

MUUTTUVA MATKAILU

MATKAILUALAN VERKOSTOYLIOPISTO

**10 vuotta tieteellä ja taiteella matkailun
asiantuntijuuteen**

**- TIETOA MATKAILUSTA JA
MATKAILUELINKEINOSTA**

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NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTIONS – A PORTUGUESE VIEWPOINT

The purpose of this text is to provide a brief account of my experience of engaging in a Socrates Exchange between the Geography Department at the University of Minho, Portugal and the Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies in Savonlinna, Finland.

For the average Portuguese citizen, Finland is perceived as a cold and icy country, replenished of coniferous trees. Portuguese have in fact very vague ideas about Nordic countries, and the Northern Lights and the Midnight Sun are blurred and surreal notions. Yet, for a Portuguese human geographer, Finland represents an exciting and interesting place, a kilt of magnificent cultural landscapes, resulting in great part from an intense history of conflicts with Sweden and Russia, from a period of extraordinary romantic nationalism in the 19th century crowned with the *Kalevala* folk epic and Sibelius patriotic symphonies. Before my exchange with FUNTS, in the context of an Erasmus/Socrates programme, I had been twice to Finland. The first time, in 1991, on an Interrail trip through Scandinavia. I mostly visited Lapland. My second visit was in 1998, and apart from Helsinki, Lapland was again my destination. At the time I was joining an international group of students, attending to the second of a series of three courses on Regional Development and Border Regions, organised by the Universities of Joensuu, Umea (Sweden) and Ulster (Northern Ireland). Both visits gave me a sense of a sparsely populated country, with endless forests, mild summers and plenty of berries and herds of mosquitoes.

In September 2002, I had the opportunity to return again to Finland, this time to Savonlinna, the most charming city of the Finnish Lake District. My stay was very pleasant and I was fortunate to join the welcoming week of the new students pursuing tourism studies in Finland. So I was taken to the medieval Olavinlinna Castle and other historic and heritage sites of relevance to the region, and had the opportunity to mingle with the students and staff in an informal way. On top of that I had the pleasure to meet another geographer, from Prague, Jirka Wagner, who was also visiting as an exchange lecturer. As a result of this encounter, the department of Geography of the University of Minho has now an exchange programme with Charles University. Jirka lectured in Guimarães in October 2003, and I was in Prague in February 2004.

In Savonlinna, my academic duties, previously organised with Petri Hottola, were to give two formal lectures and to engage in a discussion meeting of research interests. The latter was relaxed and wrapped in a friendly environment and allowed me and the FUNTS staff to understand each others research areas. We concluded that we were all interested in the links between the development of tourism, heritage and the environment. My fourth assignment was a lecture at the Geography Department, in Joensuu.

My second lecture was on the only Portuguese National Park: "The Nature of

Peneda-Gerês National Park, Portugal". Framed by the genesis and the evolution of the National Parks movement, I attempted to illustrate the pressures and consequences of tourism in a peripheral regional of Atlantic Europe, especially regarding the conflicts that arise with nature conservation. There was a very positive feedback and I think students could relate my experience to their knowledge of Finnish National Parks and other protected areas and to the challenges that result from the encounter of tourists with nature.

My first lecture, which I left here for last, was the most challenging one: "Greenway Planning: using old railway lines for transport and leisure. The case of Portugal and Guimarães". When I say challenging, I mean in the sense that I felt I was showing an example of a development that had many shortcomings in respect to the desirable planning procedures, which I suspect could hardly take place in Finland. At the time I was not sure if students were going to understand the difficulties of planning in Portugal, since there is a strong cultural difference between our countries. Later in 2003, when I returned to Finland to give a specific course on Greenway Planning at the Geography Department in Joensuu, I realised that students were faced with similar difficulties to those encountered by Portuguese students when dealing with practical exercises of planning a greenway. I felt I was right! There was also something entertaining about this lecture, since I came out on the local newspaper: "Vihertie Savonlinnasta Pieksämäelle?" the title, *Itä-Savo* the newspaper, 18th September 2002, page 2. Do not ask me what it says! It is in Finnish!

In 2004, Senior Assistant Professor Petri Hottola visited Guimarães, and stayed for one week, lecturing on tourism geography. The feedback from students was excellent, and his lectures and texts were greatly appreciated. Students were faced with theoretical and empirical themes that are not so developed in Portuguese geography and in tourism studies in Portugal, such as gender issues, and postcolonial tourism. The geographical scope of the lectures was also deeply gratifying, since we were able to "travel" from India and Sri Lanka to South Africa and Namibia. The exchange took place as an 8 hour block of lectures to the same class, and students knew that the topics being lectured were part of the course, and subject to examination. As a result of these lectures we have recently published in Guimarães one of Petri's papers on "Gender and the Body in Tourism Geography" – available online at www.geografia.uminho.pt/wp.htm. This paper inaugurated the series of *GEO-Working Papers* of our Research Centre – NIGP.

Overall I feel that the participation in these exchanges is very positive for four main reasons. The first one relates to the fact that students encounter different lecturers, with varied academic and personal paths, which enhance their studies and may encourage them to pursue part of their academic career in a foreign university. The second reason is the possibility that we, as lecturers, have, of working with students with other backgrounds from those of the students we normally teach. Thirdly, because these exchanges allow us to discuss research interests and projects with colleagues from other institutions, while making it possible for us to know these how different institutions work. Lastly,

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these interactions may be the seed for common research projects (Petri is now part of the scientific committee of *Aurora*, the new Geography Journal of the University of Minho), the publication of scientific papers (such as the one in the *GEO-Working Papers*), and the establishment of other jointly organised programmes (such as summer schools, discussed with FUNTS and Charles University), among others.

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