**Faro: From tourist capital to cultural capital?**

Greg Richards

April 2021

Faro, European Capital of Culture 2027? A big challenge for a small city better known for tourism than culture. But as our recent book *Small Cities with Big Dreams* explains, if small cities dream big enough, they can do important and surprising things. Other Portuguese cities obviously think so too, because there are currently ten Portuguese cities vying for the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) title in 2027. Why is the ECOC so popular? Because it can help cities to achieve their dreams by giving them a cultural and creative boost, stimulating the economy, polishing their image, or increasing social cohesion.

What is different about Faro is its role as the capital of the Algarve, one of Europe’s most important tourist regions. Tourism accounts for 80% of Faro’s economy - so what room is left for culture? In fact, Faro shares a common culture of tourism with much of Mediterranean Europe. Fields were transformed from growing crops to farming tourists, creating an important new industry. But the economic view of tourism is too narrow. If we view tourists merely as a cash crop, then the Algarve, and much of southern Europe, is engaged in a risky monoculture. The pandemic has shown us the dangers of over-reliance on mass tourism and raised the spectre of a future industrial wasteland on the shores of the Mediterranean. What prospects are there for the rejuvenation of tourism, or the development of new, creative alternatives?

Taking a cultural view of tourism is a good starting point. Tourists bring not only money, but also their culture, their creativity, and ideas. We should move from the old idea of farming tourists to growing knowledge for the creative economy. The Algarve has always been a meeting place for cultures, a creative melting pot. What better location to come and experience something creative (like the cooking, painting and weaving workshops offered by Loulé Criativo), or to build a creative life, as expat artists or creative entrepreneurs? The natural attractiveness of the Algarve means creative mass can be added by enticing new ‘temporary citizens’, such as tourists, students and digital nomads. These new arrivals stimulate innovation and drive change through their consumption, but increasingly also through their role as cultural and creative producers.

An important strategy for developing creative critical mass is collaboration, as previous successful ECOCs have shown. The 2007 ECOC in Luxemburg involved not just the small city itself, but also partners in France, Germany, and Belgium, drawing together a total population of 11 million to stage an impressively varied cultural programme. In 2017 the Cypriot city of Paphos, which has a similar population to Faro, managed to overcome financial challenges to stage a successful ECOC event through collaboration with regional partners. Building partnerships allows cities to do more than their own resources would allow, developing added ‘network value’. Tourists themselves can also become partners: the 2019 ECOC in Matera in southern Italy awarded passports to tourists, making them ‘temporary citizens’ and encouraging them to participate in the creative life of the city.

Faro has already shown it understands creative collaboration: the Açoteia Rooftop Festival in 2019 gave residents and visitors a new view of the city and generated considerable publicity. Most importantly, the European Rooftop Network that it founded put Faro at the centre of a network with much bigger cities, such as Barcelona and Amsterdam. Faro has also shown its potential for creativity in concepts such as the New Bauhaus – an unexpected and creative conceptualisation of one effect of tourism: the production of new architecture. This links to the EU initiative *New European Bauhaus*, which combines cultural heritage with new thinking about space, architecture, and sustainability. Another important illustration of Faro’s creativity is the linkage of the ECOC concept to longer term planning for the *Strategic Plan for Culture* in 2030.

But the Algarve should also be bolder than culture alone. It should be able to harness its heritage as the ‘Cape Canaveral of the 1600s’ to provide a launchpad for new creative discoveries. Addressing the lack of innovation common to most tourism destinations with a vision of the Portuguese Sunbelt: a desired destination not just for retirees, but also for digital nomads, hi-tech companies, and other mobile Europeans. The contact these people have with local culture is important. Recent research by the University of the Algarve on the gastronomic habits of tourists shows that they can be encouraged to consume more local fish and shellfish and eat more healthy foods in their search for authenticity and new experiences.

These possibilities can generate more positive forms of tourism, particularly if the sense of urgency of the pandemic is used creatively. Moving from short breaks to longer stays enables people to get under the skin of the places they visit. Attention should also shift from tourists who just consume culture to those who co-produce it, for example in cooking schools, arts residencies and creative bootcamps. The aim should be to create and capitalise on the diverse forms of value generated by those living in and moving through the Algarve. Innovation and creativity should increase because of, and not despite tourism. Then Faro might become a small city that realises its dreams.

Portuguese text: <https://www.dinheirovivo.pt/opiniao/faro-de-capital-turistica-a-capital-da-cultura-13782338.html>