Co-Creation of Sustainable Tourism and Hospitality Experiences: Education and Organizations in Search of New Business Models

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Abstract: Sustainability is and will be very closely linked to the development of tourism in the future. It is the most important trend shaping the sector, and it will continue to determine travelers’ preferences and motivations in the period after COVID-19. It is important that tourism destinations and the stakeholders work together to enhance their resources sustainably through valuing the socio-cultural authenticity of communities, preserving biodiversity, and also ensuring the social well-being and economic security of destinations. Destinations need to work closely with entrepreneurs to better understand their current challenges. Investment in sustainable practices and products must be part of the new business models and provide competitive advantages for all stakeholders. The time we are living in is crucial, and it is a unique opportunity to rethink the sector from the perspective of a more sustainable, safer, and technological future that favors a circular economy model. This work follows the development of a methodology using the Demola Model, collaborated by a higher education institution and a hotel, to seek an investment in a new product driven by a clear commitment to sustainability. With a methodology composed of the application of different tools, namely design research, observations/visits, interviews, benchmarking, speculative design, future scenarios, among others, we have sought to understand the main markets and contexts around the world and explore alternative opportunities and action plans. Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa (Portugal) was selected as a partner for this collaborative work. The final project presented was the creation of a restaurant linked to the sustainable concept and cooking based on fire, located on the riverbank and in the water: Aquafire—Underwater Food Experience.

Keywords: co-creation; tourism; sustainability; hospitality; restaurant; wellness; hotel

1. Introduction

Given the challenges facing the tourism and hospitality sector today, it is important that hotels and tour operators implement corporate social responsibility policies by ensuring good working conditions for employees, promoting ethical business practices, and supporting social projects in their communities [1]. Sustainability in tourism and hospitality not only protects the environment and local culture, but can also bring long-term economic benefits, such as attracting sustainability-conscious tourists, reducing operating costs through energy efficiency, and improving a company’s reputation and image.

Sustainable business practices are rapidly gaining visibility and importance in the hospitality industry. Guests and regulations increasingly demand that hotels share their commitment to the environment [2]. While implementing sustainability initiatives can be challenging, it also brings great benefits. According to the World Tourism Organization [3], innovation and sustainability are considered a new normal in order to recover tourism from the COVID-19 crisis. The hospitality industry is evolving to trends like health, well-being, harmony, environment protection, and integration in the surrounding community.

According to the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), that is a Portuguese national public agency that supports research in science, technology and innovation in
all areas of knowledge, under responsibility of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education of the Portuguese Government, in its Agenda for the Investigation in Tourism and Hospitality [4], the concept of co-creation is very present, emphasized by its importance in the challenges of innovation as well as the difficulties faced by small- and medium-sized companies and individual operators in the process of creating new products and processes and in innovation. It is said that these challenges should be identified in a formulation of policies that should obligatorily involve the actors of the “Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality ecosystem from the perspective of the “quadruple helix”, including (i) academia and intermediary bodies; (ii) economic agents; (iii) citizens; (iv) as well as political decision makers.

Despite the existence of some studies on the subject [5–7], a gap in the literature and case studies can be highlighted that is linked to the co-creation process associated with the tourism and hospitality sector [8–12], particularly in the current Portuguese reality [13–15]. It is important to analyse case studies where this strategy has been implemented in order to better understand its benefits. In the tourism and hospitality sector, not all entrepreneurs are aware of the need for closer collaboration with higher education institutions, so this article seeks, through a specific case, to show the added value of co-creation in this sector.

The transfer of knowledge from the academic area to the competent entities and to the entrepreneurial fabric itself embodies the mission of higher education and the so-called entrepreneurial university [16]. The correlation between the university and the market economy, with the intersection of fundamental and applied research, is undergoing profound changes today as the connections between science, industry, the market, and politics are coming closer together [17]. In its origins, the university was a transmitter of knowledge, later becoming a knowledge-generating institution (a second mission). Today, the university has a third mission: to contribute to social and economic development, which has transformed it into an “entrepreneurial” university [18–21]. An entrepreneurial university is open to change, innovation, and the creation of opportunities, becoming part of an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

This paper seeks to critically explain the co-creation process of the Bring Us Closer to Sustainability challenge, according to its different phases, highlighting the most positive points and also some constraints that occurred throughout the process. This description also focuses on the results presented by the co-creation team and the relationship with the partner. This paper seeks to reflect the initial moment of the co-creation process, the tasks carried out, namely the definition of the theme, design of the challenge, selection of the partner, and the team. There is also a reflection on the dissemination of the challenge and choices of the co-creation team. The co-creation process is presented according to the different phases. This paper should, through the description of this case study, present suggestions regarding how to promote the development of tourism and hospitality through following a co-creation process, and it should show the benefits of this strategy.

This experience can be extremely rewarding on multiple levels, such as through increased proximity between the co-creation team (academia) and the partner company, managing expectations and emotions, defining goals and tasks, new forms of approach to reach better solutions, greater proximity to companies in the industry, and, finally, learning new methods and strategies for learning and personal relationships [22].

Several authors such as Baggio and Cooper [8], Cabiddu et al. [9], Espinosa et al. [10] and Sambyal et al. [11], who analyse the concept of co-creation of value in the context of tourism and hospitality, agree that it is important and valuable to promote this joint business, since the actors who embrace the value co-created in the partnership are more successful compared to others and create added value for the stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Co-Creation: Industry and Academia

Co-creation in the business sense is associated with consumption when the customer adds a variety of resources to adapt the product to the specific environment in which
it is used [23,24]. Moreover, it reflects the option the customer takes when interacting
with the company [25] to represent the desired value [26]. This results in a balance of
“service production” in the corresponding “value creation” [27], which represents a mutual
benefit [23,28]. This idea of creating proximity between the parties provides companies
with a better knowledge of the customer’s “motivations” or needs or “wants” [29]. Such
a relationship between the parties provides a more refined response to the customers’
motivations and desires [30]. This highlights the contribution of co-creation to value
creation in service delivery that also involves customers [31–33].

The creation of shared value thus takes on a neuralgic dimension, with “actors” and the
“integration of resources” standing out. This last “axiom” is fundamental to the whole logic
of “co-creation of value”, since the networking of actors is completed through resources.
Often, “information” and “knowledge” are the nodal resources to be integrated [34]. This
model, therefore, considers the interaction of the institution with the so-called “service
ecosystem”, i.e., the social context is now also important as a “determinant” of real value
creation [24].

Also, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy [26], the origin of value creation is
shifting from the product to the “experience”, where the value is created by the consumers
themselves [34], which is related to their level of “satisfaction” [35]. This consumer involve-
ment can occur in certain contexts in which co-creation takes place [24], namely (i) “use”
or consumption of a product or service; (ii) “role” that the customer takes according to
their “lifestyle”; (iii) level of use of “technological tools”; (iv) clarity of the “benefit” that
the customer’s contribution to co-creation has; (v) “heterogeneity” of customers involved
in the co-creation process [36].

Co-creation is now considered an innovation-driven “approach” from which participa-
tory “commercialization” models emerge. These co-creation processes are also a “learning”
tool” that connects academia and industry. A good example is the project carried out by
the Finnish company Demola Global [37,38].

In Portugal, under the Human Capital Operational Program (POCH), in the compo-
nent dedicated to the empowerment of teachers in co-creation processes (COMPETE 2020
Co-creation Portugal—Link Me Up 1000 ideas), a series of initiatives are being considered
from the polytechnics in collaboration with different public and private entities to develop
“innovative solutions to real problems” [38]. Moreover, this process is structured in a triple-
helix model, i.e., it involves companies, higher education institutions, and society, and
embodies “active learning” aimed at solving specific problems through co-creation [38,39].
This project is based on multidisciplinary groups of students who experience solutions
with the ballast of business in different areas of action, namely “business concepts”; “new
product development”; structuring “prototypes” applied to the topic under study [40].

According to Ahmed et al. [41] this collaboration can bring productive changes to
both sectors, academia and industry, namely, (a) industrial professionals share their ex-
pertise and work behavior with students, giving them a comprehensive understanding of
professional working; (b) help students find relevancy between theoretical and practical
approaches; (c) they can conduct academic research and suggest its practical implications
in an organizational environment; (d) ideas can be made possible if they are backed by
expertise; (e) instead of sending their employees on expensive training, industries can
increase the professionalism of their employees through their personal learning experiences
by communicating and expressing their ideas with students and gathering feedback from
their perspectives; (f) they can cut short their recruitment process by hiring the students
they are already working in collaboration with; (g) both sides can quickly conduct a mutual
consensus; (h) and when both partners work together and adhere to the same standards,
problems are faced and resolved more effectively.
2.2. Challenges of Sustainable Tourism and Hospitality Experiences

Sustainability in tourism is now unavoidable, with an awareness of the multiplicity of its agents, oriented to the needs of visitors, but also to the host communities and the environmental, economic, and social impacts of tourism activity [42].

When, in 2015, the United Nations validated the 2030 agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), tourism was included in this desideratum, especially in Goal 8, related to sustainable economic growth, in Goal 12, concerning sustainable consumption and production, and in Goal 14, related to the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources. On a European scale, the European Ecological Pact should be remembered, for a more “efficient” and “competitive” Europe in terms of resources, also including the tourism segment. In Portugal, the Tourism Strategy 2027 is being developed, pointing to tourism as a hub of “economic, social and environmental development” and defining a “quality” tourist destination as shaped by sustainability values, with a segmented, distinctive, and environmentally aware offer. It is in this sense that we have to understand the Plan “Turismo + Sustentável 2020–2030”, or the association to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, and also the Glasgow Declaration on climate issues in tourism [43].

According to Silva [44], tourist accommodations have six steps to follow during the implementation of sustainability strategies, which will allow the accommodation unit to achieve a balance of the three pillars of sustainability, which in turn will generate competitive advantages and increase its performance in the market.

1. Recognition of the importance of sustainable development: before embarking on sustainability, they should recognize the importance of sustainability for the accommodation, study the possible advantages to be gained from its adoption, and seek to acquire the know-how of the whole process.

2. Making the commitment: After establishing the recognition and acquiring the know-how for sustainable development, the accommodation unit should make a commitment to sustainability. In case it is still in the project concession, this is an issue that should be thought about before, during, and after the development and implementation of the project.

3. Fitting in with the destination: The accommodation unit should try to align its concept with local culture and traditions. Any business should be based on its cultural roots, and, in the case of tourist accommodation, it should be a translation of what is the surrounding community/destination. They should seek to offer a different experience, an innovative and unforgettable experience, based on the principles of sustainability and emphasizing the importance of the cultural aspects of the region.

4. Sustainable management: Involves the planned and organized development of the commitment established in point 3. This commitment must be translated into measurable actions, goals, and objectives, which must be documented in an action plan. There must be leadership in ensuring that the objectives are met and the verification that those that are not are immediately redefined and their deadline for completion renewed. Also, in terms of leadership, there must be a constant monitoring of consumption and spending through daily records, and there should be established a preventive plan of action in order to prevent events and stipulate procedures for action in case they happen. You must ensure an annual control of all goals achieved, consumption, expenses, nights overnight stays, number of guests and employees, through an annual report, which should be analyzed using the administrative management so that there is an overall balance of the performance of the of the unit and you can identify areas for improvement.

5. Sustainability policy: The actions and goals established, referred to in point 4, must be translated into strategic actions and changes to be implemented over the course of a year, in order to achieve the established objectives. These strategic actions must be defined in the sustainability policy, which should be based on three major general axes of action: creation of value for stakeholders; environmental conservation; and management of consumption and expenses.
6. Certification: Certification is not a mandatory element for sustainability, but it can be a supporting tool. It can be a way to facilitate the process of implementing implementation of sustainability in the lodging unit, or it can just be a recognition of the unit’s good practices. However, whatever the certification, it will bring benefits such as external recognition, publicity, competitiveness, and increase in revenue.

The challenges of sustainable tourism and hospitality experiences in current days enhance the following considerations: (a) Through reducing consumption. Guests do not want to be deprived of any element of their experience, and yet to meet sustainability goals, hotels must reduce consumption. (b) Monitoring demand. Usage within the hotel environment is variable and depends on guest behavior. (c) Verifying effectiveness. Programs and their effectiveness vary widely, and it is difficult to determine which standards are most effective for measuring greenness. (d) Evaluating opportunities. Although sustainability programs frequently save money in the long run, they require an initial investment, meaning hotels must justify them through selecting programs that most affect the bottom line and are aligned with organizational goals. (e) Removing barriers. Sustainability programs tend to be siloed when they should be the entire organization’s responsibility [44–48].

3. Methodology

The main objective of this project, entitled “Aprendizagem com base em processos de cocriação” (Learning based on co-creation processes) (POCH-04-5267-FSE-000818), and the academic team was to seek investment in sustainable practices and products that would be part of new business models and provide competitive advantages for the associated hotel.

Therefore, a qualitative approach linked to a specific study case was used, with a methodology consisting of a literature review of the thematic, and also, with the application of different tools of the Demola Model during a period between January and June 2021, characterized by a close collaboration between the academic team and the hotel manager, as can be seen in Figure 1, based on information of the “Bring Us Closer to Sustainability” Team’s Final Report.

As shown in Figure 2, a set of 14 tools were developed by the co-creation team in order to present the final solution. This format is part of the co-creation process developed by the Demola Project, a Finnish-origin initiative that brings together students, teachers, and companies/institutions to respond to real-world challenges or community problems that require innovation and where a variety of skills are needed. Demola is a simple tool for higher education institutions and companies to maintain ongoing collaboration and dialogue. This interaction makes it possible to (1) identify new opportunities for collaboration and the adoption of new initiatives; (2) work in teams, in multidisciplinary, multinational, multicultural, and co-creative environments; (3) propose solutions to real challenges or community (business and institutional) problems that require innovation and a variety of skills; (4) manage projects based on key milestones and with a focus on
creating business and end user value; (5) and communicate effectively by selling an idea to an audience [4].

![Figure 2. Different tools applied in the Demola co-creation program. Source: “Bring Us Closer to Sustainability” Team’s Final Report.](image)

This process required weekly meetings, permanent monitoring, field trips for observation and interviews, namely to the selected hotel as well as two examples of best practices identified by the team (benchmarking strategy), among other team-building strategies that were fundamental to the team’s good performance. In the fifth point of this article, all these tools that are part of the co-creation process followed will be described.

4. Case Study: Co-Creation between Polytechnic University of Guarda and Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa (Portugal)

This work followed the development of a methodology collaborated by a higher education institution, the Polytechnic University of Guarda, and a hotel, the Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa, in order to create a new product driven by a clear commitment to sustainability.

The Polytechnic University of Guarda is a higher education institution under public law, at the service of society, oriented to the generation and dissemination of knowledge, the creation and transmission of culture and expertise, science, technology and the arts, combining study, teaching, oriented research, and experimental development. The Polytechnic University of Guarda has a special and particularly important relationship with the region to which it belongs. It is increasingly a center of regional development. In this project, the institution was represented by one Teacher/Facilitator (Tourism and Hospitality area) and six Students (Tourism and Leisure, Catering and Food Production, Hotel Management and Sustainability and Tourism Management areas).

Located on the banks of the Alva River in Oliveira do Hospital, Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa is a unique and original project in Serra da Estrela (Figure 3), being the first five-star resort and spa in central Portugal, and holder of several international awards, it aims to continue investing in new sustainability practices. It thrives on the connection to water in all its spaces and senses: from the name to the symbol; from the nearby river beach to the 500-m riverbank; and from the three pools to the thermal water services. Among the variety and exclusivity of the services offered, it is worth highlighting the drop structures...
The project was represented by the CEO of the resort.

Figure 3. Location of the Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa. Source: [48].

5. The Co-Creation Process

The co-creation process is built around three phases: (1) Discovery; (2) Creation; and (3) Refine and Package. The starting point for this project, the Discovery Phase, was to understand the phenomenon, its context, and the people in it. The focus was not only on the present, but the goal was to understand the trends and megatrends that will shape the future. Understanding the context serves as the basis for the team’s decision making which was required before entering the next phase of the process, the Creation Phase.

When creating future scenarios or solution concepts, the user or target group is the focus of the team’s design. The team should experiment, question, and test assumptions, fail fast, learn, and iterate. In the Creation Phase, the team can choose between two paths: the solution-oriented path or the descriptive path. The decision is made by the team based on its insights and skills. In this case, the team chose the solution-oriented track because of their interest in a concrete solution.

In the final phase, The Refine and Package Phase, the team needs time to package its weeks of work into understandable visions of the possible future(s), to store the implications of its findings, and to crystallize insights from the field into future concepts and scenarios to avoid exploratory projects dragging on forever.

In Table 1, it is possible to observe some of the tasks in each phase of the co-creation that were carried out by the team.
Table 1. Tasks carried out by the team during the three phases of the co-creation process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discovery Phase</th>
<th>Creation Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Reflection on the challenge;</td>
<td>- Choose between solution oriented or a descriptive solution of possible scenarios;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Greater knowledge of the subject, the team and the industry partner;</td>
<td>- Choice of an innovative solution, based on the sustainability of tourism and hospitality, making the company’s business more attractive and diversified, reinforcing its image;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visit to the Aquavillage Health Resort &amp; Spa (product, management, investments, etc.);</td>
<td>- Interviews;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tasks: mind map, PESTLE analysis, identification of key stakeholders, research design, data analysis, affinity diagram and problem tree;</td>
<td>- Tasks: How Might We, Idea Creation phase, Low-Fidelity Prototyping, Value Proposition Creation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interviews;</td>
<td>- Validation of the solution with experts in the restaurant sector and industry partner;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- High motivation and availability of the team.</td>
<td>- Visits to two national references linked to sustainability in the hotel and restaurant sector;</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>- High-fidelity prototype creation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Refine & Package Phase

- Improvement and consolidation of the solution to be presented;
- Preparation of the final report;
- Presentation first to the partner;
- Final meeting (external jury).

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the Final Report.

5.1. The Preparation

The first weeks of the “learning based on co-creation processes” course were reserved for the preparation of the challenge, its design, and also the search for an external partner with whom, in a real context, a co-creation process could be developed that would stimulate the elaboration of a final proposal considered to have an added value for the company.

Defining the topic was the first step. The teamwork between the different facilitators of the Polytechnic University of Guarda and the external facilitator of the Demola project was very beneficial, as the joint presentation and discussion increased the quality of the challenge. As the facilitator’s field in this particular context is more focused on tourism and hospitality, and awareness of the importance of sustainability is increasing on a global level, it was agreed that this was the right way to go for the competitive proposal. With the choice of a reference partner from the hospitality industry in mind, the development of a challenge began with the main objective of improving sustainable practices and generating greater efficiency in the use of available resources. As this is a topical issue at the level of development policies and strategies in the tourism sector, it was clear that participation would be attractive for both the partner company and the students.

We considered several hotels that were recognized for their sustainability efforts and with whom it would be easier to develop the co-creation process. Three main reasons were considered when selecting the partner company: the company’s strong commitment to sustainability practices, its privileged relationship with the Polytechnic University of Guarda, and its geographical proximity.

The personal proximity and the open-mindedness of the partner company towards new challenges facilitated the acceptance of the project. After this important step, the work on the design of the challenge continued with the collaboration of the partner. In this sense, a visit to the hotel unit (Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa) took place beforehand to get
to know the different missions on site and also to generate feedback from those in charge. This process was very productive and challenging considering that it is developed in a real context.

The proposed challenge had the theme “Bring us closer to sustainability” and sought to answer the following question: Which sustainable practices should be implemented, that focus not only on the differentiating factor in guests’ experiences, but also on reducing operating costs, increasing efficiency and the well-being of the surrounding community?

The next step was internal disclosure by students to motivate them to participate. For this purpose, institutional social networks were used, as well as informal contacts with several students.

5.2. Team Selection

After the opening of applications for the challenge, and after its closing, there were 27 applications from interested students for 6 vacancies, which on the one hand showed a good acceptance of the challenge, but on the other hand also made the selection of candidates more difficult.

This choice was based firstly on motivation, interest, and predisposition to integrate the co-creation process; secondly on academic and personal skills; and thirdly on the multidisciplinarity required for this project.

Of the six students selected, one student was attending the Degree in Hotel Management (2nd year), one student was attending the Degree in Restaurant and Catering (1st year), two students were attending the Degree in Tourism and Leisure (3rd year), and two students were in the first year of the Master’s program in Management and Sustainability in Tourism.

In order to promote teambuilding activities, contacts were made regularly, both in person and through different platforms, namely Demola Chat, a Whatsapp group (which proved to be very useful), Colibri Zoom, or Google Meets. The team developed an excellent dynamic from the beginning and was enthusiastic about the proposed challenge, about teamwork and about the new tools they would use. The role of the facilitator is fundamental in managing the tasks and also the team’s own emotions.

5.3. Discovery Phase

This phase began with a reflection on the challenge and the responses required for it, as well as a better knowledge of the subject and the partner institution. It was also an important phase to get to know the different team members and to connect with the facilitator.

It was considered important to make a second visit to the hotel, but this time with the team. This meeting, at an early stage of the process, proved to be very positive, as it allowed the team to get to know the partner and strengthen relationships with them, but also to learn about the reality of the company’s operations and missions. This meeting revealed some ways and needs of the partner, which helped guide the next work.

The tasks developed in this phase were the Personal and later the Challenge Mind Map, the PESTLE Analysis, the Stakeholders Identification, which was intended to deepen knowledge, the Design Research and the methods to be used, an analysis of the results of this research, the Affinity Diagram, and also the Problem Tree.

With the high motivation of the team, it was possible to increase the knowledge about the challenge and to discuss all results in the team. The interview phase proved to be the most challenging. It was also recognized that the path taken kept bringing new elements that facilitated the process, and that it was a dynamic process that could be improved if necessary and reversed if needed.

5.4. Creation Phase

In the creation phase, an important decision had to be made from the very beginning: whether to opt for a solution oriented approach or a descriptive solution of possible scenarios. It was clear from the beginning that the team and the facilitator itself were
focused on presenting an innovative solution based on the principles of tourism and sustainability of the hotel, which would make the company’s business even more attractive and diversified, and would seek to strengthen the positive and already established image of the hotel in terms of sustainability.

After in-depth reflection and increased data collection through interviews with key interlocutors in the hospitality industry and a meeting with the head of the partner company, it was decided to present a concrete solution.

The “How Might We” tasks to be worked on individually and then discussed as a group, the idea creation phase, and the Low-Fidelity Prototyping were very participatory and led to a very healthy and motivating discussion. In creating the value proposition, the students presented a very interesting solution that was supported by all the work they had completed up to that point.

The decisive moment of this process was in fact the validation phase of the solution, in which two experts in the restaurant business were consulted first, and then the person in charge of the partner company. At this stage, and before the creation of the high-fidelity prototype (Figure 4), it was considered very important to visit two national reference companies in the field of sustainability in the hotel and restaurant sector (Boutique Hotel Sublime Comporta and Restaurant Fogo), as the concepts they presented were important to understand on the ground and to take advantage of the opportunity to generate more knowledge from privileged actors. The incorporation of this information in conjunction with the already structured idea allowed the solidification of the proposal and the further development of the final prototype.

![Figure 4. Prototype with the initial idea. Source: “Bring Us Closer to Sustainability” Team’s Final Report.](image)

5.5. Refine and Package Phase

This phase included the refinement and consolidation of the solution to be presented, the preparation of the final report and the two presentations, the first of which was presented only to the partner, and the second, together with the other co-creation groups, to an external jury in the so-called Final Meeting.

When the final solution was presented to the partner, it was considered innovative and differentiating, and it was noted that it could bring more revenue and attractiveness to the unit and strengthen its image related to sustainable practices.
6. Towards a Sustainable Proposal: The Aquafire—Underwater Food Experience

The final project presented was the creation of a restaurant linked to the sustainable concept and cooking based on fire, located on the riverbank and in the water: The Aquafire—Underwater Food Experience.

It is the creation of a new area in the F&B area of the hotel, based on a “farm to table” concept, cooked over the fire in front of the customer, who comes into contact with the products in their most natural form and also consumes them in a natural form. In addition, the space is located in the water, which takes the concept to a much higher level.

Initially, the team had a predefined idea, which was to build a mini restaurant in the shape of a drop, like the two massage drops that already exist in the hotel complex, to highlight the brand image of the hotel, surrounded by an organic garden from which the main ingredients and vegetables for the restaurant would come directly from, so that the customer can see the origin of the food, as well as gradually conveying an environmental responsibility so that customers could also practice sustainable habits.

The central theme of this mini-restaurant would be the preparation of food over fire, as this is the oldest and most sustainable way of cooking and one of the ways of cooking that leaves practically no residue. Proposed are three independent braziers, one for meat, one for fish, and one for vegetables, with grills with adjustable height so that each dish reaches the temperature it needs to be perfectly cooked.

The concept of this AQUA FIRE, Underwater Food Experience—the name chosen for the restaurant—would be that customers would choose the vegetables they want for their meal according to the seasonal ingredients available at the time, and if they want to add a protein available on the menu, they can also do so. The restaurant would have 15 seats at a single circular counter where the food would be served and through which guests could observe the entire process (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Final prototype of THE AQUA FIRE, Underwater Food Experience. Source: “Bring Us Closer to Sustainability” Team’s Final Report.](image)

After a meeting with the partner, field visits to both Sublime Comporta and Alexandre Silva’s Fogo restaurant, and opinions from restaurant professionals, this idea was tweaked a bit more.
The AQUA FIRE instead of being placed in the middle of the vegetable garden, as originally planned, will now be placed inside the Alva River, on a platform of recycled glass, just like the walls of the structure, which would be transformed into large windows that can be collected, so that on hot days the air can enter freely, making the restaurant almost like an outdoor area. However, the overall interior layout would be the same as in the original idea, except for the maximum seating of 10. The drop itself would be partially below the water level, which would make the experience even more immersive, as the materials used to build the drop would provide a view of the water flowing below.

Around the AQUA FIRE is a wooden deck with beds of aromatic herbs to be used for service. The dimensions of the interior of AQUA FIRE are 10 m × 10 m. The vegetable garden retains all its structure and is extended only by a walkway. In order to complement these two spaces, the restaurant and the organic vegetable garden, the idea arose to create an underwater garden with hydrophilic plants to be used for restaurant service. The AQUA FIRE, Underwater Food Experience will operate only by reservation, with a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 10 guests.

This concept will be the main sustainable attraction of Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa, fulfilling the initial challenge and project developed by the team. Sustainable in the sense that almost all food consumed at the space will be produced locally, i.e., “zero kilometre” food, meat will be purchased from local organic farms, and there will be a heavy emphasis on river fish to complement the resort’s offerings. Materials are also recycled whenever possible, providing the energy efficiency needed to avoid any kind of waste, such as recycled glass for the structure itself, furniture made from burnt olive wood and other trees damaged by fires and recycled for decoration.

Since the hotel is surrounded by forest, the braziers themselves can be supplied with regularly collected firewood, cleaning the surrounding land that has been so damaged by fires in recent years. With the arrival of autumn and proper staff training, this restaurant can place a strong emphasis on mushroom foraging, as it is located on the river, an ideal place for mushroom propagation. The vegetable garden offers guests the opportunity to take walks where they can enjoy the different smells, but also to hold workshops with the younger guests.

This way, AQUA FIRE, Underwater Food Experience and the organic vegetable garden will not only become an investment in a new service, but a bet on the entertainment of guests and the creation of unique experiences, which will undoubtedly arouse the curiosity of new customers.

7. Conclusions

The moment we are living in is crucial and a unique opportunity to rethink the tourism and hospitality sector from the perspective of a more sustainable, safer, and technological future that favours a circular economy model. Sustainability is and will be very closely linked to the development of tourism in the future. It is the most important trend shaping the sector, and it will continue to determine travellers’ preferences and motivations in the period after COVID-19.

It is important that tourism destinations and the stakeholders working there strive to use their resources sustainably by valuing the socio-cultural authenticity of communities, preserving biodiversity and also ensuring the social well-being and economic security of destinations. Destinations and academia need to work closely with entrepreneurs to better understand their current challenges [8]. In a knowledge economy, destinations have to innovate to remain competitive [8]. This premise highlights the network nature of value co-creation [9].

It is very positive for Academia to work with an external partner and in a more concrete way on a topic in a real context. It is possible to try to conduct a critical analysis of the proposed challenges and work on a process to present a solution that meets the needs of the company [10]. This was developed by a multidisciplinary team in close collaboration with the managers of the company. Working in a real context also increases the level
of responsibility. The chosen partner always demonstrated an enormous openness and collaborative spirit, having always been present and has even contributed significantly to the validation of the final solution, with which he fully agreed.

This article shows the entire progression of the co-creation process, using the Demola Model, from the activities/tasks that were completed over ten weeks to the presentation and development of the final project. It was a continuous learning process where new working tools and entrepreneurial spirit were acquired. There were some financial and time constraints in the realization of this project, some of which were overcome.

Sustainable practices are increasingly important for all sectors, including tourism and hospitality. Concerns about maintaining quality of life and economic development in a sustainable manner in the hospitality industry are rapidly gaining importance for both customers and managers/entrepreneurs.

This management strategy can bring a number of benefits, such as new customers, greater efficiency, and, therefore, greater profitability. Employees can also feel motivated by these initiatives and/or ways of working, by the careful use of resources and by the feeling that they are part of something that benefits the environment.

The proposed final solution, which meets the needs and interests of Aqua Village Health Resort & Spa and takes into account the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, appears as an added value to the development of this company, which relies on innovation and sustainability as great allies in the search for success and also differentiation. In short, since this hotel is a unique and original concept, the objective of the project was to develop strategies/measures to reduce operating costs and become more efficient, without neglecting the local community, which was considered throughout the project.

Therefore, with this article, in terms of findings, reinforcing the existing literature, it is clear that there is an added value in joint work between companies and academia, especially in the tourism and hospitality sector, a sector that is facing new challenges in this post-COVID period and is developing rapidly. The benefits of this joint work are very productive for both parties, as researchers and students can have greater contact with reality and its challenges, and companies can benefit from the know-how that can be incorporated by academia.

The use of the methodology followed proved to be adequate and our results provide some guidance for both future academic researchers and managerial practice in the tourism industry and to other specific case studies. Managers, through knowing the key components of value co-creation, could be more aware of the process and could develop future solutions based on it.

The result of this application increased the market visibility of the hotel as a tourist accommodation reference and enhanced customer satisfaction with a new experience that is linked to the sustainable pillars [9], with this there are several positive effects, which, in turn, bring more revenue to the participating players and can attract new factors for tourist supply.

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