

In the Gothic Itinerary: Preserving and Revitalizing the Historic Centre of Santarém through Cultural and Creative Tourism

No Itinerário do Gótico: Preservar e Dinamizar o Centro Histórico de Santarém Através do Turismo Cultural e Criativo

Marisa Vieira Fragoso

marisafragoso@edu.ulisboa.pt

Centre of Geographical Studies (CEG)/ Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning of the University of Lisbon (IGOT-UL), Lisbon, Portugal

Maria Assunção Gato

maria.gato@iscte-iul.pt

DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte - Centre for the Study of Socioeconomic Change and the Territory, Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract

The historic centres of ancient cities require constant optimisation of their functions. This implies a continual search for a compromise between preserving heritage elements that narrate the city's history and the need to enhance their visibility and adapt their uses to contemporary needs. The growing preference for experiences that emphasise local identity and heritage, such as cultural and creative tourism, reflects an emerging trend. This article examines the potential of cultural and creative tourism in the historic city centre of Santarém as a means of enhancing local heritage and culture. To this end, empirical research was conducted to understand how culture and creativity, when combined with tourism, can contribute to the preservation, dynamisation, and attractiveness of the heritage in the city's historic centre. The findings suggest that, although the Gothic heritage is recognised for its historical and distinctive value on a regional and national scale, it is essential for responsible stakeholders to adopt concerted strategies capable of achieving a sustainable, inclusive, and balanced revitalisation of Santarém's historic centre.

Keywords: Cultural and creative tourism, Heritage, Historic centre, Santarém, Gothic.

JEL Code: Z32

Resumo

Os centros históricos das cidades antigas requerem uma otimização constante das suas funcionalidades. Este processo implica a incessante procura por um equilíbrio entre a preservação dos elementos patrimoniais que contam a história da cidade, e a necessidade de lhes dar maior visibilidade e usos mais adequados para atender às necessidades contemporâneas. A valorização da identidade e do património local, através de experiências como o turismo cultural e criativo, tem-se afirmado como uma tendência crescente. Este artigo explora o potencial do turismo cultural e criativo no centro histórico da cidade de Santarém como forma de valorização do património e da cultura local. Para esse efeito, foi realizado trabalho empírico com o objetivo de compreender como a cultura e a criatividade aliadas ao turismo podem contribuir para a preservação, dinamização e

atratividade do património do centro histórico da cidade. Os resultados indicam que embora se reconheça um valor histórico e distintivo de relevância à escala regional e nacional por via do património gótico existente, será necessário que os agentes responsáveis adotem estratégias concertadas e capazes de alcançar uma revitalização sustentável, inclusiva e equilibrada do centro histórico de Santarém.

Palavras-chave: Turismo cultural e criativo, Património, Centro Histórico, Santarém, Gótico.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban historic centres, with their rich heritage and symbolic significance, are particularly compelling spaces for tourism and related activities. Beyond the intrinsic economic dimension of this attractiveness, there are architectural, cultural, and social values that support their distinctive spatial dynamics. It has been based on the pursuit of differentiation through historical heritage that many Portuguese cities, of varying sizes, have sought to enhance the tourism appeal of their historical centres. Although the forms and processes adopted to promote this revitalisation are diverse (Yang, 2017), one of the most prevalent risks is the imbalance between new and longstanding residents, as well as between different uses and functions, which can result in the depersonalisation of places and, in extreme cases, lead to a loss of identity and the destruction of heritage.

The preservation of resident populations, along with a strategically coordinated conservation of the tangible and intangible heritage that characterizes each historical centre, constitutes two essential elements for maintaining the challenging balances faced by territories under high tourist pressure (Tavares, Feitosa & Costa, 2018). In this context, while environmental sustainability is a pressing issue to consider (Pica, 2019), social and cultural sustainability are no less important and should not be relegated to the background in favor of economic sustainability.

The decisive role that historical and cultural heritage can play in urban strategies is widely recognized, particularly through its ability to generate new sociocultural, economic, and symbolic values that trigger innovative local development dynamics (Della Spina, 2019; Richards & Duif, 2019). Given the multiple challenges posed by tourism pressures on urban historic centres, it is essential to explore more balanced approaches to integrating tourism with the historical and heritage value of these areas. Additionally, such approaches should align more closely with principles of multidimensional sustainability. In this context, types of tourism that advocate for closer alignment with the needs of local communities, as well as involving them in the processes of caring for and preserving their cultural and identity heritage (Pastor Pérez, 2018), have gained prominence in academic debate.

Inspired by these premises, cultural and creative tourism presents itself as a good alternative to engage visitors in the distinctive environments of the places they visit based on their endogenous resources, also contributing to the cultural vitality of the destination (Richards, 2019). Cultural and creative tourism is a new tourism model, whose recognized ability to leverage placemaking processes in low-density territories, small towns, or circumscribed urban areas, makes it particularly suited to respond to the challenges faced by the tourism industry (Gato et al, 2022). Despite being a model more focused on niche markets, the use of creative, innovative, and distinctive strategies for promoting places and their heritage (tangible and intangible), enables creative tourism to connect local populations with tourists/visitors. This emphasis on a system of relationships and local values, which go far beyond the underlying economic dimension of tourism activity, allows all participants not only to take advantage of existing resources but also to enhance the appreciation and meanings of these same resources.

It is through a closer collaboration between the creative economy and tourism that an increasing number of tourist destinations are adopting the cultural and creative tourism model (Al-Ababneh, 2019; Boccella & Salerno, 2016; Serra et al., 2021; Richards, 2018), to present themselves in a more effective and engaging manner with local cultures and their protagonists. Due to the immersive

nature of this model, low and medium-density areas are preferred destinations for undertaking creative and innovative experiences based on local heritage resources. However, in a highly competitive industry, the tourism promotion of low and medium-density areas also faces several additional challenges, such as the need to retain and sustain populations; develop effective communication strategies; provide good transportation and mobility infrastructure; and offer quality accommodation, commerce, and services that can meet demand, among others. Hence, the commitment to this niche market-oriented tourism model requires a concerted effort among various actors and stakeholders, working towards a common good and adding new values and meanings to these places.

This article focuses on the historic centre of Santarém to explore how cultural heritage can be effectively integrated with cultural and creative tourism. The aim is to not only stimulate balanced tourism development and related activities but also to examine how this model can contribute to the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage and, consequently, to the enhancement of a sense of place. The exploratory research is based on a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with key local actors, complemented by an “inventory” of the most relevant heritage in the city of Santarém and its state of preservation. In addition to exploring perspectives for the potential development of new tourist activities in the city's historical centre, the results aim to contribute to the broader debate regarding the role that creative tourism can play in the dynamism and preservation of the historical and architectural heritage of a city distinguished by its Gothic legacy, such as Santarém. Given the historical and heritage significance of the urban centre of Santarém, it is crucial to re-evaluate its heritage value in the context of contemporary challenges, particularly in relation to tourism. This introduction is followed by a review of the literature on the potential of historic centres as spaces for tourism and creativity. The third section presents the methodology and information on the procedures carried out. The fourth section presents and discusses the obtained results. This is followed by the conclusions, which provide recommendations for local stakeholders, particularly those directly involved in heritage, tourism, and urban planning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historic centres as spaces for tourism and creativity

It is well established that the recognition and consequent heritage enhancement of historic urban centres through the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) label leads to an increase in tourist demand, expanding the attractiveness of places, both on an international and domestic scale (Bak, Min & Roh, 2019; Ivanunik, Krul & Bryk, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that cities with this type of resource seek to make use of these distinctive values to acquire competitive advantages in the tourism market (Pérez Guilarte & González, 2018; OECD, 2014), and better position themselves in the multiple attractiveness rankings. However, these competitive advantages are not without some adverse effects.

The significant challenges confronting numerous European cities are well documented. (e.g. gentrification, touristification and overtourism, traffic congestion, the alienation of local populations, the transformation of local commerce, the commodification of culture, the de-characterisation of historic landscapes and the socio-cultural identities of neighbourhoods, among others), where over the last three decades there has been an exponential increase in tourists, attracted not only by their historical and heritage values, but also by the entire cultural, social and symbolic environment resulting from the whole complex (Milano, 2018; Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019; Goodwin, 2019; Füller & Michel, 2014; Salerno & Russo, 2020; Seraphin, Sheeran & Pilato, 2018).

This complex scenario in cities such as Venice, Barcelona or Berlin has inspired various debates on the causes and effects of mass tourism in historic centres, particularly by focusing on the need to balance the development of tourism with the preservation of heritage sites, and on how to harmonise tourist uses with the daily uses and needs of local populations (Wang, Bai & Su, 2022).

Despite the adverse (and to some extent extreme) effects faced by the mentioned European cities, including Lisbon and Porto, it is important to acknowledge that there are many other regions striving to achieve greater tourism attractiveness. These regions see tourism as a means to diversify the local economy, retain population, increase employment opportunities, enhance residents' quality of life,

and revitalise urban spaces. This goal becomes particularly significant for small to medium-sized cities located in peripheral areas, where tourism is expected to play a crucial role in promoting and safeguarding local cultural heritage, as well as in fostering community self-representation and self-esteem (Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). In Santarém, this dynamic is particularly evident. Located in the central region of Portugal, along the banks of the Tagus River, Santarém boasts a historical and cultural heritage reflected in its monuments, churches, and historic buildings. However, like many cities with a declining traditional economy, Santarém has been seeking solutions to revitalise its economy and preserve its historical heritage, with tourism presenting itself as a potential avenue to achieve these goals (Shubbar & Boussaa, 2022).

In this context, which is more commonly observed in small to medium-sized cities, the model of cultural and creative tourism can foster significant outcomes in terms of sustainable development based on local culture and heritage.

Creative-based cultural tourism plays a central role in the resurgence of cities, as visitors are drawn by the same enthusiasm that attracts creative professionals (Richards, 2014). As a measure to avoid the homogenisation of cultural offerings through traditional tourism models, there has been a constant search for strategies to differentiate destinations and tourist experiences that promote their uniqueness and protect existing unique heritage characteristics. Adding a creative component to tourism has proven to be a strategy to strengthen the diversification of destinations, particularly in the realm of cultural tourism (Richards, 2020).

The concept of creative tourism defined by Richards and Raymond (2000) primarily refers to the direct involvement and active participation of visitors/tourists in activities (such as small-scale courses, workshops, or studios) that are artistically and culturally connected to the destination where they are conducted. This connection between tourism and creativity allows for the exploration of aspects of education, learning, and knowledge, while also incorporating psychological dimensions such as experiences, affections, emotions, and sensations (Pimenta, Cadima Ribeiro & Remoaldo, 2021). Advocating for the development of new learning experiences and immersive activities requires not only greater availability on the part of the tourist/visitor but also seeks to attract a specific profile oriented towards these experiences. More than just travelling as a passive observer, the desire to deepen knowledge about the cultural identity of destinations stimulates a growing market demand, particularly attracted by immersive experiences with local communities (Richards, 2009), learning more about what motivates them and how they relate to the world.

Over time, the concept of cultural and creative tourism has progressively expanded to encompass broader experiences that include informal learning situations and encounters (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Richards, 2017), countering the mass reproductions of cultural manifestations typical of tourist destinations. It is also within this context of informal learning that the crucial importance of heritage (both tangible and intangible) as a foundation for creative tourism initiatives can gain new frameworks.

Today, the heritage industry is part of the creative industry, although it is slightly different from other cultural industries: heritage is not only inherited but also created, constantly reproduced, and performed (Juréniené, 2016). Its meaning depends on the perspective and timing of those who attribute this symbolism, and this historical and cultural construction is subject to spatial and temporal contingencies (Sousa, Netto & Oliveira, 2019). Therefore, heritage is not objective; rather, it is socially constructed and perpetually evolving, depending on the values promoted by each community at a given time (Fontal Merillas, 2016).

According to Della Lucia, Trunfio & Go (2017), both tangible and intangible urban heritage are shaped by various intrinsic factors, including its history, cultural capital, creative industries, and the local environment. These elements are intrinsically linked to the identity and distinctive character of a place, encompassing tangible and intangible aspects such as local cultures and traditions, historical narratives, landscapes, and communities (Duxbury et al., 2020).

Focusing creative tourism activities on heritage presents a multifaceted opportunity to develop enriching, authentic, and educational experiences, while also valuing and preserving the cultural wealth of the destination. In this context, cultural itineraries serve as a means to explore history and heritage, leveraging local resources and stimulating regional economic development through creative tourism. Cultural itineraries have the potential to create complex tourist spaces, incorporating historical landmarks and visible elements like landscapes, while also preserving

historical and social phenomena and providing narrative value to the territories (Ruiz-Jaramillo et al., 2023).

For successful cultural and creative tourism, it is crucial to establish a broad value network, incorporating diverse creative content and lifestyles into the tourist experience, whether in physical formats or leveraged by new technologies (Della Lucia et al., 2017). Balancing the promotion of creativity with equitable development emerges as an essential guideline to ensure comprehensive benefits for the resident population. In line with this, Richards (2021, p. 13) emphasizes the need to shift the focus from promoting passive tourism sites and itineraries to adopting more dynamic approaches in creative tourism.

These approaches underscore the importance of understanding placemaking as a social practice that fosters top-down and bottom-up synergies (Richards & Duif, 2019), by combining three essential elements: resources (both tangible and intangible, provided by the territories); meanings (emotions, relationships, and meanings that connect people to their territories); and creativity (innovative and creative use of resources and meanings to capture the attention and interest of diverse audiences). In this sense, creative tourism can be considered a privileged tool for connecting people, places, and resources through placemaking strategies that help promote and invigorate low-density territories and small cities that are off the main tourist itineraries. This model of tourism offering, based on collaborative and relational forms of knowledge and understanding of local values and distinctive characteristics, de-emphasizes economic development goals more consistent with mass tourism. Instead, it promotes a holistic view of sustainability conditions (social, cultural, environmental, economic, and citizenship), fostering a deeper engagement between visitors and local communities, as well as the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and new values.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study primarily examines the material aspects of built historical and architectural heritage, while also considering the intangible elements that enhance its overall value. The main objective is to explore how the intersection of culture, creativity, and tourism can contribute to the preservation and revitalisation of historic centres in small and medium-sized cities.

To explore this objective, an empirical study was conducted with a focus on the Historical Centre (HC) of Santarém. Located in the former Ribatejo region, Santarém serves as the capital of its district and municipality and is celebrated for its rich cultural and historical heritage, particularly its Gothic-inspired monuments. Positioned within the NUTS II Lisbon and Tagus Valley statistical region and the NUT III Lezíria do Tejo subregion, Santarém holds significant historical and cultural importance due to its location in the Tagus River Valley.

The study seeks to assess how Santarém's material heritage can foster new urban dynamics. These dynamics are expected to fulfill two main objectives: (i) to attract tourists, local residents, and relevant authorities by enhancing the appeal of the historical centre's heritage; and (ii) to serve as a catalyst for essential rehabilitation initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalising this heritage.

The empirical research was supported by a document analysis, considering strategic documents for the tourism development of the municipality of Santarém, such as the Plano Estratégico de Valorização Turística (PEVT) [Strategic Plan for Tourism Enhancement] (THC, 2018) and the Action Plan (AP) for the Historical Centre of Santarém (CMS, 2015). This analysis also provided the foundation for a comprehensive exploratory and territorial survey aimed at identifying the cultural and creative potential of the city of Santarém. The survey included fieldwork for direct observation, resulting in an "inventory" (using an analytical grid system) of the most significant built heritage and providing a general assessment of each site's preservation and maintenance status, accessibility and visitation conditions, and the availability of support or information services for tourists. This survey considered religious monuments (such as churches and convents), cultural sites (including theatres, museums, art galleries, and local handicrafts), and natural landmarks (such as parks, gardens, and fountains).

This approach enabled the quantification of a wide range of historical-architectural buildings and other spaces of heritage value within the area under analysis, along with a general evaluation of their preservation status. To complement the empirical work, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with key local specialists, representatives, and professionals linked to Santarém's

cultural, heritage, and tourism sectors. Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions to encourage in-depth exploration in a flexible, conversational format, making them ideal for small-sample, exploratory research and narrative analysis (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Ayres, 2008; Veal, 2018). Participants included historians, architects, geographers and experts in regional and urban planning, culture and ethnography. Representatives from regional tourism entities, the municipal government, as well as house-museum owners and museum founders, also contributed diverse insights into culture, tourism, and heritage. As presented in Table 1, the group of eight interviewees includes four professionals or representatives from the private sector and four from the public sector. This intentional selection aims to capture a diverse range of perspectives on the tourism potential of the Santarém region while addressing the status of heritage maintenance.

Table 1 – Main roles of the interviewees and the sectors they represent

Interviewee N°	Main role(s)	Sector
1	Historian and Tourism Consultant	Private
2	Former Head of the HC and Architect	Private
3	Specialist in Ethnography and Folklore	Private
4	Regional Tourism Entity	Public
5	Santarém City Council	Public
6	Geographer and Consultant in Regional and Urban Planning	Public
7	House-Museum Founder and Tour Guide	Private
8	Museum Founder and President of a Cultural Association	Public

The interviews, conducted in 2021 and averaging one hour each, were transcribed and analyzed using a narrative analysis framework with an interpretivist approach. This approach embraces the inherent subjectivity of participants' experiences, allowing a narrative to emerge through the interplay of participants' perspectives, making it easier for readers to interpret (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Fraser & Gondim, 2004). The interviews were subjected to an interpretive analysis content based on four main categories: i) Perceived condition and cultural significance of Santarém's historical/Gothic heritage, to explore the views on the preservation status of Santarém's historical and Gothic sites and their value to the cultural identity of the region; ii) Heritage as a driver of economic and tourism growth, to understand how heritage sites are viewed in terms of their contribution to local economic vitality and tourism appeal; iii) Tourism promotion and public-private partnerships, to analyse opinions on current tourism promotion efforts and the effectiveness of collaboration between public and private stakeholders; iv) Challenges, opportunities, and policy insights regarding a more sustainable tourism growth, to identify key challenges and potential opportunities for creative tourism, with insights for supportive public policies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Santarém in the Portuguese context

Santarém's central location in Portugal, roughly 70 km from Lisbon and just over two hours from Porto, makes it a strategically important hub. This advantageous position provides easy access to various transportation routes, including highways and railways that link the northern and southern regions of the country. According to the 2021 Census (INE, 2022), the municipality of Santarém, divided into 18 parishes, has a population of 58,770 inhabitants. Of these, 30,086 reside in the União de Freguesias da Cidade de Santarém (UFCS) [Union of Parishes of the City of Santarém], representing 51% of the total population of the municipality. Between 2011 and 2021, Santarém lost 3,430 inhabitants, equivalent to nearly 7% of its resident population. Between 2001 and 2011, the loss was 2%. This scenario confirms a declining trend that has become more pronounced in the last decade.

In terms of tourism, the former province of Ribatejo, of which Santarém is the capital, is associated with agriculture, characterised by its extensive plains known as "Lezírias do Tejo," livestock farming, and bullfighting. The annual National Agricultural Fair and the Festivities of São

José promote the local and national agricultural sector, bullfighting activities, and equestrian events, as well as regional traditions. Santarém is also known for its cuisine and wines, highlighted by the annual National Gastronomy Festival, the oldest gastronomic festival in the country.

The city is renowned for its historical and architectural heritage, particularly its Gothic-inspired monuments, hence its common designation as the "Gothic Capital". However, despite the recognition of these heritage values, Santarém has faced economic challenges in recent decades, including a significant decline in traditional commerce and a certain neglect in the preservation of its historic and architectural urban heritage.

According to the data from the Strategic Urban Rehabilitation Programme of the Santarém Plateau, published in 2016 (CMS), out of the total number of buildings in the Urban Rehabilitation Area of the plateau (which covers an approximate area of 68 hectares and 1008 buildings), 46.9% required either minor or major rehabilitation intervention. Of these buildings, 18.6% were completely or partially vacant. Additionally, the 2012 report "Urban Rehabilitation Strategy of the Santarém Plateau 2013-2027," prepared by the municipal company "Viver Santarém", highlights the existence of degraded buildings in the historic centre, emphasising its depopulation in favour of new areas, an ageing population, a high percentage of vacant dwellings, as well as a reduced commercial, touristic, and cultural dynamism.

"Currently, Santarém is experiencing an obstruction in its tourism development and the utilisation of its historic-cultural potential due to the degradation of its built environment and subsequent vacancy, as well as the absence of a high-quality, differentiated tourism product that can be integrated into regional tourist routes. This fact reinforces the conviction of the need for the identity affirmation of the Historic Centre of Santarém. Tourist and residential excellence require secure advances in these assumptions" [Own translation] (p. 41).

In turn, the analysis of the state of conservation of buildings in the core areas of Ribeira de Santarém and Alfange, carried out in 2013 by the company Domusrehabita, revealed that out of the 454 existing buildings, 192 required major rehabilitation interventions. The report underlined the critical situation of the building stock.

The PEVT for the Municipality of Santarém also recognises that the communication and promotion of tourism in the area is deficient (p. 66), and as such, includes some strategic lines to improve this fundamental aspect in the various axes it presents for tourism development.

In terms of overnight stays in the municipality, data from INE in 2022 shows a positive trend, with the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation establishments recording 102,301 guests. This represents an 11% increase compared to the year 2019, which was considered the best year in national tourism before the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding cultural and artistic activities, 2010 was the year with the highest number of theatre performances, concerts, or other live artistic events, totaling 291 shows. The second-best year was 2018, with 205 shows. It was also in 2010 that the municipality's expenditure on culture and sport reached its highest values (10,833.6 thousand euros), followed by 2022, with a decrease of over 50% (4,533.3 thousand euros).

These figures illustrate that Santarém is confronted with a range of socio-economic challenges that demand coordinated efforts across all sectors. Although tourism is just one of these socio-economic sectors, it holds significant potential to drive new dynamics that could foster economic, cultural, and social development in the region.

4.2. The monumentality of a Historic Centre

The HC of Santarém consists of two distinct geographical areas: the elevated plateau, which houses the most monumental, residential, and military urban ensemble; and the riverside area along the Tagus River, which encompasses two urban centres (Alfange and Ribeira de Santarém) that historically facilitated commercial and fishing activities. This organisational structure has remained largely unchanged over the centuries, influencing the development of subsequent urban expansion areas.

The HC of Santarém covers an area of 1.43 km² (DGT, 2014) and is characterised by a remarkable monumental heritage that attests to the strategic importance assumed by Santarém over several centuries. Despite the numerous heritage testimonies evidencing Romanisation and Arab

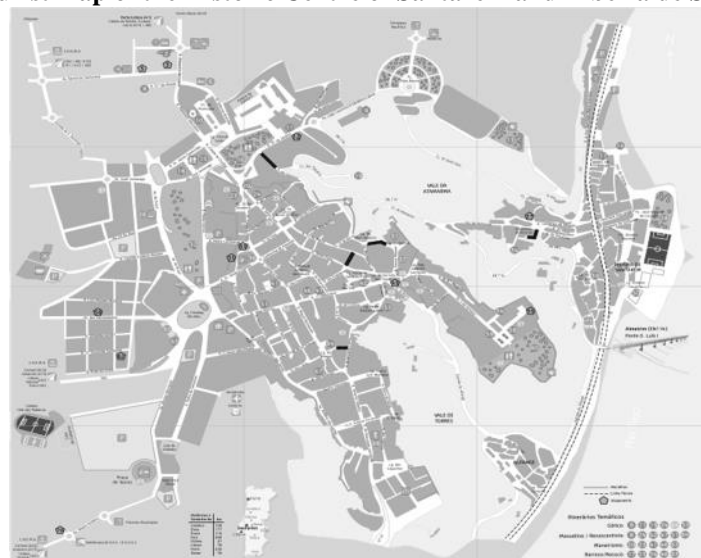
influence, the architectural construction of the HC of Santarém is distinguished by the expressiveness of the Gothic style, with Renaissance and later, Romantic traits juxtaposed. The various narrow and winding streets, as well as the old buildings, are characteristic testimonies of its development within walls between the 13th and 17th centuries. Both the urban core and the historic core of Ribeira de Santarém (Figures 1 and 2) are in the process of being classified as heritage of public interest by the Directorate-General for Portuguese Cultural Heritage. This classification procedure is based on the "high historical-cultural value as a testimony that reflects patrimonial and cultural value of memory, authenticity, originality, and exemplarity on a national scale" (Diário da República, 2012, p. 38275).

Figure 1 – Boundaries of the Historic Centre of Santarém and Ribeira de Santarém



Source: Santarém City Council, consultation of the Municipal Master Plan (October, 2023).

Figure 2 – Tourist map of the Historic Centre of Santarém and Ribeira de Santarém.



Source: Official website of Santarém City Council (n.d.)

Despite the rich heritage on which the architectural construction of the HC of Santarém is based, it can be said that the historical, cultural, and even symbolic dimension of the built heritage seems to be undervalued by local residents and may even go unnoticed by many of them. The predominance of an ageing population, with low levels of education and income residing in the HC, has contributed to a gradual loss of socio-economic and cultural vitality. This situation is

compounded by deficient and irregular building conservation works, which contribute to its progressive deterioration (CMS, 2016). Younger demographic groups tend to migrate to areas that better align with their lifestyles. This detachment from the HC, which, despite its heritage value, is not adequately maintained, impedes the development of meaningful connections, a sense of belonging, and even emotional attachment to the places and their distinctive features. All this contributes to the weakening and loss of identity ties and connection with the city and its heritage. Simultaneously, this lack of awareness or detachment from the heritage dimension of their local areas not only reduces residents' engagement in individual preservation efforts but also diminishes their involvement in or encouragement of collective initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalising both heritage and surrounding spaces.

The AP for the Historic Centre of Santarém, presented by the municipality, aimed to concertedly promote the increase in attractiveness and demand for the historic core by visitors. It intended to reverse the stagnation scenario and regenerate the HC "through the programming and designation of measures that promote the return of residents, tourists, companies, and commerce, that is – the demand for the centre – as a cultural, religious, commercial, business, professional, and residential destination." In this context, tourism was assumed as an essential activity to boost urban regeneration. According to the document, the types of tourism should be aligned with the desired identity brand – a cultural landscape with excellent heritage and scenic riches – and allow for new experiences. Understanding what makes the HC unique, its value compared to the historic centres of other cities, identifying strategic bets and target audiences, as well as ways to attract them, were also issues raised by the AP, with the aim of guiding the strategy outlined for the HC of Santarém.

4.3. Heritage in Santarém's Historic Centre: balancing potential and current challenges through interviewee perspectives

Several years have passed, with minimal progress on the strategy outlined in the AP, leading to a widespread perception that effective policies for the preservation and revitalisation of the built heritage in the HC of Santarém are lacking. Interviews with key local players provided an in-depth understanding of their perspectives and actions regarding the region's heritage resources and their potential to enhance tourist attractiveness and promoting economic and cultural revitalisation. Analysis of these interviews reveals that there is a group of specialists and local officials (both from private and public sectors) who express a deep understanding and commitment to the diverse value of Santarém's heritage:

"We have built monumental heritage, religious heritage, nature, crafts, we have many types of heritage that we can capitalise on.... It is in the built heritage that the greatest originality lies." (Interviewee 1)

"The most differentiated assets are those related to the uniqueness and exceptionality of the territory, namely its history of over three thousand years, with all the cultures that have existed here and left physical marks, such as the Romans, the Moors, and the Jews." (Interviewee 2)

"Its vast architectural and religious heritage, combined with the fact that the city of Santarém is one of the greatest representatives of the Gothic style in Portugal [...]." (Interviewee 4)

However, aside from two public officials, the interviewees expressed frustration over the perceived inaction of those responsible for heritage management. They noted that the architectural heritage, which is essential to the HC's tourist appeal, is not being sufficiently prioritized, leading to the neglect of significant monuments:

"We find that many of the significant monuments in Santarém have not received the due attention, whether in terms of their restoration, their preservation, or their availability for the tourists who visit us. Therefore, there is very significant raw material, but it has not always been properly utilised (...). We are the 'Capital of Gothic' and have such interesting monuments, but most of them are

closed. If we want to visit some museums, except for the Diocesan Museum, practically all the others have been closed for years, sometimes even decades.” (Interviewee 3)

“When many material and infrastructural issues remain unresolved, I am not sure to what extent those with decision-making power or the ability to intervene are truly focused on the immaterial component, especially when there are other more pressing issues to address.” (Interviewee 6).

These quotes highlight the challenge of prioritizing intangible heritage when material and infrastructural issues remain unresolved. They suggest that for the city to truly advance in cultural and creative tourism, an integrated approach is essential - one that values and balances both the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage, meeting the ideas presented by Richards (2020) or Duxbury et al. (2020).

Furthermore, another interviewee emphasised the significance of visitor experience:

“The impact of those visiting a city for the first time is crucial for its classification and the quality of the experience being created. The city must be welcoming, meaning it should be clean, so that visitors feel comfortable and safe while walking.” (Interviewee 7)

This statement underscores the vital impact of first impressions on a city’s reputation and appeal, or what Ruiz-Jaramillo et al. (2023) present as territorial narrative value. A welcoming atmosphere not only elevates the visitor experience but also reflects the city’s commitment to preserving its heritage. For Santarém to attract more tourists, its streets and public spaces must be well-kept and inviting. Prioritising cleanliness and safety is essential to building a positive perception, encouraging tourism and driving economic benefits for the local community. This aligns with a placemaking vision that combines top-down and bottom-up approaches, creating synergies that actively engage local communities in policy actions (Richards & Duif, 2019). But local politics must take on a more effective role.

“The historic neighbourhood of Ribeira de Santarém, properly organised and preserved, is one of the most beautiful aspects of Santarém. The Tagus River caresses our feet. There are many places that do not have this privilege, but here we have a majestic river, the largest in the Iberian Peninsula, flowing alongside us.” (Interviewee 8).

The Tagus River adds not only aesthetic beauty to the neighborhood but also a unique character that distinguishes Santarém from other cities. By focusing on the preservation and revitalisation of this historic area, Santarém can leverage its natural and cultural assets to create a more appealing destination for both visitors and residents, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the city, as observed:

“With regard to build heritage, monuments are not valued because almost all of them are closed. The only ones that are open are those in the possession of private individuals (...). Those that the City Council could manage are closed. The only one that is sometimes open is the Church of Graça, with Gothic architecture. The Church of Santa Clara, which is also Gothic, is closed. For many years, the walls of the Portas do Sol were lit, but for 20 or 15 years, this space has had no lighting (...). All the monuments were lit in the past. There was a lighting project for Santarém’s heritage, so the monuments have projects; they just need to be put into operation. This tourist valorisation that any city has does not exist in Santarém.” (Interviewee 2)

Interviewees pointed to the absence of an effective strategy and limited municipal support as key obstacles to fostering local entrepreneurship. This gap hampers efforts to attract new businesses capable of injecting fresh dynamics into the HC and mitigating the cycle of local business closures. However, the situation is complex: stakeholders, political leaders, and local associations acknowledge that issues like depopulation, building decay and an ageing population also contribute to the HC’s lack of economic, social, and cultural vibrancy (CMS, 2019; Correio do Ribatejo, 2020; THC, 2018, p. 65). Furthermore, local commerce struggle to compete with shopping centres, which benefit from extended hours and greater accessibility.

Despite these issues, the municipality has made some efforts to tackle the identified problems. According to local authorities, the entire HC is undergoing revitalisation through Urban Rehabilitation Areas, tax exemptions, and incentives for private restoration of properties. A collaboration protocol established in 2022 among key entities responsible for Santarém's monuments - the municipality, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, the Diocese, and the Higher Institute of Management and Administration of Santarém - aims to create a coordinated schedule for the daily opening of various monuments across the city. However, it is important to note that some monuments covered by this agreement remain closed due to ongoing renovations. Additionally, the involvement of multiple entities - such as the municipality, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, and the Diocese – adds complexity to the management process.

“Most of the monuments belong to the Diocese, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, they are of other orders, they are not State-owned. There is also the issue that it is the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC) that has some preponderance in some situations. This is something that has been identified, not just now, it has always been like this, unfortunately, in Santarém. As I have already had the opportunity to say, even publicly, the municipality is working, even with some meetings with the New University to have an integrated management policy for our heritage similar to what is done in Monte da Lua in Sintra.” (Interviewee 5)

According to the key findings from the inventory of CH's heritage (Table 2) 33 sites of heritage significance and historical value are currently closed, restricted, or lack suitable conditions for public visitation.

Table 2 – Inventory of heritage in Santarém's Historic Centre assessed as being in poor condition (including the areas of the Plateau, Ribeira de Santarém and Alfange)

Name and ownership	Current state of conservation / notes	Access/visitation conditions / other information
Chapel N.º Sr.ª do Monte Santa Casa da Misericórdia	Exterior in poor condition. Outside the tourist circuit due to difficult access.	Visit by request
Former Cavalry Training School (EPC) and Tower of the former Trinity Convent Santarém Municipality	Exterior of the building and some exterior spaces in poor conditions.	Free access for exterior spaces
Municipal Market Santarém Municipality	Under renovation.	Closed
Calçada de Santa Clara Santarém Municipality	In poor condition.	Free access
Fountain (Chafariz) of Calçada de Santa Clara Santarém Municipality	In poor condition.	Free access
Fountain or Chafariz das Figueiras/ Mourisca Fountain Santarém Municipality	Fountain and surroundings in poor condition.	Free access (But difficult and dangerous)
House of Portugal and Camões - Former Santarém Military Prison Santarém Municipality	Exterior/interior in poor condition. (prison area)	Not visitable
Chapel (Ermida) do Milagre Diocese of Santarém	Exterior/interior in poor condition. No signage or indications.	Closed
Fountain (Chafariz) of the Vila, of El-Rei or D. Rita Santarém Municipality	In poor condition.	Free access
Junqueira Fountain Santarém Municipality	In poor condition.	Free access
Historic Alfange neighbourhood Santarém Municipality and private entities	Buildings, façades, roads, fountains, streets, and sidewalks in very poor condition.	Free access
Church of S. João Evangelista of Alfange Diocese of Santarém	Exterior/interior in poor condition.	Closed
Church of Santa Cruz Diocese of Santarém	Interior/exterior in reasonable conditions. Surroundings neglected.	Visit by request
Church of Santa Iria Diocese of Santarém	Exterior in poor condition.	Closed
Memorial of Santa Iria Santarém Municipality	In poor condition. Surroundings neglected.	Free access

Santarém Railway Station Portuguese state	Main building and historic tiles in poor condition.	Free access
Gothic Ruins of the former Palhais Gate and Hospital Private owner	In poor condition.	Private (no access)
Remnants of the Ribeira Wall, including Santo António Postigo and houses with Portuguese heraldic coats of arms, and Casa do Infantado Private owner	Exterior in poor condition. No historical references.	Free access
Dom Luís I Bridge Portuguese state	Poor condition. Surrounding area very neglected.	Free access
Rosa Damasceno Cinema-Theatre Private owner	Interior/exterior in poor condition.	Closed
Sá da Bandeira Theater Santarém Municipality	Exterior in poor condition.	Open Tuesday to Friday between 11am and 2pm
Barão de Almeirim Palace Current Braamcamp Freire Municipal Library Santarém Municipality	Interior/exterior in poor condition.	Open Monday to Friday until 3pm.
Teatro Clube Ribeirense Santarém Municipality	Interior/exterior in poor condition.	Closed
Cabaças Tower Time Museum Nucleus Santarém Municipality	Interior/exterior in poor condition.	Closed
Church of São João de Alporão Art and Archaeology Museum Nucleus Santarém Municipality	Under renovation.	Closed
Urbi Scallabis Interpretation Centre (USCI) Santarém Municipality	Exterior in reasonable condition. Surrounding area in poor condition.	Closed
Forcado Museum Celestino Graça Monumental Square Santa Casa da Misericórdia	Exterior and accesses in poor condition.	Visit by request
Anselmo Braamcamp Freire House-Museum Santarém Municipality	Exterior in poor condition. Interior in reasonable condition.	Closed
Former Carriage Stables Building - Railway Museum Nucleus Portuguese state	Exterior/interior and surroundings in poor condition.	Closed
Garden and Viewpoint of São Bento Santarém Municipality	In poor condition.	Free access
Steps (Escadinhas) of Santa Clara Santarém Municipality	In extremely poor condition.	Free access
Ribeira Leisure Park Santarém Municipality	Garden and equipment's in very poor condition.	Free Access
Riverside Area at Ribeira de Santarém Santarém Municipality and the Portuguese Environment Agency	In poor conditions. No leisure infrastructures. Vehicle access in protected area.	Free Access

Source: Own elaboration (2021)

Although celebrated as the "Capital of Gothic," Santarém lacks essential tourist infrastructure, clear signage, and informational resources to help visitors fully engage with its rich historical, architectural, and cultural heritage.

The PEVT for the Municipality of Santarém (THC, 2018, p. 32) points to a shortage of anchor facilities, such as museums and interpretation centres, in the Ribatejo region. Additionally, the lack of complementary connections between attractions and the absence of convergence towards a central destination - namely the HC of Santarém – diminish the area's overall appeal. The limited urban vitality, stemming from the everyday activities of local residents, is another critical issue that requires attention to boost the city's vibrancy.

4.4. A Gothic itinerary for Santarém: a strategy for creative tourism

The expressiveness of the Gothic style in Santarém stands out as the most distinctive patrimonial feature of the city. This highlights its significant potential to be developed as part of an urban revitalisation strategy, based on the principles of cultural and creative tourism models. This architectural trend, influenced by the artistic culture of Northern Europe, shaped the civilisational transformation that occurred from the 13th century onwards, significantly impacting the urban structure of Santarém, both on the plateau and in the riverside area.

According to Pinto & Veiga (2004), in Santarém, the 13th century saw the application of a mendicant expression of Gothic to religious constructions, as the main promoters were precisely the mendicant orders. From the 14th and 15th centuries, there was an evolution in Gothic due to the renewal of religious ideals, royal patronage, and the influence of architects and masters from the Monastery of Batalha. The quantity and relevance of the architectural elements and Gothic tomb art led historian Virgílio Correia to confer upon Santarém the epithet "Capital of Gothic" in Portugal in 1924 (Custódio, 1996).

Given the existence of a vast and significant patrimonial collection in Santarém, the proposal of a cultural and creative tourism strategy supported by a Gothic itinerary presents strong potential not only to deepen and enrich the understanding of local culture but also to stimulate new urban and tourist dynamics in the HC and surrounding territories.

"The Ribeira de Santarém and Alfange, if they were valued, could, for example, be visited in a day. Visitors could see the Church of Santa Cruz, a Gothic church, the memorial of Santa Iria, the Church of Santa Iria, the Fonte de Palhais. They could take a ride through the fields if there was a horse trail for that experience along the river. There is a route, which was the old Roman road that passes through the Ribeira, Alfange and then through the Ómnias. Therefore, it would be possible to recover this route and create a one-day itinerary that passes through the Ribeira. It could be combined with the plateau, with a Templar Route, with a Gothic Route. That is, if everything were valued, people would come and leave satisfied." (Interviewee 2)

By transcending the mere appreciation of visible architectural elements through complementary creative experiences, the promotion of this type of itinerary would also have the ability to involve other elements of Santarém's cultural and identity heritage - such as legends, traditions, local products, and other points of interest that can be integrated into a variety of attractions related to other components of local culture - making the visitor experience of exploring the city more meaningful. Therefore, in order to maximize the impact of the Gothic itinerary, it is essential to consider the inclusion of activities that encourage visitor engagement with the heritage and history of Santarém, as noted:

"There are two important aspects: one is to encourage visitors to engage, and the other is to organise a learning activity. This would be extremely valuable and very interesting, especially for preserving traditional arts." (Interviewee 7).

This opinion underscores the importance of creating interactive experiences within the Gothic itinerary that not only inform visitors about the architectural and historical aspects of the sites, but also actively involve them in the local culture, as envisaged by creative tourism (Richards & Raimond, 2000; Richards, 2009; Duxbury et al., 2020; Pimenta, Cadima Ribeiro & Remoaldo, 2021). Incorporating educational activities focused on Gothic heritage would allow Santarém to enrich the visitor experience, making it more memorable and impactful. This approach would also support the preservation of the city's identity and traditional arts. According to Arcos-Pumarola, Paquin & Sitges (2023), the dissemination of urban spaces and their semantic relationship with creativity through maps and tourist routes confirms the potential to link creative industries with the development of tourist products. Creative dimensions involving crafts, folk art, or gastronomy should also be integrated into the itinerary, either as complementary attractions or as autonomous products of cultural and creative tourism, capable of creating more persistent and robust tourist offerings in the area (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023). In this context, creativity acts as the catalyst for revitalizing traditional tourism resources, emphasizing active learning and immersive experiences. Through atmosphere, storytelling, visuals, community-led artistic initiatives, and participatory local participatory activities, tourists gain deeper knowledge of the destination (Rabazauskaitė, 2015).

A heritage tourism strategy based on these premises would link the itinerary to its historical context, adding new dimensions of value to the territory's tangible and intangible legacies (Ruiz-Jaramillo et al., 2023). This approach would not only cater to tourists and visitors but also educate and engage local communities with their historical, architectural, and cultural heritage. Thus, this comprehensive strategy for the HC of Santarém represents a crucial approach, not only for revitalising the area as a vibrant urban space for daily experiences but also for expediting the heritage rehabilitation and conservation processes, which, according to most interviewees, have been ongoing for several years.

Opening this strategy to regional and national partnerships will be a crucial next step for its consolidation. Engaging in dialogue and learning from other cities in Portugal with significant Gothic heritage will be essential, as will exploring collaborations for joint initiatives.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of cultural and creative tourism models, aligned with placemaking strategies in small or medium-sized cities, offers transformation opportunities that are not only more rooted in local contexts but also capable of leveraging tangible and intangible heritage values with strong potential for attraction and tourism development. In this context, creativity is not seen as an end in itself but rather as a tool to enhance the quality of life of communities (Richards, 2020).

Based on these premises, the aim was to assess the existing heritage richness in the HC of Santarém to evaluate its potential for generating new urban dynamics related to tourist attraction. This could simultaneously act as a catalyst for more effective heritage rehabilitation and conservation efforts by the responsible entities.

Empirical analysis demonstrated that, although the current limited tourist attractiveness of the HC of Santarém is not solely attributable to the unavailability of many monumental spaces for visitation, this issue undoubtedly impedes the development of comprehensive and multidimensional strategies for tourism promotion. This affects both the city as a reference destination and other points of interest within the broader region.

While other Portuguese cities have significant Gothic heritage, Santarém is widely recognised as the "capital of Gothic." However, this distinctive "brand" has not received much attention from key local leaders and decision-makers regarding tourism and heritage.

Adopting a creative approach to tourism development, particularly through the investment in an interactive itinerary that provides engaging and innovative experiences centred around Gothic heritage, could be an effective strategy for both heritage preservation and revitalisation, as well as for enhancing the area's attractiveness.

It is essential to adopt approaches that balance the conservation of historical and architectural heritage with ensuring that these spaces remain relevant and functional for both residents and visitors. This involves integrating and maintaining accessibility for daily use and experiences. Therefore, urban planning should include local community participation and invest in connecting communities to their heritage values through information, education, and awareness. Such strategies are crucial for ensuring that historic city centres can thrive sustainably, inclusively, and in a balanced manner in the present and in the future.

This article promotes cultural and creative tourism as a more advantageous model for revitalising historic centres in alignment with sustainable, inclusive, and balanced approaches to experiencing and learning from these spaces. Creative tourism activities facilitate a deeper connection between the local population and their tangible and intangible heritage, while also enhancing awareness among both residents and visitors about the importance of preserving this heritage. By adopting innovative approaches that value local history, heritage, and traditions, it is possible to offer visitors and tourists more enriching experiences that go beyond mere observation, allowing them to actively participate in the culture and history of the place. It will be crucial for local cultural and tourism agents to fully leverage Santarém's cultural and identity heritage, making visitor experiences more meaningful and enriching. So long as its heritage is available for visitation in the short term, an appropriate multidimensional strategy can be developed to reposition Santarém on tourist routes.

5.1. Limitations and future research directions

One limitation encountered during this research was the scarcity of scientific publications on the cultural and tourism development of Santarém. This gap in the literature confirms the relevance of the present study and reveals the need for future research focused on a territory that is gaining increasing importance in Portugal's tourism landscape. Additionally, literature on the development of cultural and creative tourism experiences in Portugal is limited. Therefore, this study contributes

to enriching the understanding of the potential of this emerging tourism model and its suitability for specific cases within the national territory.

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