

Garden heritage and tourism: present and future of Madeira Island as a garden destination

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Abstract – Madeira Island (Portugal) is widely recognized for the exuberance of its landscape, largely anchored in the abundance of gardens, parks, and flowers. These are one of the biggest tourist attractions, as well as one of the great brand images of this region, which has helped to position the island on the route of a worldwide interest in visiting gardens. Garden tourism has therefore gained expression. This work aims to analyse the trajectory of the garden tourism in this destination by evaluating the supply and demand trends in the three main entrance-fee gardens. It goes beyond the strategies implemented and looks at the constraints that remain, the associated challenges and potentialities, finishing with suggestions to improve the garden experience in Madeira. It is a fact that tourism has acted as a vehicle for validating this heritage. The island has a huge range of spaces capable of positioning it as an outstanding garden destination. The demand for gardens has increased, although it is still firmly based on the three anchor-gardens. Improvements in maintenance and available information are highlighted, but Madeira's garden tourism lacks a strategic and comprehensive vision of its multiple actors and interests.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the link between tourism and gardens is neither new nor recent, there is a growing interest in gardens. A reality that reflects their prestige and popularity, amplified not only by the abundance and diversity of gardens, which continue to be created, but also by their physical and historical qualities, the new experiences offered, and society's growing and discerning interest in these spaces [1-3]. The size of the demand, which is about a billion visitors according to Benfield's estimate [3], leads the author to judge it to be one of the most dynamic areas of tourism.

Portugal has an extensive and varied spectrum of gardens from various periods. Furthermore, Portuguese historic gardens differ from others around the world because of their unique features whose distinctive cultural aspects are very attractive, so that visiting gardens is

becoming more prevalent [2,4]. Garden tourism does not exist as a stand-alone organized product, nor has it really been considered in the tourism strategy defined for the country [2]. However, gardens simultaneously bring together the dimensions of culture and nature [5], taken as key resources of the tourism activity and strategic distinguishing assets of tourism in Portugal in the Strategy for Tourism 2027 [6].

In this context, Madeira makes an impression by having positioned itself on the route of this global interest, supported by the number and variety of its gardens. They have been brought together to be included in several tourist packages, offered as part of national and international tours and itineraries [2]. This heritage, according to Quintal [7], is capable of catapulting the island to a higher level in the European garden tourism market.

This work aims to analyse the garden tourism segment in this destination, using the supply and the recent trend in demand, to assess the position of gardens and garden tourism in the tourism development strategies of the island and to identify constraints and opportunities. Achieving the objectives involved undertaking a review of the scientific literature, carrying out a statistical data analysis from various sources, and fieldwork by participant observation. These reflections and conclusions are intended to be useful references for those involved in the decision-making processes in this area in Madeira.

II. MADEIRA – THE GARDEN OF THE ATLANTIC

Since Madeira was first discovered, the landscape has played a relevant role in the conceptualization of the island as a large garden [8]. This image has survived over time through literature, which has helped to build an identity through the multiple epithets attributed to it: 'Flower of the Ocean', 'Island of Flowers', 'Flower of the Seas', 'Pearl of the Atlantic', and others [9]. This was a propaganda vehicle of the island that stimulated the tourist development of the destination.

The combination of ecological and historical factors has given rise to considerable floral richness. On the one hand, the climate, the rich soils, and the availability of water have created conditions for the development of wide

floristic diversity composed of native species and acclimatized species brought by immigrants. On the other hand, *quintas* [villas] started to emerge; these were holiday homes for foreign communities of which the English are prominent members, and for wealthy Madeirans. They were surrounded by large gardens ostentatiously adorned with exotic species and Madeiran flora [7]. The *quintas* began to appear from the seventeenth century on, but became particularly relevant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Matos [10] identified about 160 units dating from between the early nineteenth century and the first World War. Besides the monumental character of many of them, Pessoa [11] argues that they are essential to the knowledge and understanding of the island's history, culture and structure, particularly of the city of Funchal. However, most of these properties are private, closed to public access, and many of them are not part of any official inventory or listed on tourist promotion sites.

In order to understand the trajectory and heritage base that supports the garden tourism segment in Madeira, data were collected on *quintas*, gardens and parks entered in official inventories. These included the Inventory of Architectural Heritage [12], the Inventory of Gardens and Landscapes in Portugal [13], and the Inventory of Historic Gardens [14]. This research was extended to certain websites that promote tourism on the island. About 70 references to gardens and parks were collected, most of them located in the municipality of Funchal (Figure 1). Many are public property, although not all are currently visitable. This group includes urban or municipal gardens, *quintas*, and a botanical garden.



Fig. 1. Gardens and Parks of Madeira

III. VISITING GARDENS IN MADEIRA

Madeira's tourist activity has always had the climate and landscape as its main support [15]. From the eighteenth century on, medical professionals began to recommend therapeutic stays on the island and the *quintas* began to receive travellers hoping the island's air would provide a

cure, as advertised in international medical guides. At this time Madeira had positioned itself as a destination for therapeutic tourism [16,17]. At the same time, its natural heritage aroused the curiosity of scientists who came for professional/scientific reasons, and whose stay was made easier by fellow countrymen who lived there [18]. During the nineteenth century, the increased movement of passengers in the port of Funchal was crucial for spreading the word about the beauty of the island, particularly its gardens, which soon caught the visitors' attention [8]. Several literary texts praised Madeira's gardens and the remarkable floristic specimens, which were also reported in travel guides, specialist magazines, and books [7,19]. Around this time Madeira starts to lose its reputation as a therapeutic resort in favour of becoming a holiday island, encouraged by the opening of the *quintas* to a selected public.

Madeira's gardens are still mentioned in reference publications. Likewise, in lists of places to visit, on tourism promotion websites, and in national and international tourism packages [2], constituting important factors of tourist attraction [7,15,19].

It is not possible to accurately establish the number of visitors to the island's gardens either because most of the spaces are publicly owned and free to enter, or because, even if the private ones have public access, the number of people admitted is not recorded. There will be several hundred thousand visitors per year, considering, for example, that the island receives more than 1 million visitors by air and sea, to which must be added visits by local residents.

Nevertheless, the gardens with paid entrance give an idea of the size of the demand. The Madeira Botanical Garden, the Monte Palace Tropical Garden, the Palheiro Gardens, and more recently the Quinta Vigia Garden are the most visited paid entrance gardens on the island. Indeed, in a decade (2009-2019) the first three received about 6.5 million visitors. In 2019 there were almost 700,000 visitors, with a clear advantage for the Botanical Garden, which was visited by more than 300,000 people annually in the period before the pandemic (Figure 2).

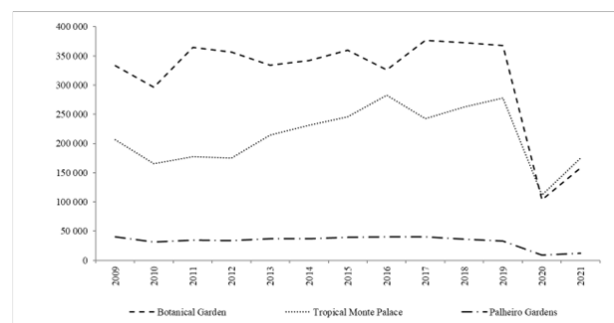


Fig. 2. Visitors to Botanical Garden, Monte Palace Tropical Garden and Palheiro Gardens (2009-2021) [20]

Two decades (1999-2019) saw an increase of around 80% in total visitors and the dominance of the tourist dimension, considering a high percentage of paid entries. With fewer visitors than the Botanical Garden, the Monte Palace recorded a more significant increase in visitors (more than 200%), while the Palheiro Gardens recorded a fall in demand of around 40%. In all three cases there is an irregular interannual evolution of visitation. The economic crisis at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, along with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, were at the origin of the most severe declines [20].

The three main gardens have different scales of visitation that are explained not only by the attractions available in each space, but also by the visitor reception structure, that is, the garden experience offered. In addition, the location and associated accessibility play a central role in their performance as tourist attractions, as well as the decisive issue of publicity. The Botanical Garden is the largest in area and is organized into several thematic areas that present a rich and diverse floristic heritage composed of around 3000 species. Information panels and digital information via an application helps with interpretation. The Monte Palace Tropical Garden has a more complex and diversified tourist structure. It contains several floristic collections that are in symbiosis with other art collections (sculptures, tile and terracotta panels, architectural structures, ceramics,...), and there is even a museum set amidst the gardens. Palheiro Gardens has the structure of a typical *quinta de recreio* [recreational farm], is linked to a hotel, and offers sports activities (golf). The visitable garden is not large but it does include a wide diversity of species, most of which are identified. Species identification is a feature that is common to the three gardens. The Botanical Garden and Monte Palace have a better range of visitor support amenities that provide a more complete and lasting experience. The three spaces are some distance from the tourist epicentre of the region, Funchal, especially Palheiro and Monte Palace, although the latter has access via cable car from Funchal, which also benefits the Botanical Garden. Palheiro Gardens suffers from its peripheral position in relation to the others and from its poor accessibility. Moreover, the retail window display promoting the island virtually eclipses any mention of this garden. The Botanical Garden is the most widely advertised space, with references and information appearing frequently in various places [20].

IV. GARDENS AND GARDEN TOURISM IN THE TOURIST STRATEGY OF THE ISLAND

Gardens have generally been considered as tourism resources in Madeira's tourism strategy on a regular basis. However, while they were seen as emerging tourism products at the beginning of this millennium, as part of one of the strategic development plans, in subsequent tourism development strategies gardens were relegated to a secondary role. They were associated with an additional

offer and often disguised by the Nature product and by-products, or as an activity to enjoy while visiting Madeira [2].

The Tourism Strategy 2022-2027 [21], in its preliminary document, takes the richness and diversity of the natural heritage, fauna and flora as strengths of the region. The tourism assets relating to gardens and forests are inserted in the Nature category, being included in the strategic pillar Nature, Active & Sport Tourism. However, gardens are ignored in a more refined analysis of the opportunities in this pillar. These assets come up again when defining audiences. Gardens are classed as a tourism product engaging with the characteristics and needs of the experience seekers, devoted family, and mindfulness and nature market segments. Nevertheless, they do not clearly, effectively, and prominently integrate the strategy for tourism development over this period of time.

In a broader government programme context, the relevance of natural elements, landscape and flora in the regional economic base, particularly in tourism, is accepted. In this plan, designing a tourist route of Madeira's *quintas* and gardens and creating new parks and public gardens were established as strategic guidelines [22], which have been achieved.

At the same time, some gardens have been the target of rehabilitation interventions under the Regional Operational Programme of the Autonomous Region of Madeira or under more specific heritage-oriented programmes. The purpose was to improve the garden's physical space and visitation conditions in order to diversify their offer, improve the visitor experience, and consequently increase their attractiveness.

The focus on the qualification of the garden experience is visible in two aspects: the overall quality of the public and private spaces – the flora collections, the built heritage assets, the new attractions, the new facilities, and the overall visitor reception structure –, and the information available to support the visit and interpretation of the spaces. In the past, these two aspects had a negative impact and influenced the quality of the experience and product visibility [7].

Despite the progress noted in recent years, some constraints remain within the framework of the dimensions presented above, and others. First, and in general terms, there is a lack of strategic vision in regional policies regarding gardens, and even a lack of public policies specifically aimed at gardens. This hampers further ambition in developing the island as a reference garden destination. More specifically, there is a lack of knowledge about the totality of the *quintas* heritage in official inventories and some exceptional gardens are not open to the general public. These facts can have implications for the development of a network of gardens that structure different visit programmes. Some spaces, especially private ones, are suffering deterioration and abandonment, and others still remain closed in the wake of past natural

disasters. The result could be an irreparable loss of heritage and important attraction points that not only diversify the offer but also help to spread the large flows of tourists. Information, particularly online, is often scarce or out of date, which means that the offer is out of step with reality. These situations can jeopardise the garden experience and result in it being negative, not to be repeated or recommended. There is a lack of varied programming of activities in gardens such as ones related to flora or gardening, and in several gardens there is even a total absence of activities beyond the guided tours that only a few offer, and there is a lack of marketing of significant gardens. All are crucial aspects in mitigating seasonality and reaching new audiences. Furthermore, in most of the visited gardens the information available to visitors is limited to species identification plaques and the space and structures are poorly adapted for children, the elderly, and people with reduced mobility. In some cases visiting times are reduced and the signage is poor or missing, with repercussions on accessibility [20].

Garden tourism in Madeira faces critical challenges to becoming fully established but also has great opportunities that should be exploited in order to develop and consolidate the island as a garden destination.

V. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND SUGGESTIONS

Madeira has a rich, diverse, and distinctive cultural heritage and landscape associated with gardens, and good general reception conditions. It can promote a high-quality garden experience that is best enjoyed at leisure, and thereby establish the island as a garden destination, not only for a general public but also for a more specific market of experts.

Within this framework, it is crucial to effectively convey to the visitor that the offer is not limited to the Botanical Garden, Monte Palace and Palheiro Gardens, which are still anchor attractions, widely advertised in key locations. The island has other gardens that gather a wide range of arguments capable of forming an offer that promotes an original, diverse, high-quality and long-lasting garden experience. Some of them have recently been remodelled for this purpose. Diversifying points of attraction in terms of gardens is crucial for a sustained and sustainable garden tourism activity, not least because the massification of tourism on the island is nowadays a reality and the massification of the main gardens is an increasingly present threat. This situation can result in degradation, loss of essence, purpose, and the de-characterisation of the gardens. The outcome could be in an unmemorable garden experience and a decline in the attractiveness of the island for visiting gardens. The trend is for visitation to increase in the Botanical Garden and the Monte Palace Tropical Garden, making the overload of these spaces a problem that could force a rethink of the entire structure and conditions for opening to the public in the near future.

Moreover, there may be a need to implement visitor control systems, as already happens in other European gardens.

Promotion efforts as well as the development of information content and diversification of forms of interpretation, while adapted to the type and relevance of the garden, should cover all gardens open to the public and not be only a prerogative of the major attractions.

Competition from other garden destinations could be a threat to Madeira's consolidation in this segment. However, the island has great opportunities to assert itself based on the prestige of the Madeira destination in general terms and with respect to gardens, on the recognition of its quality, on the increase in demand, and also on the worldwide increase in the appreciation of nature and the overall demand for gardens. The challenge lies in the differentiation from those destinations, considering the tourism product, the general and specific reception conditions and the marketing. The construction of new gardens, the most recent actions to upgrade the spaces and some sources of funding for that are excellent opportunities to realise these objectives.

In the particular field of promotion, it is necessary to target publicity more to the main foreign markets, especially those with a stronger tradition in visiting gardens. The Portuguese market should not be ignored, because it has a great scope for development in terms of interest in and visits to gardens. Madeira Island has very favourable weather conditions all year round. As such, the marketing campaigns should be highlighting the fact that Madeira's gardens are in bloom all year round, even in December and January, when in other areas of Europe it is impossible to visit gardens due to wintery weather. This could stimulate the development of distinctive recreational and educational activities for different audiences and encourage more regular visits by specialists and the general public.

The digital space should be regarded as a window of opportunity for Madeira's gardens to boost themselves and connect with a wider audience. In particular, they can work to attract new ones, such as Millennials and younger people, who use various digital platforms and networks extensively. However, demographic ageing is increasing and having repercussions on tourism. Gardens as tourist attractions are facing the challenge of adapting to this public, which has specific characteristics and needs. Spaces, staff, and facilities must not only be sensitive but also be adapted to the frailty and reduced mobility of this age group of visitors. Activities should be inclusive and take into account all the members of a family, from children to grandparents.

The opening of the island's private gardens for certain periods diversifies the offer, which can attract more visitors. The distinction of the excellence of some gardens would add to the strength and visibility of Madeira as a garden destination.

VI. CONCLUSION

The growing demand for distinctive experiences and the appreciation of nature have drawn attention to gardens. Garden visiting has increased, the audiences and underlying motivations are more and more diverse. Along the way, Madeira has gained a name for itself with the consequent increase in national and international demand. The luxuriant landscape bestowed by the singular geographic and climatic conditions is one of its most important assets, enabling it to establish a large number of gardens open to the public, many of them free of charge, with high phytodiversity and species in bloom all year round. These are some of the key assets that could put the island in an exceptional position as a garden destination.

Despite the improvements achieved in the last decade, it is admitted that Madeira has not invested enough in garden tourism. The construction of a structured garden tourism product requires a strategic, comprehensive vision of its multiple actors and interests, in the areas of conservation, enhancement, cooperation and promotion. Defining concrete policies and financial programmes that focus on these pivotal issues becomes of paramount importance to the future trajectory of this heritage and tourism segment, as well as to the mitigation of constraints and maximization of opportunities.

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