



**Good Practice Story Title:**

From whitewater to rafting for everyone

**Destination:**

Arouca UNESCO Global Geopark

**Country:**

Portugal

**Submitting Organization:**

Arouca Municipality

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

**Destination description:**

Although the tourist recognition of Arouca is relatively recent, there are already decades of work carried out in favor of tourism in the region. As far as tourism is concerned, Arouca has lived many years under the promotion of its main ex-libris, the Monastery of Santa Maria de Arouca and its Sacred Art Museum, always allied to the rich gastronomy, either in the



spectrum of conventual and regional sweets, or with regard to arouquesa veal, made in various ways (baked in a wood oven, grilled or fried). But natural resources have always been there and, even if in a less concerted way, they have always been recognized and worked on. It is old the practice of rafting in the Paiva Valley as well as tourist visits to Serra da Freita go back decades.

A strategic tourism reform was urgently needed, which would allow tourism to work in a concerted way, promoting and valuing its resources, from cultural to natural. From this need, in 2009, under the auspices of UNESCO, the geographical area of Arouca Municipality was accepted as a member of the European and Global Geopark Networks. This is where a strategy based on geotourism begins, a tourism product based on principles of conservation, education and sustainable promotion, in this 328km<sup>2</sup> territory.

Based on this geotourism strategy, over the past 15 years, the Arouca Geopark destination has been consolidated, where the following tourist attractions can be highlighted: 41 geosites, 4 of international relevance (Pedras Parideiras, Giant Trilobites, Cabanas largas and Mourinha Ichnofossils), two Interpretation Centers in two of the geosites of international relevance referred (Pedras Parideiras and Giant Trilobites), 14 hiking trails, the route of the geosites, the Paiva Walkways and the 516 Arouca - Suspension Bridge.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story:**

The Paiva River has always been an important resource for the people of Arouca, housing villages and towns around it and promoting a riverside culture. Even so, in terms of its use for leisure, it was later that its banks became places for families to socialize, essentially in the summer, where they also cooled off in its waters.

Aware of the potential of Paiva, rafting lovers, coming from all over the country and even from other European countries, traveled to Arouca to enjoy the whitewaters they found



here. These recurrent visits by outsiders aroused the interest and attention of the people of Arouca, who became involved and specialized in the activity.

Nowadays, rafting justifies the existence of adventure sports companies and several jobs, complemented with the practice of other nature and adventure activities such as canyoning, canoeing, hiking, mountain biking or orienteering.

### **Issues faced:**

As described in the previous section, rafting arose spontaneously in Arouca. The curiosity aroused in the people of Arouca made them start to learn about the activity and to carry it out informally. The growing demand for the sport promoted entrepreneurship, having emerged, in the late 80s, the first tourism entertainment companies to operate in an organized manner in the territory. Since then, also based on promotion and word of mouth, rafting has gained substantial prominence as a tourist experience.

With the integration of Arouca in the European and Global Geopark Networks, the work in favor of tourism promotion increased, and the dissemination of rafting was also a bet. It should be noted that integration into these networks has brought increased responsibilities with regard to sustainability (environmental, social and economic). Based on the geotourism strategy, it was found essential to promote and support this practice in a sustained way, so that there were no phenomena of mass tourism, massive degradation of the environment. Still with regard to sustainability, namely in the social area, it was noted that rafting transmitted an image of adrenaline and physical demand which, in fact, does not apply, showing an extra need for communication of “rafting for all”. Finally, given that at the national level, there is no legislation for the practice of rafting, it was crucial to create tools and criteria for good practices, also to ensure the safety of participants and responsibility of the organizers of the activity.



### **Solution:**

Referring to good practices to combat seasonality, we found that the realization of events and activities in low season is a good strategy for the distribution of visitors throughout the year. Given that rafting requires a considerable river flow for its realization, this is a winter practice, and a good support for the decrease of seasonality. Thus, combining the modality with tourism and observing social and economic sustainability, rafting has become a fundamental bet of Arouca Geopark, as it employs human resources in low season and promotes visitation in winter. Under this motto there are events to disseminate and promote the event, from the FIAB – International Whitewater Festival, the Paiva Fest and, more recently, the Arouca Rafting Summit. This event allowed a more assertive and targeted promotion and communication, as well as raising awareness of responsible, sustainable and safe practices.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

As mentioned above, the organization of events focused on the theme of rafting has become a very useful tool to achieve the desirable ends. The most recent event in the area is the Arouca Rafting Summit whose 4th edition was held at the end of January this year. This is an event that, since its first edition, has the partnership of several local tourism entertainment agents that promote and practice of rafting, the Portuguese Canoeing Federation, the Whitewater Canoeing Club of Portugal, the AGA – Associação Geoparque Arouca, and the support of the IPDJ – Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth among others. The Arouca Rafting Summit, as the anchor event of the Arouca Geopark, was created and designed to respond to all the needs of the modality and the territory as a sustainable tourist practice, counting, in general terms, with the following schedule:



- Inclusive rafting descents:

The event has a rafting descent with associations of a social and public nature with public with diverse types of limitations, from the blind, to cognitive and motor problems. This dynamic allows a communication of rafting as an inclusive activity and demystify some stigmas that relate the modality to adrenaline, insecurity and physical preparation.

- Rafting descents with the groups of schools of Arouca:

This practice, preceded by moments of awareness, promotes the interest of young people in rafting, in order to enhance the future of the sport. At the same time, within the framework of the School Sports Training Centers, the only Training Center in the country dedicated to whitewater was created at Arouca Geopark, which, in 3 years, held 240 sessions, accounting for 2416 uses by students and 315 by teachers.

- Competition activity and Taça de Portugal - OPEN

This day of event brings together amateurs and professionals/rafting guides, from the most diverse countries.

- Workshops / seminars and simulations

With a view to prevention and awareness, the Arouca Rafting Summit incorporates a day of work more directed to rafting guides, canoeists, firefighters and Portuguese National Guard. Throughout the four editions already held, dynamics have already been organized in the following themes: rescue and safety, basic aquatic life support and heli mountain rescue.

- Conference on rafting

Considering the constant evolution of nowadays, this conference is held under the motto "Rafting: past, present and future". In this conference we have already been addressed as 1) environmental impact of rafting and good practices; 2) sustainable rafting; 3) rafting in women; 4) marketing and whitewater; 5) legislation and safety rules; 6) risks and safety; 7) evaluation of the quality of the rafting experience.

- Promotional descent





The event ends with a promotional descent, carried out by local tourism animation agents, whose participation is open to the community and to which several entities of territorial promotion and social communication are invited.

As can be seen, there is a concern for the safety of visitors and the adoption of practices that minimize risks, since there is still no legislation that supports the modality. Considering the absence of a specific legal regulation in Portugal for the Rafting activity, namely with regard to the responsibility in relation to the safety of the participants, Arouca Municipality led, with the support of AGA – Associação Geoparque Arouca, the Portuguese Federation of Canoeing and a set of technical experts and other professionals with relevant knowledge in this matter, to create an “Arouca Model - Manual of good Rafting practices”, associated with the exploitation of this activity for commercial and tourist purposes. With this document, the Arouca Municipality aimed to bring together a set of rules and criteria of good practices to be applied to the rafting activity, aimed at tourism entertainment agents operating in the territory, specifically on the Paiva River. This is not a certification process, nor is it mandatory, but a voluntary membership to obtain the rafting qualification and the companies that practice it. It is intended to work as a useful tool for entrepreneurs in this sector, promoting a change in attitudes and the adoption of safer and higher quality practices, demonstrating that it is possible to make the business more sustainable, that is, with greater economic and environmental benefit.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

Although there was already a lot of work in favor of rafting and other white water sports, with regard to the creation of conditions (better access, ramps for boats to descend) and improvements in existing infrastructures (requalification of bathhouses, adding the possibility of hot baths at the end of the activity), mainly resulting from the classification of the destination as a “geopark”, this event allowed the modality to reach another level in terms of visibility and awareness for its practice. Nowadays, rafting is more seen as a practice





for any audience, from blind people to families while, a few years ago, it was associated with adrenaline and some fear. This is a huge step in terms of communicating a sustainable activity, as far as social is concerned. Also regarding sustainability, whose concern is growing, to emphasize the continuous promotion of good practices with regard to the protection of the natural environment.

The Arouca Rafting Summit, proceeding from its programming with a great focus on raising awareness of the risks and safety of the modality, allowed transmitting to the potential visitor that, despite being an adrenaline sport, carried out in white water, there is a growing concern in the safety and well-being of those who carry out the activity.

In short, the effort dedicated to this modality, and its potentiation as a tourist activity, allows, as seen analyzed, to reduce seasonality. As is widely known, tourism is experienced with greater intensity in the summer months, with greater employability in this area, which decreases dramatically in the winter months. It should be noted that this is a countryside destination that, like any other, has the enormous challenge of promoting the fixation of young people in the territory. With rafting, and the attraction of visitors in low season, companies in the tourism sector (tourism animation, accommodation and restaurants) are able to have activity and maintain jobs all year round (fixing population).

### **Achievements and Results:**

As previously mentioned, we currently have tourism animation agents with activity all year round, employing several human resources, also all year round. These companies have specialized and their participation in the Arouca Rafting Summit is proof of their commitment in all the issues referred to in the previous topics. In addition, the number of tourism entertainment agents has increased substantially. These are agents that share, with Arouca Municipality, the concern regarding seasonality, which incurs partnerships with accommodation in order to also promote an increase in the average stay. These agents also show great concern for the natural resources that they end up enjoying and, during their





rafting visits/descents, complement the activity with interpretation of the riverside landscape that they cross by raft and awareness of its protection.

Also in recent years we have been receiving a more diverse audience, that is, more women, more children, more seniors and people with the most diverse pathologies. This, in addition to diversifying the target audience and increasing demand, comes from the objective of transforming the sport into “rafting for all”, inclusive and, once again, sustainable.

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

Rafting has taught us, as destination managers, that natural resources are one of the main drivers of tourist demand, which requires increased responsibility regarding their valorization and conservation.

We believe that, observing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, we have been able to extract, from natural resources and their involvement, dynamics and initiatives that help us to foster multiple sustainability issues in the territory.

### **Recognitions and Additional References**



