

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL TOURISM IN THE GENERAL PUEYRREDON DISTRICT (ARGENTINA)

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## Abstract

*The district of General Pueyrredon (Argentina), with Mar del Plata as its main city, has a large peri-urban territory with scenic, agricultural and cultural characteristics that favour Rural Tourism, based on local cultural traditions and contact with nature. In recent decades, it has become a strategy for economic diversification that promotes sustainable development and careful management of the effects of touristification, which can lead to the commodification of culture and the loss of local identity. The aim is to explore the opportunities and challenges of Rural Tourism in the district of General Pueyrredon, analysing its relationship with sustainable development and the implications of touristification in the region. An exploratory and descriptive study is carried out, consulting bibliographic, documentary, graphic and virtual sources, taking as a case the Estancia Santa Isabel, whose productive diversification allows its positioning as an innovative reference of Rural Tourism.*

**Key words:** *Rural Tourism, Sustainable Development, Touristification, Estancia Santa Isabel (Argentina).*

## Introduction

Interest in nature and rural culture favors the development of Rural Tourism, based on the revaluation of traditional agriculture and culture. It acts as a complementary alternative to agricultural activities, diversifies and increases income, reinforces traditions, practices and local knowledge. It requires careful management of the effects of touristification, which can generate the commercialization of culture and the loss of local identity.

In Argentina it has been developing since 1990, as a consequence of political changes that cause a strong increase in taxes on agricultural activity and social transformations in rural areas. Under these conditions, a new rurality emerges, understood as the multifunctionality of rural spaces, the incorpora-

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tion of tourist and recreational functions, complementing the main agricultural and livestock activities. Rural Tourism is positioned as a second activity and economic alternative, which allows the diversification of uses and generates different income.

In the words of Barrera (2006), the modification of the traditional productive function arises with the incorporation of non-agricultural activities and the possibility of entering into the provision of services, generating new commercial alternatives, which aspire to the diversification of risk and the generation of additional income to that of agriculture. Craviotti (2007) states that this new productive scenario generates an increase in the linkages of agriculture with other sectors and the increase of non-agricultural occupations of rural inhabitants, which stimulates an increase in the levels of pluriactivity of the sector.

In the vast territory occupied by Argentina, different estancias, fields, farms and smallholdings receive tourists all year round who seek contact with nature and to participate in agricultural activities. The district of General Pueyrredon (Argentina), with Mar del Plata as its main city, has a large peri-urban territory with landscape, agricultural and cultural characteristics that favor the development of Rural Tourism, promoting the revaluation of traditions and contact with nature. The new activity requires the adaptation of existing facilities, preserving the cultural imprint that characterizes each type of agricultural exploitation; and offers contact with nature, carrying out and participating in daily country activities, such as horseback riding, carriage rides, walks, flora and fauna recognition, preparation of artisanal gastronomy (cheeses, sausages, sweets), and tasting native food (empanadas and barbecue), accompanied by a good wine (Barrera, 2006). In recent decades it has become a strategy for economic diversification that promotes sustainable development and requires careful management of the negative effects of touristification, which can lead to the commercialization of culture and the loss of local identity.

The objective of the research focuses on the analysis of the challenges and opportunities of Rural Tourism in the district of General Pueyrredon, analyzing its relationship with sustainable development and the implications of touristification in the region. An exploratory and descriptive study is carried out, with a qualitative methodological approach, based on the collection of data arising from descriptions and observations, and applied to a case study focused on Estancia Santa Isabel (General Pueyrredon District, Argentina), whose productive diversification allows its positioning as an innovative ref-

erence for Rural Tourism. Different data collection techniques are selected: semi-structured interviews with qualified informants from the public and private tourism sector; observation and field visits with semi-structured guides; review and critical analysis of bibliographic and documentary sources; content analysis in photographs and videos; and consultation of websites of official tourism organizations and the private sector.

It is expected that this study will contribute to the development of programs and projects that promote Rural Tourism as an alternative for sustainable development, based on a territorial approach, taking advantage of the potential and strengthening local identity.

### **Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development**

To explain the meaning of Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development, the terms are defined: Tourism, Tourist Space and Rural Space, to then reflect on the contribution of this tourism modality to local development.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, professional or business reasons, and for a consecutive period of time of less than one year” ([www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)). It includes the activities carried out by people during their trips, for a consecutive period of less than one year, for pleasure, business or other purposes. It integrates all types of motivations (linked to work and the economic system in general) and different types of accommodation (collective or individual), strengthening the relationship between tourism and territory.

López Trigal (2015:228) defines tourist space as “that portion of geographic space in which socio-spatial practices related to leisure, recreation and tourism activities are carried out”. It is a real and virtual space, linked by practices of tourist agents and the people directly and indirectly involved in them (local residents and travelers). The tourist space is made up of sites (scenarios of tourist practices), areas (according to different scales of analysis) and flows (tourist flow). It is virtual because it includes spaces dreamed of or thought of as potential touristification, any mental construction about places (subjective dimension), as well as the growing presence of tourism in the virtuality of cyberspace.

Rural space “is a type of geographic space resulting from the different uses and exploitations, not only agricultural, that rural and urban societies make of it” (López Trigal, 2015:226). It is located outside the urban limits and responds to a question of territorial organization in relation to the different functions that society attributes to each space. Traditionally, it was characterized by the presence of inhabitants specialized in agricultural activities, with a low population density, sociocultural homogeneity of its inhabitants, less differentiation, social stratification and social mobility, with more closed systems of social interaction. Nowadays, the classic opposition between town and country is tending to disappear, with a fragile frontier between rural and urban space, which allows the introduction of the concept of rururban and the idea of a new rurality where agricultural and livestock exploitation are confused and coexists with tourist and recreational activities, natural resources, cultural heritage, landscapes and local identities are valued, reflecting a continuity of urbanization in the multi-functional rural territory (Barrado and Calabuig, 2001).

This is how Rural Tourism emerged, which according to the WTO “is a tourism activity where the visitor’s experience is related to a wide spectrum of products linked to nature activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle and culture, fishing with rod and visiting places of interest” ([www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)). It is based on the countryside as a resource and on the search for tranquility by people who live in urban areas and a space to dedicate themselves to outdoor recreational activities (Jafari, 2000). It uses a rural house or hotel as accommodation, with the option of developing complementary activities in the natural environment, such as hiking, horseback riding, agro-tourism, green tourism, ecotourism, hunting tourism, among others.

It is an alternative modality to the conventional tourism, with a strong focus on and awareness of the environment, values and local culture, together with recreational practices of leisure and free time outside the urban limits. The rise of this modality is associated with changes in the preferences of tourists; and due to its social and territorial effects, it plays a fundamental role as an instrument of local development (López Trigal, 2015).

### **Challenges and opportunities for Rural Tourism in Argentina**

In Argentina, Rural Tourism is presented as a sustainable tourism alternative that promotes the balanced development of rural territories, respecting their natural and cultural resources, and contributing to the well-being of local

communities. This tourism modality seeks to guarantee a harmonious relationship between visitors, hosts and the rural space; and allows recreational and accommodation practices, which can represent a challenge or opportunity in the development of sustainable Rural Tourism.

It presents the following challenges:

- Lack of definition and classification of rural space which complicates the promotion and planning of Rural Tourism.
- Demographic challenges, depopulation of rural areas, lack of basic services (infrastructure, transportation, communications), limited accessibility.
- Heritage preservation versus development, need to balance tourism development with conservation of natural and cultural heritage.
- Unplanned exploitation leads to resource degradation and loss of authenticity.
- Seasonality, dependence and tourist specialization.
- Excessive commercialization, overcrowding and disappearance of cultural and environmental values.
- Installation of foreign companies attracted by the potential of the area and loss of benefits for the local population.

Rural Tourism offers the following opportunities:

- Economic and cultural revitalization, and income diversification.
- Flexibility, adaptation of the offer to the characteristics of the territory.
- Conservation of the environment, sustainable tourism management of natural resources and landscapes, promotion of responsible practices and preservation of the rural environment and local culture.
- Alternative to decongest saturated urban spaces and redistribute economic benefits to rural areas.
- Direct contact with nature and local culture.
- Authentic and personalized tourist modality.
- Promotion of craftsmanship and local production.

Rural Tourism is an economic alternative to agricultural activities, it prevents migration to urban areas and reduces the exclusive dependence on the agricultural sector. It generates employment, contributes to improving the quality

of life of the rural population and stimulates local development. The challenge is based on proper planning that avoids overcrowding and loss of traditional values, the entry of exogenous capital and the reduction of benefits for the local community.

### **General Pueyrredon District (Argentina). Santa Isabel Ranch**

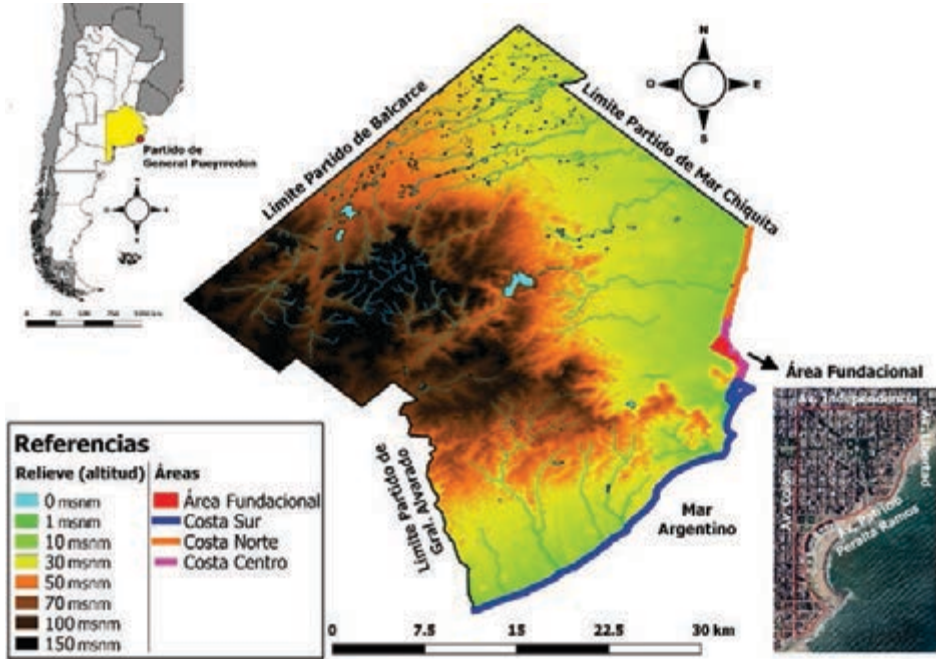
The General Pueyrredon District is located in the southeast of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Its geographic coordinates are 38°00'S 57°33'W. It is bordered to the northwest by the Balcarce District, to the northeast by the Mar Chiquita District, to the southeast by the Argentine Sea, to the southwest by the General Alvarado District. The total surface reaches 1.460,74 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 245,48 km<sup>2</sup> correspond to the urban area and 1.215,26 km<sup>2</sup> to the rural space, it has 47 km of coastline. It is crossed by provincial routes 11 (La Plata/Miramar), 88 (Mar del Plata/Necochea) and 229 (Mar del Plata/General Villegas) and Highway 2 (Mar del Plata/Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires). It has a Railway-Automotive Station (with 29 weekly railway services and a bus station where more than 50 companies operate); an Astor Piazzola International Alternative Airport (6 aviation companies with more than 130 weekly services) and an artificial deep-water port (with a fishing, recreational and tourist mooring sector).

According to data published by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC), there are 667,082 inhabitants in 2022, distributed in 350,607 women and 316,475 men, with a population density of 456.9 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. Mar del Plata (founded in 1874) is the main city and main tourist destination in Argentina, with strong summer demand, receiving 8,500,000 tourists a year. It has 9 smaller localities (urban settlements dispersed in the rural urban space with 2000 inhabitants: *El Marquesado*, *Chapadmalal*, *El Boquerón*, *Santa Paula*, *Sierra de los Padres*, *La Peregrina*, *Estación Camet*, *El Casal* and *Batán*). The foundational area is located in the central coastal zone of the city, with extensions to the north and south. The rural area borders the urban area (Figure 1).

In Argentina, the process of land occupation originates with the Spanish conquest and the creation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata (1776) with its capital in Buenos Aires, where the port of the same name was consolidated as a colonial trade route. A military campaign began to expand the frontiers and advance on the native peoples, with a strategy of territorial occupation based on the ranch or estancia (large extensions of land granted to a person or religious

order) for agricultural and livestock exploitation. Many of these estancias are in the hands of powerful families of the ‘Bell Époque’ in Argentina.

**Figure 1. Study area**



*Source: Own elaboration with QGIS v. 2.18 software and Google Satellite.*

The estancias were born as a self-sustainable economic unit, with the capacity to supply, defend and solve problems. It was made up of different buildings, both for the permanent and temporary population, facilities for animals and agricultural machinery, a school, a chapel and housing. The main house is called “casco” and was designed in European architectural styles, imitating French palaces, with gardens designed by landscapers, with fountains and artificial lakes. Each owner competed with his peers and highlighted the most sumptuous and beautiful design. These old estancias, full of history and secrets, have been incorporated into the accommodation offer from the 1990s, promoting the consolidation of Rural Tourism.

The district of General Pueyrredon preserves several estancias, although they have a smaller surface area due to the succession process of property division, they still preserve the agricultural and livestock production and the gaucho traditions. Estancia Santa Isabel is located 20 km from the centre of Mar

del Plata. It was part of the Chapadmalal Estancia with a surface of 25,500 hectares, whose owner José Martínez de Hoz introduced technology and innovation in the field and in the breeding of horses, livestock and agriculture, being his animals recognised in the most demanding markets of London and Paris. When he died (1888), his son Miguel Alfredo received 12,500 hectares with the original farmhouse, the horse and cattle breeding farm; his other son Eduardo received 13,000 hectares dedicated to agriculture, horse and cattle breeding, which he called Santa Isabel. The following heirs divided the ranch and since 1996 the farmhouse, together with 600 hectares, has belonged to the Estrada Mora family, who remodeled the facilities and added new buildings for accommodation and sports facilities.

In 2009 they started a wine project, introducing vine plants brought from Italy, in an experimental area of 10 hectares located 6 km from the coast, under the influence of a temperate oceanic climate. Under the name Bodega Trapiche Costa & Pampa they offer different varieties: Carmenere, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. It is the first experimental winery located on the edge of the Argentine Sea, where the maritime climate and the properties of the land are combined, allowing the cultivation of the vines and the development of a new industry, which is added to the agricultural and livestock activities, the organization of events held in three multipurpose rooms and the possibility of staying in the old part of the Santa Isabel ranch.

## **Conclusions**

In Argentina, Rural Tourism has promoted the multifunctionality of the agricultural sector and the pluri-activity of its actors, acting as a complement to primary activities and revaluing local culture, traditions, practices and local knowledge of the territories. Although there is a wide range of establishments, it is possible to group them into two categories according to the surface area devoted to agricultural production and the modalities of service provision. On the one hand, there are the large estancias specialized in cattle breeding and agricultural exploitation, whose historic centers have a strong heritage, architectural and landscape value and have been refunctionalized to provide accommodation and a wide range of recreational and sporting activities. On the other hand, there are also smaller enterprises dedicated to agricultural exploitation and farm animals (farms, farmsteads, country houses), where the owner acts as host to the visitor, and which are more closely linked to agro-



tourism. In recent years, the wine industry has been incorporated into Rural Tourism, adding winery tourism as a new alternative linked to nature.

Rural Tourism in the General Pueyrredon District is presented as an opportunity to promote sustainable development, boost the local economy, diversify productive activities, preserve heritage and decentralize the tourist offer located on the coast of the foundational area. However, it faces challenges related to the lack of a definition of rural space, the provision of infrastructure, and the search for a balance between conservation and development, avoiding overcrowding and the loss of traditional values. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive planning to maximize the potential of Rural Tourism and ensure its sustainability.

In this context, Estancia Santa Isabel is witness to the historical process of colonization and land appropriation, as well as the evolution of traditional families dedicated to agriculture and livestock exploitation. The ranch house symbolizes the architectural past and represents a cultural element that allows the reproduction of the traditional way of life of the Argentinean landowners. However, due to the fragmentation of land and the reduction of the estancia's surface area, in recent years it has diversified its production, incorporating the cultivation of grapes and the production of wines in a coastal area, with a strong influence of the temperate oceanic climate. The challenge to the atmospheric conditions favored the development of the new industrial activity and the productive diversification, allowing its positioning as an innovative reference of Rural Tourism in the district of General Pueyrredon (Argentina).

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