

# Effects of the Pandemic on Urban Tourism in the City of Porto

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## Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of secondary quantitative data on the impact of the pandemic on one of the most relevant urban tourism destinations in the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. This in-depth study of the official tourism statistics yielded by Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau is justified given the fact that Porto witnessed a huge increase in the number of tourists before the pandemic. Hence, the aim of the paper is to analyse the effects of the pandemic in the socioeconomic sustainability of tourism in this destination. The results of the research highlight the sudden drop in tourist activity driven by the constraints derived from the pandemic in Porto. In addition, we will analyse the first signs of recovery that were felt in the tourist industry of Porto, looking at how they may influence the immediate future of this activity. In fact, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE), tourism, during 2021, in Portugal, despite registering a notable growth compared to 2020, was still below 2019.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Touristification · Secondary data analysis · Urban tourism · Porto

## 1 Introduction

Urban tourism has been witnessing a great expansion, which led to the morphological and socioeconomical modification of cities [1]. This growth is associated with rapid global urbanisation (in 2015, 54% of the world's population lived in urban areas and by 2030 this figure is expected to be 60%) [2]. In addition to this factor, we can also mention others: the saturation of the classic sun and sand destinations, the greater appreciation of cultural and heritage elements, the widening of what is considered tourism (active experiences and not just passive enjoyment), and the great growth of low-cost carriers, which allow greater mobility between source markets and destinations. In fact, according to [3], from 2009 to 2019, there was an increase in the number of arrivals at Porto's airport of 169%.

In Porto, tourism has a longstanding historical tradition [4]. Portugal's second city and its metropolitan area has been a very attractive space for visitors not only because of the richness of its historical heritage, but also because of the presence of the famous Porto wineries and the extraordinary urban landscape linked to the *Ribeira do Douro* [5, 6]. In addition, the city has always been the starting point for river tours that, going up the Douro River, have allowed tourists and visitors in general to get to know one of the most unique destinations of the Iberian Peninsula [7].

As a matter of fact, according to respondents to a study by [5], Porto has three comparative advantages: gastronomy, hospitality, and cheap prices [8], for their part, add other, eminently competitive ones: a competitive business environment, the city's

short distance from the autonomous community of Galicia, the strategic location of the airport, the existence of relevant R&D units, the differentiation of its tourist resources and products, as well as its reputation as a tourist destination, as evidenced by the several awards it has won.

In the turn of the century and the millennium, the city of Porto became one of the main centres of urban-cultural tourism in Europe. In fact, the recognition of Porto's potential as a tourist destination was evident in the election of this city as "Best European Destination" in 2012, 2014, and 2017 [3, 9, 10].

The discovery of Portugal in general, and Porto in particular, by European urban tourists, together with the great performance of Sá Carneiro airport and the boost given to tourism by the local administration have been attracting more and more

tourists every year. In fact, the city experienced a 77% increase in the number of overnight stays between 2001 and 2020 [11].

In Porto, there was an actual surge of vitality around the *Baixa*, a run-down and degraded neighbourhood from an urbanistic and social point of view [6, 9]. The revival of tourism in both cities boosted positive processes of urban renewal and revitalisation, but also negative processes that will be analysed here [3, 12–14].

The aim of our study is to do an appraisal of the impacts of the pandemics in the socioeconomic sustainability of Porto. Also, we will analyse the first signs of recovery that were felt in the tourist industry of Porto, looking at how they may influence the immediate future.

The methodology used in this study is based on secondary analysis of quantitative data from official statistics concerning Porto as a tourist destination [15].

Likewise, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) what was the impact of the pandemic on the socioeconomic sustainability of tourism in Porto? (2) Did Porto recovered in a significant way in 2021, when a considerable part of the Portuguese population had already been vaccinated?

The structure of this paper begins with an introduction highlighting the recent growth of the tourism sector in Porto. We then proceed with a review of the literature on the phenomenon of touristification and gentrification in Porto. The methodology used in the elaboration of this study is addressed in depth in the third section, which is followed by an analysis of the statistical data of the tourism industry in Porto, before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Finally, in the discussion and final remarks section, the results obtained after analysing the statistical data are compared with the research questions previously stated.

## **2 Touristification, Gentrification, and Urban Tourism in Porto**

In a pre-pandemic world characterised by hypermobility of people, goods, and information, globalisation emerges as the real explanation for the rapid expansion of the COVID-19 and the acceleration of its spread [16]. The hypermobility of global commodities thus emerges as one of the characteristics of our time [17, 18].

Looking now at the mobility of people, we must admit that the process of globalisation has also led to an increase in the movement of people on an unprecedented scale [19]. The globalisation of the economy explains why more and more people are travelling for work or business. In this context, the pandemic has created the conditions for the development of digital nomadism, a concept that aims to reconcile work with leisure activities at the destination [20, 21]. Its practitioners are businessmen, women, and students travelling on exchange programmes [22]. In this context, this floating population has contributed to the intensification of the gentrification phenomenon in the city of Porto [10, 23].

This great growth in the typologies of what we can consider tourism and tourists is undoubtedly related to the rise and success of urban tourism. [24] defines urban tourism as “a sociological and anthropological phenomenon that is oriented towards urban centres and areas with historical, heritage, and cultural value” (p. 419).

According to [25] in Lisbon and Porto, tourism has contributed to “the recovery of degraded and depopulated areas and neighbourhoods, gastronomic innovation, the improvement and diversification of commerce in areas of high tourist frequency, new ways of organising local visits (tuk-tuk and others), the intervention of new actors, and the diversification of products” (p. 120).

The progressive reduction in the number of days spent in destinations has gone hand in hand with an increase in the frequency of trips, thanks to the expansion and reduction in the cost of mobility, especially in air transport [26]. In this context, cities with international or well-positioned airports have had a great advantage, and the existence or not of air connections has been a determining factor in many cases to explain the success of certain urban tourism destinations. In this context, the case of the city of Porto is paradigmatic: from 2005, the implementation of the low-cost airline Ryanair at Francisco Sá Carneiro airport led to a massive increase in the number of tourists staying in this city [6, 12].

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought tourism activity to an abrupt halt [27] all over the world, but it was particularly visible in cities with hyper-specialised tourism, where a series of phenomena such as touristification and gentrification had reached a very important quantitative and qualitative importance [28].

In effect, the pandemic arrived in Europe (in Portugal and Spain as well) in February 2020, after a year full of visitors in 2019 [29], in which all tourist records had been broken, especially in a number of emblematic cities such as Madrid, Lisbon, Barcelona, Porto, Bilbao, Santiago de Compostela, etc. Undoubtedly, the choice of leisure and business tourists to visit cities with heritage recognition (Unesco World Heritage)—or with important cultural and heritage facilities—explained, before the pandemic, an unstoppable growth in tourism statistics of all kinds [30], as we will have the chance to see in the case of Porto.

In a pre-pandemic scenario, gentrification and touristification were one of the key theoretical concepts that attracted the attention of tourism academics and researchers in general [31]. In major tourist cities across Europe and, of course, on the Iberian Peninsula, the idea that tourism was becoming more and more widespread, and gaining more and more economic weight in the life of cities was disseminated. The opening of new tourism-oriented establishments (restaurants, pubs, souvenir shops, art galleries, etc.) was increasingly related with the closure of many traditional businesses, unable to survive in the face of the gradual departure of lifelong residents, replaced by tourists [12, 23].

At the residential level, a parallel and more or less similar process was taking place: the departure of the traditional lifelong inhabitants and the development of these properties as tourist flats or new tourist accommodation. In its simplest expression, this process can be characterised as touristification [25] and consists of a replacement of traditional uses, activities, and inhabitants by something totally new and tourism-oriented: tourist uses, tourist activities, and tourist accommodation [10, 13].

From the point of view of the neighbourhoods, touristification has had contradictory effects. Perhaps the place where this phenomenon is best seen is Porto, Portugal's second city. The *baixa portuense* was a degraded space that had lost all its attractiveness, with abandoned and dilapidated buildings, where very few people lived [5, 9, 13]. Amongst the resident population, the existence of low-income and even marginalised groups was common [9, 12, 13]. All this made for a degraded and unattractive urban landscape in a prime location, very close to the centre and the *Ribeira do Douro*. The urban tourism boom of the 2000s and 2010s, together with the aforementioned factors, explained the sudden tourist success of the famous *Rua das Flores*, today one of the most touristified streets in Europe [32]. Can this touristification be read in a negative light? Yes, it can, but we must not forget that tourism has revitalised a very degraded sector, lifeless from a functional point of view and unattractive from all points of view. Tourism, with its lights and shadows, has put *Rua das Flores* and *Baixa do Porto* on the city map [33].

### 3 Methods

The research methodology used here is based on the examination of secondary data on tourism demand collected by the Portuguese INE (National Statistics Institute); by the CCDR-N (Commission of Coordination and Development of North Region), Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau and *Base de Dados Portugal Contemporâneo* (PORDATA).

As we noted in the introduction, this study aims to answer the following research questions. First of all, to ascertain what was the impact of the pandemic on the socioeconomic sustainability of tourism in Porto? Secondly, to know if Porto recovered substantially in the first five months of 2021, when a significant share of the Portuguese population had already been vaccinated?

In this process of research, we derive the following research hypotheses:

- H<sub>1</sub>: The incidence of the pandemic was reflected in the reduction of the socioeconomic sustainability of tourism in Porto with respect to 2019.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There is an association between the increase in the number of people vaccinated and the recovery of tourism activity in Porto in the first five months of 2021.

Specifically, we want to know if there was a maintenance of profits (high revenues) that benefited the local economic systems and to distinguish the evolution of arrivals, knowing whether there was a differential impact of the pandemic on the arrival of nationals and foreigners in the city.

The present study is not limited to a mere collection and reproduction of quantitative data obtained by the institutions within the scope of their activity [15], but rather reworks the information to fit the research objectives that are substantiated into the research problems outlined above [34–36]. The secondary data collected are therefore useful to analyse trends in tourism activity over time in Porto, the impact of

a specific event (i.e., COVID-19) on tourism activity, the relationship between two variables (pandemic and tourism activity) or test hypotheses (the 2 above).

This type of research has advantages such as the reduced cost and time involved in the collection of information; the high quality of the data obtained through discrete methods; and the possibility of longitudinal analysis. However, this mode of analysis also has limitations (lack of familiarity with and complexity of the data; lack of control over the quality of the data obtained; absence of key variables because the data were collected for a different purpose than the present study [15]).

In effect, the use of secondary data is justified when the available information is already sufficient to answer the research questions. In this case, additional data collection would constitute a waste of resources [35].

Secondary data analysis should not be seen as an inferior method to other methods. In fact, given the research objectives, this method may prove to be the most or even the only appropriate one [36].

## 4 Research Findings

Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal, on 2 March 2020 [37], tourism activity in the city of Porto and its metropolitan area had registered a continuous exponential increase (see Table 1). However, the health crisis has led to a negative percentage change of 73% in terms of overnight stays in Porto hotels.

In this context, to get an idea of the magnitude of the decline in tourism caused by the coronavirus, it will be illustrative to look at the data on overnight stays in tourist accommodation in Porto per 100 inhabitants. From the analysis of Fig. 1, we can observe a continuous increase, from 2010 to 2019, in the number of overnight stays in hotel establishments in the city of Porto until 2020, when this value drops abruptly.

Another revealing indicator of the economic deprecation generated by the pandemic is the income generated by overnight stays, meals, and other services provided in hotel units. By examining Fig. 2, we come to the same conclusion regarding the effects generated by the pandemic maelstrom. In this case, however, the retraction is even more noticeable (78%).

These figures are in line with those for passenger traffic at Francisco Sá Carneiro airport (see Fig. 3), which show the same reduction (this time of 66%) in the transition from 2019 to 2020.

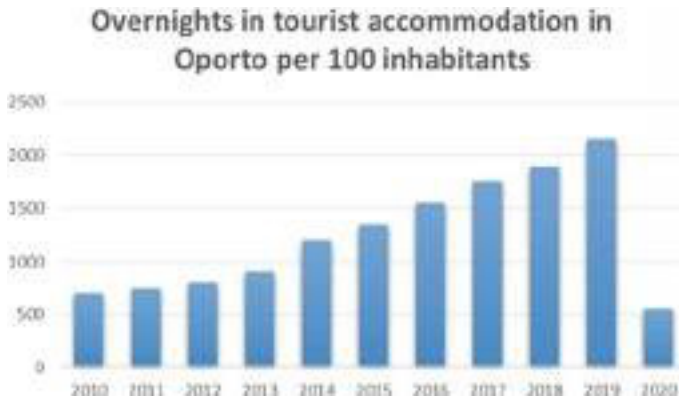
If we go back to the analysis of the available data on hotel accommodation [11], moving from the analysis of long time series to shorter time series, the impact produced by the pandemic is also inevitable. Thus, if we compare 2019 with 2020, we see that the net bed occupancy rate suffered a strong retraction. Specifically, from a total occupancy rate of 55.1% of accommodation units in 2019, this value drops to 22% in 2020.

**Table 1** Overnight stays in hotels in Porto

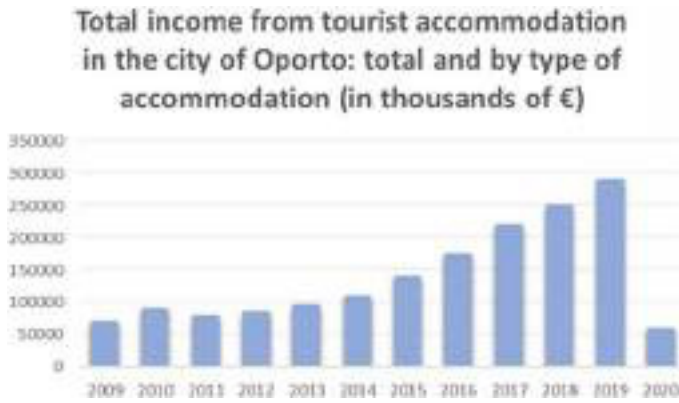
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Metropolitan area of Porto	2,966,657	2,979,939	3,445,153	4,030,435	4,580,506	5,210,981	5,883,971	6,319,435	7,013,152	2,319,572
Porto	1,783,781	1,815,157	2,102,481	2,548,591	2,879,833	3,300,011	3,782,858	4,091,975	4,587,237	1,243,952

Source INE, n.d.; CCDR-N, 2021a, 2021b; PORDATA, n.d.





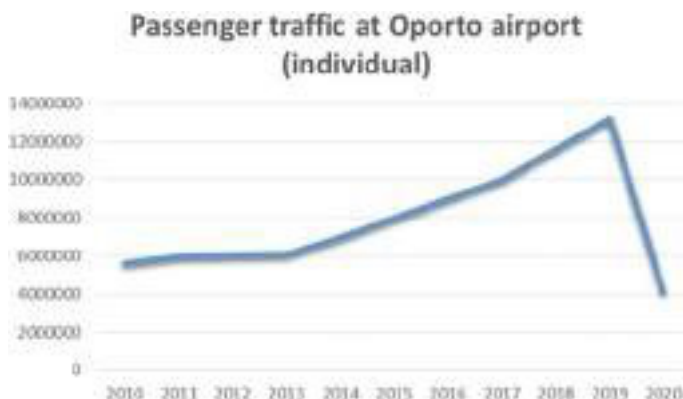
**Fig. 1** Overnight in tourist accommodation in Porto per 100 inhabitants. *Source* INE, n.d.; PORDATA, n.d.



**Fig. 2** Total income from tourist accommodation in the city of Porto: total and by type of accommodation (in thousands of e). *Source* INE, n.d.; PORDATA, n.d.

Clearly, the impact of the coronavirus in the city of Porto mimics what happened in the Northern region of Portugal, where the effects on tourism and hospitality were more severe than those that affected other economic activities. In fact, although the restrictions on mobility and social interaction were only felt from March 2020 onwards, the region recorded a 57.6% decrease in the number of guests and a 59.2% decrease in the total number of overnight stays in that year [38]. In the North region, the number of guests fell to lower values than in 2010.

One indicator where the city of Porto seems to differ from the NUTS II region to which it belongs (the Northern region of Portugal) is the proportion of non-residents in hotel accommodation (see Table 2). In this case, the retraction was less noticeable in the city of Porto, where foreign guests accounted for around two thirds of the total in 2020, whilst in the North region, the proportion did not reach one third.



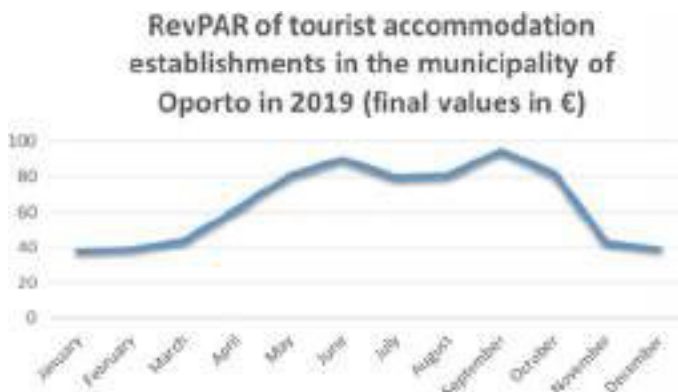
**Fig. 3** Passenger traffic at Porto airport (individual). *Source* INE, n.d.; PORDATA, n.d.

**Table 2** Proportion of foreign guests in tourist accommodation

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
North of Portugal	36.7	38.1	39.5	42.2	43.9	45.9	48.3	50.8	51.2	52.8	30.5
Porto	56.6	61.1	63.4	66.0	67.6	69.2	71.8	74.4	76.9	79.1	66.1

*Source* INE, n.d.; PORDATA, n.d.

We now move on to the analysis, in detail, of the years 2019, 2020, and 2021, with regard to two indicators, RevPar and bed occupancy rate. As for the average revenue obtained per room in 2019 (Fig. 4), this value remained above €40 for a substantial part of the year (from March to November).



**Fig. 4** RevPAR of tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2019 (final values in €). *Source* INE, n.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.



**Fig. 5** RevPAR of tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2020 (total provisional values in €). *Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

However, in 2020, the hinge value of €40 which, in the same period of 2019, differentiated the low season from the medium and high season, is never reached, not even in August when the index is far from reaching the figure of February, the month immediately prior to the outbreak of the virus (see Fig. 5).

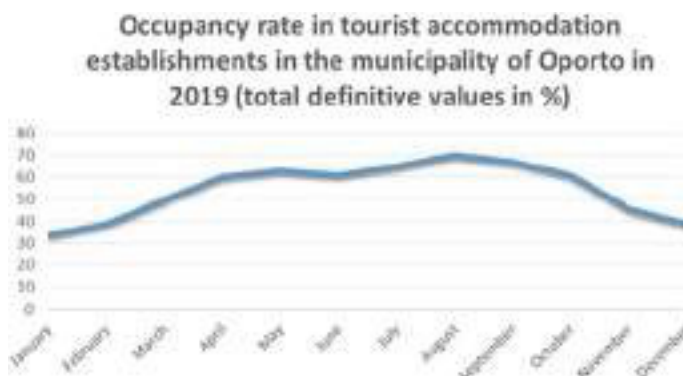
Recent figures on the RevPar of tourist accommodation establishments in the city of Porto already give signs of the recovery of tourist activity. In fact, since April 2021, there has been a consolidated growth in this indicator. However, the values were always well below €40 (see Fig. 6).

Regarding the occupancy rate of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments in the city of Porto, the 2019 figures reveal that during the mid and high season (March–November), the occupancy rate remained at or above 40% (see Fig. 7).

With respect to 2020, according to Fig. 8, although there was an increase in the occupancy rate in January and February compared to the same period of the previous



**Fig. 6** RevPAR of tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2021 (preliminary values in €). *Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

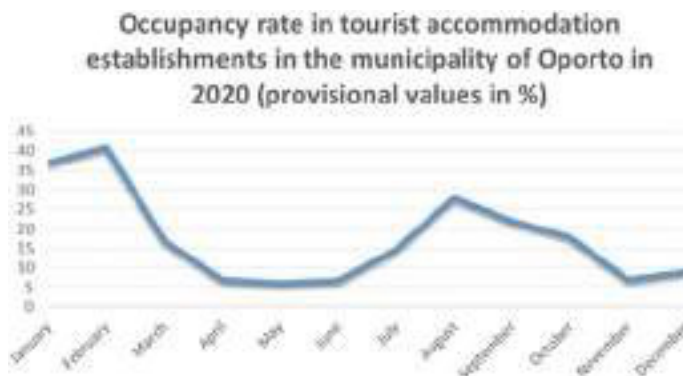


**Fig. 7** Occupancy rate in tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2019 (total definitive values in %). *Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

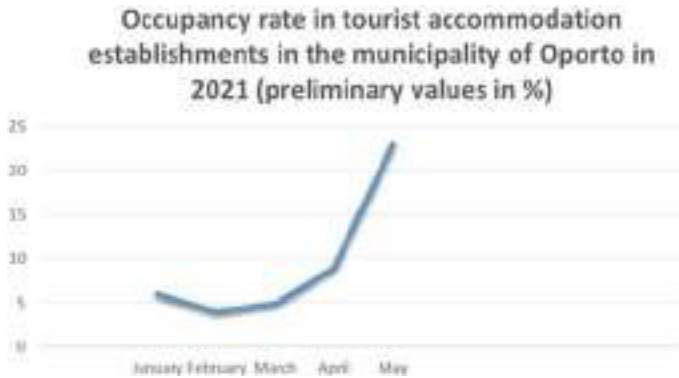
year, the month of March marked the beginning of an abrupt fall that reached its lowest point in May, recovering in August, but at a level more than half lower than in the same month of 2019. Of note is the small recovery in December.

Finally, in 2021, the available data end in May (see Fig. 9). Whilst in January, there is a retraction, from March onwards the occupancy rate registered a substantial increase, although it remains at very low values compared to the figures for 2019.

These encouraging signs of recovery are in line with the information contained in the “Norte Conjuntura” report for the 3rd quarter of 2021 [39]. This document mentions that the North region registers the same recovery. Thus, NUTS 2 hotel establishments experience an increase of 37.9% in the number of guests accommodated, which is, however, 28.2% lower than in the same period of 2019. The same trend is observed for the number of overnight stays which increased by 43.9% compared to 2020 but decreased by 28.2% compared to 2019.



**Fig. 8** Occupancy rate in tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2020 provisional values in %). *Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.



**Fig. 9** Occupancy rate in tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto in 2021 provisional values in %). *Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

In terms of revenue, this figure, in the third quarter of 2021, was 48.8% higher than in the same period of the previous year, but compared to 2019; however, there was a decrease of 32.9%. Meanwhile, RevPar in the North region stood at €37.7 in the third half of 2021, showing a recovery compared to the same period in 2020, but still far from the €57.8 recorded in 2019 [39].

Therefore, the data available, which point to a solid recovery of tourism activity in Porto and Norte de Portugal, attest that the industry is still far from reaching pre-pandemic levels [40].

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

When it comes to verifying the abovementioned hypotheses,  $H_1$  was based on the idea that there was a reduction in socioeconomic sustainability of tourism in Porto due to the pandemic. The preliminary data that we have collected seems to confirm this hypothesis in Porto.

In fact, the pandemic brought a decrease in overnight stays in hotels as well as passenger traffic at Porto airport. This decrease was felt more acutely in the Northern region of Portugal than in the city of Porto.

On the other hand, the revenue per available room (RevPar) and the occupancy rate of hotels in the city of Oporto also seem to contribute to the validation of  $H_1$ .

The current study also seems to confirm  $H_2$ , notably in that the recovery of tourist activity has gone hand in hand with an increase in the rate of vaccination. In effect, the increase in the number of people vaccinated already seems to be indicated by the increase in the occupancy rate from March 2021.

In Porto, the worst moment of the pandemic was in February 2021, just after Christmas 2020–21, when the population was still unvaccinated. The progressive vaccination of the most advanced age groups from the spring of 2021 marked the

**Table 3** RevPAR of Porto's tourist accommodation establishments (2021)

	Total
January	5.6
February	4.5
March	5.2
April	8.4
May	23.1
June	21.6
July	23.4
August	39.6
September	41.5
October	51.0
November	36.0
December	24.0
January (2022)	13.9

*Source* INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

beginning of the recovery throughout the spring and summer of the same year, consolidating in the following months. Similarly, the rapid spread of the “omicron” variant from autumn 2021 implied the beginning of a more negative situation in Porto.

The most recent data, which are still provisional, on the RevPAR of tourist accommodation establishments in the municipality of Porto seems to confirm this recovery of tourism and the strengthening of the economic sustainability inherent to this activity ( $H_1$ ). Moreover, the beneficial effect of vaccination ( $H_2$ ) also seems to be felt in this increase in profitability (see Table 3).

The recovery motivated by the growing immunity conferred by vaccines also seems to explain the behaviour of the occupancy rate in Porto's tourist accommodation establishments, which intensified in August, September, and October (Table 4).

Although this research presents preliminary data on the evolution of tourism in Porto in pandemic times, it also reveals unpublished data that has not yet been analysed on the economic effects of the coronavirus on the tourism activity in Porto. For this reason, we believe that it is a valid contribution to the state of the art of tourism in Porto.

We believe that the hypotheses presented herein can also be the object of a study that relies on a methodological, informational, and interdisciplinary triangulation that uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, data sources, and interpretations of the pandemic phenomenon and its consequences for the tourism sector. In addition to the weaknesses already pointed out in Sect. 3, the present research has some limitations, namely the delay between the time when research is being conducted and the time when official statistics are available [36].

**Table 4** Occupancy rate in tourist accommodation establishments in the Municipality of Porto (2021)

	Total
January	7.6
February	5.5
March	6.4
April	9.3
May	17.8
June	21.9
July	25.7
August	43.8
September	41.9
October	48.3
November	37.1
December	25.5
January (2022)	16.9

Source INE, s.d.; Porto Convention and Visitors Bureau, s.d.

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