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RURAL TOURISM AT THE METROPOLITAN EDGE: HERITAGE, DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY IN CHINCHÓN (MADRID)[1]

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Abstract: The paper examines tourism as one of the leading sectors of the world economy, while arguing that the sector requires a reflection that was already needed before the Covid-19 pandemic and can no longer be deferred. The health crisis raised precise questions about the way tourism is organised and made existing weaknesses more evident, among them increasingly fragmented demand and the marked concentration and seasonality of tourist flows.

Within this framework, attention also shifts to rural tourism, which should be understood as an authentic experience rather than simply as a means of limiting health risks, on condition that some challenges are addressed.

A renewed organisation of the sector calls for structural change, and four directions are put forward and discussed: sustainability, the experiential dimension, digitalisation and accessibility. These directions concern tourism supply as a whole, yet they are especially significant for rural areas. The paper therefore combines a theoretical framework with a case study of Chinchón, a scarcely investigated municipality in the metropolitan area of Madrid that shares the demographic and economic fragility of rural areas while lying close to a large urban market. The analysis of territorial factors, based in this first phase on official statistical and documentary sources, made it possible to design strategies and actions suited to the study area. The case also supports the relevance of the four paradigms, whose value appears to increase when they are applied together, and provides concrete elements for the development of rural tourism.

Keywords: tourism, cultural paradigms, sector renewal, rural tourism, strategy design

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES OF POST-COVID TOURISM AND THE CASE OF RURAL TOURISM

Over the past few decades tourism has become one of the leading sectors of the world economy. The abrupt collapse in travel during the Covid-19 pandemic, between 2020 and 2021,

[1]Although the paper results from the joint work of both authors, sections 1, 2 and 6 were written by Emilia Sarno and sections 3, 4 and 5 by Nicole Nunzi.

made its economic weight even more apparent. In the first twenty years of this century tourism contributed on average about 9% of global GDP, and in 2018 international arrivals reached roughly 1.4 billion, a volume equivalent to almost one fifth of the world population. Recovery after the crisis of 2020–2022 was correspondingly rapid, and traveller numbers have risen markedly again since 2023. According to UNWTO data, international arrivals in 2024 amounted to about 1.4 billion, or 99% of the pre-pandemic level, an increase of 11% (some 140 million arrivals) on 2023. The organisation attributes this result to sustained post-pandemic demand, the solid performance of the main source markets and the continuing reopening of destinations in Asia and the Pacific. Forecasts indicate average annual growth of 3.3% up to 2030, when arrivals could reach 1.8 billion (Figure 1)[2].

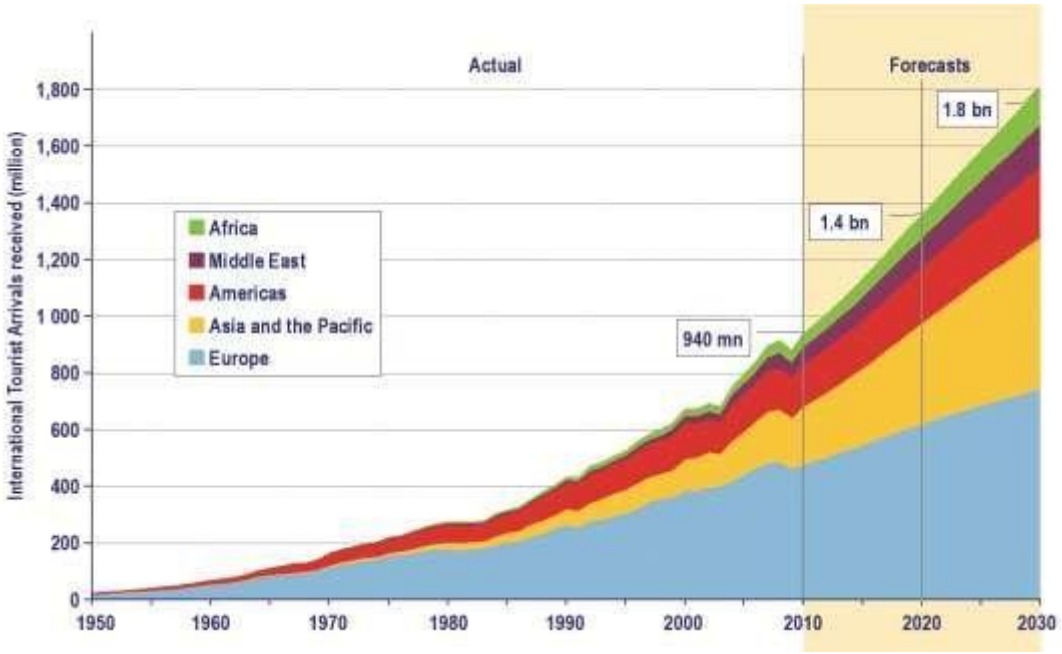

Figure 1. Tourist destination regions and the recent growth of interest in Asian destinations

These results coexist with questions that have been debated for some time. Even amid the recovery, the state of the sector calls for a reflection that was already needed before the pandemic and can no longer be postponed. The health crisis raised precise questions about how tourism is organised and made existing weaknesses more visible, among them the increasing fragmentation of demand and the marked spatial and seasonal concentration of flows (Dematteis, 2021). Tourism growth may also degrade the environment and cultural resources, while the economic benefits retained by local communities can be modest, to the point that residents come to perceive visitors as a burden.

Demand is changing as well. Travellers increasingly wish to leave the mass holiday behind and to engage more closely with places, through experiences that allow an authentic encounter with their spatial and temporal dimensions. Conventional tourism assets attract less interest than in the past, as visitors tend to assemble personalised holidays centred on well-being (Rinella,

[2] See D. Harrison, 2016: https://www.researchgate.net/.

2019). Well-being has acquired particular importance, since tourists expect experiences that respect their health and their privacy. Active holidays, in which people can pursue their own interests in a sustainable and responsible manner, are also in demand. These trends require renewed approaches to destination communication and the shared use of advanced technologies (Bagnoli, 2018).

Such problems concern tourism supply in general, but they are especially acute in rural areas, where tourism is widely regarded as a promising opportunity that often fails to materialise. Across Europe rural areas display recurrent characteristics, such as fragile demographic structures, geographical and economic peripherality and limited access to goods and services for residents. Their environmental and historical-cultural resources frequently remain underused, and their settlement pattern rests on small centres with small resident communities.

In these contexts tourism is often presented as the only route to requalification and revitalisation. Its development is nonetheless held back above all by inadequate transport and telecommunications, by parochialism and by a political tendency to apply top-down formulas.

Nevertheless, rural tourism is becoming increasingly relevant and is no longer regarded merely as a way of escaping urban chaos or of protecting oneself from health risks. Rather, it represents authentic tourism (Bagnoli, 2018), which cannot be reduced to the rediscovery of country life. In 2025, Richards et al. presented a detailed study highlighting the potential of rural tourism, which takes several forms: food and wine tourism, festivals linked to the agricultural world, the discovery of intangible heritage, and even exclusive experiences for luxury tourism. This research confirms that rural tourism is a valid formula, especially after the pandemic, but the literature also highlights a number of challenges, such as the quality of the resources available, the limited presence of technology and the overall constraints of rural areas (Rosalina et al., 2021). A further challenge is the need to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism and the involvement of communities (Lane, 1994). Nevertheless, as scholars emphasise, this sector is an opportunity for tourists who wish to spend their holidays in safety, including health safety (Sarno, 2022), but it requires the refinement of theoretical models for its implementation and field studies for adequate verification.

For these reasons, and also in relation to the problems discussed above, the following section focuses on the key concepts that form the theoretical basis for building the post-Covid tourism offer, both for the sector in general and for rural areas. However, the paper does not stop at the theoretical dimension, but proposes a specific case study to show how rural tourism can be planned. It therefore examines a Spanish community, Chinchón, which has an interesting rural potential and a particular geographical position, being a short distance from Madrid. The research is designed to apply a qualitative-quantitative methodology, analysing both the resources of Chinchón and the point of view of the community, in order to acquire all the elements needed to design a rural tourism offer consistent with the territorial reality of the case examined. In this way, the proposed theoretical paradigms are not imposed from above but designed according to the territorial identity of Chinchón. This paper presents the first, document-based phase of that analysis (Section 3.3). It therefore provides theoretical indications, but also a method for implementing rural tourism.

2. PARADIGMS OF TOURISM CHANGE AND A TOURISM OFFER FOR RURAL AREAS

On what conceptual basis could tourism be reorganised? Four paradigms are proposed and discussed here: sustainability, the experiential dimension, digitalisation and accessibility (Sarno, 2022).

Sustainability has been a recurrent reference in tourism discourse for decades, yet its systematic translation into tourism practice remains incomplete. The United Nations declared 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development and presented the concept as a foundation of socio-economic development. The initiative pursued a broader aim, that of fostering recognition of the value of human civilisations and, through mutual respect, supporting peace. Understood in this way, sustainable tourism combines a low environmental impact with inclusion, equity towards host communities and the valorisation of their cultural heritage (Sarno & Pugliese, 2019). Seen from the present, the 2017 agenda appears prescient in more than one respect. Its reference to peace has gained weight, and its emphasis on equity draws attention to social disparities that tourism does not erase. Tourism may nevertheless help to narrow them if sustainability is understood broadly, as a field encompassing respect, awareness and responsibility (Duxbury, 2021). Respect concerns the environment as well as social inclusion. Awareness and responsibility call for commitment at institutional and informal, collective and individual levels. Since every actor takes part in the process, the implementation of sustainability rests on genuine participation.

This perspective moves attention away from the tourist as consumer towards a visitor who is responsible, engaged and inclined to live the holiday as an experience. Contemporary travellers look for emotions and stimuli that begin with the senses (Sarno & Audi, 2019) and seek involvement on emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual levels. Experience of this kind lends authenticity to the stay. The visitor, curious and emotionally involved, comes into close contact with the human and cultural reality of a place, perceives the experience as unrepeatable and retains its memory through colours, scents, sounds and tastes. Whether such experiences materialise depends largely on the ability of operators to read visitors' expectations and to translate them into personalised proposals (Dieguez & Conceição, 2021).

Digitalisation, the third paradigm, underpins the design of authentic and original experiences (Adamo, 2018). Direct online contact between supply and demand is only its most elementary expression. In a wider sense digitalisation entails innovation, that is, operating models that exploit complementarities and bring hotel and non-hotel accommodation into closer integration (Watkins et al., 2018). The relationship that matters most, however, links businesses and tourists. Visitors move continuously between devices according to the kind of trip, the destination and their previous experience, while so-called *neverending tourism* blends physical and virtual experiences. The sector is moving from a tourism that simply employs digital tools towards *smart tourism*, in which technology supports the personalisation of experiences and the active participation of the user. Two traveller profiles can be recognised in this transitional phase, one that finds its way through the *mare magnum* of online information and one that acts as a protagonist of the virtual sphere. The first relies mainly on traditional channels, such as personal contacts, recommendations from friends and earlier trips, uses the internet to collect

information on places, accommodation and itineraries, and prefers direct contact with managers and businesses while accepting online support. For the second, the virtual dimension is part of the trip from the outset; the journey starts online with the search for a destination and proceeds with the selection of accommodation and experiences (Kamboj & Gupta, 2020).

Accessibility, the fourth paradigm, is closely tied to digitalisation. People with disabilities are socially active subjects, and accessibility is the precondition for their participation in tourism (Bianquin, 2018). The aim is a set of services that enable people with specific needs to use holiday and leisure opportunities without barriers. Removing architectural obstacles produces social benefits and may also bring economic returns. Technology offers further possibilities. All in One Touch, for instance, combines a touch-screen computer with software for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and can assist users with various disabilities[3], especially communication impairments, while the head pointer is a pointing system designed for people with motor impairments. Devices of this kind allow visitors to take part in excursions on equal terms. Accessibility therefore concerns building design as much as the equipment needed to accommodate diversity (Levi, 2015).

The challenge for the sector is thus to design tailor-made holidays in sustainable and digitally equipped settings, moving away from massified and standardised models.

In principle these paradigms fit the conditions of rural areas closely. Sustainability is a shared value for environmentally fragile territories and for the communities living in them, since it links the protection of ecosystems with the continuity of economic activities and cultural traditions and can support the regeneration of depleted places. Local history may itself become an attraction to be rediscovered, as the growth of memory tourism, which offers a journey through time as well as through space, appears to indicate.

Contemporary tourists, as noted earlier, increasingly look for holidays that deepen their understanding of the history and beliefs of the places they visit. They also expect adequate infrastructure and accessible facilities, and they draw on digital skills that range from basic to advanced. Technological innovation can therefore broaden the potential visitor base of rural areas and contribute to increasing the flows directed towards them.

How can this theoretical framework be translated into a tourism plan for a rural area or for its municipalities? The first step is to identify resources, potential and critical issues. Since top-down formulas have shown limited effectiveness, the process needs to proceed from the bottom up, starting with a detailed territorial analysis that identifies feasible strategies and actions consistent with the area under study. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods, in the recognition that territories are complex systems of social relations, institutional dynamics and economic processes that a single perspective can hardly capture (Gugliuzzo & Sarno, 2024). An integrated approach allows the scale of territorial phenomena to be measured while also recording the everyday experience of the communities concerned. Structural conditions are described through demographic, social, economic and administrative indicators. Motivations and values, by contrast, require social research tools able to record perceptions,

[3]An All-in-One PC integrates the computer within the monitor and requires no additional hardware. It is supplied with an ordinary keyboard and mouse, but its distinctive feature is multi-touch interaction through the screen.

observations and reflections. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups provide information for a contextualised interpretation of territorial dynamics and bring out aspects that statistics alone would leave hidden (Sarno, 2013). Qualitative inquiry also involves local communities directly. By voicing needs and expectations, residents can influence choices and decisions and thereby experience empowerment, understood as the recognition of the social role they play (Sarno, 2018). The strategies of a tourism plan should emerge from the triangulation of quantitative data and qualitative information. The following sections apply the first, document-based stage of this procedure to Chinchón.

3. RURAL MARGINALITY AND METROPOLITAN PROXIMITY IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Peri-urban transformation, rural tourism and the post-COVID conjuncture

European research on peri-urbanisation describes the belts surrounding large cities as hybrid spaces in which agriculture, residence, production and leisure overlap and are constantly renegotiated (Shaw et al., 2020). Under metropolitan pressure, rurality in these belts is redefined. In the rural–urban fringe of post-socialist capitals, changes in land use, the arrival of new residents and the relocation of urban functions have transformed local economies and social relations more quickly than planning instruments could adapt (Ianoș & Jones, 2019). At a finer scale, research on Timișoara shows peri-urban expansion advancing faster than the capacity of local authorities to provide infrastructure and services (Caizer et al., 2026).

The role of tourism in this literature is ambivalent. In the depopulated villages of southern Transylvania, newcomers from cities have helped to conserve heritage by restoring buildings and attracting funds, while tourism emerges as the main source of pressure on that same heritage (Dragan et al., 2024a). A study of two communities on opposite banks of the Mureș treats rural landscapes as bearers of local identity, whose valorisation opens development opportunities and creates new risks at the same time (Dragan et al., 2024b). Taken together, these studies suggest that metropolitan proximity acts on rural heritage through two channels, residential mobility and visitor flows, which do not necessarily point in the same direction.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a temporal reference point for these processes. Spanish municipal register data for 2020 record exceptional net migration gains in rural areas and losses in core cities, although both had largely reverted to pre-pandemic values by the end of that year (González-Leonardo et al., 2022a). The increase in in-migration was strongest in rural municipalities close to cities and with a high share of second homes (González-Leonardo et al., 2022b). On the demand side, the crisis renewed interest in proximity tourism as a lower-impact alternative to long-distance travel (Romagosa, 2020). Spanish accommodation data confirm the shift. Rural tourism performed better than urban tourism during the pandemic, and in the summer months of 2020 and 2021 overnight stays in rural accommodation reached historic highs, sustained mainly by residents who chose destinations within their own autonomous community (Benítez-Aurioles, 2022). In the same years, therefore, rural municipalities within metropolitan orbits experienced both a revival of residential attraction and growing short-distance visitation. Whether these dynamics have produced durable local development is an empirical question that the 2021–2025 period, short as it is, allows us to begin to address.

3.2. Case selection and research questions

Chinchón has received little attention in this debate. The municipality lies within the metropolitan orbit of Madrid and yet displays demographic and economic fragilities usually associated with rural areas. Spanish research on the *España vaciada* has concentrated on the most isolated territories (Bandrés & Azón, 2021; Collantes & Pinilla, 2019; Cuadrado et al., 2019), and much less is known about whether a large urban system alters the dynamics of rural marginality and, with them, the capacity of tourism to support local development (Mínguez García et al., 2022). At the European scale, the relationship between urban and rural contexts, and the peri-urban fringe in particular, is likewise identified as one of the least explored aspects of cultural tourism in rural areas (Richards et al., 2025). The distinction itself is not new. Lane (1994), drawing on the OECD typology, already separated remote rural regions from economically integrated ones close to large urban complexes, and noted that the more accessible countryside attracted counter-urbanising residents while other rural areas continued to decline. Recent classifications of Spanish rural space make the same point, treating the rural ring of Madrid as a distinct case within inland Spain and describing a post-pandemic phase in which new residents have not offset structural imbalances (Molinero-Hernando & Alario-Trigueros, 2025). Chinchón appears to occupy an intermediate position, close to a metropolis yet economically marginal. Proximity to a metropolis does not by itself produce growth (Copus, 2001; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). We treat it as a latent asset, whose value depends on whether a place can convert accessibility into lasting opportunities.

The study asks to what extent, and under which conditions, tourism can contribute to local development in a rural municipality within a metropolitan orbit in the post-pandemic period. Two further questions follow. Which demographic, economic and tourism indicators reveal the persistence of marginality despite metropolitan proximity? Which interventions could redistribute tourism demand in space and time, and what governance arrangements would they require?

3.3. Research design, data and limitations

We adopted a single-case, place-based design (Yin, 2018). Chinchón is not presented as statistically representative. It was selected because it can clarify a configuration that theory has so far treated only marginally, that of fragile rural municipalities close to a large metropolitan area. The aim is analytical generalisation, and the transfer of the findings to other peri-metropolitan contexts depends on comparable institutional and territorial conditions.

The analysis draws on official secondary sources. Demographic and economic indicators come from the municipal profile compiled by the regional statistical office (IECM, 2025) and from national population figures (INE, 2025). Visitor numbers are those released by the regional government and reported in the local press (Madrid Actual, 2025). Legal and policy documents, together with material on the historical and cultural heritage of the town obtained from the Ayuntamiento de Chinchón and Hispania Nostra, complete the dataset. The analysis focuses on 2021–2025 and uses the 2000–2025 series for population, so that recent change can be read against a longer trajectory.

Three limitations apply. First, visitor totals derive from press and associational sources taken up by the regional administration. These sources do not state how visitors were counted

and do not consistently distinguish day-trippers from overnight guests, so they are used only as an order of magnitude. Second, statements about the clustering of visitors around the Plaza Mayor, and about their possible seasonal concentration, are interpretive. They are consistent with research on seasonality in small heritage towns (Butler, 1980; Cheer et al., 2019), but no spatial counts or daily series were analysed, and no comparable tourism series for the years before 2020 was available for the municipality. Third, the integrated quantitative–qualitative approach outlined in Section 2 could not yet be applied in full, since no surveys, interviews or focus groups with residents and operators were conducted at this stage. The diagnosis that follows is therefore a first, document-based phase, and its results are offered as hypotheses for intervention to be tested through fieldwork.

4. THE TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

The municipality occupies the south-eastern edge of the Comunidad de Madrid, some 50 km from the capital, with the town centre at an elevation of 753 m. Garlic growing, especially the local *ajo fino*, and the distilling of *anís*, the aniseed liqueur named after the town, have long been the mainstays of the local economy, to which tourism has more recently been added. On 1 January 2025 the municipal register counted 5,800 inhabitants in a territory of about 115.9 km², or roughly 50 inhabitants per km² (INE, 2025; IECM, 2025). Some classifications of *despoblación* set the threshold at 12.5 inhabitants per km², a quarter of the local value. Measured in this way, Chinchón does not belong to the *España vaciada*[4] in the narrow sense, and its marginal position has to be traced through other demographic and economic features.

Between 2002 and 2025 the population rose from 4,346 to 5,800 inhabitants (+33.5%). Growth was strongest up to 2010, when residents reached 5,344, followed by stabilisation, with a peak of 5,447 in 2014, and a slight decline to 5,239 in 2018 linked to the Spanish economic crisis. From 2019 the population recovered, reaching a maximum of 5,818 in 2024 (INE, 2025). The expansion of residential development in the Madrid metropolitan area and the arrival of immigrants employed in agriculture and local services account for much of this trajectory, while the limited local supply of goods and services seems to have prevented it from consolidating.

Ageing has continued through the post-pandemic years. The mean age is about 45.6 years, and natural change was negative in every year between 2020 and 2024; in 2024 there were 44 births and 60 deaths (IECM, 2025). Between 2021 and 2025 the ageing index (population aged 65 and over per 100 inhabitants under 15) rose from 141.9 to 151.3, the dependency ratio from 50 to 52, and the replacement index of the working-age population (40–64 over 15–39 years) from 142.9 to 149.3 (IECM, 2025). The natural deficit means that population growth now rests on migratory balances alone. The available series do not isolate migration after 2020, yet they indicate that any residential inflow following the pandemic has been insufficient to counter ageing, a pattern observed across much of rural Spain (Molinero-Hernando & Alario-Trigueros, 2025).

[4]In Spanish public debate the expression *España vaciada* (‘emptied Spain’) designates territories affected by persistent population loss (Mínguez García et al., 2022). It usually refers to municipalities below 12.5 inhabitants per km², whereas a threshold of 8 inhabitants per km² is used to single out those at greatest risk (Bandrés & Azón, 2021).

The economic indicators are consistent with this picture. Municipal GDP per capita rose from 18,577 euros in 2021 to 20,938 in 2022 and 23,162 in 2023, an increase of about 25% in two years, yet in 2023 it was still close to the average of the South-East statistical zone (23,061 euros) and little more than half the regional figure of 43,413 euros (IECM, 2025). Gross disposable household income[5] reached 17,201 euros per inhabitant in 2024, equal to 69.4% of the regional mean and below the zone average of 74.1% (IECM, 2025). The housing stock shows a different kind of gap. In 2021 only 54.99% of the 3,941 conventional dwellings were main residences, and 45.01% were not, against 13.88% in the region (IECM, 2025). Among main residences, the tenure structure is close to the regional one: about 72% are owner-occupied and 19% rented, compared with 74% and 21% in the Comunidad de Madrid (own calculation from IECM, 2025). The distinctive feature of Chinchón therefore lies in the weight of non-principal dwellings rather than in tenure. This share may point to a substantial number of second homes associated with metropolitan proximity, a profile shared by the rural municipalities that recorded the largest migratory gains in 2020 (González-Leonardo et al., 2022b). The link remains interpretive, because the statistics do not distinguish second homes from vacant dwellings.

Gender differences in unemployment are pronounced. In 2026 women represented 61.45% of those registered as unemployed in Chinchón, a share close to that of the South-East statistical zone (62.83%) and above the regional figure (59.23%); among jobseekers under 25 the proportion was 52.38% (IECM, 2025). This has direct implications for tourism planning. Worldwide, women hold 54% of jobs in tourism compared with 39% in the economy as a whole (UNWTO, 2019), so the quality of any employment created by a new tourism offer would affect this group in particular.

Legal protection of the historic centre dates from 1974, when it was listed as a Conjunto Histórico-Artístico (Decreto 1870/1974), and this status is commonly linked to the expansion of hospitality and tourism in the decades that followed (Los Pueblos Más Bonitos de España, n.d.). Its focal point is the Plaza Mayor, an arcaded space of irregular plan that took shape between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries and is frequently cited among the most characteristic urban squares of the Castilian plateau[6] (Troitiño Vinuesa, 1998). According to regional data reported in the press, Chinchón received 355,611 visitors in 2024, of whom 37,505 were international and 318,106 domestic (Madrid Actual, 2025). For the reasons set out in Section 3.3 this total is treated only as an order of magnitude, but even as such it is high when compared with a resident population of 5,800. Tourist accommodation is also growing; *viviendas turísticas*, private dwellings let to visitors for short stays, increased from 56 to 78 units between 2024 and 2025 (+39.3%) (Observatorio de Vivienda Turística, 2025). Day visits from the Madrid metropolitan area nonetheless appear to predominate, a hypothesis consistent with the short distance from the capital that available accommodation data cannot confirm.

[5]Gross disposable household income measures the resources available to households once direct taxes and social contributions have been paid and social transfers received (IECM, 2025).

[6]The regional tourism portal describes the town's heritage as a route through traditional Castilian architecture and identifies the Plaza Mayor as its principal identity marker among the Villas de Madrid (Turismo Madrid – Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.-a).

Other heritage resources complement the square, but access to them is limited. The churches and the other monuments can be visited only on paid guided tours booked at the municipal tourist office or during open days (*puertas abiertas*), while the Castillo de los Condes belongs to private owners and is closed to the public (Ayuntamiento de Chinchón, n.d.). In the gastronomic field the key product is *anís de Chinchón*, which has held geographical indication status since 1989 (Reglamento (CEE) 1576/89), with a regulation approved by the Comunidad de Madrid in 1991 (Orden 2310/1991), and remains the only spirit drink so protected in the region (MAPA, 2022). The aniseed used as raw material comes from Andalucía, and the only active distillery, the Alcoholera de Chinchón, was founded in 1911 by most of the local producers and has belonged to the González Byass group since 1969 (Ayuso Rejas, 2025). Despite its weight as a marker of local identity, the liqueur has not yet been built into a structured tourism product.

Location within Madrid's orbit has therefore not brought income convergence with the metropolitan core, and the economic indicators give no sign that high visitor numbers have translated into higher local incomes. The case is consistent with the argument that accessibility is necessary but not sufficient for development in peripheral places (Copus, 2001; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). It also extends that argument to a municipality whose peripherality is functional and economic, since Chinchón lies within easy reach of one of the largest metropolitan areas in Europe.

5. DESIGNING THE TOURISM PLAN

The diagnosis suggests that tourism could support development in Chinchón if interventions were planned jointly. The four paradigms set out in Section 2 provide the frame, since the environmental and social weaknesses identified above call for sustainable and digitally supported strategies. The proposals are grouped along three axes. The first is the spatial redistribution of demand, through the enhancement of under-used cultural assets and links to slow-mobility routes. The second is its temporal redistribution, through identity-based experiences and events that could extend the season. The third is territorial governance, without which neither of the first two can be implemented.

Visitor activity is concentrated on the Plaza Mayor. The rest of the heritage is less visible and can be visited only on paid guided tours or open days (Ayuntamiento de Chinchón, n.d.). This makes it difficult to build an integrated offer that would spread visitors, lengthen stays and distribute spending more widely.

Among the under-used assets, the Castillo de los Condes[7] offers the clearest gap between heritage value and actual use. As the building is in private hands and closed to visitors, a public–private arrangement could be explored to reconcile conservation with a sustainable management model. Fiscal incentives for the owners, regional funding for conservation and time-limited concessions for cultural or exhibition uses are among the instruments that could be considered (Della Lucia & Trunfio, 2018).

[7] A fifteenth-century fortification, the castle was destroyed during the Revolt of the Comuneros (1520–1521), rebuilt by the third Count of Chinchón in the second half of the sixteenth century, and sacked and burned during the siege of 1808 (Ayuntamiento de Chinchón, n.d.).

A first line of action would connect the town's dispersed assets into a network that spreads visitors across the historic centre. Hispania Nostra's *Lista Roja del Patrimonio* (Heritage Red List), created in 2007 to draw attention to heritage at risk and to encourage citizen participation (Hispania Nostra, 2022), offers a model for setting priorities. A similar participatory inventory at the municipal scale could identify which assets most need recovery before being opened to visitors. Digital tools would then be required to make the extent of the town's heritage, and the conditions for visiting it, known to potential visitors. In small municipalities this kind of valorisation appears to depend on reducing digital divides and on strong civic networks; research on rural Transylvania, for instance, attributes a leading role in heritage preservation to NGOs and small investors (Dragan et al., 2024a).

A second scale of intervention concerns the landscape. The Vía Verde del Tajuña reuses about 47 km of the main line of the former Ferrocarril del Tajuña between Arganda del Rey and Ambite (Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles, 2025). Chinchón itself was served by a branch of the same railway, which reached the town in 1902 and Colmenar de Oreja in 1903; passenger service ended in 1954 and the Chinchón–Colmenar de Oreja section closed in 1964 without being converted (Vía Libre, 2003; CRTM, 2021). The greenway of the Tren de los 40 Días, often associated with the area, follows a different line, the Torrejón–Tarancón strategic railway built in 1938, which did not pass through Chinchón (Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles, 2025). Short connecting paths could link the town to the Tajuña route. Nationally, the *Vías Verdes* programme, coordinated since 1993 by the Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles, has turned disused railways into about 140 routes totalling over 3,600 km (Fundación de los Ferrocarriles Españoles, 2025). This experience indicates that former railway corridors may support local development where the associated services and hospitality follow environmental and social sustainability criteria. Since the pandemic, routes of this kind have also met renewed demand for proximity tourism and open-air leisure (Romagosa, 2020).

The second axis would turn identity resources into experiences able to lengthen stays and reduce dependence on day trips. The weight of intra-regional demand in Spanish rural tourism (Benítez-Aurioles, 2022) suggests that such experiences should address the Madrid market in particular, encouraging repeat visits and overnight stays rather than single excursions. *Anís de Chinchón* could anchor a *Ruta Gastronómica* linking restaurants and visits to production sites, on the model of the wine routes of areas such as Ribera del Duero[8] (ACEVIN, 2025). The history of the product, from aniseed brought from Andalucía to the distillation carried out by the Alcoholera de Chinchón since 1911, could become part of its narrative and an element of the visit.

Events could be approached in the same way. Two recurring initiatives already rest on collective identity. The *Pasión de Chinchón* has been staged since 1963 and obtained the status of *Fiesta de Interés Turístico Nacional* in 1980, while the *Mercado Medieval* has been held since 2004 through a partnership between the *Asociación Cultural Arco Iris* and the town

[8]Ribera del Duero is a wine designation of origin in Castilla y León and one of the best known in Spain. Its wine route ranks among the most visited in the country and is part of a national network that receives more than three million visitors a year (ACEVIN, 2025).

council (Ayuntamiento de Chinchón, n.d.). Their contribution to reducing seasonality would depend on whether related activities can be distributed across the rest of the year.

The third axis concerns the organisational conditions on which the other two depend.

Chinchón belongs to the association *Los Pueblos Más Bonitos de España* (Los Pueblos Más Bonitos de España, n.d.), which provides a recognised label and a degree of visibility. Membership alone does not produce economic effects, and the label risks remaining symbolic without inter-municipal cooperation and jointly developed tourism products (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). According to its own figures, the French association *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* (n.d.) records visitor increases of between 10% and 50% in member villages. As these data are self-reported and have not been independently checked, they are read here only as a sign that a territorial label tends to yield results when it is part of a shared governance framework.

For Chinchón this could mean closer cooperation with Nuevo Baztán, with which it is grouped in the regional visitor figures (Madrid Actual, 2025), and with the municipalities of the Comarca de Las Vegas. Itineraries combining historic heritage, rural landscape and local produce could direct part of demand towards resources currently outside the main circuit. Within the municipality, the sectoral councils provided for in Spanish local government regulations (Real Decreto 2568/1986, arts. 130–131) could coordinate the council, private owners, cultural associations and tourism businesses, in line with the principles of collaborative planning (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Nunzi et al., 2026). The peri-urban area of Timișoara, where growth outpaced cooperation between institutions (Caizer et al., 2026), illustrates what can happen when such mechanisms are lacking.

Accessibility should here be understood in a broad sense. It includes better connections and soft mobility; Chinchón is already a stage of the Gran Tour CiclaMadrid, the 420-km regional cycling route promoted by the Comunidad de Madrid (Turismo Madrid – Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.-b). It also includes routes usable on foot and in wheelchairs and equipped for people with sensory impairments.

The three axes translate the four paradigms into measures specific to Chinchón. Whether they can be implemented depends at least as much on institutional capacity as on the resources available, an issue taken up in the conclusions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The case study supports the analytical relevance of the four proposed paradigms, whose value appears to grow when they are combined. Tourism processes should follow a path of sustainability anchored in territorial values and, at the same time, receptive to the expectations opened up by innovation. Attention to the particular characteristics of the territory allowed low-impact interventions to be proposed with the aim of improving the living conditions of residents. In the same way, the digital strategies selected from the many available were those that fit the study area and the measures put forward.

Chinchón also yields proposals that apply to rural municipalities within the sphere of influence of large metropolitan areas. These places can pair cultural and natural heritage of

acknowledged value with easy access to a wide tourist market, and yet find it hard to convert such assets into lasting territorial development. Proximity to a metropolis may bring large numbers of visitors without spreading economic gains across the local community, while fragmented governance and poor coordination among actors can restrict the use made of existing heritage (Molinero-Hernando & Alario-Trigueros, 2025; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Seen in this light, Chinchón is relevant as an instance of a territorial type that the literature on rural marginality in Spain has so far examined only to a limited extent. Turning these opportunities into territorial development would require governance capable of linking, on a permanent basis, public administrations, owners of cultural assets, businesses, local associations and residents, so as to overcome the present dispersion of initiatives. Such an arrangement is in line with recent work on collaborative governance in rural tourism (Valderrama & Polanco, 2022) and with the *Estrategia Nacional frente al Reto Demográfico*, initiated at the VI Conferencia de Presidentes in January 2017 and adopted in March 2019 (Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública, 2019).

Experiential tourism represents another essential point of orientation. It can help rural areas to diversify their economies and to become more resilient, as long as local communities follow the same logic of sustainability in order to preserve, renew and hand down their identity resources. If this does not happen, heritage may be used up more quickly than the community can renew it, and tourism may cease to support resilience and instead add to vulnerability (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2023; Butler, 1980).

Finally, tourism is likely to move increasingly towards a smart model based on interconnection and accessibility. The objective is within reach, yet it is particularly challenging in rural areas, where it depends on continuous political commitment and targeted funding for small enterprises. Under these conditions the four paradigms can convert the potential of a territory into objectives that can be achieved. Theoretical reflections, therefore, should not remain on paper but should inform the design of tourism policies, through a close relationship between researchers, sector operators and policy-makers. This relationship represents a critical issue that post-Covid tourism must address. Likewise, as Richards et al. (2025) suggest, further field studies are needed to implement rural tourism more effectively. If every territory has its own specific features, a wide range of cases is needed to identify the different types of rural tourism. The case examined offers a model for rural areas close to large urban centres, but the scientific path of rural tourism deserves further investigation.

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