <p>Carrying out the activity outdoors and in a rural environment.</p> <p>Fewer participants per activity.</p> <p>Social distance maintained between participants.</p> <p>Social distance maintained between the participants and the masters/artisans (social conduct—the form of contact between supply/demand has changed).</p> <p>Mandatory wearing of masks and/or personal protective equipment for artisans and participants (respiratory notice).</p> <p>Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitizer to participants and masters/artisans (e.g., use of disinfectants).</p> <p>Sanitization of the spaces used (tables, benches).</p> <p>No materials/objects to be shared between participants.</p>

4.2. 'Lime Tours' Activity

The Lime Tours activity (named 'Passeios de Cal' in Portuguese) culminates in a sgraffiti workshop—a decorative mural technique that consists of scrawling on the surface of a mortar with a sharp point while it is soft in order to show the underlying mortar, resulting in a play between light/dark and texture and relief. This technique, used in the decoration of popular architecture in Alentejo, is applied in this workshop to a tile with lime mortar and natural dyes. Table 3 presents the types of creative experience that the activity can offer the tourist.

The 'Lime Tours' activity also allows tourists' to have five types of creative tourism experiences, as presented in Table 3. Specific sanitary measures such as the sanitization of materials/utensils (brushes and spatulas), providing the participants with information regarding security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format and the carrying out of outdoors activities in a rural environment, were tailored for this specific activity.

4.3. 'Basketry for Birds' Activity

The activity 'Basketry for Birds' (named 'Cestaria para Pássaros' in Portuguese) consists of a workshop for the building of nests and feeders in basketry for birds that, once placed outdoors, will serve as a structure that invites them to stay and/or feed from them. The observation of several species is an activity that was traditionally very dynamic in the family. Table 4 below shows the types of creative experience the activity can offer participants.

The 'Basketry for Birds' activity also allows tourists' to have full contact with local handcrafters and a fully immersive experience with the local/rural community, appealing to an exploration of the five types of creative tourism experience, as presented in Table 4. Specific sanitary measures such as the sanitation of materials (e.g., wicker, water containers, tools), provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format and the carrying out of outdoors activity and in a rural environment, were tailored for this specific activity.

4.4. 'Field Drawing' Activity

The 'Field Drawing' activity (named 'Desenho de Campo' in Portuguese) consists of a walk through the countryside with time and drawing materials to observe and draw various natural elements found in nature. Table 5 below shows the types of creative

experience that the activity can offer to participants, as well as adaptation strategies in a pandemic context.

The 'Field Drawing' activity is another example of how an activity allows tourists to explore the intangible heritage, promoting full contact with landscapes, places and natural ecosystems, as presented in Table 5. Specific sanitary measures such as the sanitation of materials (e.g., pencils and paper), provision of information on security procedures to participants (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format and the carrying out the activity outdoors activities in a rural environment, were tailored for this specific activity.

Table 5. 'Field Drawing' activity: Experiences and adaptation strategies in a pandemic context.

Type of Experiences	Description of Experiences
Sensorial (Sense)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observation/sight: opportunity to see the countryside/nature; differentiating isolated elements from the whole and exploring framing and textures. - Touch: exploring and handling materials and textures. - Smell: exploring aromas from the natural elements of the landscape (seeds, plants and wood). - Hearing/sound: exploring and concentrating on the sounds of nature. Sharing the experience with other participants.
Affective (Feel)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involvement with the natural environment/nature. <p>Immersion in the experience of being in touch with the surrounding nature and exploring it through different drawing techniques.</p> <p>Exploring simple exercises with immediate results that allow a level of positive satisfaction, regardless of the participant's level of talent/competence at drawing.</p>
Cognitive (Think)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of different techniques which are accessible to all people that can be applied in other contexts. <p>Use of accessible and common materials, thus opening up a range of possibilities and creativity that goes beyond the context of the activity (e.g., drawing using an object's shadow, tracing, using coffee to draw, etc.).</p>
Physical, behaviours and ways of living (Act)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowing that changing behaviour is made through three components: affectivity, cognition and predisposition to act. This activity has three components starting from the relationship with nature and contact with natural elements, stimulating a relationship of respect and care, namely through the careful handling, collection and final transport of natural elements. <p>It provides an awakening of attention and sensitivity that motivates an affective connection to and knowledge of natural elements and the ecosystem, leading to more pro-environmental behaviours and respect for the environment.</p>
Social and cultural identity (Relate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The workshop includes the contextualization of natural ecosystems and the evolution of the landscape, the importance/impact of man on natural ecosystems and landscape modelling, and associates a social and identity perspective of the places visited. <p>Participants expand their knowledge and develop their understanding of the relationship between man, environment and landscape.</p>
Adaptation strategies in a pandemic context: description of the measures adopted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanitization of materials and tools (e.g., pencils, paper). Provision of information to participants on security procedures (information given to all participants beforehand) in digital/online format. Carrying out the activity outdoors and in a rural environment. Fewer participants per activity. Social distance maintained between participants. Social distance maintained between the participants and the masters/artisans (social conduct—the form of contact between supply/demand has changed). Mandatory wearing of masks and/or personal protective equipment for artisans and participants (respiratory notice). Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitizer to participants and masters/artisans (e.g., use of disinfectants). Sanitization of the spaces used (tables, benches). No materials/objects to be shared between participants.

4.5. Impacts Generated on Creative Tourism Activities

Considering SO3 (to identify the impacts generated on creative tourism activities in a pandemic context), the information collected from the interview indicates that the lockdown of the tourism sector at a regional, national and international level, which aimed to prevent the circulation of visitors, caused a general substantial negative impact on local tourism activity. Thus, more visible negative effects on the economic dimension have had an impact on MARCA network partners, even though the income from these activities is complementary for the entities and people involved. Creative tourism activities based on areas such as preservation and recovery of cultural practices and traditions and natural resources were slightly affected by the pandemic situation, because they are already embedded in a global strategy for the sustainable future of rural areas, in which the tourism sector has an important role.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present research intends to identify how the MARCA association reacted to the challenges and constraints imposed by the pandemic situation and developed adaptive strategies in the context of the 'Saídas de Mestre' project to ensure the continuation of investments that resulted in a project anchored in the ideas of sustainable development. According to study results, MARCA presents a management plan with strategies to mitigate impacts caused by the pandemic, as deemed important by several authors [4,29–31,40]. The project 'Saídas de Mestre', whose four activities were characterized in the previous sections based on Schmitt's model [41–43], evidences a set of holistic experiences of a passive and active character, that participants can continue to enjoy in the different creative workshops in which they engage. In addition, like any other tourist service, they are now subject to the fulfilment of new dimensions of action related to the health and safety of all those involved, revealing the adoption of adaptation and resilience strategies, as suggested by some authors (among others, [28,37]).

The necessary strategies that MARCA has developed to guarantee the safety of artisans/masters and participants in the pandemic context do not call into question the sustainability of the activities, nor the specificities of the experiences that tourists can enjoy within the scope of the activities under analysis. However, within the scope of the project under analysis, MARCA restricted the offer of some activities in order to minimize possible risks, according to two main criteria: age and health conditions of the teachers/activity facilitators and characteristics of the places and cities where creative initiatives usually took place. Thus, with regard to the age and health conditions of the teachers/stimulators, activities which are led by older people or people with health problems were cancelled. With regard to the spaces where the activities are carried out, they are mandatorily held outdoors. The organization and dynamics of the sessions are adapted in order to reduce the proximity between people and the sharing of materials.

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, and due to imperatives that forced the participants' contact with the local community to be minimized, the only creative tourism activities they undertook were workshops on 'Field Drawing', included in the scope of the projects of environmental volunteering promoted by MARCA, which continued operating. This was due to the fact that it is less demanding in terms of the use of materials and contact between the facilitator and the participants, and also because it can be easily done outdoors without great demands in terms of material and logistical conditions. This experience allowed MARCA to test/design solutions to respond to the health crisis, many of them transversal to the different activities of the 'Saídas de Mestre' project, as described in the tables in the previous section. At the same time, the institution took advantage of this phase to consolidate and plan/develop new activities, establish local contacts and seek support to make these new and recent offers viable. Given the mobility restrictions imposed between countries on a global scale, it also focused more on exploring the possibility of investing in the creation of offers aimed at the national public. In this way, the organization faced this new pandemic scenario and sought to adapt to the new context of tourist consumption,

exploring various solutions and measures that seek to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the demand for its programmes. Such resilient behaviour falls within the action model proposed by some authors (among others, [37,38]), contributing to the fulfilment of MARCA's mission and objectives [44].

Considering the hygiene of cultural spaces, instruments, objects, artefacts and people's safety, so far, MARCA has chosen not to adopt any voluntary national quality seals (e.g., Clean & Safe by Turismo de Portugal National Tourism Authority) or any international ones (e.g., Safe Travels Stamp Guide by the WTTC; European Tourism COVID-19 Safety Seal; ISO/PAS 5643/2021). The strategies adopted to ensure the hygiene of cultural spaces, instruments and objects considered in the creative tourism experiences analysed (see Tables 2–5), despite not having been subject to a formal certification process, are in line with the measures of the General Directorate of Health and with the essential requirements associated with the Clean & Safe seal promoted by Turismo Portugal [46], considered a pioneer at the European level. First, it prioritized the consolidation of activities related to the 'Saída de Mestre' project, and in addition, in its opinion, MARCA considered that the dimension of the project did not justify the investment in registering for this type of seals or certificates. However, in the future it is considering the possibility of joining, as there is evidence that tourists are increasingly giving importance to these instruments when choosing their holiday destination and the activities they intend to do [31]. Even so, with regard to health requirements and protocols for mitigating and preventing the spread of COVID-19, an attempt was made to identify the changes in terms of supply, whether at the level of the profile of the participating masters or in the choice of indoor versus outdoor spaces. As for the health protocol/requirements that MARCA identified in terms of supply and demand, and considering the contacts they had, one of the main requirements was linked to the transport of groups in conditions that respected the indications of the General Directorate of Health; the organization and dynamics of the activities themselves; and use of masks even in outdoor spaces in case it is difficult to maintain distance between participants. In addition to the specifics of the strategic options that MARCA has adopted for its operating context, additional procedures were also identified, identical to those of other institutions that provide services, namely the following: individualized material; cleaning of materials/spaces; type of space/arrangement of materials and resources in the space; number of people per group; restricted interaction with the older community; communication/information about restrictions and/or rules to be followed during the activities (see Tables 2–5). In terms of benchmarking action, the question: "Has any analysis been carried out on the development of similar initiatives with other actors in the context of the pandemic?" was asked to check whether they were following up on good practices that may have been developed by other operators in the area. MARCA did this in a very punctual and systematized way. "In terms of benchmarking, we searched for any analysis that had been carried out on the development of similar initiatives with other actors in the context of the pandemic. This was done in an individually tailored way". In more specific terms, the following question was asked: "What communication strategies are used to promote the 'Saídas de Mestre' project in the context of a pandemic and attract participants?" That is, how are communication strategies being developed/adapted? 'Saídas de Mestre' is a recent project, and so the communication aspect is important and requires emphasis. The participants are mainly from environmental volunteering projects (national and international), for which we maintained the strategy of communication and presentation of offers (we included these activities in programmes integrated with environmental volunteering). During this period, we publicized it on social networks and adapted communication materials to contact companies, mainly in team building and later in tourism. With regard to questions on sociocultural and economic impacts on community and network projects (among others), it was mentioned that the pandemic, in fact, caused some effects on the 'Saídas de Mestre' project (as in all organizational typologies globally [38]), but not at the level of the supply structure. The pandemic made some aspects impossible, forcing visits to the Montemor-o-Novo region to be cancelled, for example. This fact had economic impacts for MARCA and also for its partners involved in this project, although the income resulting

from this activity is only complementary for the entities and people involved. Another question posed was: "Under what conditions has the pandemic affected, or could it affect the 'Saídas de Mestre' project, positively or negatively?" The pandemic negatively affected the project 'Saídas de Mestre' due to the cancellation of some scheduled appointments and activities. The difficulty of planning and scheduling the future activities also proved to be a negative constraint on the enjoyment of these activities. Positively, it seems that there is potential in this type of programme that combines creative activities and contact with nature, due to the safety conditions they offer, because these activities can be undertaken outdoors, they are planned for a limited number of people and as they use endogenous resources and collaboration with local entities and people. Searching for further response practices and actions that might contribute to continuing creative tourism activities as business or commercial practice, the following question was asked: "Despite the constraints of the pandemic, did MARCA consider integrating the project's initiatives into any national or international network? Why?" The answer was affirmative: "this was considered and we are continuing with this option. We remain committed to collaborating with the creation of a network of creative tourism at a national level together with other partners, arising from the participation in the creativity project". This approach and attitude correspond to a position of resilience and continuous commitment to improving and adapting the offer of services and products, as the crisis generated by the pandemic also creates opportunities for organizations to go beyond business continuity [31,38]. The issue of 'traditional normality' versus 'new normality' in creative tourism experiences was also addressed. The question was: "After the pandemic period, are there any prospects of returning to normality or will the procedures become part of the characteristics of supply and demand?" According to the person interviewed, the new normality will not lie outside what has happened in the last months and unknown developments are still awaited. It makes sense to keep most of the new health safety rules, even if the pandemic is fully controlled because it must be hypothesized that other epidemics and pandemics could emerge in force with significant impacts on supply (e.g., supply chain interruptions) and demand (e.g., changes in visitor expectations and needs). As for the rules of physical and/or social distancing, it is expected that they will no longer be necessary, above all, considering the specificities and objectives associated with the offer of creative tourism on a cultural, material or immaterial basis. But so far, general/common rules for the organization of all activities were established and the guidelines of the General Directorate of Health were complied with (e.g., cleaning of surfaces and treatment of clothes, utensils used in the activities, etc.).

The 'Saídas de Mestre' project uses the existing intangible heritage values in the Alentejo territory to promote a set of experiential, formative and creative activities involving the participant, but following the health and safety rules stipulated by MARCA. The essence of creative tourism resides not only in the creative experience that tourists have in the territory they visit, but also in the contact with the local culture through the community that transmits their know-how to the tourists. This level of involvement and proximity is an essential premise of culture-based creative tourism. Therefore, even considering the constraints imposed on health security, MARCA has developed strategies to ensure that this premise is maintained, as it is the contact between tourist and community that makes the experience unique and enriching in its different dimensions, as explained in this article. However, the level of success of the strategies defined by MARCA also depends on the success of other external and circumstantial factors (e.g., vaccines, tests, civic attitude).

The constraints were strongly felt at the demand level due to the restrictions imposed on the movement of visitors. Given that creative tourism implies the participation and interaction of visitors, the nondigitization of the creative activities was a strategic option. Instead, in times of suspension of face-to-face activities, the option was taken to channel efforts to strengthen the network of partners and plan solutions for carrying out activities in outdoor spaces. During this investigation, it was also observed that MARCA's creative tourism supply strategy, which is based on the principles and objectives of sustainable development, made it more resistant to the impacts caused directly and indirectly by the

pandemic. In fact, it is believed that its resilience is due precisely to the way in which its mission, objectives and priority areas of action have been strictly related to the defence of the ideals of sustainability in the territory since the first moment it was created.

In summary, one of the central issues of this article was to identify and reflect on the strategies that MARCA implemented to adapt its ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project to the context of the pandemic. MARCA acknowledges that during the period of the pandemic it was not able to carry out part of the scheduled activities and those that were carried out were highly conditioned by the application of various health and safety rules. It intends to maintain its portfolio of experiences within the scope of the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project, to guarantee the continuity of the characteristics of the activities associated with the five types of experiences, based on the dimensions of intangible heritage, as described in detail in this article based on the model developed by Schmitt [41–43]. It assumes the inevitability of associating activities with essential sanitization procedures but hopes that measures of social distancing and the use of masks will be cancelled. This will again allow participants to fully live the spirit of the experiences which creative tourism intends to provide, as referred to in its conceptual definitions to make it distinct from other products. Although the reflections and contributions that emerged from this exploratory work allow a view on how a local development association is adopting strategies to ensure that its creative activities continue to be viable in a market which is heavily conditioned by the pandemic in terms of supply and demand, the study is considered to have limitations. In future studies, it will be pertinent to explore more cases of initiatives developed by local associations and compare their strategic plans, response practice or actions with other institutions offering creative tourism activities. Since this study is only based on the analysis of four activities, future studies should consider a more extensive sample in order to explore the adaptative strategies of creative tourism organization in the light of organizational adaptation theories.

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Appendix A

Questions:

- What strategies has the MARCA Association implemented to adapt the creative tourism activities of the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project to the context of the pandemic? If none, identify the reasons.
- In more specific terms, what is the planned strategy to guarantee the health and security of everyone involved in the activities of the ‘Saídas de Mestre’ project? What protocols have you adopted? Have you adopted quality labels (e.g., Clean & Safe

[Turismo de Portugal], Safe Travels Stamp Guide [WTTC]? If so, which one? If not, why was this possibility not considered?

- In terms of benchmarking, has any analysis been carried out on the development of similar initiatives with other actors in the context of the pandemic?
- In more specific terms, how did you develop/adapt the communication strategy to promote the 'Saídas de Mestre' project in the context of a pandemic and attract participants?
- What sociocultural or economic (among others) impacts has the pandemic had on the 'Saídas de Mestre' project?
- Under what conditions has the pandemic positively and negatively affected, or could it affect, the 'Saídas de Mestre' project?
- Did MARCA consider integrating the initiatives of the 'Saída de Mestre' project into any national or international network? Why?
- After the pandemic period, are there any prospects of returning to normality or will the procedures become part of the characteristics of supply and demand?
- What other information/lessons do you consider important to share with us in the context of the experiences associated with the 'Saídas de Mestre' project in a pandemic context (or in the more general context of MARCA), about which we have not asked questions?

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