

(Dis)connected atmospheres

Tourist locations in dead zones in post-pandemic Portugal

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ABSTRACT

How are Portuguese dead zones positioned as tourist locations to disconnect from digital media? In this chapter, I use the concept of atmosphere to explore how tourist dead zones contain different dimensions that work to restrain as well as foster connection: on the one hand, mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgic elements to deter connectivity as ways of suspending the mediated and accelerated everyday life, and on the other, social media promotion and expansion of digital connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter is based on a study conducted in Portugal in 2021–2022 under the DIS/CONNECT project, combining in loco and social media observation with interviews with promoters and visitors to five tourist locations in dead zones. The analysis highlights how, in the aftermath of the backlash and still under the transformation brought about by a global pandemic, dead-zone tourism stands at the intersection of offline, nature, and rural tourism, seeking an idealised individuality and selective sociability – and that the promise of disconnection tourism is only exceptionally embraced by a few tourists.

KEYWORDS: tourism, market, atmosphere, sensations, social media

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Introduction

Cities are flooded with connectivity. Aside from signal blockage in, for instance, prisons, banks, and some show venues, or signal problems caused by thick walls or part of underground places, dead zones in cities are rare. Not all forms of connectivity are available to everyone who circulates in those cities, and at times rules and norms dictate when and where it is inappropriate to use connected devices, such as in churches or cinemas. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when face-to-face communication was unadvised in favour of digital contact, digital availability became an even more accepted norm.

The normalisation of smartphones in particular has made “always-on” accessibility possible and enforced the social expectation of perpetual and ubiquitous contact (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). However, during holidays, this norm is negotiated with the desire to enjoy the surroundings (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021) while ensuring safety (Dickinson et al., 2016; Rosenberg, 2019). Holidays thus hold, at least for some, the expectation of escape from the overload of mediated distractions that characterise contemporary lives (Farkic et al., 2022) and are epitomised by the portable and multifunctional smartphone (Lomborg, 2015). However, in this media-saturated society, tourism is also heavily mediated (Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume), as a source of information, a form of orientation, and in the representation produced by tourists on digital media in geotagging or social media posts – so, imagining a tourist experience devoid of media and digitalisation is untenable.

A considerable number of studies have focused on digital detox programmes as part of a growing retreat culture and wellness industry (Hesselberth, 2021; Sutton, 2020), as well as on other digital-free tourism (Cai et al., 2020; Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume). And some research on rural and nature tourism has also highlighted the expectation of disconnection (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021). In this chapter, I explore tourism in dead zones: locations with non-existent or limited connectivity, primarily referring to mobile reception. Usually inserted in rural or mountain areas, or in remote or desert territories, the locations might be too far from the next cell tower emitter just because it is a scarcely populated area. Rocky hills or mountains can also block the signal. Different from other forms of digital-free tourism (Cai et al., 2020), dead-zone tourism does not result from intentional blockage of the connection. Crucially, and distinct from disconnection or digital-free tourism, tourism in dead zones does not offer a structured programme of activities to follow: While several leisure options are available, it is up to the visitor to decide what they want to do and how long to spend on each activity (Farkic et al., 2022).

Context and method

This chapter is based on a study of tourist dead zones in mainland Portugal, under the DIS/CONNECT project, conducted in Portugal in 2021–2022 in parallel with the DIGITOX project, led by the University of Oslo. In 2022, Portugal ranked fifteenth of the 27 EU member states in the *Digital Economy and Society Index* (European Commission, 2023), led by its Nordic counterparts. Compared with the latter, Portugal is a poorer (29,127 euro annual average wage in 2022; OECD, 2023) and more unequal (Gini index of 34.7% in 2020; World Bank, 2023) society. As digitalisation has been slower and more unevenly distributed in the country, I wish to explore how the pandemic affected (dis)connectivity.

I – at times together with a research assistant and my partner – conducted in loco observation in four locations, interviews with five promoters (via video call, average of one hour each) and 23 participants (mostly on location and some via video call, around half an hour each), and social media observation between March and September 2021. As agreed with participants, only their gender, age, and when relevant profession, are used to identify them. Interview guides were adapted from the DIGITOX project (see Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume) and structured around the key themes of motivations and experience at the locations; perceptions of intrusive media; and strategies and values about digital media (see also Syvertsen, 2022). We chose the locations through online searches for “digital detox”: Moinho do Maneio, Moinhos de Ovil, Quinta da Franqueira, and Cerdeira were listed in a 2019 piece in the tourism section of *Expresso*,¹ the reference weekly newspaper in Portugal, and Entre Sebes was the focus of a piece in the online news portal *Sapo* (Ribeiro, 2019). In Moinho do Maneio, there is no mobile service provided by any of the three telecoms in the country; in Cerdeira and Entre Sebes, one can only get signal from one (Vodafone); and in Moinhos de Ovil, there is a weak and unstable signal by either of the operators. While the five locations are surrounded by nature, two profiles can be discerned here: Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira are farms, and Cerdeira,² Moinho do Maneio, and Moinhos de Ovil are old watermills located in the forest, and they are rebuilt villages that had been abandoned, corresponding to an economic model of pre-industrialisation. Cerdeira is an open location, as a small village, whereas the others are now private property.

Visits were conducted after the second hard lockdown (in the first trimester of 2021; the first occurred in March–May 2020), when the hospitality sector was closed in Portugal and working from home became a requirement. I spent three days in Cerdeira and Moinho do Maneio, one day in Entre Sebes, and half a day in Moinhos de Ovil (because of the place’s exclusivity, I could not stay at the same time as any guests). A research assistant accompanied me to Cerdeira and Moinho do Maneio and conducted interviews with guests; my partner was with us in Cerdeira; and I was alone in visits to Moinhos de

Ovil and Entre Sebes. These different modalities allowed me to experience the places from different positions, and to witness different interactions from hosts and guests towards a young person (the research assistant, in her early 20s), a couple, or a solo traveller. I drove to all these locations, as public transport does not cover them.

Analytical framework and questions

As we discovered, during the pandemic an Internet connection was made possible in some of these locations, although advertised differently. To make sense of this experience in the post-pandemic context, in this chapter I use the concept of atmosphere (Stewart, 2011) to explore how dead zones construct a disconnected place and how it is encountered by tourists. Sumartojo and Pink (2018) defined atmospheres as ephemeral elements of our everyday experiences and environments, comprising the mutually co-constitutive interaction between human and non-human elements. Atmospheres might contain multiple and contradictory elements (Germann Molz & Buda, 2022). The notion of atmosphere draws attention to the material, sensorial, and symbolic dimensions of a context (Lupton, 2017), the meanings contained in it (including memories and imagination that are evoked and created experientially), and the affective ways those are experienced and made sense of. Drawing on media, cultural, and audience studies, I perform a cultural and critical analysis where I seek to, on the one hand, expose the narratives, symbols and metaphors, tropes, and lexicon that sustain the imaginaries and imageries of disconnection as they are linked with tourist locations, and on the other, describe the role of different agents (promoters, influencers, journalists) in propagating and facilitating those imaginaries and explore how disconnection is socially distributed and negotiated.

Mainly, I ask how, if at all, dead zones are positioned as tourist locations to disconnect from digital media. I explore how the atmospheres of these tourist dead zones contain different dimensions that work in contradictory directions, both to restrain and foster connection. The elements of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia created around dead zones have the potential to deter connectivity, as they invite individuals to suspend the mediated and accelerated everyday life, while elements of social media promotion and an expansion of digital connectivity that took place during the pandemic accentuate connectivity. While this indicates the well-known paradox of disconnection being embedded in connected culture (Hesselberth, 2018), it further demonstrates how this was accentuated and complicated during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Remoteness and mindfulness

Disconnection in these locations is created, first and foremost, by their geographic conditions. The tourist points are located in remote locations, some in the mountains or behind hills, which are barriers to signal diffusion. Access was sometimes difficult, especially in the case of Cerdeira – through a tight road in the Lousã mountain in the centre of mainland Portugal – which, I must say, challenged my driving skills. Moinhos de Ovil is just outside a small village, but the private road is very steep as it approaches the stream; luckily, the owner advised me to park on the road and walk the remaining meters. Remoteness is, of course, relative to the context of the country, which is a small territory with most people concentrated in cities, especially near the coastline, resulting from decades of land exodus of which these same (now tourist) locations are evidence. This remoteness explains the fact that there is no mobile signal, or that it is weak. For a long time (and until the hard pandemic lockdowns of 2020), telecommunication operators would not guarantee service via landline or satellite to these areas.

In addition to location, other material conditions are unfavourable to connectivity. The manager of Quinta da Franqueira, Piers Gallie, told us that, in the main room of the main house, “there is a normal [Wi-Fi] signal, clients can make video calls from there, no problem. But in the guest houses, that’s another problem. Old houses have more than a meter thick walls. The signal won’t get through!” I also felt this in Moinho do Maneio, where I could get a Wi-Fi signal at the front door of the guest houses made of schist, but not inside. These material impediments indicate that disconnection is not intentionally created as in other forms of digital-free tourism, but something that can be marketed as a limitation *or* as a perk.

These remote and “secluded places” (Hesselberth, 2021) afford sensations that sustain a disconnection disposition beyond a material level (Chia & Beattie, 2021), as they are symbolically invested with the possibility to disconnect from civilisation. As a journalist wrote about her stay in Entre Sebes, in the (green) north of the country: “Internet access is not available and there is not always a mobile phone network, which makes the farm the perfect place to disappear from the world, disconnect from social networks and create a connection with the surrounding nature” (Ribeiro, 2019). As the locations are in the forest or close to trails, they offer the possibility of hiking as a mindful (and romantic) activity in the style of Thoreau, inviting introspection. While spending time outdoors and enjoying nature is an important part of Nordic cultures (Syvertsen, 2022), such approximation to nature is far more recent in a southern European country. In Cerdeira, a 44-year-old woman indicated that her inclination to disconnect is facilitated by her attitude towards immersing herself in the location’s spirit, “by looking with other relationship with the surroundings, we are less interested in being online”.

Not just the landscape but also the soundscape composes the atmosphere for a disconnected break. On Facebook, Moinho do Maneio (n.d.) includes as part of their page description: “Disconnect from the World. Come to listen to the silence”. Silence is deemed restorative for stressful lives and stands in opposition to the constant noise of the ubiquitous media. It contrasts busy urban lives, where people struggle to find time to think and reflect, as connectivity avoids the “in-between-times” (Görland, as cited in Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020). Dead-zone tourism intersects with an emergent industry of idleness and do-nothing tourism (Farkic et al., 2022), crossing the mindfulness industry (Rauch, 2018). This bodily attuning and mindfulness promise the opportunity to “reconnect with nature and detach from mediated anxieties” (Rauch, 2018: 97) and to listen to oneself. Visitors are invited to slow down and live in the present through contemplation, introspection, and relaxation. This “presence here-and-now is essential for an authentic life”, as self-help authors also preach (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021: 228). Through the Instagram location tag, we found that retreats with specific programmes are organised in Cerdeira: Feed Your Soul, a yoga retreat with a plant-based chef and including chanting; and Conecta-te Terra Maya, a spiritual and holistic retreat.

This soundscape is not just made of silence, but also of the streams nearby. Guests in Cerdeira can find a water bottle in their houses to fetch water from the fountain for their consumption, and there are natural pools. The water element continues with (artificial) pools in Moinho do Maneio, Entre Sebes, and Quinta da Franqueira. Soaking up the sun and observing the natural elements are, to mindfulness gurus, grounding practices. Following the rhythm and flow of nature is said to calm the nervous system and decrease heart rate, and it stands in contrast with allowing one’s time and energy to be dictated by others or machines. In Moinho do Maneio, we joined a Pilates class at sunset by the pool with the guests.

Non-human elements are also constitutive parts of the atmosphere and invitation to disconnect: The relationship with animals, whether in the farms or the forest resorts, also contributes to an ambience of resting and tenderness, but also to adventure. Mindfulness proclaims that animals – be they domestic, farm, or wild – can sooth the urban spirit. In Cerdeira, one of the attractions is the proximity to wildlife in the Lousã mountain, and guests are incentivised to take hikes through the tracks in the mountain and see the deer. But the advertising posters do not mention other more frightening animals, such as wolves, snakes, or boars, revealing a romanticisation of nature. Entre Sebes runs a pedagogic farm with farming animals in small numbers (two horses, one donkey, goats, sheep, Vietnamese Pot-bellied pigs, guinea pigs, and rabbits), which works well for their consumer target of families, as we found with the guests when we visited this place in the North of Portugal. Here, you can “enjoy the birds singing” (Ribeiro, 2019) and I woke – fortunately, not too early – to the sound of the hens. There, they have some cats and dogs,

as does Moinho do Maneio. In the latter, the romantic profile meets that of the farm: The dogs and cats are very much part of the experience of the location, as are the donkeys – lovely, if I may say. In Ovil, pets are allowed, and they even have a dedicated corner inside the house. Eduarda Santos told me that her guests know they can run into small animals, such as a lizard.

These locations offer an atmosphere predicated on “slowness” (Sharma, 2015) and solipsism based on the “me” and the present. To Sharma, this would serve as a tool to recalibrate the neoliberal worker subjectivity. Instead, Coleman (2022: 147) described mindfulness as “an affective response to [people’s] encounters with the world”, whereby the “‘cadences’, ‘rhythms’, ‘gestures’, ‘noticings’ [...] remodulate how people feel, experience and live”. In these dead zones, the absence of a structured programme of activities to follow means they propose temporal autonomy (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020). In addition to the natural elements, some objects are introduced to invite self-indulgence and idleness – or, as Eduarda Santos, the owner of Ovil, said, “tranquillity and relaxation”. There were also hammocks in Moinho do Maneio, as well as in Moinhos de Ovil, as encouragements to relax, take a nap, or read a book; and Entre Sebes and Moinho do Maneio offer massages as an extra service. Moinhos de Ovil and Moinho do Maneio invite people to eat outside at their tables and to use the canoes in the small rivers that cross their properties. In the latter, one can also find a table football board. A couple, 39 and 40, said: “We are keen to enjoy the rails and we saw a canoe and we are doing that! And the bikes! [...] maybe even the trampoline”. Another couple who stayed at the bubble tent, where one can see the sky and stars at night, told us they spent the evening “talking and playing the board games they have up there”. These suggested activities are efforts to avoid the feelings of anxiety and boredom that can be created when tourists are liberated from mindless connectivity (Cai et al., 2020). In a hyper-productive society where mindless scrolling is an accepted way to “kill time”, “dead time” during holidays may be daunting (Farkic et al., 2022).

The two mill properties (Maneio and Ovil) use folkloric elements in their decoration, including traditional games in Ovil, which attempt to counter the homogenising global society. They also infuse the atmosphere with a “positive vibe” through the use of messages and posters. In Maneio, they have rocks on the small street that crosses the property with wishes inscribed on them with chalk: “love”, “health”, “tolerance” (in Portuguese), or “be happy :)” (in Portuguese and English, with the emoticon). In Ovil, at the entrance of the farm one can find a poster: “Always look on the bright side of life”. And closer down: “It always seems impossible until it’s done” (in English). In both places, there are carefully curated book collections. In my room in Moinho do Maneio, I could find *Siddharta*, by Herman Hesse, a famous novel

about a spiritual journey of self-discovery. In Moinhos de Ovil, books relate to the Douro region, feelings, and photography. And in Cerdeira, there is a small library, but it was restricted during our visit because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reading books is an activity that is notoriously constricted by the time and energy drained by intrusive media, as it requires more attention and a single focus. In the cases where I had access to books, they offered the possibility to disengage from digital technologies, and further accentuated either the work on the self or the local connection.

In the guest house where I stayed in Moinho do Maneio, a decorative clock whose hands do not move, made from a pan, brings attention to a feeling of time standing still on this farm in the almost deserted Portuguese countryside. Tourist venues in dead zones seek to create an atmosphere that will put on hold “the alleged accelerated affordances of life in modern late capitalist societies” (Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020: 89) and promise a respite from the intensified media use that “contributes to our feeling distracted, anxious, alienated, forgetful, overworked, stressed out” (Rauch, 2018: xiii). As one of the visitors we interviewed told us, “if you are in a holiday mood, for me it is great not to have Internet or phone” (female, 39). The “holiday mood” precedes the encounter with the tourist locations, which then works to modulate it into a disconnected mood or state of mind (Karppi et al., 2021).

A romantic and exclusive perk

The atmosphere of disconnection of these tourist dead zones is also a product of the social isolation that derives from the remoteness. The settings are romantically located in nature, away from the burdens of the developed world – that is, as much from over-connection as from the busyness of the city. In Ovil, one of the visitors found herself in “a rewarding isolation” (female, 41), and another said she was looking for “an exclusive place, that would not have other people, right? [...] We were able to be in our very own world” (female, 45). A tourist (female, 50) in Moinho do Maneio said: “I hope it stays like this and does not get an influx”.

The romanticism associated with natural landscapes includes contemplating the landscape but also feeling alone in nature and, ultimately, enjoying individual freedom and privacy (Jacobsen, 2004). Moreover, the growth of rural tourism is also a reaction to the massification of tourism (Cohen, 1987), which was accentuated in the resolution of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Hence, dead-zone tourism sits at the confluence of the feelings of anti-tourism and anti-sociality. The exclusivity of the locations is more evident when it is menaced, as in the case of the open village of Cerdeira. When we stayed there (as Joana Salgado had mentioned in the interview she gave us prior to our visit), visitors were passing through the village during the day, visiting several of these schist villages across the region. We saw many of

those daytime visitors taking a tour around the village and taking and posing for pictures with their phones. When looking for geolocation on Instagram, one can find many public posts from those visitors, and if one searches on Google Maps, there are many contributions of different corners and views of the village.

Dead zones offer romanticism for love or an affective relationship. Portuguese sociologist José Machado Pais (2010) wrote that in contemporary, accelerated societies, romantic relationships fall prey to the lack of time and energy – and that is accentuated by intrusive media. Among our cases, Moinhos de Ovil is the one that has the most robust romantic positioning. Eduarda Santos told us she could make more money by booking a family but advises people to try to have the experience as a couple. She added that “some female clients book to come here to surprise their husbands because they want them to take a break from work”. While Eduarda said her clients report their stays were effective in having men disconnect from “phone and work”, she also told us that this works only for a short stay and would not work for a week. (In support of this, a 48-year-old businessman in Cerdeira told us he would be “without breath” if he could not get hold of his e-mail.) The romantic atmosphere is also heightened, ironically, by the influencers who have stayed at the property, such as famous Instagrammer Catarina Miranda, who stayed at the property for her honeymoon, or Isabel Saldanha, a photographer who writes emotional captions with a bon vivant vibe. The two former guests we interviewed, 41 and 45 years old, said they initially knew about the place through influencers on Instagram. It is neither a coincidence nor a surprise that Ovil is the highest-priced location in the study, affordable to upper-middle- to upper-class national tourists; it is part of the (growing) high-end segment of the disconnection market.

This romantic atmosphere is not only highly individualistic (Jacobsen, 2004), but it also constructs a preferred sociality for tourists. In Cerdeira, a schist board in the café reads, in handwriting: “Wi-Fi: only after 30 minutes conversation” (see Figure 16.1). Such sayings have become tropes that emphasise the value of face-to-face, present, and fully attentive interaction over (digitally) mediated interaction (Docherty, 2020), which is deemed as “effortless, non-committal and somewhat superficial sociality” (Lomborg, 2015: 48). Moreover, the use of these posters, often with irony or puns, applies a parodic sensibility that attracts hipsters, for example (Zhao, 2013), and captivates sophisticated tourists. In addition to confirming cultural capital of those who recognise the paradoxes and original references (as I signal for the nostalgic messages), these references elicit a lightly humorous reaction or a positive affective response (Karppi et al., 2021) that engages the tourist more with the place. Ironically, they invite tourists to share such tropes on social media (Jorge, 2019).

FIGURE 16.1 “Wi-Fi: only after 30 minutes conversation”



Comments: The photograph was taken in a café in Cerdeira.

Source: photo by Ana Jorge

Such a model of sociality is echoed in the interviews with tourists. A 50-year-old female visitor to Moinho do Maneio said: “Maybe it is just more important that I try to talk with the person standing next to me”. And in Entre Sebes, we found a group of three couples on their annual getaway who told me that the weak service on their mobile devices meant that they had more uninterrupted conversations. In the post-pandemic environment, visitors were seeking exclusivity as much as human presence. However, being with a partner, in a group, or as a family without interruptions from digital technologies was the preferred model of sociality. This marking of face-to-face conviviality as better than digitally mediated interaction is confirmed in the many statements we listened to from the tourists, that they take satisfaction in the fact that nothing (relevant) had happened online when they went back.

Such a model is enforced on children and young people. The managers of the tourist locations echo the idea that these locations work “to take children away from digital technologies” (Eduarda Santos), inviting them to play more. A 41-year-old mother of three recalled her stay in Ovil, saying the children were playing incessantly on the property and that she felt it was safe because it was a closed property. However, we hardly found teenagers in our visits, and accounts show resistance to spending time in dead zones. The only teenage boy (15) we interviewed in Cerdeira had gone there, after

initially resisting the idea, with his parents. He told us they have stayed in other places in the country with limited connectivity, as his mother is a creative worker who prefers these locations to rest and work. In Entre Sebes, we found families with young children, who were said to have been busy and playing, distracted from tablets, but host Susana Pereira told us she had cancellations from families with teenagers as well as seen youngsters brought by their parents to the farm who were in a bad humour *because* of the limited connectivity. We found similar affective responses through the accounts of parents we interviewed in Moinho do Maneio: A 49-year-old father told us, “I keep *forcing* them [teenagers] to disconnect. This last August, we checked in here and left after ten days! They bring their books, I try to *drag* them to experiences, so they can see things live”.

In fact, disconnecting through stays at dead zones seemed a conscious choice only of a few. While individuals embarking on tourism for their holidays usually negotiate their availability with significant others who stay home (Rosenberg, 2019), many of our interviewees were unaware of the limitations to mobile connectivity of the places they were visiting. One father (39) said, “our kids are staying with my sister, and we were supposed to text [upon arriving]”, and his wife (40) added: “It’s the first time our son is without his parents, he is 7. Had we and them known [there was no service], there would have been no problem, no anxiety at all”. A 49-year-old female teacher who was at Moinho do Maneio with her husband, sister, and brother-in-law told us, “the only thing that *disturbed* us a bit was more the mobile service than the Internet itself”, as they have SIM cards from all three national operators.

When talking about the anxieties of being out of contact, and even if we conducted some of the interviews with couples, it was women who expressed their concerns for the children at home, and parents – “they are of a certain age already, you know?” (female, 50, Moinho do Maneio). As we will see, the possibility to connect via the Internet did not necessarily solve these anxieties, especially of contacting the elderly, as the latter do not use digital services. In contrast, people who resist constant availability at home accept more easily the unexpected disconnection: Although she did not know she would be deprived of the Internet or have a feeble mobile service, the 41-year-old female visitor to Ovil told us she did not feel it as a problem, as she does not usually talk with her parents every day; when staying there, she just sent them a picture when she found service.

For others, staying in a dead zone was a matter of economy. If Ovil is marketed to the upper-class (one of the interviewees acknowledged that “not every family can afford these getaways”), and in Moinho do Maneio and Cerdeira, we found primarily urban, middle-class tourists (high school teacher, designer, engineer, architect, businessman),³ in Entre Sebes, we found a group of working-class friends who chose the place for their annual reunion because it was cheaper than every other farm property after the inflation exacerbated

by the pandemic, with many people looking for isolated venues. The latter was the cheapest location among our cases, partly because they do not consider themselves in the “disconnection” segment. They market the location as a “pedagogic farm” and warn guests about it being a dead zone; the host told us the *Sapo* journalist (Ribeiro, 2019) chose to frame it as disconnected.

Marketing through nostalgia

Cerdeira, Moinho do Maneio, and Moinhos de Ovil invest more heavily in social media promotion than the farms of Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira, which work to mark out sociocultural differences through mechanisms of distinction. The former have pages on Facebook and profiles on Instagram and invest in influencer marketing. The irony of social media promotion about locations that offer the possibility to disconnect is not lost on the promoters, who frame this as a necessary tool to attract and engage audiences. Anabela Martins, who runs Moinho do Maneio with her husband, told us the place has received good media and social media attention; Facebook has worked well because people engage “organically”; that is, she does not have to invest in sponsored ads, and only since the start of the pandemic has she dedicated more attention to Instagram. The promotion by influencers on social media has immediate results in reservations, she told us, which confirms influencers’ strategic role in promoting disconnection as a form of recalibration for productive workers (Jorge & Pedroni, 2021). As a 57-year-old returning visitor to the Lousã mountains said: “I thought that people coming here were older people wanting to get some rest. It’s not like that now. I clearly saw many more young people”.

Through digital observation, we found that these social media contents cultivate a longing for the past. In an Instagram post with “Do you remember?” in a handwritten font, Cerdeira shared a picture of a phone counter (see Figure 16.2) from a time when mobile phones were non-existent and phone communications were limited, paid according to the time of day, and in this case with a public device, in places like cafés or stores. Another post shows a 1980s television advertisement, framing the post with references to times when there were only two (public and national) television stations. The caption reads, “Who knows what this piece is?”, directly calling audiences to respond. These nostalgic social media posts evoke the memories of the target consumers, rather than showing relics of the actual locations, abandoned even before the twentieth century (Figlia, 2016).

FIGURE 16.2 Phone counter in a social media post



Comments: Instagram post by @cerdeira_homeforcreativity. In English, "Recorda-se?" means "Do you remember?".

Nostalgia "entails affective management" of the relationship with the objects, spaces, and people associated with such a past (Paasonen, 2021: 144). It works affectively, moving or touching the audiences (Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020), which means that nostalgia is also an efficient mechanism to increase social media engagement (commenting, liking, or sharing) through identification and relatability to everyday, even banal experiences that are associated with memories.

In fact, these contents allude to analogue forms of media that resonate with social media users of specific generations, now in their 30s through to their 50s. These analogue media have an imperfect quality of communication (Wieghorst, 2021), but are also bound to limited connectivity – as one would have to, for instance, pay according to use and move to the few places where the devices were available. Limited connectivity is, in turn, associated with an idea of greater intentionality, that is, using media for contact just as needed. In other words, as the discourses of mindfulness proclaim, the imagery of analogue media pertains to the same constellation of tropes where digital media are said to control people rather than act as tools they operate (Wieghorst, 2021). Some of the examples recuperated by the tourist companies are also specific to the country, as there was more variation, for instance, in how telecommunication corporations set infrastructures and devices before the era of economic and technological convergence, where global references reign. This local significance also creates a sense of belonging and cultural connection, which is accentuated on-site through folkloric and regionally bound objects used in decoration.

Analogue nostalgia used in social media marketing consolidates the intent of ironic posters to attract the sophisticated tourist. Only those with the memories and references can understand the nostalgic messages and fully appreciate the irony of critiquing the digital *on* social media platforms. Furthermore, it intersects with a generational difference. In this line of reasoning, older generations lived in more pristine conditions, and the younger ones live in a world dominated by digital technologies. It is to approximate such an authentic environment – with more time on their hands and a far less stressful life (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and in a time older than themselves – that tourists are invited to book their stay in a dead zone. For example, a simple life is celebrated in one of Moinhos de Ovil’s social media posts. Through the multimodal affordances of Instagram Stories, a close-up photo of a cup of black coffee and some crackers and honey is accompanied by the music lyrics, “Don’t need any TV, don’t need any phone” (English in original).

As Paasonen (2021) sharply remarked, these notions of the past are also romanticised: Think of people living without electricity and spending long evenings with only themselves as entertainment. Peasants were not necessarily happy in an arduous everyday life, mostly connected with farming. Now, guests have every convenience at their disposal – even if, in Moinho do Maneio, appliances are hidden within nice wooden cabinets. The rustic elements of the five venues are preserved, though stylised in the case of Ovil (with low saturated, pastel colours), Cerdeira, and Maneio (with red solid and intense blue, respectively, contrasting with the schist).

Colonised by connectivity

Other factors pertaining to the influence of digital and social media on tourism complicate disconnection in dead zones. Social media not only work as an important source of information about the tourist locations (including influencer visibility), alongside traditional media, but also a collaborative pool where tourists recount their experiences to others. “At the time [I was at Ovil] I shared about this on Instagram and my friends asked me where this was”, a female guest, 45, recalled. Smartphones can also be used for photography, although the 50-year-old female tourist in Maneio said this should be done in moderation during a hike and, if posted online, this should be done later; she is critical about people who keep taking pictures all the time during the hikes she takes in groups. The digital services are also used for geolocation, as a 60-year-old male tourist in Cerdeira told us: “I just used the Internet to find the trails”.

I drove to a (jumbo) swing we had heard about, at the top of Serra da Lousã, but could not find it until I used Google Maps, as there were no signs on the road. Over the last few years, Portugal has installed more swings, walkways, and suspension bridges in inaccessible mountains to incentivise tourism in a country that does not have a strong relationship with nature as the Nordics do

(Syvertsen, 2022). Especially swings and suspension bridges bring a romantic flavour with a modern touch to the natural places. When I got to the Lousã swing, some people were posing for photos, patiently waiting to take them with no one in the frame, alluding to the romantic ideal (Jacobsen, 2004). The poster bore the hashtag #IstoéLousã [this is Lousã] – when accent marks from the Portuguese language do not even work for hashtag traffic; hence, the association is more expressive than functional (Jorge, 2019).

Additional material evidence of the influence of social media on tourism is a frame in the shape of a heart, built in wood in Candal, the village next to Cerdeira (see Figure 16.3). One must climb the mountain a bit to get a photograph of the village from above. The irony is that this village has a very scarce mobile signal, and the frame conducts tourists to get the postcard in a specific way, maybe to make this village distinct from others in the region, when they share it on social media.

FIGURE 16.3 Frame for a social media postcard



Comments: The photograph was taken in Candal.

Source: photo by Ana Jorge

Dead zones stand in tension with the crossbreeding that social media inflicts on nature and rural tourism. When connectivity spreads symbolically, if not materially, into natural places and fosters tourists to continue their visits on social media, the divide between connectivity and place is eroded and nature is further romanticised – and “Instagrammised”. As Simmel (2002) posed, metropolitan life is so grand that its web affects even those standing outside through the means of money relations. Digital media expands and colonises nature tourism and dead zones even where connectivity is unavailable.

Expanding connectivity during the pandemic

The relationship between dead zones and disconnection was further complicated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the venues we initially listed from 2019 media pieces had changed their conditions when we started collecting data in March 2021. During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, three of the five businesses had their connectivity increase. The promoters of Entre Sebes and Moinho do Maneio mentioned they “finally” had one operator agreeing to install better Internet services. This expansion was felt as all the more needed because the mobile connectivity was feeble:

During the early period of the pandemic, we were mostly at home and we heard about a solution. We eventually installed the Internet via satellite. We never say that we have it so that they [the clients] won’t expect Internet everywhere. But because there is no mobile signal, people need it more. By the public area of breakfasts, we have a TP-link [router] which anyone, if they want to, can use to go online. (Anabela Martins, Moinho do Maneio)

These changes in Moinho do Maneio were not marketed through social media and were inconsistently communicated to actual clients. As previously demonstrated, some of the clients we interviewed were surprised to find themselves without any mobile service. They keep the Wi-Fi key on a handwritten paper at the corner of the breakfast lounge, which one can only find if they ask the staff. As for Entre Sebes, Susana Pereira said she still calls guests to directly inform them in advance what the mobile connectivity is like at the farm: “Most of them still come, but I have had a few cancellations”.

In Cerdeira, the pandemic led to spreading Wi-Fi availability throughout the resort as a sanitary precaution to avoid concentrating people in the café, the single Internet access point they used to have. The schist guesthouses now have fibre Internet access, which was announced in our reservation confirmation e-mail. Joana Salgado said that “now, everyone can access the Internet from the houses. They can choose, right? Now it’s up to each of them if they want to use it or not”. To further accentuate the irony, Cerdeira has also been promoting options for remote workers, or even digital nomads, as Portugal has been doing in the aftermath of the pandemic. In fact, promising creativity through immersion in a mountain environment is still part of the

focus on sensations (Farkic et al., 2022) – precisely what was sought by the mother of the 15-year-old boy we interviewed in Cerdeira.

Concluding discussion

Through the notion of atmosphere, I have explored in this chapter how dead zones contain different and contradictory layers (Germann Molz & Buda, 2022) between material and symbolic elements related to (dis)connection: Some deter, while others expand, connectivity. Moreover, possibilities to connect and disconnect from digital media are affectively experienced differently by visitors in these complex atmospheres.

Disconnection through tourism in dead zones appears as symbolically and sensorially constructed through repertoires of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia, which create an atmosphere of detachment from what is habitual or dictated by the outer world to replace it with a self-indulgent set of bodily sensations focusing on here, now, me, and the selective us. In the post-pandemic world, the tropes of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia pose dead zones as spaces for an idealised individuality and selective sociability. As digital detox retreats and camps, dead zones would produce a “therapeutic disconnection” (Hesselberth, 2021), or a form of physical and mental restoration or recalibration (Sharma, 2015). In that sense, in addition to being a business in themselves, tourist dead zones are an instrument that returns an ameliorated individual to the neoliberal society.

The pandemic accentuated what was already a profound implication of connectivity in these tourist locations. The smartphone was already the habitual device at the service of the tourist experience for its affordances relating to photography, navigation, information, and contact. Digital media logics have also colonised tourism in dead zones as tourism offices, municipalities, and hosts invest in seeking tourists’ engagement with places through digital devices and further sharing of experiences through social media, affectively elicited by posters, puns, frames, or hashtags. During the pandemic, however, while mobile signals remained feeble or non-existent due to remoteness and material conditions, Internet connectivity and access were expanded in these locations – out of sanitary precaution, attending to visitors’ anxieties in a hyperconnected post-pandemic society, or capitalising new opportunities by targeting remote workers.

Analysing the media and social media visibility of the different locations allowed us to go past detecting the irony or cynicism of promoting disconnection through digital media. In fact, social media promotion – including influencers – works to affectively engage consumers and augment and socialise their tourist experience of disconnection. Crucially, the venues that specifically market themselves as disconnected (Moinhos de Ovil, Moinho do Maneio, and Cerdeira) increase their market value and attract customers who are able to pay more. On the contrary, Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira do not

capitalise on disconnectivity, and instead take it as an accidental limitation of remote and unfavourable locations. While all tourists we interviewed were from urban contexts, we only found working-class clients in Entre Sebes, and Quinta da Franqueira does not distinguish a class profile in their foreign customers.

In addition to being classed, disconnection is gendered, as interviews revealed different types of anxieties generated by the unreachability (Cai et al., 2020; Farkic et al., 2022). In the cracks of connectivity expectations, we could see the social distribution and negotiation of connectivity, as women are the main carers for children and the elderly. Disconnection in dead zones is expected, negotiated, and embraced differently by tourists, as they bring their social but also cultural and personal viewpoints to atmospheres that accumulate these distinct possibilities to disconnect. Experiences of disconnection in dead zones are variable as an affective relation that occurs through temporality as well as embodiment (Coleman, 2022). Most of the tourists we interviewed did not expect complete disconnection, but rather a contained disconnection that would allow them to be away from whatever is heteronomously imposed and remain deliberately and self-consciously connected. In fact, only a few visitors embraced the promise of disconnection in dead zones and considered it a way to open up for other sensorial experiences and modes of attention (Karppi et al., 2021).

Exploring tourist locations in dead zones in Portugal as atmospheres allowed for an understanding of the social construction of disconnection – by hosts, tourists, journalists, audiences of social media, tourism offices, and beyond – in conflation with material conditions, and how these are experienced socially as well as affectively. In the post-pandemic period, the complexity of these atmospheres emerges both as a response to and a capitalisation of reconfigured modes of sociality, engagement with outdoor life, and mobility.

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Endnotes

- 1 The *Expresso* newspaper suffered a major cyberattack in January 2022, and the original publication, “Disconnecting: digital detox in 8 wi-fi free venues”, could not be retrieved.
- 2 Cerdeira was rebuilt through a venture initiated by Kerstin Thomas, a German student in Coimbra in the late 1970s who found the village, as Joana Salgado told us in an interview. It is an entire village that has been being rebuilt since the late 1980s with the investment of the family of the couple that owns it as an arts residency – and since the 2000s also with a touristic component with the investment of other parties.
- 3 The host of Quinta da Franqueira told us the visitors were mostly foreigners and that no class patterns could be captured.