

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# TOURISM AND RAILWAYS AS A WAY OF TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF THE DUERO LINE (PORTUGAL) AS A MODEL FOR THE ARANJUEZ-CUENCA-UTIEL RAILROAD

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The global crisis caused by Covid-19 and its impact on tourism activity has accentuated the debate on the sustainability of the tourism model worldwide. This debate has been especially intense in countries that are leaders in tourist arrivals such as Spain (Romero Padilla, Romero Martínez & Navarro Jurado, 2020; Pitarch Garrido, 2020). Moreover, world tourism is affected by the challenges caused by Climate Change, and it may be one of the most affected socioeconomic activities (Olcina Cantos, 2020). Given these facts, proposals that advocate containing or decreasing the growth of tourism figures are taking more and more prominence (Fletcher, Murray Mas, Blanco Romero and Blázquez Salom, 2019; Romero Padilla *et al.*, 2020). It seems clear that these two events (the Covid-19 crisis and Climate Change) represent a turning point for the future of tourism in Spain and worldwide, making it necessary to bet on strategies that in the medium and long term try to alleviate the deficiencies of the mass tourism model and correct bad practices of the past (Romero Padilla *et al.*, 2020, Mantecón, 2020). Similarly, the tourism sector is determined to be of interest to society and highly competitive, so it must come out stronger after the Covid-19 crisis and face the challenge of Climate Change by applying the principles of Sustainable Development (Padrón Fumero & Hernández Martín, 2020). Therefore, there is a commitment to a paradigm shift, in which changes in travel patterns are proposed and it is urged to give greater importance to local or proximity tourism, much less dependent on air traffic (Grande, 2020; Martínez Quintana, 2020; Pitarch Garrido, 2020).

In this new paradigm, rail transport plays a fundamental role, having stood out as an example of sustainability and efficiency compared to road and air transport (European Commission, 2021; Government of Spain, 2021). With the aim of promoting mobility by rail, the European Union developed the initiative “European Year of Rail 2021”, which made it possible to publicize the intentions of the European Commission in this regard (Decision 2020/2228 of the European Parliament and of the Council 2020 European Year

of Rail, 2022). In addition, the railway can not only be considered a mean of transport, but also, in case of historic trains, they represent a tourist attraction by themselves, where “the train trip becomes the real reason for being of the tourist experience” (Babinger, 2011:716). Railway Heritage and its disposition towards tourists play a prominent role in the favorable experiences of the visitor when practicing rail tourism (Lee and Chen, 2017). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that rail tourism is, at the same time, an example of sustainable mobility towards tourist areas, and an element of preservation and dissemination of rail heritage (Dallen, 2007).

Despite everything, and contrary to what was previously stated, in the last quarter of 2021 the Government of Spain through the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda (MITMA), together with different business associations and regional and local institutions, they initiated a plan to practically close the entire Aranjuez-Cuenca-Utiel railway (MITMA, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The foreseeable closure of the railway line especially affects rural towns crossed by it, disappearing regular rail connection, as well as the potential tourist use that could be made of the infrastructure. Following Dallen (2007) and Babinger (2011), the tourist use of the railway is an alternative to the closure of secondary railway lines and promotes the preservation of existing Railway Heritage.

For this reason, the objective of this paper is to present an alternative from the perspective of sustainable tourism to the closure of this railway line, taking as an example the efforts that have taken place in the Portuguese *Linha do Douro* to revitalize said railway line. The proposal is an intention to promote sustainable mobility in the province of Cuenca (Spain), combining the use of the railway as regular transport for the local population with tourist initiatives and developing leisure products.

## **2. THE DOURO LINE AS A MODEL FOR THE REACTIVATION OF THE ARANJUEZ-CUENCA-UTIEL RAILWAY**

The Douro Line is a good example of rail transport reinforcement in Portugal. With the new model inserted, sustainable mobility in the region has been promoted, both for locals and tourists who visit the World Heritage Landscape of *Alto Douro Vinhateiro*, making more attractive rail transport through the conservation of railway heritage. This line currently has a regular passenger service of 12 daily services between Porto and Régua / Pinhão. Among these services, the Interregional trains provide regular service with historic Schindler-type rolling stock recovered for this purpose (Mêda *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, between June and October, *Comboio Histórico do Douro* runs between Régua and Tua stations with a historic steam train (De Matos Salvador, 2012:41-42; Comboios de Portugal, 2022b). In this sense, Portuguese authorities are trying to promote a paradigmatic case of tourism and sustainable mobility through this model of exploitation of the railway line, following the precepts of Dallen (2007). In this way, they are acting directly on several aspects:

1. Facilitation of communications in a territory of 194,225 inhabitants, with socio-economic problems linked to depopulation (Morgado Areia, 2018:86) through regular railway services.

2. Promotion of sustainable mobility of tourists visiting the World Heritage region of *Alto Douro Vinhateiro* , through the use of regular railway services, making them more attractive through the conservation of the railway heritage.
3. Use of a historic seasonal train as a tourist attraction, in combination with the landscape and the gastronomic and wine culture of the region.
4. Endowment of a solid long-term future for the line, in which infrastructure improvements are planned to reopen the abandoned section up to the Spanish border.

On the opposite side, the Aranjuez-Cuenca-Utiel railway in Spain only offered two daily regional services between Madrid and Cuenca, with a change in Aranjuez from Monday to Friday, which have been definitively replaced by buses (MITMA, 2022b). Likewise, the journey between Cuenca and Utiel is served by bus due to the poor state of the infrastructure (Renfe Operadora, 2021). Faced with this situation, what is proposed for the Aranjuez-Cuenca-Utiel railway from the Spanish authorities is its dismantling and use of infrastructures to recondition urban spaces into buildable areas. For rural spaces, a cycling route is offered through the old line, and a combination of transport between buses and high-speed trains through the Cuenca-Fernando Zóbel station for the affected localities is planned (MITMA, 2022a). It should be noted that the total population affected by said closure is 194,652 people <sup>1</sup>(INE, 2022), a figure similar to that of the region crossed by the Portuguese line.

Therefore, the proposal made for this railway line is to follow the example of good practices developed in the Duero Line, developing the following strategies:

1. Urgent renewal of the infrastructure between Aranjuez and Utiel, allowing regular train services to be adapted and improved in optimal operating conditions for their use (De los Cobos Arteaga, 1998:80; Salvador Zuriaga , 2022).
2. Use of regular rail services as a form of sustainable access to different urban, rural and natural tourist spaces of great heritage value, especially in the province of Cuenca, which are crossed by rail from the urban areas of Madrid and Valencia.
3. Conservation of the existing railway heritage through the rehabilitation of disused railway infrastructures. Creation of tourism seasonal trains.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this work, it has been tried to establish solutions and proposals to avoid the closure of the conventional railway line that crosses Cuenca's province. In this sense, the combination of tourist use with regional rail services turns out to be the key that would allow this railway to remain in operation, promoting sustainable mobility through the affected territory. The case of the Portuguese Douro Line would establish the guidelines to follow, where the application of said model is allowing us to glimpse a future of hope for the reopening of the line up to the Spanish border. This operational model that could

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<sup>1</sup> The resulting figure is a sum of the data from the 2021 municipal register of the municipalities that have a railway stop between Aranjuez, Cuenca and Utiel-Requena.

be implemented in Cuenca would follow the precepts of sustainable tourism development stated by institutions such as the World Tourism Organization or the European Commission. The objective would be to give priority to access to tourist attractions through the railway, implementing a tourism model far from mass tourism, called into question in the face of the global challenges. At the same time, on a regional scale, maintaining and strengthening regular passenger rail services, Cuenca's province would be sustainably connected with towns of great importance such as Tarancón, or the cities of Madrid and Valencia. Likewise, the territorial structure imposed by this railway would help to maintain communication between smaller populations. It is well-known these rural spaces have significant depopulation problems, and this option allow to create connections with the large cities mentioned. The problem of depopulation in Spain is currently in full discussion, and the assurance to maintain the railway line is a constant claim in this area.

However, the current intentions of the Spanish administrations are contrary to what has been argued above. In this case, the provincial, regional, and state administrations have not opted for what is perhaps the only existing infrastructure in Cuenca capable of structuring its region effectively. That is the reason Spanish institutions are urged to have a broad vision and a clear desire for public service, in line with the actions carried out in other European countries. Likewise, this paper encourages Spanish institutions to follow guidelines of the supranational organizations that are committed to sustainable mobility through the railway, which, in this case, can allow the revaluation of the heritage and suppose improvements for the local population of the aforementioned spaces.

Finally, this work aims to serve as a starting point for the approach of similar initiatives in other Spanish territories, where the railway-tourism pairing can bring great benefits to society.