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Rural tourism in Uruguay: a growing trend

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Abstract

Uruguay is a country with numerous competitive advantages afforded by its natural landscapes and cultural heritage, and has been promoted around the world mainly as a “sun and sand” destination. However, with the impetus of the citizens themselves, rural tourism is becoming a “growing trend” and efforts are now under way to professionalize and position this sector as a major tourism product. This article examines the sector’s legal and institutional framework as well as the main activities encompassed by the concept of rural tourism for the relevant authorities. It also describes the providers of rural tourism services and, finally, offers a brief description of the current status of and outlook for rural tourism in Uruguay.

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Introduction

Uruguay covers an area of 176,215 sq. km with endless natural landscapes: green pastures, gently undulating countryside, forests and pristine white sand beaches. It also has an important hydrographic network of rivers, streams, marshes, wetlands and lakes that provide a refuge for more than 450 species of birds, sea turtles, whales and seals. With its natural attractions and its efforts to preserve the environment, Uruguay is committed to being a “natural country”.

Legal and institutional framework

Law no. 14 335 published in 1975 (known as Decree-Law by Law no. 15 738) declares tourism to be a major factor of economic and social development and an activity of public interest. Tourism is understood as a group of activities stemming from the temporary and voluntary displacement of individuals or groups of people away from their usual place of residence, for leisure purposes. The law defines tourists as individuals or groups who are subjects of that displacement, and anyone who offers tourism services to tourists is considered to be a provider of tourism services.

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services classified as *tourism* is generally considered a private business activity, the State may take charge of these for reasons of public order, or when the government considers the need to promote or develop tourism activities and services that private individuals cannot or will not assume.

The aforementioned law mentions public, national and provincial institutions as contributors to the development of tourism, and coordinates their actions with the competent institutions. According to Law no. 17 243, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MINTURD) is responsible, among other things, for advising the Executive Branch and proposing national policies on the matters under its authority.

The provincial governments or Intendencies also have their own tourism offices. Each of Uruguay's 19 intendencies has a tourism office - with varying degrees of internal hierarchy, autonomy⁴ and dynamism - responsible for promoting and developing local tourism activities.

⁴ In some cases, the Tourism Offices in the provinces are attached to the departments of the environment or planning.



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In addition, Uruguay has established a National Development Plan for Rural Tourism and Ecotourism and has a National Tourism Council (CONATUR). The Plan is being implemented in the context of a loan agreement signed between MINTURD and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) for the execution of the program “Improving the competitiveness of strategic tourist destinations.” This is the first IDB loan obtained by Uruguay for the development of tourism.

In 1974, CONATUR was created by Law no. 14 335, with the overall objective of contributing to the design of medium and long-term sustainable development policies for the tourism sector. This body is headed by MINTURD and includes representatives of the national government, decentralized institutions, the National Congress of Intendants, the Tourism Commission of the Chamber of Intendants, the Tourism Commission of the Chamber of Representatives, the Uruguayan Chamber of Tourism, delegates of the Inter-union Workers’ Plenary (PIT) and the National Convention of

Workers (CNT), education representatives, members of the private tourism sector, provincial corporations and individual tourism operators.

In 2008, Decree no. 267/008 was published, which defined “providers of rural tourism services “ as physical or juridical persons who offer tourism services, with or without lodgings, in agricultural, livestock, forest or agroindustrial establishments or in rural areas with a preserved natural environment. All such providers must be registered in MINTURD’s Registry of Tourism Operators.

Main activities

In Uruguay the concept of rural tourism encompasses “everything found in the rural milieu and linked to agricultural activities.”⁵ The main purpose of this business activity is to improve the income of farms and rural establishments. Many rural communities in Uruguay are promoting this type of tourism to complement or supplement agricultural incomes.

5 Words of Ing. Antonio D’Ambrosio, Director of Rural Tourism and Ecotourism of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MTD) of Uruguay.

Decree no. 371/002 of 25/09/2002, defines rural tourism as a new form of tourism characterized by:

- Activities that take place outside urban centers.
- Services provided in a personalized manner.
- Activities that generally take place outdoors.
- Varied use of natural and cultural resources, facilities, lodgings and services, typical of the rural milieu.
- Contributes to local development and to the diversification and competitiveness of tourism.

The following agricultural activities are included in the concept of rural tourism:

- Active participation in, or simple observation of, production processes:** from routine work on farms and ranches (*estancias*), such as milking animals, taking care of livestock, harvesting crops etc.) to special activities carried out only at certain times of the year (cattle branding, herding, hunting expeditions, etc.).
- Horseback riding** around the farm or longer cross-country journeys on horseback with overnight stays in camps. These rides may be of varying duration, depending on the distance covered, and may last from a few hours to several days. Uruguay has large expanses of gently undulating natural pasturelands.

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- Birdwatching** is one of the most popular activities among conservationists and nature lovers. Because of its latitudinal position between Ecuador and the extreme south of South America, Uruguay is visited by migratory species from the entire American continent. The country's name comes from the Guaraní language and means "River of the Painted Birds".
- Water sports.** Activities include fishing, swimming, recreational activities for children, canoe or boat trips, and others. Uruguay is a freshwater paradise teeming with life.

Other activities that may be included in the concept of rural tourism are: geology (indigenous settlements), the gaucho tradition (anthropology), immigrant colonies (San Javier), cycle tourism, gastronomic tourism (focusing particularly on national agrifood products), and harvesting different kinds of mushrooms. All these activities enrich the traditional "asado" (grilled meat) –horseback tourism," allowing visitors to become better acquainted with the country's varied history, culture, customs and traditions through a direct experience of rural life. The tourist learns first-hand about the local gastronomy, handicrafts, production methods and even lifestyles.

According to the Secretariat of the Uruguayan Rural Tourism Society (SUTUR),



“tourists want to live like the people in the countryside: getting up early and performing the same tasks.” The concept embraces “all forms of tourism that take place in the rural milieu,” and includes activities such as guided walks, hiking on trails, mountain biking, canoeing and educational trips, as well as so-called adventure tourism.

Status of and outlook for rural tourism in Uruguay

Efforts are under way to professionalize and position rural tourism in Uruguay. The idea is to promote this sector as a complement to other options such as “sun and sand” tourism, in which the Ministry of Tourism and Sports has invested large sums in publicity and information campaigns.

To professionalize the rural tourism sector, SUTUR created the Sustainable Rural Tourism Quality Program, with the aim of improving the quality of services provided. However, its execution had not been possible until this year, due to a lack of funds. In terms of training, various institutions have developed courses and training activities in this field, but on an independent basis and not necessarily with the appropriate human resources. Although

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CONATUR established a Work Group on Training, the Ministry of Education and Culture is not a member of this body. As regards training opportunities, numerous technical courses are available, together with degree and postgraduate studies in general Tourism. However, there are very few courses specializing in rural tourism.

In other countries, rural tourism is a leading activity and is of strategic interest to governments as a means of keeping the population settled in rural areas, conserving the countryside’s cultural and natural heritage, its identity and traditions, and as a development opportunity for rural women and young people.

In Uruguay, by contrast, rural tourism has not been viewed as a priority by the authorities or even by certain operators.

In Uruguay, rural tourism has come from the demand and tastes of the citizens themselves and not as a result of a government program designed for that specific purpose.

This is due, in part, to a lack of information and to the fact that this sector is considered new and informal. Instead, the growing interest in this type of tourism has come from the demand and tastes of the citizens themselves and not as a result of a government program designed for that specific purpose. Proof of this is that rural tourism does not receive the tax benefits enjoyed by other sectors such as the hotel industry.

Studies estimate that rural tourism generates, on average, around three additional jobs in each rural tourism enterprise - this in a sector that has still not achieved continuity and stability in terms of the annual flow of visitors. Paradoxically, this sector is not affected by the strong seasonal variations suffered by other types of tourism (e.g. "sun and sand") and remains attractive to visitors throughout the year.

Although there are no policies specifically aimed at developing rural tourism, there is recognition that this sector has been somewhat neglected. For this reason, it is necessary to provide a real stimulus and include it in the promotional efforts of the "Uruguay Natural" policy. Also, there is no official up-to-date and comprehensive study on rural tourism. The last report dates back to 1997.

As noted previously, Uruguay has no official standard definition of rural tourism and its component activities. In addition, the country has no detailed national statistics on the number of visitors and their destinations, or on the various activities they engage in, or on the level of customer satisfaction. This situation leaves the sector without reliable

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information concerning its current status and its development in recent years.

Furthermore, it was not until 2008 that Rural Tourism Service Providers were required to register with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. Although some operators are known to engage in this activity without being registered, this measure has at least made it possible to gauge the scale of rural tourism existing officially in the country.

Uruguay has many competitive advantages to offer both foreign and regional tourists: peace and quiet, varied landscapes and an abundance of natural resources, accessible distances, roads and trails that are mostly passable, and a population that is hospitable by nature. Rural tourism could also be promoted more intensively in the domestic market as a vacation option.

Although Uruguay is one of the region's leaders in the development of technology and communications services, in the interior of the country there are still places with little or no access to these resources. Moreover, these tools are not used to their full potential, due mainly to a lack of training.

Another of the most striking features of the sector is its institutional fragmentation. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Intendencias are responsible for this area of development,

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there has been little coordination between these institutions and varying levels of commitment.

At the same time, there is no mechanism to link the environmental policies of the Ministries of Housing, Land Planning and Environment and of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries to tourism, other than through an annual event organized jointly by these institutions.

A process is currently under way to incorporate the nature reserves of the National System of Protected Areas (SNAP) into the activities of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and the authorities are working on regulating environmental impacts in the SNAP areas.

With respect to the private sector, when the concept of rural tourism is mentioned, some operators immediately associate this with tourism products offered by farms or rural establishments, overlooking adventure tourism and gastronomic routes (among others). At present, we find situations such as the fact that SUTUR – the leading rural tourism association at national level - has no joint projects with NGOs or with the Uruguayan Chamber of Tourism.

However, on a more positive note, integration is being promoted through the annual Meetings on Rural Tourism and Protected Areas. In 2007, the Fifth National Meeting on Ecotourism and

Rural Tourism and the Fourth National Congress on Protected Natural Areas were organized with the aim of analyzing the current status, progress and prospects for protected areas, ecotourism and rural tourism activities. A number of actions were proposed for improving the links between protected areas and for enhancing the country's conservation and development policies. These events provided a space for sharing and discussing scientific research projects, the management of protected areas and their zones of influence, and for disseminating development experiences and introducing new rural tourism and ecotourism products. This year the Sixth Meeting on Ecotourism and Rural Tourism and the Fifth Congress on Protected Areas will take place. The institutions involved are currently organizing these events.

Lessons learned

- a. Although tourism development generally begins with a governmental policy or support program, rural tourism in Uruguay emerged from the initiatives and efforts of the Uruguayans themselves, through an association of interests.
- b. All efforts require direction; therefore, work is currently under way on the National Sustainable Tourism Plan 2009 - 2020.



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- c. All agents that provide tourism services require professional training. Uruguay has the motivation to achieve this goal, as well as a clear commitment to quality.
- d. It is necessary to coordinate public and private efforts in very diverse areas to offer tourists a high quality service: information and hospitality, conservation and care of natural resources, security, good roads and trails and computer and telecommunications services in the country's interior, among others.
- e. Up-to-date statistics on rural tourism are needed to measure its scale and impacts on agriculture and rural life.

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Résumé / Resumo / Resumen

► **Tourisme rural en Uruguay : une réalité en croissance**

L'Uruguay possède des avantages concurrentiels, fruits de son patrimoine naturel et culturel qui ont été vantés dans le monde entier, principalement sous le thème « soleil et plage ». À l'initiative des Uruguayens eux-mêmes, le tourisme rural a vu naître un processus de professionnalisation et de positionnement en tant qu'offre touristique, pour devenir ce que l'on a appelé « une réalité en croissance ». Dans le présent article, nous décrivons le cadre légal et institutionnel du secteur et les principales activités qu'englobe cette notion pour les autorités concernées. Nous établissons également les caractéristiques des fournisseurs de services touristiques ruraux et, enfin, nous présentons une brève description de la situation et des perspectives du tourisme rural en Uruguay.

► **Turismo rural no Uruguai: uma realidade em crescimento**

O Uruguai possui vantagens competitivas, produto de seu patrimônio natural e cultural, as quais vêm sendo promovidas em todo o mundo, principalmente quando o tema é “sol e praia”. A partir do estímulo dos próprios cidadãos, o turismo rural iniciou um processo de profissionalização e posicionamento como oferta turística e converteu-se no que é visto como “uma realidade em crescimento”. Este artigo identifica o quadro jurídico e institucional do setor e as principais atividades inseridas nesse conceito que cabem às autoridades em questão. Também caracteriza os prestadores de serviços turísticos rurais e, finalmente, apresenta uma breve descrição da situação e perspectivas do turismo rural no Uruguai.

► **Turismo rural en Uruguay: una realidad en crecimiento**

Uruguay posee ventajas competitivas producto de su patrimonio natural y cultural que han sido promocionadas por el mundo, principalmente con referencia a “sol y playa”. A partir del impulso de los propios ciudadanos, el turismo rural ha iniciado un proceso de profesionalización y posicionamiento como oferta turística y se ha convertido en lo que se ha denominado “una realidad en crecimiento”. En el presente artículo se identifican el marco legal e institucional del sector y las principales actividades que se engloban en dicho concepto para las autoridades referentes. También se caracterizan los prestadores de servicios turísticos rurales y, por último, se hace una breve descripción de la situación y perspectivas del turismo rural en Uruguay.