

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Sustainable Creative Tourism on Islands and the Pandemic: The Creatour Azores Project

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As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt worldwide, the tourism sector was forced to seek ways of reinventing itself. Two decades prior to this crisis, in varied rural areas and island contexts, small-scale, community-based creative tourism had appeared as a sustainable place-making solution to foster place vitality, competitive distinctiveness, regenerative development and destination resilience. From an island perspective, this article presents the theoretical framework, methodological approaches, and empirical practices of the Creatour Azores project, which was carried out in the North Atlantic archipelago of the Azores from 2019-2022. Given this timeframe, the investigators and pilot projects that implemented this research-practice project were confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, which accentuated the isolation and remoteness that tend to characterize islandscapes, especially peripheral islands such as the Azores. At the same time, however, this devastating global pandemic, which impacted the tourism sector especially, ended up offering unexpected opportunities along with special challenges, seeming to underscore the relevance of studies focused on the isolation and remoteness that characterize islandscapes. After describing the project methodologies and practices, as well as the adjustments adopted due to the pandemic, this article considers future possibilities for creative tourism on islands, in general, and in the Azores.

Introduction

Creative tourism has evolved as a burgeoning field in the last two decades, in reaction and as an alternative to mass cultural tourism. In this article, we build upon previous knowledge which emphasizes the potential benefits of properly planned and developed creative tourism initiatives for smaller cities and more rural and peripheral destinations (e.g., Duxbury & Richards, 2019b; Greg Richards, 2020b; Stolarick et al., 2010). From our perspective, many of the challenges faced by smaller-scale places are similar to those faced by island communities, since their common-ground of peripherality calls for the fertile

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exchange of the experiences and good-practices of creative tourism. However, as acknowledged in the Annual Report on Global Islands (Randall, 2019), small islands are also confronted with their unique ‘landscapes’ and the exceptional challenges that distinguish them from non-island contexts. With respect to the Creatour Azores project, the challenges posed by the isolation and remoteness of landscapes were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed special problems to the project. At the same time, however, the recent pandemic offered unexpected opportunities and possibilities, seeming to highlight the growing relevance of studies focused on the peripheral nature of islandness.

While considering the impact of the pandemic on island tourism and the Creatour Azores project, our basic premise is that small island communities can learn from, and build upon, the good practices of creative tourism that take place in non-island rural and peripheral contexts, while adjusting their creative tourism initiatives and strategies to the unique features, vulnerabilities, and strengths of each particular landscape. Simultaneously, we advocate that creative tourism initiatives and policies, particularly in small islands ecosystems, need to be articulated with wider holistic and integrated approaches. Namely, small island communities should reinforce their attention and commitment to the cultural and environmental pillars of regenerative sustainable development, which are so crucial today but are so often forgotten or seen as secondary in the creation and implementation of local developmental strategies.

Creative tourism on islands

In the last two decades, creative tourism has evolved as a viable and vital alternative to mass cultural tourism, with a significant growth in the scope, scale, and diversity of the forms being developed and implemented around the world (Duxbury & Richards, 2019a; G. Richards & Raymond, 2000; Greg Richards, 2011, 2018; Greg Richards & Wilson, 2007. Among the earliest formulations of Creative Tourism, the one adopted by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (2006, p. 3) defines it as: “travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place” that “provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture.” Linked to place-making dynamics, this connective and relational dimension, experienced by hosts and visitors, is the most distinctive feature of creative tourism, going beyond mere economic transactions and emphasizing co-production rather than just consumption (Baixinho et al., 2020). While “cultural tourism tends to be based on exploiting the past as a resource” (e.g., museums, monuments), the emphasis in creative tourism experiences lies mostly “on the contemporary use of cultural knowledge and skills in order to develop future creative potential” (Greg Richards, 2015, p. iv). According to the OECD (2014, p. 20), creative tourism “expands the very concept of tourism as a whole,” driving a shift from conventional models of heritage-based cultural tourism to contemporary models of tourism centred on intangible content, creativity, innovation, and regenerative development.

In this context, culture is understood as one of the key drivers of tourism attractiveness and infrastructure development, while cultural heritage, which is basic to both cultural and creative tourism, is seen as a powerful factor in social and economic development that helps achieve objectives in other sectors. As noted by the European Commission (2019, pp. 13–15), cultural heritage “constitutes an invaluable resource in the fields of education, employment, tourism, and sustainable development,” and it often “generates substantial earnings for the tourism industry, while tourism can be good for culture, encouraging the display and conservation of cultural assets and generating revenue needed for their preservation.” As an extension of cultural tourism, then, creative tourism usually involves a shift from tangible heritage towards more intangible culture, as well as greater involvement with the everyday life and reality of destinations. From the mindset that tourists not only “visit places” but also “make them,” ‘co-makership’ becomes a distinctive element of creative tourism “through an exchange of skills and knowledge with those who are visited” (Greg Richards, 2011, p. 15). Overall, the implementation of creative tourism activities is becoming more common in many places, in tandem with the growing desire of travellers for more meaningful and authentic experiences, in which they can engage with local communities while simultaneously developing their own skills and creativity.

As mentioned above, the Creatour Azores project focused on creative tourism as a sustainable place-making endeavour for small, remote island communities. The essential character of islands encompasses both the physical and cultural landscapes and the seascapes of coastlines and other bodies of water, as well as the intersection areas between them (Cheer, 2019, p. 135). Such islandscapes often support pristine, high-quality natural environments that are often also highly fragile. Thus, the very uniqueness of island contexts often comprises higher social, economic, cultural, and environmental vulnerabilities and challenges (Baldacchino, 2006; McElroy, 2003; Sharpley, 2012; Styliadis et al., 2007; Wilkinson, 1989). Most small islands face peculiar challenges due to their isolation, making them more vulnerable than mainland territories to social, economic, and environmental problems. Along with remoteness and isolation, multiple factors act as concomitant barriers to their development; these include limited resources, weak economies, poor accessibility, inadequate infrastructure, and dependency on external forces. Thus, below-average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and a higher cost of living are common in island societies, prompting many island economies to increasingly rely on tourism as a key source of export earnings (Hull & Sassenberg, 2012, p. 106; Moncada et al., 2010).

Peripherality, however, can also be understood as both a strength and an opportunity to do things differently and better (Eriksen, 2020; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008; Weaver, 2018). For instance, as Scheyvens and Momsen (2008, p. 492) have argued, there is a need to foreground the potential of islands, particularly small islands/island states “to chart their own paths in the global economy and provide self-determined futures for their people” by setting their

own political, environmental, economic, social, cultural, and well-being agendas, thereby fostering alternative mindsets. Hence, we maintain that there is a need for greater care and commitment with integrated sustainable development policies, and therefore small-scale, well planned, and context-sensitive creative tourism may be a relevant and beneficial catalyst for this (Baixinho et al., 2020, 2021; Blapp & Mitas, 2018, 2019; Channara et al., 2015; Gallou, 2017; Giaccone et al., 2017; Korez-Vide, 2013; Saiphan et al., 2014; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008; Scrofani & Leone, 2017; Sungsuwan, 2018; Weaver, 2018).

Creatour Azores was the first integrated research-and-application project to advance the study of creative tourism in island regions of Portugal. Running between April 2019 and December 2022, the project built upon the research model developed and implemented from 2016-2020 by the Creatour Portugal (CP) project, which developed pilot projects throughout the Portuguese Mainland (Cabeça et al., 2018; Gato et al., 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2020; Remoaldo et al., 2020). The project was coordinated by the Observatory of Tourism of the Azores (OTA) and the University of the Azores, in partnership with the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra.

In the context of this project, creative tourism was understood as the design and implementation of small-scale creative initiatives which encourage personal self-expression and interaction between visitors and locals, inspired by the endogenous resources of a place and its people, and “designed and implemented by local residents for community benefit” (Duxbury et al., 2020, p. 1). By attracting visitors for longer stays in less touristed places, ideally during low season, small-scale creative tourism can foster more sustainable local development strategies since it can be “tailored to achieving higher value from the smaller numbers’ of tourists” involved, dimensions that are of great relevance to island destinations. And when we think about “the value to be generated from tourism, we should also think about all potential forms of value—cultural, educational, symbolic, social, intrinsic, institutional,” and environmental, we add— “rather than just economic value” (Greg Richards, 2020a, pp. 9–10).

In smaller cities and more peripheral rural communities, and particularly in island contexts such as the Azores, creative tourism initiatives are meant to foster local identity in relation to sense of place, contributing to capacity building and local empowerment, community cohesion and pride in local culture among residents, and economic development and renewal (Baixinho et al., 2020). Moreover, as highlighted by several authors, if properly planned and developed, the design and implementation of attractive creative tourism offers can promote sustainable place-making strategies, and help develop local culture and creativity, results that are of the utmost importance for smaller places, which often lack the tangible heritage resources that constitute the core of traditional cultural tourism (Hull & Sassenberg, 2012; Greg Richards, 2021). Ultimately, sustainable creative tourism approaches may provide viable, alternative pathways for the post-pandemic future. Indeed, as Richards (2020a,

p. 10) suggests, perhaps we should see the pandemic not just as a major challenge, but also as a major opportunity to change previous unsustainable models of tourism, forcing us to think beyond the “old normal.”

The Creatour Azores project

This project was implemented to develop an integrated approach and a pilot research agenda focused on creative tourism in island regions, duly adjusted to the natural and cultural heritage of the Azores. An Autonomous Region of Portugal, the Azores Archipelago is comprised of nine volcanic islands—Corvo, Flores, Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Graciosa, Terceira, São Miguel, and Santa Maria—geographically dispersed along 600 km of the North Atlantic Ocean, at 1815 km from Mainland Portugal and Europe, and around 4000 km from the North American continent (Nunes, 2014, p. 57). This territory is particularly rich in natural beauty, landscapes, biodiversity, and geodiversity, reinforcing the relevance and commitment to continue the environmental sustainability policies of the last decades. In fact, the region was recently named ‘Best Sustainable Destination in the Atlantic’, and its certification as a ‘Sustainable Destination’, according to criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), is currently underway (Castanho et al., 2020, p. 15).

As a start, the Creatour Azores project benefitted from the practice-based knowledge gathered through the Creatour project in Mainland Portugal (2016-2020). In fact, two former members of the coordination team from the University of Coimbra (CES) were part of Creatour Azores, as external consultants accompanying the activities in the Archipelago. Overall, several operational tools and methodologies developed by Creatour Portugal in small cities and rural areas were made available to the Azorean team, along with insightful guidelines and advice. In line with Creatour’s perspective, there were four aspects that resonated with the type of creative tourism activities that our project aimed to catalyse in the Azores: active participation, creative self-expression, interactive learning, and connecting with the local community (Duxbury & Richards, 2019a, p. 4).

Globally, this project aimed to promote creative tourism to help combat seasonality and encourage tourists to visit ‘new’ areas, namely small communities, and rural, peripheral areas (Duxbury & Richards, 2019b, p. 188). As such, creative tourism is meant to be a stimulus for the revitalization, diversification, and sustainability of more remote, rural communities, allowing them to retain local control and direction. As an integrated research and application project, Creatour Azores also aimed to help empower local agents in the design, implementation and promotion of small-scale and place-based creative tourism offers which are both sustainable and internationally attractive. Other more specific objectives of the project were: 1) bringing tourists to interact creatively with the culture and territory of the Azores; 2) offering visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential by co-creating experiences with local agents, becoming themselves creative agents within Azorean tourist destinations; 3) linking tourism to creativity through

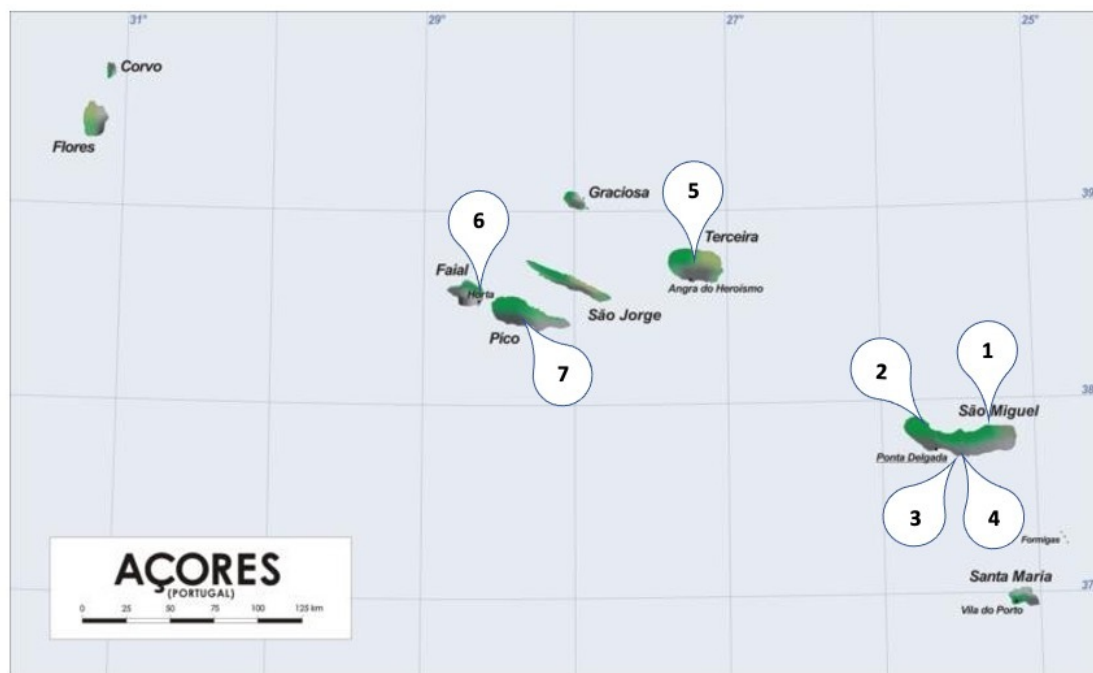


Figure 1. Map of the Azores Archipelago indicating pilot project locations.

Source: Azores Tourism Observatory (OTA).

added-value products, thereby increasing awareness of intangible heritage and creativity; and 4) contributing to the sustainable growth of local tourism by revitalizing existing tourism offers and/or fostering technological innovation and efficiency in tourist services.

These objectives were grounded in the work of the pilot project partners selected in 2019 through a regional open call issued from May to July across the nine-island archipelago. During the selection process, all applications were reviewed by the project's team of researchers according to the following criteria: the cultural value of the proposed activities; the capacity to attract tourists; the expected impact of the project in terms of local community development; the geographical location and type of promoter, target audience and proposed activity; the operational capacity, professional skills, and necessary infrastructure, to develop the proposed activities; the financial ability to maintain the activity, during the project and after; and the capacity, and commitment, to work with the project team until the end of 2022. In the end, the seven pilot projects selected were spread over four islands ([Figure 1](#)) and dedicated to a variety of creative areas and activities ([Table 1](#)). Of the seven, two were complementary pilots (2 and 4) designated as 'friend pilot projects' since they were not eligible for financial support, given the constraints of the project's budget. Nevertheless, all projects were allowed to engage in and benefit from the project's mentoring and training activities.

Methodological approaches

Following Creatour's research model, there were three key "interlinking dimensions" at the core of Creatour Azores: 1) the pilot initiatives, 2) the IdeaLabs (Laboratories of Ideas), and 3) a fostering-networks approach

Table 1. Creatour Azores pilot projects.

Pilot project	Project promoter and contact	Type	Creative tourism activities
(1) <i>Farm tour experience</i>	Gena Pinheiro, <i>Âmago Wellness & The Farm</i> , thefarmazores@gmail.com	Independent agricultural business	This farm in the northeast of São Miguel invites visitors to experience sustainable organic farming practices, animal welfare, and local food to promote health and well-being.
(2) <i>Local network: Land of artisans</i>	<i>Norte Crescente</i> – Local Development Association, miguel.bras@nortecrescente.pt	Local NGO	Based in the rural western area of São Miguel, this inclusive community-based pilot coordinates a network of local artisans and handicraft creators, connecting visitors with the local population.
(3) <i>Discover the Azores through photography</i>	Pedro Canto Brum – <i>City House</i> , info@casadacidade.pt	Independent photography business	With a BnB base in the urban southern coast of São Miguel, this pilot provides workshops on photographing landscapes, flora and fauna, and local food culture throughout the island.
(4) <i>Azores: All in blue</i>	CDIJA – <i>Centro de Desenvolvimento Infante Juvenil dos Açores</i> [Azores Children's and Youth Development Center], direcao.geral@cdija.pt	Inclusive tourism initiative	Based in São Miguel, this pilot offers an inclusive creative tourism experience to connect families of children with autism spectrum disorders with the nature and culture of the Azores.
(5) <i>Goodbye, Azores</i>	Paulo Sousa – <i>Re.function, The Eco Sustainable Art Residence</i> , refunctionproject@gmail.com	Independent art residence	This pilot promoter offers a creative experience in an artistic residency on Terceira, as visitors get to know the artists' work and create their own unique souvenirs from the Azores.
(6) <i>Mahilawake</i>	Isabel Areosa – Mahilawake, mahilawake@gmail.com	Independent women's wellness business	From Faial to the surrounding sea, this pilot organizes aquatic adventure trips for the personal growth and wellbeing of women, connecting mind, body, nature, and community.
(7) <i>Art in nature</i>	Terry Costa – <i>MiratecArts</i> , info@mirateca.com	Cultural association and arts partnership	This pilot promotes the arts of music, visual arts, photography, cinema, etc. in relation to the nature of Pico and through a dynamic of local, regional, and international partnerships.

(Duxbury, 2021b, p. 35). Within Creatour Azores, as in Mainland Portugal, the pilot promoters were considered ‘co-researchers’ by the research team and played a central role through the development and implementation of creative tourism activities, providing “*front-line* knowledge and insights” on their ongoing processes (Duxbury, 2021b, pp. 34, 37–38). These pilot promoters included informal art and cultural partnerships, small entrepreneurial businesses, non-profit regional development associations, inclusive initiatives, and professional associations. As catalysts of new creative tourism initiatives in the Azores, the pilots linked tourism to creative cultural activities based mostly on the tangible and intangible resources of local food culture, traditional handicrafts, stories and narratives, and contemporary forms of artistic expression.

Through their creative tourism offerings, Creatour Azores pilots aimed to stimulate territorial competitiveness and sustainable territorial development. As such, this project combined theoretical and practical knowledge with a flexible methodology that implied reciprocity, co-learning and inter-knowledge between researchers and pilot promoters, along the lines of what has been called para-ethnography (Duxbury et al., 2021; Holmes & Marcus, 2006, 2008). According to Holmes and Marcus (quoted in Given, 2012, p. 596), para-ethnography proposes an analytical relationship in which researchers and their subjects or co-researchers can experiment collaboratively and creatively with the conventions of ethnographic enquiry. According to Creatour’s



Figure 2. IdeaLab 1, Creatour Azores Project.

approach, pilots as co-researchers would be responsible for gathering data (namely by applying tourist surveys to the participants in their creative tourism activities), for documenting their activities, and for sharing their experiences, namely through their engagement in Creatour Azores' IdeaLabs.

The project's IdeaLabs were designed as collaborative workshops, for the research team to help pilots design and implement their creative tourism offers. The project's IdeaLabs were working spaces to: discuss and readjust pilot initiatives; exchange ideas, doubts, knowledge, and experiences; consider the reality of island destinations; and foster regional, national, and international connections and collaborative processes. All the IdeaLabs in the project were initially designed as in-presence initiatives, aiming to foster active interaction and networking between all participants from the different islands.

For instance, in the first IdeaLab ([Figure 2](#)), representatives from the selected pilot initiatives (both funded and non-funded) had the chance to present their projects, sharing their expectations and questions among themselves, as well as with the team of researchers and external consultants of the project, during a two-day workshop.

The first Idea Lab was an in-person workshop in São Miguel Island on December 10-11, 2019. In the foreground, [Figure 2](#) shows varied objects selected by the pilot organizations that were used as prompts in a cultural mapping exercise (Day 1) meant to better convey the local culture and natural resources of each pilot initiative. The main purpose of the exercise was to catalyse thinking on the connections between creativity and place, and on the embedded nature of the pilots' proposed creative activities. In the background



Figure 3. International conference *Creative Tourism, Regenerative Development, and Destination Resilience*, held in São Miguel Island from November 8-10, 2022. Panel of Creatour Azores pilot promoters in the round table session *Insights from practice*, within the International Conference held at *Arquipélago – Contemporary Arts Centre*, Ribeira Grande, November 8, 2022.

of [Figure 2](#), the posters on the wall, with post-its attached, are the results of another activity-based exercise (Day 2). For further descriptions of similar IdeaLab exercises, see Duxbury et al. (2021).

Given the island context of the Azores, the methodological approach also included site visits with participant observation (for the research mentors to learn how creative initiatives were being developed and implemented in loco, to actively participate in the creative tourist offers, and to learn more about who was attending them); interviews with the pilot promoters, to understand the obstacles and challenges they were facing and explore ways to overcome them and adjust initial plans; as well as in-person and online exchanges with pilots of projects from Portugal Mainland, to foster wider networking at the national level.

The project also involved the development of a range of research outputs, including publications in scholarly journals, annual reports, participation in scientific meetings, and training workshops with international experts, culminating in the organization of the international conference *Creative Tourism, Regenerative Development and Destination Resilience*, held in the Azores in hybrid mode, in-person and online, from November 8-10, 2022, with participants from 27 different countries and island regions ([Figure 3](#)).

Impact of the pandemic

No doubt all research projects have their often-unexpected challenges and operational constraints, which can often spark “new ways of understanding and interpreting developments” (Duxbury, 2021b, p. 36). However, no one could have anticipated the worldwide consequences of the current ongoing

and ever-shifting COVID-19 pandemic situation, which forced us to rethink and change almost everything that was previously taken for granted, from our modes of interacting with each other, to our ways of conducting daily life, working, consuming, and moving around (Adey et al., 2021; Couto et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2021).

Due to the unprecedented restrictions on global travel and tourism brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak, with massive lockdowns, social distancing requirements, ever-changing compulsory health, and safety measures, the tourism sector was one of the most affected worldwide, with an estimated 84% decline in international tourist arrivals between March and December 2020, when compared to 2019 (UNCTAD, 2021). In many places increasingly dependent on tourism, as is the case of the Azores and other island destinations, the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating socio-economic effects.

As would be expected, the pandemic also generated unintended impacts on the Creatour Azores project, forcing us to rethink the initial research model. Among the questions that arose, the following received special attention: *Without tourists how can pilots develop their creative activities? Which roles are left to the research team? In the absence of face-to-face encounters and group interactions, how can we move forward and keep a sense of working together and 'project belonging'? What will be the real impact of the pandemic on island tourism?* There were no easy answers to these questions, since the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the full range of project plans, disrupting how we usually communicate, foster relationships, develop research, and design and implement touristic activities. We were all (somehow) personally and professionally affected, and the project researchers and practitioners were no exception, as methods initially established had to be dropped or completely rethought.

The easiest and perhaps only possible way forward was to rely on technology and turn to virtual ways of interacting. As a result, regular Zoom meetings became a must among the team of researchers and between mentors, pilots, and consultants, even though a few (exceptional) one-on-one meetings were eventually allowed. Given the absence of tourists, dramatically felt in the Summer of 2020, still in 2021, and with repercussions in 2022, the team of researchers and pilot partners focused on finding possible alternatives to carry on with the project. From those individualized online meetings with each pilot, a few ideas came up on how to deal with the constraints imposed by the pandemic. These included targeting inter-island and domestic visitors (regionally and nationally) and other kinds of participants (young people, local schools, community members) to experience the proposed creative tourism activities; developing virtual creative tour experiences; strengthening local networks and partnerships (with travel agents and local/regional authorities, between pilot projects); and seeking out similar international island projects and/or complementary funding sources, all strategies that make increasing sense in a variety of island landscape realities.

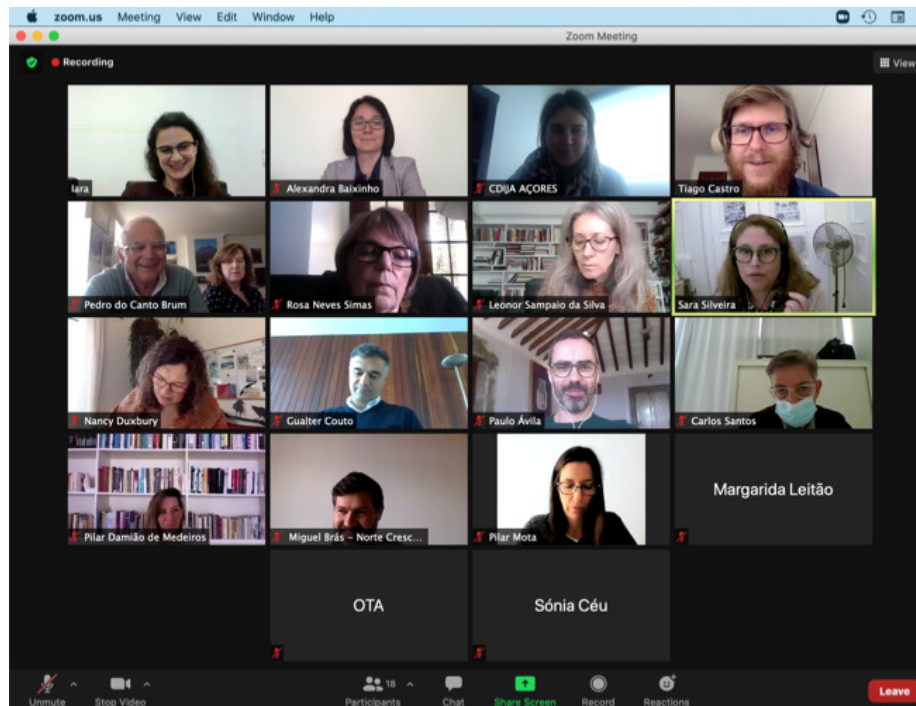


Figure 4. Idea Lab 2. Screenshot of the second IdeaLab, held online on April 30, 2021.

Throughout these processes of collective thinking, the real contours and challenges of island tourism and of each pilot project became clearer, not just for the mentors but also for each pilot partner. Indeed, it soon became evident that, in dealing with the pandemic crisis, the pilots had been forced to turn to their own business survival. In fact, it turned out that, in all cases, the design and implementation of creative tourism offers became dependent on the survival of the core business models of our pilot projects.

The pandemic also spread a sense of time-lag, as many things were postponed to whenever possible or simply cancelled. These were, of course, accompanied by other practical barriers to developing group activities brought on by varied restrictions to people gathering, social distancing, compulsory mask wearing, etc. As would be expected, such forced inertia brought along a certain sense of frustration and demotivation: It seems that no virtual bonds can replace place-based human proximity and the connective synergies it generates. Still, we tried our best to adapt and keep the project going. Given the unpredictability of the pandemic, and the constant back and forth in terms of lockdowns and other measures with pronounced social impact, the team decided to proceed with the organization of a second IdeaLab in April of 2021, this time in a virtual meeting mode ([Figure 4](#)).

The main purpose of the second IdeaLab was to bring the entire project team together again, with all pilots sharing the adjustments in the design and implementation of their own creative tourism offers with each other, and with the project's mentors and external consultants. This IdeaLab was designed as an all-day event, with coffee and lunch-time breaks, and virtual adaptations of previously planned group exercises. For instance, with the help of the JamBoard software and the share screen option within Zoom, it was possible

to virtually replicate the use of post-its, followed by joint open discussions. The chatroom was also useful as an alternative mode to exchange messages, documents, and web links between participants. And we even engaged in the creation of smaller virtual ‘breakout rooms’ where pilots could exchange ideas more privately with their mentors on how to better explain their adapted creative tourism strategies, before rejoining the general meeting with all participants.

Another key step introduced by IdeaLab 2 was the widening of the pilot network beyond the local and regional scale. Indeed, one of the main roles of the team of researchers was to encourage the pilots to set their own connections with other national and international creative tourism initiatives, by providing the necessary information and contacts, and giving notice of meetings, initiatives and events of interest, such as Creatour’s international webinars.

Despite the methodological adaptations introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research solutions developed within Creatour Azores were still insufficient to face all the unexpected additional limitations. We did surpass several difficulties caused by the pandemic, namely by turning to online approaches. But some methods (such as participant observation and surveys of creative tourists) had to be dropped or reduced. No doubt, the entire project dynamic was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic (within the research team; between researchers and pilot initiatives; between pilots and tourists; and between pilots and their local communities). Without face-to-face connections, during a long and decisive part of the project, the networking dimension was certainly less efficient than what was initially expected.

Paths to the future

So far, the core of tourism in the Azores has been nature-based, including ecotourism and more introspective forms of direct contact with nature, as well as vigorous experiences such as adventure tourism. According to Castanho, Couto, and Pimentel (2020, p. 15), the region’s strategy for tourism development is mainly focused on ‘active’ nature-based tourism set as the top priority in the Strategic and Marketing Plan for Tourism in the Azores (PEMTA), being complemented by other offers, such as “nautical tourism, cultural and landscape touring, and health and wellness tourism.”

Similarly, although the region’s Action Plan for the Sustainability of the Azores as a Tourism Destination set for 2019-2027 (DMO, 2019) already includes strategies and commitments regarding ‘society and culture’ within its strategic vision, this is just one of nine key strategic areas of intervention, with the other eight being more environmentally targeted, in accordance with EarthCheck’s benchmarking criteria. Despite the merits of this Action Plan, however, it seems that there is still a lot to be done. Many potential opportunities remain unexplored in terms of sustainable culture-based tourism in the Azores, including creative tourism initiatives such as those proposed by Creatour Azores project. These would include community-based/oriented

initiatives involving co-presence and active co-creation between visitors and locals through hands-on activities, workshops, and/or smaller-scale creative events (Baixinho et al., 2020, 2021).

While in many places the so-called “cultural’ turn in rural planning has encouraged greater attention to the role of culture in the construction of rural identities and futures,” in most rural contexts it still seems that “policy to support cultural activity and enterprises” is “fractured” and “underdeveloped” (Duxbury, 2021a, p. 755). In fact, with regards to culture-based tourism and local rural development, the panorama in the Azores seems, at least until now, not very distant from the overall trend in most peripheral rural areas. An identical view, on the mostly unattended structural vulnerabilities of peripheral rural areas, is shared by researchers in the field of tourism development. As Castanho, Couto, & Santos (2021, pp. 3–4) highlight:

Tourism development in peripheral rural areas has had little attention, and most rural communities are not prepared to deal with structural changes in their economy. People who live in these communities commonly work in agriculture or fisheries, have low education, and do not have the appropriate skills to establish synergetic relationships with tourists and tourism companies. So, it is critical to capitalize on the strengths that exist in these communities, especially regarding their bond with natural resources, traditional economic activities, folklore, food, festivities, and rituals.

Regarding creative tourism, as Nancy Duxbury (2021a, p. 762) has pointed out, there is a crucial “need to acknowledge differences among rural locations and circumstances, to enhance distinctiveness and to identify local cultural resources, both tangible and intangible.” This approach is also in line with Greg Richards’ (2020b, p. 9) perspective that creative tourism needs to be context-sensitive, with an appropriate consideration of resources, meanings, and creativity, and simultaneously driven by a clear vision, as well as a flexible and open dynamic, enabling a wider participation both in “the local space of places” and “the global space of flows.”

So, what can small, remote places and environmentally sensitive islands like the Azores offer as unique and competitive creative tourism initiatives? We believe that a key aspect of the archipelago is the need to address the exceptionality and fragility of most island environments, fostering sustainable creative tourism initiatives which are aligned with the goals set in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015), in all its dimensions—economic, cultural, social, and environmental. Within Creatour Azores, we intend to place creative tourism at the heart of such holistic, inclusive, integrated, and long-term sustainable development strategies. The archipelago’s pilot projects focus on the creative potential of both land and sea activities, while getting inspiration from the community’s rich cultural heritage and sensitivity to social inclusion to develop dynamic

creative agendas for visitors to the islands. Moreover, in order to be at the forefront of international best practices in culture and creativity-based development strategies in tourism, such creative tourism initiatives should be “tailored according to the specificities of each local context (according to the stakeholders, amenities, resources, capabilities, limitations, and expectations of each place)” and should actively and inclusively engage “a wide set of local actors” in the design and implementation of the most appropriate creative tourism for each community (Baixinho et al., 2020, p. 20). Such is the aim of this project.

The introduction to this paper identified the potential benefits of small-scale, properly planned and implemented creative tourism activities, duly adjusted to small cities, peripheral rural locations, and small island contexts. However, since the expansion of creative tourism initiatives in remote rural areas, and particularly on islands, is still relatively recent, there are also potential risks and challenges that must be considered and, whenever possible, prevented, avoided, or minimized. Therefore, our recommendations for creative tourism on islands also include the consideration of the following aspects:

1. Serial reproduction of creative activities, either through an acritical transference of “urban-centric creative economy policies and practices to rural locations” (Duxbury, 2021a, p. 755), or a mimesis of initiatives from small cities or peripheral rural areas increasingly falling in the domains of “culture and popular art [...] arts/festivals, gastronomy and wine” (Remoaldo et al., 2019, p. 178).
2. Unintended changes in the economic basis of communities (Scrofani & Leone, 2017).
3. Commodification of culture and everyday life (Blapp & Mitas, 2018, 2019; Scrofani & Leone, 2017).
4. Lack of capacity/training/empowerment of local residents (Bellow et al., 2019; Hull & Sassenberg, 2012).
5. Inadequacy of local infrastructures, such as road accessibilities, healthcare facilities, etc. (Stolarick et al., 2010).

Within Creatour Azores, we advocate a sustainable, regenerative model of creative tourism which needs to be aligned with the best international sustainable tourism guidelines, to help maximize the social, cultural, economic, and environmental benefits for all stakeholders in a given community, while minimizing any eventual negative impacts. Indeed, an orientation towards holistic, integrated, and “sustainable creative tourism” approaches is more likely to attract visitors to peripheral rural areas and islands, while disadvantages related to the possible degradation of cultural and natural

heritage due to overuse or commodification can be prevented or mitigated, considerations that are especially relevant in highly sensitive and vulnerable island ecosystems (see Baixinho et al., 2021, p. 9; Korez-Vide, 2013).

Thus, from the viewpoint of Creatour Azores, and in accordance with the sustainable creative tourism we propose, interweaving the cultural and natural heritage of the archipelago, in terms of effective long-term cultural and touristic policymaking, necessarily implies not only considering the Azores as a whole, in its geographic and cultural identity, but also acknowledging the inner diversity between islands, as well as within each island. This means addressing the multiplicity of local places in the Azores (from macro to micro-scale levels), and considering their respective socio-economic contexts (some urban, but mostly rural). It also implies an increased understanding and mobilization of the wider connections which place the Azores within the “global space of flows” (Greg Richards, 2020b, p. 9).

Final considerations

All things considered; the Azores have only taken the first steps in the long path to their full potential in culture-led creative tourism. Creatour’s vision of creative tourism emphasizes “a shift of attention towards grassroots, endogenous processes, bottom-up approaches, and locally-embedded and contextualized development models to stimulate sustainable and creative local development” (Duxbury et al., 2021, p. 15). In the case of the Azores, the need to fully comprehend and adequately convey the multiple interconnections between natural and cultural heritage remains, as does the need to push boundaries towards more sustainable creative tourism approaches in island destinations. At the same time, our vision on creative tourism is also open to further interconnections with concepts that, we believe, make sense in vulnerable rural and island communities. These include *cultural landscapes*, *ecomuseums*, *ecotourism*, *slow tourism*, *rural tourism*, *agritourism*, *education tourism*, *scientific tourism*, *responsible tourism*, and *solidarity tourism*, among others (see Baixinho et al., 2020, pp. 18–21; UNESCO, 2018; UNWTO, 2019).

In addition, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of Creatour Azores as an incubation project based on pilot initiatives which cannot be too ambitious in terms of establishing local/regional strategies for cultural and creative tourism policies, particularly given the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, as well as the preliminary stage of research in this area. Moreover, the absence of long-term monitoring of pilot initiatives, which would generate stronger empirical evidence, can also be identified as a limitation in this research. We believe, nonetheless, that the project’s overall outputs and recommendations can contribute to reshaping current and future policies in this field according to more culturally creative and sustainable paradigms.

Paradoxically, the recent disruptions in the tourism sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may, in fact, benefit cultural and creative-based tourism development in peripheral, rural areas and remote islandscapes because they are

intrinsically more isolated, less crowded, and potentially safer. In the medium and long-term, then, so-called islandness may very well prove to hold the keys to a more sustainable paradigm shift that goes beyond a mere return to “the old normal” (Greg Richards, 2020a, p. 10). As Richards has already noted, by attracting tourists for longer stays in less touristed places, ideally also in low season, small-scale creative tourism on islands can foster more sustainable local development strategies, since it can be tailored to achieving higher value from the smaller numbers of tourists” (Greg Richards, 2020a, p. 10). We believe that these are extremely timely issues which need to be widely discussed and carefully considered in relation to tourism today.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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