

Shaping the Future: Strategic Insights for Geotourism Development in the Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis

To provide contributions toward the strategic strategy for geotourism in the Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis territory - Silves-Loulé-Albufeira, a team of researchers from CinTurs designed and implemented an original methodological strategy to find solutions to the questions raised by the Aspirante Geoparque Algarvensis' technical team. The Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis territory - Silves-Loulé-Albufeira -, located in the Algarve, south of Portugal, covers a total area of 2426 km², of which 1584 km² are terrestrial and 842 km² marine, extending to the bathymetric limit of 120 meters. This geopark has a significant geological heritage at national and international levels, with a history dating back 350 million years. Its territory bears witness to geological events from the birth of mountain ranges and ancient seas to the current configuration of the continents long before the dinosaurs existed. Since its officialization as an Aspiring Geopark by UNESCO in 2019, the Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis works on the intersection between geological conservation, environmental education, and sustainable development through tourism, acting as a model for territorial valorisation and the integration of local communities in the preservation of heritage and socio-economic development initiatives (Algarvensis Geoparque, 2024). The Arouca Declaration, signed in 2011 under the auspices of UNESCO, not only defines the concept of geotourism but also determines the implications of such a strategic option in the context of a geopark. Under this umbrella vision, the design of a geotourism strategy for a geopark that aspires to become part of the UNESCO Global Geopark Network, as is the case of Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis, must be perfectly coordinated and contribute to strengthening the identity of the territory in its multiple aspects, namely geological, environmental, cultural, and landscape, among others, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the well-being of the community. Interpretation and storytelling must be approached on the stage where residents are living forces co-creators of value.

Aligned with those mentioned above, the Application Dossier for UNESCO Global Geoparks (UNESCO, 2022) asks for the development of a strategic plan for GEOTOURISM centered on the design of an offer inspired by the assumptions of sustainability and the SDGs (E6 GEOTOURISM, page 5). A Human-centered approach was adopted to comply with the call, according to which problems and solutions arise from community involvement through participatory and exploratory methodologies. In practice, the methodological strategy guided by the Human-centered approach through the Design Thinking process as adapted to territories and places (Golestaneh, Guerreiro and Pinto, 2021), favours the adoption of participatory-collaborative methods, such as the case of Focus Group and Nominal Group.

The investigation occurred through the following phases: (Phase 1) Research to Discover - Understanding the Geopark and its potential by detailed observation to clarify the significant challenges and potential for Geotourism in the Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis informed by published sources. Methods such as desk research, exploratory conversations, and team meetings were utilized to achieve this. (Phase 2) Synthesis to define - This consists of coming up with new and innovative ideas with the stakeholders' involvement as a basis for outlines of critical solutions.

The aims of this phase include generating data to identify anchor themes within the scope of the geotourism strategy in this destination-area, designing touristic routes aligned with the anchor themes, profiling a package of themed events, products and experiences aligned with the anchor themes and informed by the existing offer in the territory or with new ideas, and identifying key partners in the territory. Primary data collection will focus on qualitative methodologies through Nominal Group and Focus Group techniques. (Phase 3) Ideation to develop - focuses on developing concepts for possible solutions, drawing up new strategies, and evaluating the proposed ones. As mentioned above, bearing in mind the participatory and bottom-up nature of designing valid and relevant strategies for Geotourism in Aspiring Geoparks Global Network, nominal groups and team meetings were held to achieve the above objectives, thus providing a collaborative environment for generating ideas and developing effective strategies. (Phase 4) Delivering solutions - consisted of advancing innovative management strategies, articulating and communicating solutions, obtaining feedback, and evaluating experiences. Team meetings and brainstorming sessions were carried out to outline the solutions. Arouca Declaration, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the UNESCO Global Geoparks principles are guiding the elaboration of our recommendation for the strategic axe of Geotourism in the Aspiring Geopark Algarvensis.

Researcher(s): Manuela Guerreiro and Patrícia Pinto, CinTurs & FEUAlg (coordinators); Bernardete Sequeira, CinTurs & FEUAlg (Senior Researcher); Ana Rita Cruz, CinTurs & FEUAlg (Senior Researcher); Cláudia Henriques, CinTurs & ESGHT UAlg (Senior Researcher); Raquel Branco (Research Fellow) and Sofia Soeiro (Research Fellow)

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More info: <https://geoparquealgarvensis.pt/en/>