

## Rural tourism and its immediate future in the context of COVID-19 in Cuba

### Turismo rural y su futuro inmediato en el contexto de la COVID-19 en Cuba

### O turismo rural e seu futuro imediato no contexto da COVID-19 em Cuba

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the development of tourism worldwide. This research was developed with the objective of assessing rural tourism and its immediate future in the context of COVID-19 in Cuba. For this purpose, a study of possible futures was carried out, where it was convenient only to arrive at exploratory scenarios based on the probability, importance and date of occurrence of the events, with a panel of five specialists consulted online. The development of the research was based on the results of the situational analysis and summary of the situation, for which both a synchronic and diachronic study was carried out. From this, it was determined that rural tourism in Cuba, as a product, is in the growth stage, having a good image, high demand and excellent market prospects, so that the trend, referential and framing scenarios reflect an optimistic assessment in the face of the possible occurrence of events of a political-legal and management nature, among others. It is valid to point out that it was determined that Cuba has potentialities for the development of rural tourism, however, the available data on its behavior PRE-COVID are almost null and the information on its management is limited, for which reason the managers of the tourism sector and rural spaces are limited in their decision making, even more so in the new context of the pandemic and its immediate future.

**Keywords:** rural tourism; COVID-19; Cuba; possible futures

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## **RESUMEN**

La pandemia de la COVID-19 ha afectado en gran medida el desarrollo del turismo a nivel mundial. La presente investigación se desarrolló con el objetivo de valorar el turismo rural y su futuro inmediato en el contexto de la COVID-19 en el destino Cuba. Para ello, se realizó un estudio de los futuros posibles donde fue conveniente solo arribar a escenarios exploratorios a partir de la probabilidad, importancia y fecha de ocurrencia

de los eventos, con un panel de cinco especialistas consultados vía online. El desarrollo de la investigación se basó en los resultados del análisis situacional y resumen de la situación, para lo cual se realizó un estudio tanto sincrónico como diacrónico. A partir de ello, se determinó que el turismo rural en Cuba, como producto, se encuentra en la etapa de Crecimiento, al tener buena imagen, alta demanda y excelente perspectiva en el mercado, por lo que los escenarios tendenciales, referencial y de encuadramiento reflejan una valorización optimista frente a la posible ocurrencia de eventos de carácter político-legal y de gestión, entre otros. Es válido señalar que se determinó que Cuba posee potencialidades para el desarrollo del turismo rural, sin embargo, son casi nulos los datos disponibles de su comportamiento PRE-COVID y la información sobre su gestión es limitada, por lo cual los gestores del sector turístico y de los espacios rurales se ven limitados en la toma de decisiones, más aún en el nuevo contexto de la pandemia y su futuro inmediato.

**Palabras clave:** turismo rural; COVID-19; Cuba; futuros posibles

## RESUMO

A pandemia COVID-19 afetou muito o desenvolvimento do turismo em todo o mundo. Esta pesquisa foi desenvolvida com o objetivo de avaliar o turismo rural e seu futuro imediato no contexto da COVID-19 no destino Cuba. Para isso, foi realizado um estudo de futuros possíveis onde era conveniente apenas chegar a cenários exploratórios com base na probabilidade, importância e data de ocorrência dos eventos, com um painel de cinco especialistas consultados online. O desenvolvimento da pesquisa baseou-se nos resultados da análise situacional e síntese da situação, para a qual foi realizado um estudo síncrono e diacrônico. A partir disso, determinou-se que o turismo rural em Cuba, como produto, se encontra em fase de crescimento, com boa imagem, alta demanda e excelentes perspectivas de mercado, de forma que os cenários de tendência, referencial e enquadramento refletem uma valorização otimista em frente à possível ocorrência de eventos político-jurídicos e de gestão, entre outros. É válido notar que se determinou que Cuba tem potencial para o desenvolvimento do turismo rural, porém, os dados disponíveis sobre o comportamento do PRE-COVID são quase nulos e as informações

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sobre sua gestão são limitadas, para o que os gestores do turismo setor e das áreas rurais são limitados na tomada de decisões, ainda mais no novo contexto da pandemia e seu futuro imediato.

**Palavras-chave:** turismo rural; COVID-19; Cuba; futuros possíveis

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has undergone a process of adaptation throughout its history. The practice of this activity originates from the time of the Greeks, although it was at the end of the 19th century (called the century of industrialization) and the beginning of the 20th century, when it was considered as an economic activity of great relevance, thanks to industrial advances that facilitated transfers from one place to another (Ayala Castro & Hernández Flores, 2021).

In the 20th century, tourism became known on a large scale, especially activities linked to sun and beach tourism. This caused a deterioration in these destinations, as tourism activity had a very limited vision regarding the care of the environment and the local population, all that tourism leadership was not taken advantage of and consequently, it was lost (Morillo Moreno, 2011).

According to Cruz and Gutiérrez (2019, p. 2), tourism "is a socioeconomic, spatial and prevailing phenomenon today, of obligatory study and observation due to its dynamics, with a geographical, economic and social approach; these approaches must be interrelated and dimensioned".

For his part, Kieffer (2018) states that this sector has been an important factor for the growth of local economies and an axis for the development of urban and rural territories. Thus, at the global level, tourism development has been, since then, part of the policies, plans and programs of the countries of the region and the world.

Tourism in natural areas has generated expectations and has influenced the social, economic and environmental changes of the populations related to these areas. Within

this field, there are those who see tourism and territory as a symbiosis, where actors, practices and spaces are articulated; they do not see territories as only providers of attractions or resources, but see interrelationships between local participation, income distribution, territorial characteristics, equity, gender among others (Chin et al., 2018).

It can be affirmed that in the second half of the twentieth century, tourism began to adapt to all the social changes, with emphasis on environmental protection. Several modalities or types of tourism and activities linked to this philosophy emerged, the best known of which was "rural tourism".

Rural tourism emerges as a tourism alternative that is essentially characterized by the fact that it is developed in rural areas and is based on environmental, social, cultural and economic principles. Consequently, it constitutes a new alternative for income diversification for rural communities and a strategic axis for the development of the territories (León Abarca & Reyes Vargas, 2020).

This type of tourism began to increase its importance as a strategic activity for the development of some territories. Some possible causes are the increased importance and interest in ecology and natural spaces, aspects closely linked to the concept of sustainability, new preferences and trends detected in tourism demand, exhaustion of traditional tourism modalities, among others (Galmarini, 2016).

Lane and Kastenholz (2015) state that rural tourism has evolved through three stages. The first stage was its appearance in tourism markets as a novel product with a focus on sustainability, which in developed countries complemented the income of the primary sector or made use of underutilized resources located in the natural environment. The second stage was characterized by the growth and expansion of the offer, usually in a poorly planned manner. The model spread to a multitude of countries and activities, which made it possible to convert the concept of rural tourism into an umbrella brand that covers very diverse realities.

A third phase within this development is taking place well into the 21st century and not with the same clarity in all destinations. It is characterized by a certain saturation of the offer and clear changes in demand expectations. This combination means that either the

product will be regenerated through innovation, or the market will inexorably evolve towards maturity and product decline.

Despite this, several key actors have adopted sustainable development strategies in order to counteract the negative effects that may be caused by the disrespectful practice of activities developed as part of rural tourism. An example of this was the commitment made by 193 member states of the United Nations General Assembly, who, in 2015, approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets, presents an ambitious vision of sustainable development for the next 15 years.

Under these criteria, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Based on this, it was urged that the actors linked to the subject opt for better practices in their operations and implement socially fair, economically profitable and environmentally friendly practices.

These ideas take on greater importance once the arrival of a new virus in China was known in December 2019, which caused an outbreak of the disease at the international level. From that moment on, the world gradually began to enter a state of sanitary emergency, which logically led to a contraction in tourism (Pierre Alvarez & Harris, 2020).

In a new scenario, according to Hernandez et al. (2020), visitors will opt for a less mass tourism and away from cities, especially in the search for greater hygienic-sanitary safety and committed to sustainability.

In this sense, Wagner (2020) states that, as a result of this serious situation, a greater social awareness has been generated, which will stimulate sustainable environmental and social behaviors, so it should be assumed that post-pandemic tourism will feel committed and aligned with those organizations that reflect these same values of sustainability and for the development of activities related to rural tourism. Social responsibility will be an even more valued aspect, as will providers and destinations that carry out and promote environmental care.

In recent years, different actors in the Cuban tourism sector have spoken out in favor of the development of new ideas in line with international trends and the demands of potential visitors interested in developing rural tourism in Cuba.

Although tourism policies in Cuba contribute to local development and the Cuban peasantry benefits from the advantages offered by tourism, a comprehensive development strategy is not yet seen in all territories, but rather has not transcended the scope of some specific areas.

Local entities have not been involved in this activity, since this product is marketed through traditional tourism circuits and incoming enterprises, such as the Ecotur travel agency, are essentially responsible for its development.

In Cuba, there are opportunities for the development of rural tourism in a POST-COVID-19 scenario, but there are few data available on its behavior PRE-COVID-19 (such as flows, main demand segments, among others) and information on its management is limited, which is why decision-makers in the tourism sector and others related to rural tourism, from national to local territorial levels, are limited in making decisions on this activity, even more so in this new context of the pandemic and its future.

For this reason, the present study was carried out with the objective of assessing rural tourism and its immediate future in the context of COVID-19 in Cuba.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

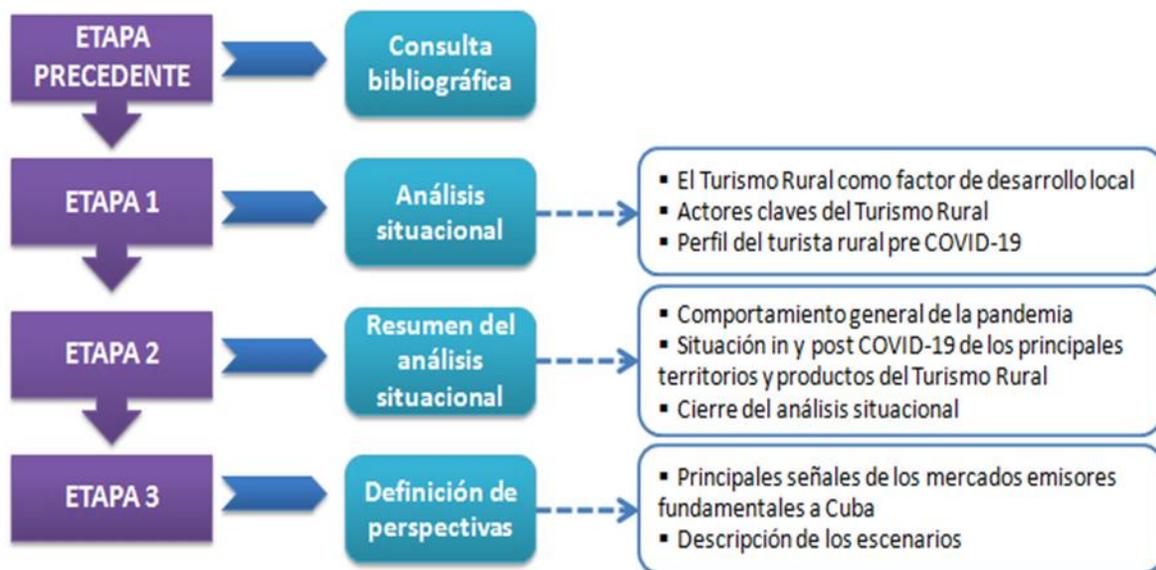
The research was developed in the context of the confinement generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and has as a fundamental background the practical experiences of the Student Scientific Working Group "Tourism, Biodiversity and Territory" (TURbiot) of the Faculty of Tourism of the University of Havana, regarding rural tourism and its development in Havana del Este municipality between 2017 and 2019.

It presents a position framed in a mixed methodology, where it contemplates qualitative and quantitative elements. The theoretical methods used in the study were the hypothetical-deductive, the systemic-structural and the historical methods. Among the

procedures used, it can be mentioned the analysis and synthesis and induction-deduction. All these methods made it possible to process the information resulting from the bibliographic consultation, as well as to synthesize the results.

As for empirical methods, surveys were conducted with the specialists involved in the study and measurement was used through the use of inferential statistics for the interpretation of the results of the surveys.

The research was structured in three (3) stages, after the previous stage of bibliographic review for the theoretical foundation on Rural Tourism as a socioeconomic activity, as shown in the following flow chart (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** - Research trajectory

Source: Own elaboration

For the development of the first stage, based on the guidelines on strategic management from the innovative approach, an analysis was carried out, both externally and internally, with respect to rural tourism in Cuba. The external analysis was based, at first, on the study of the factors that affect the country's rural tourism activity in the economic, technological, environmental, social, political, demographic and other general areas.

Secondly, the performance of stakeholders related to the activity was analyzed, including actual and potential rural tourism territories and products, suppliers, customers, substitutes, distributors, other organizations in the sector and/or the context, governmental structures and the community.

The analysis included the study of synergies and antagonisms, barriers and rivalries that are created in the interactions at the time of the activity in praxis. In this case, the fundamental thing was to arrive at a set of possible opportunities and threats that are configured for rural tourism.

The internal analysis was carried out by identifying the strategic capacity of the rural tourism activity in the sector and its relationship with local development in order to act with the necessary quality and that would allow it to achieve success in satisfying clients and, consequently, society. It was also necessary to have information on existing rural resources and skills to carry out tourism activities of this typology in the Cuban IN and POST-COVID-19 context. The idea was to find weaknesses and strengths of the activity in Cuba.

In the second stage, it was necessary to summarize the Cuban context and the general epidemiological behavior of COVID-19 by consulting reliable and more updated secondary sources of information in the country. Then, for the summary of the analysis of the situation of rural tourism for Cuban conditions, it was appropriate to use the matrix of Weaknesses, Threats, Strengths and Opportunities (SWOT).

Taking into account the existing limitations and restrictions caused by COVID-19, this tool was developed by consulting (online), five (5) specialists linked to rural tourism, agricultural and forestry activities, with knowledge about tourism products developed in rural areas, who were contacted and agreed to participate through the *WhatsApp* social network.

In the third stage, the study of possible futures was carried out with little information and no field study, so it was advisable only to arrive at exploratory scenarios. For this purpose, an analysis was made of those scenarios that describe a series of events leading

logically to a specific future scenario based on the current situation of the system (in this case, rural tourism). Within this type of scenarios, the following were differentiated:

- Trend: that which is based on the importance of the events for the system.
- Referential: the one with the events and their probability, which expresses the system in its real context.
- Framing: that which was oriented to delimit the space of possible futures

The elaboration of each future scenario was based on the results of the previous stages of situational analysis (first stage) and situation summary (second stage), for which both a synchronic (reasoning by coherence) and diachronic (dynamics of trends) study was carried out. The synchronic examination involved checking the coherence of the different elements of rural tourism and its context, and the diachronic examination began by analyzing the temporal evolution and trends of each of the basic information of the previous stages.

Then, the coherence of the evolutions was checked from a new synchronic perspective, through the statement and list of events on rural tourism in the Cuban context. To the initial list, the List Reduction technique was applied to clarify the events; in this way, the ideas of the list were integrated and complemented and reduced to a manageable number of events (no more than 15).

"Filters" or criteria were applied that had to be met for an aspect to be kept under consideration. The filters applied were: Is this aspect relevant among the others? Is it influential? Is it worth considering? Is it likely to be acted upon? Is it feasible?

After applying this technique, a definitive list of events was obtained, with which an evaluation was made with closed selection criteria, which allowed each type of scenario to be placed in only one of its categories, for which the same five specialists from the previous stage were consulted online.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Stage 1: Situational analysis of rural tourism in Cuba

#### Rural tourism as a factor of local development

Cuba's tourism offer has been characterized by a predominant sun and beach tourism, based on international trends that govern the activity in the Caribbean islands. Despite the above, there is a tendency to diversify this national tourism product towards other offers that find a favorable space in the national context, as is the case of nature tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism (Camargo Toribio & Casas Vilardell, 2007).

These authors argue that this contrasts with the significant possibilities of national rural spaces, which are characterized by a set of attributes that have been recognized nationally and internationally by various institutions, including: biosphere reserves, protected areas, as well as Cultural and Natural Heritage of Humanity.

The variants of rural tourism that are developed in the Cuban rural environment are far from the scope of local development, as well as local entities, in most areas of the country, although strategies have been developed to reverse this context. It is in the midst of this situation that local development emerges as one of the ways to strengthen the wealth that a given territory may have.

In this way, they bring economic advantages for their population and provide the possibility of integral development for each member of the population (Iglesias Pérez & Jiménez Guethón, 2017). Therefore, it is important to conceive strategic lines of local development with a strong focus on sustainability that allows a harmonious development of human society and nature.

An example of the areas that have been articulating strategies for the development of rural tourism as a modality is Viñales, where, according to Cardoso et al. (2019), the associated products are offered by private lessors. Similarly, Darias et al. (2017) insist that another rural product of notable importance in the province is the Tobacco Route, a tourism product that exalts the tobacco culture and all the cultural values associated

with it. It consists of several tourist centers, which are nothing more than tobacco plantations where rural tourism is developed as a complementary activity to agriculture.

In the center of the country, there is also the preserved Valle de los Ingenios, a center where the sugar industry was developed and which, together with the city of Trinidad, was inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List. In this sense, it is consolidated as an interpretation center on sugar production and life patterns in the rural environment, where gastronomic activities are carried out (visitors are shown the process of obtaining and tasting guarapo, a drink derived from sugar cane), tourists are exposed to the traditions of natural medicine, inherited by ancient generations of slaves, as well as being shown various handicraft techniques.

In addition to these consolidated destinations for the practice of rural tourism in Cuba, other authors such as Echarri and Bulnes (2015) state that there are other territories with natural, rural, sports, scientific and historical-cultural resources that make possible the implementation of activities related to the modalities of nature, rural and scientific tourism, as well as religious, cultural and sports tourism, among them different municipalities of Mayabeque province.

Currently, some of these initiatives come from urban areas, promoted by universities, travel agencies or other centers, although other projects are also born from the spontaneity of the inhabitants.

Exogenous initiatives favor the population many times with the results, but they become mere beneficiaries without direct involvement in the process, which is often seen as a state and not a local issue (Darias Fuertes et al., 2017).

### **Profile of rural tourism demand PRE-COVID-19**

Data from 2019, offered by the digital portal of rural tourism *Clubrural*, show a profile of how is the tourist who chooses rural houses and rural tourism activities for their days off. Among the most outstanding characteristics it is worth highlighting:

- *Age*: The most frequent age among the rural public is over 41 years old, with 61.93 % of the people who have traveled. Those who practice this type of tourism the least are people between 18 and 30 years of age (9.95 %).
- *Gender*: Women are the ones in charge of preparing this type of trip, as confirmed by the survey: 75.3% compared to 24.7% of men.
- *Company*: In this aspect, there is a clear choice, travelers prefer to travel as a couple (48.6 %), although those who choose the family (35.7 %) for these rural experiences are not far behind (35.7 %).
- *Motivations*: The reasons why they choose rural tourism for their vacations are more than clear: to disconnect and relax, in fact, 57.3 % of the responses have so indicated. However, the enjoyment and interaction with nature, including flora and fauna, also plays an important role (39.6%).
- *Travel time investment*: 3 out of 10 travelers prefer to choose destinations that are between 2 and 3 hours from their place of departure. Not to mention that 2 out of 10 are disenchanted by those that are more than 3 hours away.
- *Number of trips*: Regarding the number of times they choose rural tourism to travel during the year, 23.9 % make three trips and 27.6 % prefer to escape twice a year.
- *Travel dates*: Most travelers choose weekends for this type of trip. Almost half (49.2 %) did so during the course of 2017. But it is also noteworthy that they take advantage of long weekends (18.9 %) to extend the days of rest in rural houses.
- *Type of rental*: When it comes to relaxing getaways, the majority prefer to stay in fully rented rural houses, which guarantee more tranquility (47.7%), while 32.4% opt for rural hotels.
- *Expenditures*: The average investment made by these tourists is between 26 and 30 euros (35 %), followed by those who spend more than 30 euros (31.9 %).
- *What do they look for?* The first thing rural customers look for when they book is the services offered by the accommodation (31.7%), followed by the reviews and rating of the site on the Internet (26.8%).
- *Where do they search?* Google is the main search source for finding accommodation, representing 35.2% of the total. The rest of the sources are

distributed among the professional rural accommodation portals, such as *Clubrural*

According to Dueñas et al. (2018), from a theoretical point of view, tourism managers in Cuba have taken the generic denomination of Nature Tourism for all products, destinations and developments that had nature as the main motivation and that made a responsible use of nature.

Within this context, rural tourism has its own horizons; however, upon analyzing the statistics of arrivals in the country, according to the reason for the trip, it was detected that there is no segmentation or differentiation by typology within the Nature Tourism modality, which made the analysis of this aspect difficult.

The profile of rural tourists visiting Cuba coincides with the profiles described in international studies. Tourists who decide to engage in rural tourism have in mind a break with the formality of their behavior in the city. They are looking for the countryside and an opportunity to restore their energy and balance. A tourist who values his/her quality of life is looking for a small, quiet town, with living nature and attractive local culture.

## **Stage 2: Summary of the situational analysis**

### **General pandemic behavior**

Cuba began the process of confronting COVID-19. Since January 2020, when the first reports of the new coronavirus COVID-19 appeared, the Cuban government conceived an intersectoral work strategy, led by the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba (Minsap) and the Civil Defense System, with the objective of containing as much as possible the risk of introduction and dissemination, as well as minimizing the negative effects of an epidemic on the health of the Cuban population. This strategy was reflected in a Prevention and Control Plan with different specific objectives, which are aimed at protecting the health of the Cuban people.

The plan defined three stages for dealing with the pandemic and specific actions for each of them: Pre-epidemic stage (Phase I), Limited autochthonous transmission stage (Phase II) and Epidemic stage (Phase III). Cuba went through the stage of limited autochthonous transmission, although later, according to new indicators, in October 2020, the stage of "new normality" was established.

In the economic and social sphere, as in other countries, the main measures were associated with: closing of borders, interruption of productive activities and non-essential services, restriction of trade activities, reorientation of available resources to strengthen the health system, interruption of face-to-face teaching activities at all levels, promotion of telecommuting and distance work, labor guarantees to interrupted workers, social guarantees to people with greater needs and at risk of vulnerability, tax benefits to the non-State sector, among others; all with the fundamental purpose of guaranteeing physical isolation and slowing the spread of the virus.

Each of these measures has been relaxed or increased depending on the country's health indicators.

### **IN and POST-COVID-19 status of the main rural tourism territories and products**

Currently, the country is immersed in a difficult stage of resurgence of the virus after reaching encouraging figures. In a first moment of confrontation with COVID-19, the destinations of Viñales, Vueltabajo and Trinidad saw paralyzed all tourist activity, both rural and other modalities, since the entry of foreign visitors to the country was prohibited. The tourist products that are marketed in these territories are paralyzed as expected, however, this does not mean that work has stopped, different maintenance tasks have been carried out, where the infrastructure has been rehabilitated and have benefited from maintenance work.

Likewise, the local inhabitants have tried to beautify these small towns with their own efforts, even though the economic situation of the country is going through a difficult crisis caused by the lack of basic necessities and other external factors, such as all the

restrictions imposed by the United States (U.S.), which has maintained an iron and cruel economic-financial blockade against the island of Cuba for almost 60 years.

In spite of this international tourist paralysis, there is hope that the return to normality is about to come gradually. Cuba has accumulated vast experience in confronting U.S. hostility and numerous climatological events that have allowed it to rebuild its capacities in a short time and put its hotel and non-hotel infrastructure in optimal conditions; in other words, this is not the first setback the island has faced.

### Closing the situational analysis

Tourism in Cuba is called to begin the road to economic recovery after the current imposing health crisis of COVID-19, as it is a key sector that can have an impact on the country's development. In this sense, rural tourism plays a decisive role. Today, elements such as uncertainty and insecurity prevail among the world's population, which is why creativity in proposals should be an incentive for the activation of travel.

After analyzing this situation, it has been possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Cuban rural tourism and the opportunities and threats perceived in the environment, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** - SWOT analysis of rural tourism in Cuba

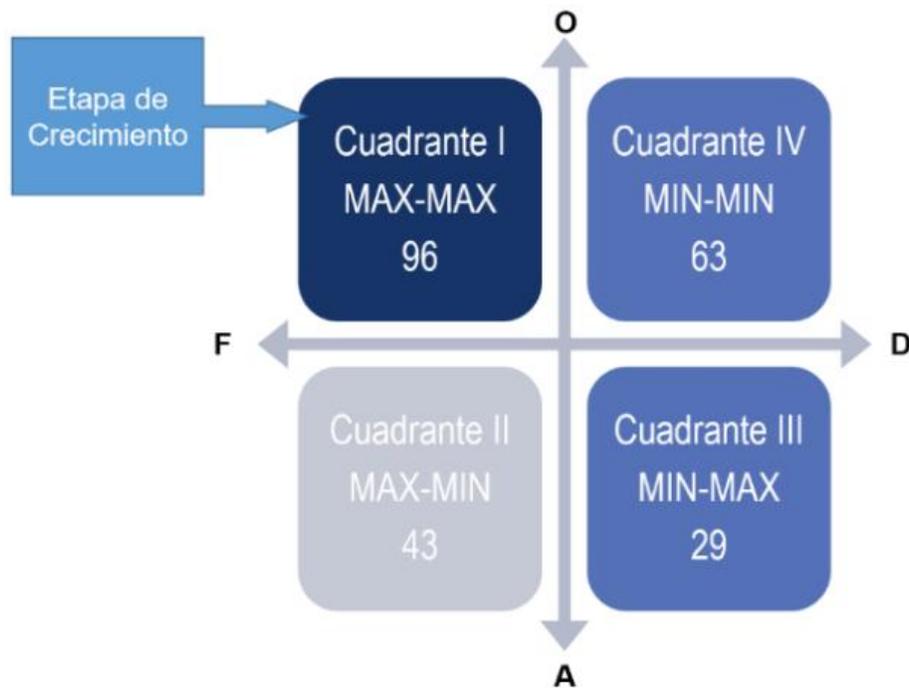
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Existence of attractions configured from natural resources under state ownership and management regimes with a focus on sustainability.</li> <li>2. Implementation of territorial development plans, with strategies that include the design and development of ecotourism, adventure and/or rural tourism products.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low level of exploitation of rural tourist destinations or areas with great potential.</li> <li>2. Deficient and insufficient development of eco-lodges, eco-hotels and eco-resorts and spas in the country.</li> <li>3. Low incorporation of farms and other forms of agro livestock</li> </ol>

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Articulation of key actors that guarantee the existence and continuous improvement of the modality's products, with emphasis on the business groups of the Ministry of Agriculture, local governments and some non-governmental organizations.</li> <li>4. Human capital trained in specific rural resource management and conservation activities, capable of meeting the specialized demands of rural tourism.</li> <li>5. Interest and concern of the inhabitants of rural localities to take advantage of rural tourism as an incentive for local development as a complementary activity to agricultural and livestock production.</li> <li>6. Planning and management of the nature tourism modality and its different typologies (including Rural Tourism) through a National Nature Tourism Program, which favors the monitoring of the life cycle of the destinations.</li> </ol>	<p>and forestry production organization, with great potential for agrotourism, into the rural tourism product portfolio.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Insufficient tourism culture among the population in areas where there is potential for rural tourism development.</li> <li>5. Low comprehensive level of most rural tourism destinations for a personalized and quality service, as well as for better waste management.</li> <li>6. Low interest in rural tourism among domestic demand.</li> </ol>
<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p>	<p><b>THREATS</b></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis of the main issuing countries to Cuba.</li> <li>2. Positioning of Cuba as a safe destination, due to its efficiency in the fight against COVID-19, as well as the prestige achieved through solidarity aid to other nations.</li> <li>3. Growing and sustained economic recovery of the countries of origin to Cuba and the stabilization of jobs and vacation or leisure</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sustained tightening of the U.S. economic, financial and commercial blockade against Cuba.</li> <li>2. Effects of the global economic crisis POST-COVID-19.</li> <li>3. Prolonged uncertainty of international travelers to leave</li> </ol>

<p>funds of clients with high purchasing power, characteristic of the segments of demand for nature in the world.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4. Increased environmental awareness and respect for nature among the world's population.</li><li>5. Decrease in international interest in mass tourism and search for less crowded activities.</li><li>6. Decrease in the prestige, reliability and safety of destinations in the Americas, strong competitors of nature and rural tourism, due to the inadequate management of the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery, such as the USA, Canada, Brazil and Ecuador. Canada, Brazil and Ecuador.</li></ol>	<p>their countries after the first COVID-19 health crisis.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4. Contraction of air and maritime operations that support international traveler flows.</li><li>5. Worldwide prevalence of domestic tourism and inclination for short trips.</li><li>6. Effects of climate change or unfavorable weather conditions for rural areas and their resources.</li></ol>
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Source: Own elaboration

According to the level of importance of the previous points, the Cross Impacts Matrix showed that Rural Tourism in Cuba is positioned in the growth stage of the Product Life Cycle, in Quadrant I, as shown in figure 2.



**Fig. 2** - Position of the product Rural Tourism in Cuba

Source: Own elaboration

This analysis, taking into account the strengths and opportunities identified, means that the Rural Tourism product in the country has an outstanding image, a significant demand and a good market outlook.

### **Stage 3: Definition of perspectives**

#### **Main signals from key issuing markets to Cuba**

Evidently, the current health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has turned the estimates and statistics planned for the current year upside down. Taking previous crises as a starting point, leisure travel, especially to visit friends and family, could recover more quickly than business travel. It is along these lines that most objectivity points to the fact that tourism demand would be domestic, i.e., within the country itself. Domestic demand could show a faster recovery (Hernández Flores et al., 2020).

International tourism in Cuba, at the close of January 2020, had already registered a decrease of 19.6% compared to the same period of the previous year, when it was down 9.3% and revenues were US\$2 185 million, a figure similar to 2018 (ONEI, 2020).

The recovery of the tourism sector in the country is not unaware of the real existence of the U.S. blockade, which prevents its citizens from traveling to the largest of the Antilles and its airlines and cruise lines from carrying out commercial operations. In view of this possibility, Cuban tourism authorities have designed, since before the outbreak of the pandemic, a strategy to target outbound markets that could potentially travel to the country. Today, many of these long-distance destinations such as China and Russia are affected by the scourge of the virus.

However, as these markets themselves gradually begin to open their borders and air operations begin, tour operators will begin, with the required health security, to offer attractive packages for leisure travel.

As conceived by the Cuban Government, a gradual opening to tourism, after the beginning of the country's recovery, would have as its main objective to encourage domestic tourism, but this new scenario will still have to consider certain restrictive measures, derived from the experiences obtained after having faced the pandemic.

Since June 18, domestic tourism in Cuba began to make reservations, especially in the bases of Campismo Popular, located in the interior of the country, excluding Havana, which due to its epidemiological situation did not go to Phase I, on a par with the rest of the provinces.

On the other hand, on July 1, 2020, the country reopened its doors to international tourism with the application of all the protection protocols that respond to the indications of the World Health Organization, the WTO and the Minsap. These protocols included the screening of foreign tourists through the real-time PCR test to identify possible COVID-19 infection, in addition to the requirement, as of January 20, 2021, for entry into the country, of a negative PCR test 72 hours in advance.

Undoubtedly, there has been a change in the travel paradigms, in which the greatest enemy is uncertainty, and for this the transmission of a climate of trust, security and creative promotion that legitimizes the social usefulness of travel will be the best tools to motivate the issuing markets.

In this new scenario in which the world in general and tourism in particular have not been free from the emotional impact caused by the coronavirus pandemic, indicators point out that, after this situation, rural tourism could be one of the sectors with the capacity to revert its situation and use the COVID-19 situation as an element to grow among tourists' preferences.

In a context where agglomerations are avoided and physical distance prevails, rural tourism is positioned as a suitable option for relaxation, while rural spaces are considered as environments to decongest or absorb the overcrowded and homogenized tourist market of the cities.

Fernández et al. (2019) state that "the tourist demand, after the time of confinement, is eager to be in natural spaces, open spaces, with a sense of freedom and without meeting anyone, that makes this type of tourism a priority".

### **Description of future scenarios**

Godet, cited in Perilla and Gonzalez (2017, p. 5), posits that a scenario is "a set formed by the description of a future action and a path of events that allow moving from an original situation to a future one".

In the present section, the results obtained in the research are shown, so the scientific facts resulting from the situational analysis on Rural Tourism are pointed out, summarized with the SWOT instrument previously exposed, which allowed listing a series of essential events derived from such analysis. Then, it was proceeded to work with the three descriptive scenarios that determined the location of the events (Table 2).

The values granted reflect a positive and optimistic vision of the possible occurrence of the events previously listed, however, they do not constitute sufficient elements for this analysis to allow observing the interrelation between them. It is very probable that Rural Tourism in the country will become an alternative of tourist and socioeconomic development for the Cuban rural territories, as long as the events of political-legal character occur. The Mintur must maintain an open attitude to study and approve activities that contribute to the differentiation and diversification of the Cuban tourist offer, as long as it complies with the established legal requirements, is respectful with the natural environment and meets the determined quality standards.

Exploration of fundamental uncertainties, on the one hand, and of certain trends, on the other, are key to the process, where it is important to identify the factors that promote or inhibit change. This is to ensure that decision-makers consider a wide range of strategies for dealing with numerous possible future circumstances.

**Table 2** - Descriptive scenarios of Rural Tourism

No.	Events	Scenarios		
		Trend	Referential	Framing
1	Integration and mutual cooperation of all key actors involved in the development of rural tourism in the country.	It is important	Fairly Likely	From 2 To 3 Years
2	Proposal of the legal framework that protects and encourages the development of activities in rural areas.	It is very important	Fairly Likely	Within 1 Year
3	Increase in tourist preferences and motivations that provide feelings of isolation and security, associated with natural and rural activities due to a decrease in mass tourism.	It is very important	Fairly Likely	It's Happening
4	Implementation of policies that encourage the development of rural tourism as a	It is very important	Fairly Likely	From 1 To 2 Years

	diversifying element of the country's tourism offer.			
5	Determination of the integral rural tourism product as a tourism offer proposal with the services and resources/attractions that comprise it.	It is very important	Sure to Happen	Within 1 Year
6	Worldwide prevalence of domestic tourism and the inclination for short trips, characteristic elements of rural tourism.	It is important to	May Occur	From 2 to 3 years
7	Definition of the quality standards of the rural tourism offer in the territory as an activity that guarantees a personalized service.	It is important	Fairly Likely	From 2 To 3 Years
8	Appearance of substitute products for rural tourism that could generate greater interest among international travelers POST-COVID-19.	Indifferent	Unlikely	Within 3 Years Or More
9	Contraction of arrivals and of the international tourist flow in general as a consequence of the current health crisis caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.	It is very important	Sure to Happen	It's Happening
10	Approval and implementation of laws and regulations governing the development of rural tourism in Cuba.	It is very important	Fairly Likely	From 2 To 3 Years
11	International recognition of Cuba as a safe destination, due to the efficiency of its health system in the fight against COVID-19, possessing an autochthonous vaccine candidate (Soberana-01).	It is important	Fairly Likely	Within 1 Year

12	Emergence of negative events and occurrences in rural and natural heritage in general, as a consequence of the devastating activity of man and climate change.	It is important	Fairly Likely	It's Happening
13	Increased interest of the inhabitants of rural localities in taking advantage of rural tourism as an incentive for local development and as a complementary activity to agricultural and livestock production.	It is important	Fairly Likely	It's Happening
14	Increase in domestic tourism by the demand segments of tourism typologies associated with nature and the rural environment.	It is important	May Occur	From 2 to 3 Years

Source: Own elaboration

According to the choice of the time and space horizon, the period considered was chosen as present or future, depending on the dynamism of the tourism sector, so the short term was estimated as 1 year, the medium term to the space between 2 and 3 years and the long term within three years or more.

Based on the scenarios analyzed, it can be concluded that a series of circumstances converge in rural tourism that can help minimize the effects of this crisis with respect to other sectors and accelerate the return to the new normality. In view of this situation, its character as a product for minorities, with its image of open spaces and the little agglomeration it provides, its situation as a proximity alternative and its link to values of respect and conservation of nature are noteworthy.

The current context and the immediate POST-COVID-19 are a good time to rethink the rural-urban dialogue, which is so necessary, not only from the point of view of tourism, but also for the future of all rural territories that, until now, have not visualized formulas

from the endogenous approach to development that would generate actions, strategies and projects, true drivers of local development.

This situation can provide not only an advantage when it comes to overcoming the crisis more quickly, but also an opportunity to reposition itself in the market. It is also important to promote integration between communities and public and private institutions linked to tourism in order to facilitate understanding and generate strategic alliances to improve the services offered to tourists.

For its part, the state plays a fundamental role in local development, which is why it is convenient to obtain greater attention from the authorities to support and motivate the creation of new small-scale projects that promote tourism development in rural communities.

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#### **Conflict of interest:**

Authors declare not to have any conflict of interest.

#### **Authors' contribution:**

All authors designed the study, analyzed the data and prepared the draft.

All authors reviewed the writing of the manuscript and approve the version finally submitted.



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