

## Article

# SEO in Rural Tourism: A Case Study of Terras de Trás-os-Montes—Portugal

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**Abstract:** This research investigates the application of search engine optimization (SEO) in developing the digital image of rural tourism businesses in the Terras de Trás-os-Montes region of Portugal. With digital marketing becoming increasingly important for businesses to stay competitive, SEO has become a vital tool for developing online recognition, qualified traffic acquisition, and enhancement of conversion rates. The research performs an SEO analysis of 21 rural tourism websites by applying the Ubersuggest tool, analyzing such key indicators as on-page SEO scores, organic traffic, keyword ranking, backlinks, and technical performance. The results identify wide SEO performance discrepancies, with some sites registering excellent practices and others with critical errors that impair the sites' online recognizability. In particular, low word count, absent meta description, and loading speed issues are very much present. The research emphasizes the need for effective SEO methods, such as on-page maintenance, content creation, and link building, to advance search engine ranking and end-user experience. Moreover, the study emphasizes the necessity for rural tourism businesses to evolve and adapt to current SEO trends, i.e., voice search optimization and local SEO, in the changing digital business environment. The results provide recommendations for rural tourism businesses to develop their digital marketing activities and make progress online.

**Keywords:** SEO; digital marketing; rural tourism; online visibility; Terras de Trás-os-Montes



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## 1. Introduction

Digital transformation has revolutionized various sectors of the economy, and tourism is no exception. In recent years, digital marketing strategies have become essential for the competitiveness and visibility of companies, particularly in rural tourism, where the connection to nature and the authenticity of experiences are key factors in attracting visitors [1,2]. Rural tourism, characterized by its intrinsic link to cultural traditions and natural resources, has faced significant challenges with the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT). The need to adapt to an increasingly digitalized market requires companies in this sector to adopt effective digital marketing practices, such as search engine optimization (SEO), to improve their online presence and attract a wider audience [3,4].

In the Portuguese context, the Terras de Trás-os-Montes region stands out as one of the country's most authentic and well-preserved territories. Located in northeastern Portugal, this region is known for its mountainous landscapes, deep valleys of the Douro River, and rich traditional culture. Terras de Trás-os-Montes comprises nine municipalities: Alfândega da Fé, Bragança, Macedo de Cavaleiros, Miranda do Douro, Mirandela, Mogadouro, Vila

Flor, Vimioso, and Vinhais. Historically isolated, this region retains a strong cultural identity, with ancient traditions, unique cuisine, and a natural heritage that attracts visitors looking for authentic experiences and a connection with nature.

However, despite its tourism potential, Terras de Trás-os-Montes faces significant challenges in terms of digital visibility. Many rural tourism businesses in the region still do not fully leverage the opportunities offered by digital marketing, which limits their ability to attract domestic and international tourists. Implementing SEO strategies can be particularly beneficial for these companies, allowing them to improve their visibility on search engines, attract qualified traffic, and increase conversion rates [5,6]. However, the effective implementation of SEO strategies requires an integrated approach, including technical optimization, the creation of relevant content, and the building of quality backlinks [7].

In the context of rural tourism, the application of SEO techniques can be particularly beneficial, as this sector heavily relies on the ability to attract visitors through online platforms. Despite this, many rural tourism businesses still face significant challenges regarding digital visibility, with websites exhibiting technical and content deficiencies that compromise their performance on search engines [8,9].

This study analyzes the SEO performance of the websites of rural tourism companies in Terras de Trás-os-Montes. It identifies best practices and areas requiring improvement to increase their competitiveness in the digital marketplace. Through a detailed audit, the study seeks to provide practical information to help these businesses improve their online presence and attract more visitors to the region.

## 2. Digital Marketing

Digital marketing has become an indispensable strategy for companies seeking to increase their visibility and competitiveness in the online environment [10]. Among the various approaches used in digital marketing, search engine optimization (SEO) stands out as one of the most effective methods for increasing brands' digital presence on search engines [3,5].

SEO refers to techniques applied to optimize websites, making them more visible in the organic results of search engines such as Google [7]. Successful optimization results in better positioning in search rankings, increasing the likelihood of attracting qualified traffic and potential customers [6].

SEO strategies are broadly categorized into three main dimensions:

1. On-page SEO, which includes optimizing content, the structure of the website, and the appropriate use of keywords, meta descriptions, and headings [11]. Applying good on-page SEO practices improves the user experience and makes it easier for search engines to index content [12].
2. Off-page SEO, which refers to strategies external to the website that influence its positioning, such as building quality backlinks and mentions on social networks [13]. Obtaining links from high-authority websites improves the domain's credibility and has a positive impact on ranking [4].
3. Technical SEO, which involves optimizing the site's infrastructure, including improving loading speed, mobile compatibility, and URL structure [14]. A technically optimized website provides more efficient navigation and increases the chances of retaining visitors.

The adoption of SEO strategies has proved crucial for companies in various sectors. A study carried out by the authors of [15] revealed that organizations that consistently invest in SEO see a significant increase in lead generation and an increase in conversion rates. In the hotel sector, for example, companies that use SEO integrated with online booking platforms such as Booking and Google Business are able to significantly increase their visibility and attractiveness [16].

In addition, SEO is directly related to building brand authority. Companies that publish optimized content based on keyword research and search trends strengthen their reputation and position themselves as references in their segments [17].

As search engine algorithms evolve, SEO continues to adapt to meet the new demands of the digital market. Some of the emerging trends include:

- SEO for voice search: The growth in virtual assistants, such as Google Assistant and Alexa, requires SEO strategies to adapt to more conversational searches and long-tail keywords [9].
- User experience (UX) and SEO: Google has prioritized factors such as time on page, bounce rate, and interactivity when ranking websites [4].
- Local SEO: Optimization for local searches is gaining relevance, especially for companies that rely on geolocation to attract customers [18].

Furthermore, digital marketing is key to brand sustainability, particularly in competitive markets such as the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and service sectors [19]. SEO has also proven effective during digital transformation, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where businesses adapted their marketing strategies to remain competitive [20].

Recent advancements in machine learning have led to the development of Python-based SEO audit tools that assist in analyzing and optimizing web performance, further enhancing digital marketing strategies [21]. In addition, the performance evaluation of Content Management Systems (CMS) using SEO methodologies has been exploited to improve digital marketing results [22].

The importance of SEO in different industries is also evident, such as its impact on sustainability in the airline sector through effective search engine optimization techniques [23]. For startups, the role of SEO in digital marketing is crucial, as search engine rankings significantly influence brand visibility and customer acquisition [24].

In small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), digital marketing, including SEO, has been identified as a key factor in business performance and adaptation to modern digital transformations [25]. Integrating SEO with broader digital marketing strategies is essential for achieving long-term growth and market presence.

However, the challenges of SEO are also evident. Competition for strategic keywords, constant changes in Google's algorithms, and frequent content updates require continuous monitoring and dynamic strategies.

SEO remains one of the fundamental pillars of digital marketing, providing companies with greater visibility, credibility, and sustainable growth. The practical implementation of SEO strategies and an integrated digital marketing approach allows brands to stand out online and maximize their results. The future of SEO is directly linked to adapting to new technologies and consumer behavior, making its constant updating essential for companies' digital success.

### 3. Rural Tourism

Rural tourism stands out from other forms of tourism due to its distinctive features, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in cultural and gastronomic traditions while enjoying a more personalized interaction with tour operators. However, as civilizations evolved, so did the tourism industry, becoming deeply intertwined with digital transformation. In this process, travelers, tour guides, and destinations increasingly adopt ICT as an essential tool, with digital marketing playing a pivotal role.

Lane [1], a widely cited author in rural tourism literature, asserts that this form of tourism should possess specific characteristics, including being situated in rural areas, maintaining a functional connection to the region's natural resources and traditional lifestyle, operating on a small scale, and developing in a controlled manner. Some authors reinforce this perspective by emphasizing that rural tourism depends on certain features of the

rural environment, such as the geographical, social, and cultural setting where tourists and residents interact. It should be perceived as a tourism model that values authenticity, preserving ancestral traditions and customs while offering meaningful activities and experiences to visitors [2,8,26].

Accommodation in rural areas, legally classified as “Tourism in Rural Areas”, is characterized by traditional architecture and high-quality lodging standards, aiming to use the region’s natural and cultural resources [27]. According to Decree-Law 80/2017, rural tourism enterprises provide accommodation services in rural settings while preserving, restoring, and enhancing the architectural, historical, and natural heritage of the regions in which they operate. These enterprises fall into Country Houses, Agro-Tourism, and Rural Hotels.

Despite its potential, rural tourism faces digital visibility and market reach challenges. In an era where most travelers plan and book their trips online, well-optimized websites are crucial in attracting visitors. A strong online presence, supported by effective search engine optimization (SEO) strategies, enables rural tourism enterprises to enhance their visibility, compete with larger tourism operators, and attract domestic and international tourists.

The importance of sustainable rural development has been increasingly recognized, mainly through capitalizing on local cultural heritage. Studies indicate that cultural tourism has significant potential for economic and social development in rural areas, as observed in the case of Hârman Commune in Romania, where local heritage has been successfully integrated into tourism activities [28]. However, for such initiatives to succeed, rural tourism enterprises must ensure that their websites effectively communicate their unique offerings, leveraging SEO techniques to reach a broader audience.

Furthermore, sustainable rural tourism development requires a comprehensive evaluation considering environmental, social, and economic factors. The Adaptive, Vulnerability, and Carrying Capacity (AVC) theory provides a framework for assessing sustainable rural tourism by integrating adaptive, vulnerability, and carrying capacity perspectives [29]. Digital platforms, supported by SEO, can be instrumental in promoting sustainability by educating tourists on responsible travel practices and enhancing awareness of rural tourism’s benefits.

Agro-Tourism has emerged as a vital component of rural tourism, particularly in less-favored areas where economic diversification is essential. The case of Hacienda Guachinango de Trinidad exemplifies how Agro-Tourism development strategies can enhance the resilience of rural communities while preserving traditional agricultural practices [30]. A well-structured digital marketing strategy, including SEO-optimized content and local search visibility, must ensure these initiatives gain potential visitors’ attention.

In addition, rural tourism plays a crucial role in urban–rural integration, fostering economic interactions between cities and countryside regions. Empirical studies from the Yangtze River Delta highlight how tourism can bridge development gaps and enhance rural areas’ economic viability [31]. Effective SEO practices, including content marketing and link-building strategies, can help rural destinations connect with urban consumers searching for authentic travel experiences.

The competitiveness of rural tourism destinations on a global scale depends on implementing innovative strategies that enhance visitor experiences while maintaining sustainability. In Bali, for instance, a conceptual model has been developed to boost rural tourism competitiveness through strategic planning, infrastructure investment, and cultural promotion [32]. However, even the most competitive destinations may struggle to attract visitors without a strong digital presence. Optimizing websites for search engines ensures that rural tourism destinations remain visible in online searches and can effectively market their unique cultural and environmental assets.

Another emerging trend in rural tourism is the rising demand for Agro-Tourism, particularly from international markets. Research on Chinese demand for agritourism in

the United States suggests a growing interest in rural tourism experiences that combine agriculture with leisure activities [33]. This trend underscores the importance of adapting rural tourism offerings to cater to international tourists, ensuring that marketing strategies align with evolving consumer preferences. SEO strategies such as multilingual website optimization and localized keyword targeting can be critical in reaching these audiences.

By integrating sustainable tourism practices, leveraging local cultural assets, and adopting strategic digital marketing approaches, rural tourism can become a driver of economic resilience and environmental sustainability. Websites that employ SEO effectively increase their visibility and provide a user-friendly experience that encourages potential tourists to explore and book rural tourism experiences.

### *3.1. SEO Challenges for Small Rural Tourism Businesses*

Small rural tourism businesses face specific challenges in implementing SEO, mainly due to limited financial and technical resources. Recent studies indicate that many of these businesses lack the specialized knowledge and suitable tools for optimizing their websites [5]. In addition, competition with large online booking platforms such as Booking and Airbnb represents a significant obstacle, as these platforms have greater domain authority and advanced SEO strategies [7].

Another relevant challenge is the need for the continuous production of optimized content. Smaller companies cannot often create relevant material regularly, compromising their positioning in search engines [6]. Strategies such as local SEO and content marketing have been touted as solutions to improve the competitiveness of these companies [9].

### *3.2. Impact of Changes in Search Engine Algorithms*

Constant updates to search engine algorithms, especially Google's, can significantly affect the visibility of websites. For example, changes to Google's core updates often alter the ranking criteria, making websites adapt quickly [20]. Small businesses, however, often struggle to react to these changes, which can result in a loss of organic traffic [25].

Studies suggest that optimizing for local search, using long-tail keywords, and improving the user experience can mitigate the negative impacts of algorithm updates [21]. In addition, the growing importance of voice search and the adaptation of websites to mobile devices are crucial factors in maintaining relevance in the digital environment [14].

### *3.3. Conceptual Model*

Based on the literature reviewed, we propose a simplified conceptual model for evaluating rural tourism SEO performance, encompassing three dimensions: (1) Technical SEO (loading speed, mobile performance); (2) Content Quality (relevance, keyword targeting, freshness); and (3) Authority (backlinks, indexed pages). These were operationalized through measurable indicators derived from Ubersuggest. This model can serve as a foundation for future SEO audits in similar contexts.

#### *3.3.1. SEO Technical Aspects and Their Impact on Online Visibility*

Technical SEO aspects, including loading speed, interactivity, and visual stability, are essential for improving user experience and search engine rankings. A website's ability to load quickly and function responsively across devices significantly influences its visibility [6]. However, it is important to note that websites with high organic traffic demonstrate that other factors, such as content quality and authority, also play a critical role. While technical optimization can enhance user experience and contribute to SEO, it is not the sole determinant of success in search engine rankings. Well-optimized technical aspects, when combined with high-quality content and strong backlinks, create the foundation for improved online visibility [3].

### 3.3.2. Content and Relevance for SEO

Content is one of the key pillars for SEO success. High-quality, relevant, and fresh content helps improve search engine rankings by ensuring that websites meet the informational needs of users [5]. Websites that regularly update their content with keyword-optimized, informative pages are more likely to rank higher in search results. Additionally, pages that lack sufficient content depth or targeted keywords may struggle to gain visibility in search engines, even if other SEO aspects, like technical optimization, are strong. Regularly updating content with information that addresses user intent, integrates appropriate keywords, and provides value is crucial for long-term SEO success [7].

### 3.3.3. Authority and Backlinks

Backlinks from authoritative and relevant sources play a significant role in improving a website's domain authority and overall search engine ranking. The more quality backlinks a website acquires from reputable and contextually relevant sites, the more it will be trusted by search engines, leading to better rankings [13]. Backlinks from local directories, regional associations, and partnerships with influencers can significantly enhance a website's authority. These types of backlinks not only improve domain authority but also help increase organic traffic by making the website more discoverable to a broader audience [23].

### 3.3.4. Integration of the Three Components

The integration of technical SEO, high-quality content, and authoritative backlinks is essential for optimal SEO performance [6]. A well-optimized website with fast loading times, relevant content, and a solid backlink profile will have a competitive advantage in search engine rankings [3]. Improving one of these areas without addressing the others will limit the potential for achieving higher visibility and organic traffic. Therefore, an integrated SEO approach, addressing all three pillars, is crucial for websites to achieve sustained success in search engine results and drive meaningful traffic.

## 4. Methodology

This study aimed to conduct an SEO audit of rural tourism business websites in Terras de Trás-os-Montes, a region in northeastern Portugal known for its natural and cultural richness. The region comprises nine municipalities: Alfândega da Fé, Bragança, Macedo de Cavaleiros, Miranda do Douro, Mirandela, Mogadouro, Vila Flor, Vimioso, and Vinhais. These areas are characterized by mountainous landscapes, deep valleys of the Douro River, and a strong cultural tradition, including local festivals, unique gastronomy, and well-preserved historical heritage.

The sample was drawn from the official National Tourism Register, ensuring representativeness of all legally operating rural tourism businesses in the Terras de Trás-os-Montes region. Only those with operational websites were included, reflecting the actual online presence of the sector.

To conduct the audit, a search was carried out in the National Tourism Register (<https://registos.turismodeportugal.pt/>, accessed on 15 January 2025) for Tourist Enterprises in the NUTS III—Terras de Trás-os-Montes, focusing on “rural tourism enterprises” (Country Houses, Agro-Tourism, Rural Hotels, and Tourist Villages). The sample consisted of 57 registered rural tourism enterprises, of which 31 were Agro-Tourism, 22 were Country Houses, and 4 were Rural Hotels. No Tourist Villages were identified in the region.

Of these 57 enterprises, 26 had no website available in the National Tourism Register, and 10 websites were not functional. The websites of 21 rural tourism enterprises were analyzed. The audit was conducted using the Ubersuggest tool between 15 and 31 January 2025. Ubersuggest analyzed the websites based on various parameters, including on-page SEO score,

monthly organic traffic, number of organic keywords, number of backlinks, and technical issues identified. The choice of Ubersuggest was based on its accessibility and intuitive interface, making it a suitable tool for SMEs with limited resources.

The analysis focused on metrics such as loading speed, interactivity, and visual stability of the websites on desktop and mobile devices. These metrics are crucial for user experience and search engine rankings. The audit allowed for identifying best practices and areas needing improvement, providing valuable insights for rural tourism businesses in the region.

## 5. Data Analysis

### 5.1. Sample Data and Characterization

The data were collected on 29 November 2024, and 57 Rural Tourism Enterprises were registered in the National Tourism Register. Of the 57 rural tourism enterprises, 31 are Agro-Tourism, 22 are Country Houses, and 4 are Rural Hotels. There were no Tourist Villages.

Of the 57 rural tourism businesses, 26 have no website available on the National Tourism Register, and 10 websites are not working. The websites of 21 rural tourism enterprises were analyzed. The identification of the sample is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the rural tourism enterprises.

Name	Typology	Location
Quinta da Caída	Agro-Tourism	Macedo de Cavaleiros
O Casario	Country House	Mirandela
O Abel Hotel Rural	Rural Hotel	Bragança
Curral D'Avó Turismo Rural	Country House	Vimioso
Hotel Rural Villa Julia	Rural Hotel	Vila Flor
Casa Luis Gonzaga	Country House	Bragança
Casa Moleiro de Baçal	Country House	Bragança
Quinta da Rica-Fé—Casa das Amoreiras	Agro-Tourism	Bragança
Quinta do Palame	Agro-Tourism	Vila Flor
Casa del telar	Country House	Miranda do Douro
Quinta de la Barandica Turismo Rural Unipessoal Ld <sup>a</sup>	Agro-Tourism	Miranda do Douro
Casa das Argolas	Agro-Tourism	Macedo de Cavaleiros
Quinta da Porta	Agro-Tourism	Mirandela
CASA DE L PUIO	Agro-Tourism	Miranda do Douro
Hotel Rural Senhora das Pereiras	Rural Hotel	Vimioso
Casa das Arribas	Agro-Tourism	Mogadouro
A Lagosta Perdida—Turismo Rural, Lda	Country House	Bragança
Casa do Guieiro	Agro-Tourism	Bragança
Casa do Forno	Agro-Tourism	Bragança
Quinta Entre Rios	Agro-Tourism	Mirandela
Casa dos Valdarmeiros	Agro-Tourism	Vinhais

### 5.2. SEO Website Audits

In addition to keyword presence, we manually evaluated content from selected pages, considering factors such as relevance to rural tourism, clarity of communication, presence of unique value propositions, and freshness (last update). While this assessment was not systematically quantified, it highlighted the lack of storytelling and multimedia content that could better engage potential tourists. It is important to consider that Google's frequent algorithm updates, such as the core updates, may have influenced the SEO performance metrics at the time of the audit (January 2025). These fluctuations underscore the importance of continuous SEO monitoring rather than one-off evaluations.

The SEO audit of the websites was carried out using the Ubersuggest tool (<https://neilpatel.com/ubersuggest/>). The Ubersuggest platform analyzes the websites according to a set of parameters: On-page SEO score (overall SEO score for all the pages checked in this website audit. It is a score from 0 to 100 points. This score represents a combination of the proportion of problems found with the number of checks carried out by the audit tools); Organic Monthly Traffic (the estimated total traffic this domain gets

considering organic keywords); Organic Keyword (the number of keywords for which this domain is ranked in organic search); and Backlinks (how many links received from other websites to this domain). It also lists the number of pages found and the SEO problems encountered.

Figure 1 shows the result for the Hotel Rural Villa Julia.

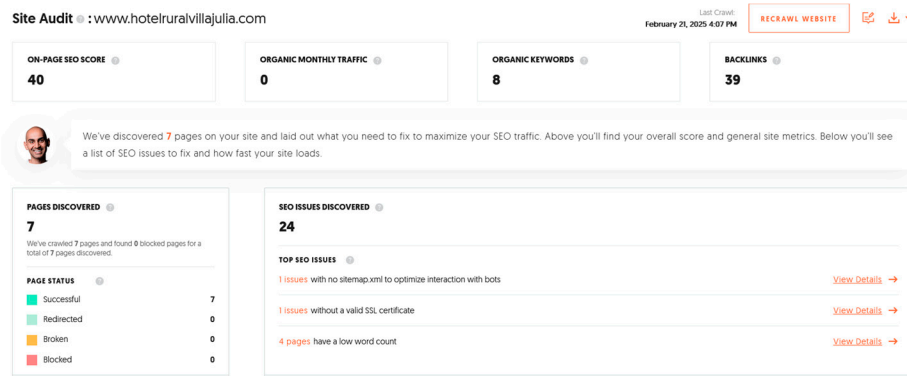


Figure 1. Audit of the website [www.hotelruralvillajulia.com](http://www.hotelruralvillajulia.com) (accessed on 15 January 2025).

The analysis was carried out for all rural tourism enterprises. Table 2 summarizes the audit of all the rural tourism websites.

Table 2. Website SEO audit.

Website	On-Page SEO Score	Organic Monthly Traffic	Organic Keywords	Backlinks	Pages Discovered	SEO Issues Discovered
<a href="http://www.quintadacaida.pt">www.quintadacaida.pt</a>	75	0	3	5	4	10
<a href="http://www.ocasario.pt">www.ocasario.pt</a>	79	2	20	32	121	64
<a href="http://www.oabel.pt">www.oabel.pt</a>	55	294	45	637	150	320
<a href="http://www.hotelruralvillajulia.com">www.hotelruralvillajulia.com</a>	40	0	8	39	7	24
<a href="http://www.curraldavo.com">www.curraldavo.com</a>	59	0	5	10	22	74
<a href="http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt">www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt</a>	33	0	4	28	7	33
<a href="http://www.casamoleirobacal.com">www.casamoleirobacal.com</a>	30	1	4	51	22	90
<a href="http://www.quintadaricafe.pt">www.quintadaricafe.pt</a>	50	3	6	38	6	16
<a href="http://www.quintadopalame.com">www.quintadopalame.com</a>	76	155	55	12	150	150
<a href="http://www.casadeltelar.com">www.casadeltelar.com</a>	66	0	0	14	39	127
<a href="http://www.labarandica.com">www.labarandica.com</a>	41	0	2	67	5	21
<a href="http://www.casadasargolas.pt">www.casadasargolas.pt</a>	63	0	4	261	51	133
<a href="http://www.casaldaporta.pt">www.casaldaporta.pt</a>	70	3	9	27	119	262
<a href="http://www.casadelpuio.com">www.casadelpuio.com</a>	69	1	8	26	150	165
<a href="http://www.hotelruralvimioso.com">www.hotelruralvimioso.com</a>	72	165	50	335	41	86
<a href="http://www.naturisnor.com">www.naturisnor.com</a>	78	15	52	455	53	64
<a href="http://www.lagostaperdida.com">www.lagostaperdida.com</a>	59	0	26	643	76	162
<a href="http://www.quintadascovas.pt">www.quintadascovas.pt</a>	60	0	0	360	1	3
<a href="http://www.amontesinho.pt">www.amontesinho.pt</a>	70	4160	887	5298	150	326
<a href="http://www.quintaentrierios.pt">www.quintaentrierios.pt</a>	60	-	-	-	32	81
<a href="http://www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com">www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com</a>	55	0	5	2015	13	31

The analysis of rural tourism websites reveals significant SEO performance discrepancies, highlighting good practices and flaws that can compromise online visibility. The on-page SEO score varies considerably, with some sites achieving values above 70, such as [www.ocasario.pt](http://www.ocasario.pt) (79) and [www.quintadacaida.pt](http://www.quintadacaida.pt) (75), while others, such as [www.casamoleirobacal.com](http://www.casamoleirobacal.com) (30) and [www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt](http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt) (33), show worryingly low values, indicating the need for structural improvements and content optimization.

Monthly organic traffic is one of the most critical aspects of the analysis, as most sites have a very low volume of visits from organic searches. However, there are some cases where performance is above average, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), which has 4160 monthly visits, [www.hotelruralvimioso.com](http://www.hotelruralvimioso.com) (165 visits/month), and [www.quintadopalame.com](http://www.quintadopalame.com) (155 visits/month). On the other hand, most of the websites analyzed have zero or residual traffic, highlighting the need for a more robust SEO and digital marketing strategy to increase visitor attraction.

The number of organic keywords indexed also reflects visibility on search engines. While [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt) stands out with 887 keywords, followed by [www.naturisnor.com](http://www.naturisnor.com) (52 keywords) and [www.quintadopalame.com](http://www.quintadopalame.com) (55 keywords), many other sites have less than 10 indexed terms, severely limiting their ability to attract qualified traffic.

The presence of backlinks, essential for a domain's authority, also varies substantially. Some websites have a significant number of external links, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt) (5298 backlinks), [www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com](http://www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com) (2015 backlinks) and [www.lagostaperdida.com](http://www.lagostaperdida.com) (643 backlinks). However, others have a small presence, such as [www.quintadacaida.pt](http://www.quintadacaida.pt) (5 backlinks) or [www.quintadaricafe.pt](http://www.quintadaricafe.pt) (38 backlinks), suggesting an urgent need for link-building strategies to improve their credibility and positioning in search engines.

The number of pages discovered and indexed is also a relevant indicator. Some sites, such as [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt), have many pages recognized by search engines, [www.quintadopalame.com](http://www.quintadopalame.com), and [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), with 150 indexed pages each. However, there are cases where their online presence seems low, which can limit their ability to attract organic traffic and requires an in-depth analysis of the site's indexing and structure.

Finally, the survey of SEO problems indicates that many platforms have technical flaws that can compromise their performance in search engines. Some websites have detected more than 300 problems, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt) (326) and [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt) (320), showing that, despite good performance in terms of traffic and keywords, there are still technical aspects to correct to optimize their digital presence.

- The most common SEO issues were:
- Pages with a low word count;
- Pages without a H1 heading;
- Pages with no meta descriptions;
- Pages with duplicate <title> tags;
- Pages blocked from appearing in search engines;
- Pages with duplicate meta descriptions;
- Pages without sitemap.xml to optimize interaction with bots;
- Pages with broken links.

The analysis shows that although some websites have good SEO practices, most need significant improvements to increase their visibility and attractiveness in search engines. Implementing more effective on-page optimization strategies, creating relevant content, and obtaining quality backlinks could be crucial to boosting the rural tourism sector's online performance.

In addition, an audit was also carried out on the website's speed. For the load time variable, a loading time of less than 2.5 s requires improvement between 2.5 and 4 s, and is poorer than 4 s. For the interactivity variable, the ideal speed is less than 200 milliseconds, requiring improvements between 200 and 600 ms, and considered bad when it exceeds 600 ms. The ideal measure for the visual stability variable is less than 0.1, requiring improvements between 0.1 and 0.25, and considered bad when greater than 0.25. Table 3 summarizes the speed audit of all the websites under study.

Analysis of the technical performance of websites reveals significant variations in loading times, interactivity, and visual stability, all of which are crucial to the user experience and search engine positioning. Website loading times show notable differences between desktop and mobile versions, with the mobile version being penalized the most. Some websites show extremely fast loading times, such as [www.hotelruralvillajulia.com](http://www.hotelruralvillajulia.com) (0.27 s on desktop and 2.40 s on mobile) and [www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt](http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt) (0.40 s and 1.88 s, respectively), ensuring smooth navigation. However, others face high times, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt) (6.47 s on desktop and 39.93 s on mobile), [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt) (6.47 s and 36.72 s) and [www.ocasario.pt](http://www.ocasario.pt) (6.38 s and 23.34 s) can negatively impact visitor retention and conversion rates.

**Table 3.** Website SEO speed audit.

Website	Load Time (Seconds)		Interactivity (Milliseconds)		Visual Stability	
	Desktop	Mobile	Desktop	Mobile	Desktop	Mobile
<a href="http://www.quintadacaida.pt">www.quintadacaida.pt</a>	1.46	4.72	1.5	119.50	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.ocasario.pt">www.ocasario.pt</a>	6.38	23.34	377.00	678.00	0.12	0.00
<a href="http://www.oabel.pt">www.oabel.pt</a>	6.47	36.72	0.00	0.00	0.67	0.89
<a href="http://www.hotelruralvillajulia.com">www.hotelruralvillajulia.com</a>	0.27	2.40	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.curraldavo.com">www.curraldavo.com</a>	1.12	5.48	2.00	27.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt">www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt</a>	0.40	1.88	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.03
<a href="http://www.casamoleirobacal.com">www.casamoleirobacal.com</a>	4.06	21.82	52.00	96.00	0.04	0.00
<a href="http://www.quintadaricafe.pt">www.quintadaricafe.pt</a>	1.79	5.04	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.quintadopalame.com">www.quintadopalame.com</a>	3.85	28.61	66.00	900.50	0.00	0.01
<a href="http://www.casadeltelar.com">www.casadeltelar.com</a>	1.05	4.54	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
<a href="http://www.labarandica.com">www.labarandica.com</a>	4.90	29.90	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.casadasargolas.pt">www.casadasargolas.pt</a>	1.68	8.51	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02
<a href="http://www.casaldaporta.pt">www.casaldaporta.pt</a>	3.73	22.71	146.00	90.00	0.11	0.35
<a href="http://www.casadelpuio.com">www.casadelpuio.com</a>	1.46	7.01	0.00	0.00	0.43	0.31
<a href="http://www.hotelruralvimioso.com">www.hotelruralvimioso.com</a>	2.40	21.14	16.00	29.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.naturisnor.com">www.naturisnor.com</a>	4.13	12.66	64.00	340.00	0.06	0.53
<a href="http://www.lagostaperdida.com">www.lagostaperdida.com</a>	1.41	6.00	1.00	34.50	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.quintadascovas.pt">www.quintadascovas.pt</a>	2.76	15.90	108.40	141.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.amontesinho.pt">www.amontesinho.pt</a>	6.47	39.93	304.00	450.00	0.00	0.00
<a href="http://www.quintaentrerios.pt">www.quintaentrerios.pt</a>	3.45	11.76	7.00	11.00	0.00	0.23
<a href="http://www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com">www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com</a>	0.97	4.51	0.00	11.00	0.02	0.00

Interactivity time, which measures the time taken for page elements to respond to users, also shows discrepancies. Some websites, such as [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt), [www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt](http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt), and [www.casadeltelar.com](http://www.casadeltelar.com) record zero milliseconds of delay, which means immediate response to user commands. However, there are websites where interactivity is considerably affected, such as [www.quintadopalame.com](http://www.quintadopalame.com) (900.50 ms on mobile) and [www.ocasario.pt](http://www.ocasario.pt) (678 ms on mobile), suggesting that script blockages or resource overload may make it difficult for the page to respond immediately.

Visual stability, which assesses whether page elements move while the page is loading, is generally satisfactory on most sites, with values close to zero. However, some exceptions should be mentioned, such as [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt) (0.67 on desktop and 0.89 on mobile) and [www.naturisnor.com](http://www.naturisnor.com) (0.06 on desktop and 0.53 on mobile), where the values indicate a less stable experience, negatively affecting user perception and usability, especially on mobile devices.

The analysis suggests that the fastest and most interactive websites, such as [www.hotel-ruralvillajulia.com](http://www.hotel-ruralvillajulia.com), [www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt](http://www.casaluisgonzaga.com.pt), and [www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com](http://www.casadosvaldarmeiros.com), offer a more efficient browsing experience. Websites with high loading times, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), [www.oabel.pt](http://www.oabel.pt), and [www.quintadopalame.com](http://www.quintadopalame.com) may need technical optimizations. Optimizing interactivity and visual stability, especially on mobile devices, will be crucial to improving the user experience and search engine performance.

The discrepancies observed across the analyzed websites are not merely descriptive but reflect substantial digital asymmetries that can affect business performance. Websites with low on-page SEO scores, minimal organic keywords, and high numbers of technical issues tend to also exhibit negligible organic traffic, signaling poor online discoverability. In a sector like rural tourism, where online presence directly influences visibility and bookings, such discrepancies suggest a digital divide that may limit the competitiveness of certain businesses. Although this study does not include direct metrics of business performance (e.g., bookings, customer satisfaction), the indicators analyzed—such as organic keyword count, backlinks, and page load times—are widely recognized as critical enablers of user acquisition and engagement, as supported by studies on the role of search engine optimization in enhancing visibility, user experience, and credibility [3,5,6,13]. These findings underline the need for systematic digital upskilling and technical support to improve the online effectiveness of rural tourism enterprises. Future research could deepen

this analysis by exploring statistical relationships between SEO performance and business metrics such as online reviews, revenue trends, and occupancy rates.

### 5.3. Integration of Technical SEO, Content, and Authority for Optimal Performance

The analysis of SEO performance, using the three core components—technical SEO, content quality, and backlinks (authority)—shows that a holistic, integrated approach is essential for achieving high search engine rankings and sustained organic traffic. The websites analyzed in this study demonstrate how each component contributes to overall SEO performance, but it is the combination of all three that results in optimal performance.

**Technical SEO:** The technical analysis shows that websites with fast loading speeds and good interactivity tend to perform better in search rankings. However, [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), which has relatively high organic traffic, still faces challenges due to a slower loading time. This illustrates that even websites with good content and backlinks can be limited by technical performance. Therefore, while technical optimization is essential, it needs to be supported by high-quality content and authoritative backlinks to achieve optimal results.

**Content:** Content quality is a central pillar for SEO success. Websites with regularly updated, relevant, and keyword-optimized content are more likely to rank higher in search engine results. [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt) benefits from strong content and regularly updated pages, contributing to its higher traffic despite its technical challenges. Conversely, websites that lack strong content, such as some rural tourism websites, face difficulties in gaining visibility, even if they are technically optimized. This reinforces the importance of content for driving organic traffic.

**Backlinks/Authority:** Backlinks continue to be one of the most significant ranking factors. Websites with a large number of high-quality backlinks, such as [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), experience higher domain authority and better rankings. In contrast, websites with few backlinks, such as [www.quintadacaida.pt](http://www.quintadacaida.pt), struggle to compete in search rankings, even if they are technically optimized. This demonstrates the critical role of backlinks in establishing trust and authority with search engines, which contributes to better SEO performance.

In conclusion, the websites analyzed in this study highlight the necessity of integrating all three SEO components—technical SEO, content, and backlinks—to achieve optimal SEO performance. The interaction between these elements creates a synergistic effect that enhances visibility, increases user engagement, and drives long-term organic traffic. Websites like [www.amontesinho.pt](http://www.amontesinho.pt), which excel in content and authority, show that even technical shortcomings can be overcome with strong content and backlink strategies. However, websites that optimize all three areas are positioned for the best performance in search engines. Therefore, an integrated approach to SEO, addressing technical optimization, content quality, and backlink building, is essential for long-term digital success.

## 6. Conclusions

This study analyzed the SEO performance of rural tourism business websites in the Terras de Trás-os-Montes region, highlighting the importance of digital optimization for this sector's competitiveness and online visibility. The results revealed significant variability in website performance, with some demonstrating good SEO practices, such as high on-page optimization scores and a significant number of backlinks. In contrast, others face considerable challenges, including low organic traffic, few indexed keywords, and technical issues compromising user experience.

The analysis showed that, although some businesses have invested in SEO strategies, many still lack technical and content optimization, limiting their ability to attract visitors and compete in the digital market. Loading speed, especially on mobile devices, and visual stability were critical areas requiring improvement to ensure a satisfactory user

experience and better search engine rankings. Additionally, the lack of relevant content and the absence of optimized meta descriptions and titles are common issues affecting the visibility of these websites. Building quality backlinks also proved to be a determining factor for SEO success, with some businesses showing a significant number of external links while others have almost no presence.

Implementing integrated SEO strategies, including technical optimization, relevant content creation, and backlink building, is essential for rural tourism businesses to increase online visibility, attract visitors, and drive sector growth.

### *6.1. Practical Implications*

For rural tourism businesses, effective backlink strategies include submitting websites to local tourism directories, collaborating with regional associations, engaging in guest blogging with travel influencers, and obtaining mentions in local news media. These backlinks not only enhance authority but also improve visibility in geolocated search queries.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for rural tourism businesses aiming to enhance their digital presence and competitiveness. Businesses should improve on-page SEO elements such as meta descriptions, title tags, and headings. Ensuring each page has a clear H1 heading and unique meta descriptions can significantly enhance search engine visibility. Developing high-quality, relevant content is crucial. Blogs, travel guides, and multimedia resources can increase organic traffic and user engagement. Regularly updating content based on keyword research and search trends can also help maintain visibility.

Additionally, it is essential to address technical issues, such as slow loading times, especially on mobile devices, and improve site structure to ensure efficient navigation. Implementing responsive designs and optimizing images can also contribute to better performance. Establishing a robust backlink strategy is essential for improving domain authority. Businesses should seek partnerships with local entities and obtain links from high-authority sites to enhance their credibility and search engine positioning.

Given the growing importance of local and voice search, businesses should optimize their websites for local SEO and incorporate long-tail, conversational keywords. This can help attract a more specific audience and increase visibility in local and voice searches.

### *6.2. Limitations and Future Research*

Although the study focused on the Terras de Trás-os-Montes region, the characteristics of this rural territory—low digital maturity, dispersed SMEs, and cultural-tourism potential—are shared by many rural areas. Therefore, the findings may offer relevant insights for other rural contexts with similar socio-economic conditions. Nonetheless, further research is needed to validate the applicability of these findings across different regions and countries.

While this study provides valuable insights into the SEO performance of rural tourism websites, it also has certain limitations that suggest avenues for future research. The study focused on a specific region, Terras de Trás-os-Montes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size to include rural tourism businesses from different regions or countries to provide a more comprehensive understanding of SEO practices in rural tourism.

This study identified the lack of relevant content as a significant issue. Future research could explore the impact of content optimization on SEO performance, including the role of blogs, travel guides, and multimedia resources in driving organic traffic and visitor engagement. Given the increasing reliance on mobile devices for online browsing, future studies should investigate strategies to improve mobile loading speeds, usability, and overall user experience. This could include implementing responsive designs, compressing images, and leveraging content delivery networks (CDNs).

The role of social media and influencer marketing in promoting rural tourism destinations could be examined. These platforms are increasingly influential in shaping consumer behavior and driving online visibility, and their integration with SEO strategies could be a fruitful area of research. Future research could also explore the long-term impact of SEO strategies on rural tourism businesses, including how sustained investment in SEO can lead to increased brand authority, customer loyalty, and sustainable growth.

As search engine algorithms evolve, future studies should investigate the impact of emerging SEO trends, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, on rural tourism websites. Understanding how these technologies can be leveraged for SEO optimization will be crucial for businesses aiming to stay competitive in the digital market.

In conclusion, rural tourism has significant potential to benefit from SEO strategies, but this requires continuous investment in technical optimization, content creation, and digital authority building. As the digital market continues evolving, rural tourism businesses must adapt to new trends and technologies to ensure long-term competitiveness and sustainability. This study is a starting point for future research and a practical guide for businesses looking to improve their online presence and attract more visitors to their regions.

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