

## MOUNTAIN TOURISM AND LIMINALITY: INTENSE EXPERIENCE IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

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### Abstract

The objective of this work is to contribute to delineating the profile of mountain tourists from the Highlands of Scotland who choose to use bothies as accommodation (small extremely rustic houses, usually made of stone, without any urban comfort). Using the methodological triangulation, mixing quantitative and qualitative methodologies, were verified in the field research, from April to June 2015, with the use of questionnaires, interviews and participant observation, the origins and motivations of tourists who stayed in the Scottish Highlands. The data were revised in 2020. The theoretical approach encompasses the reference of adventure and mountain tourism and the anthropological perspective related to the studies of rituals, understanding the tourist's departure from their daily life to temporarily live in a bothy as a psychologically and socially liminal stage. It is concluded that it is the citizens of small towns who feel the greatest need for social isolation from the mountain, seeking to enjoy an isolated and rustic place outside their daily lives.

**Keywords:** Mountain Tourism. Scotland. Bothies.

## TURISMO DE MONTANHA E LIMINARIDADE: EXPERIÊNCIA INTENSA NAS HIGHLANDS DA ESCÓCIA

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## Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é contribuir para delinear o perfil do turista de montanha das Highlands da Escócia que optam por usar como alojamento os bothies (pequenas casas extremamente rústicas, geralmente feitas de pedra, sem qualquer conforto urbano). Utilizando a triangulação metodológica, mesclando metodologias quantitativas e qualitativas com o uso de questionários, entrevistas e observação participante, foram verificadas na pesquisa de campo as origens e motivações dos turistas que permaneceram nas montanhas escocesas no período de abril a junho de 2015. Os dados foram revisados em 2020. A abordagem teórica engloba o referencial do turismo de aventura e de montanha e a perspectiva antropológica relativa aos estudos dos rituais, entendendo o afastamento do turista da sua vida cotidiana para viver temporariamente em um bothy como um estágio psicológica e socialmente liminar. Conclui-se que são os cidadãos de pequenas cidades que sentem a maior necessidade de isolamento social da montanha, procurando usufruir de um lugar isolado e rústico fora do seu cotidiano.

Palavras-chave: Turismo de Montanha, Escócia, Bothies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The desire to explore remote or inaccessible areas is a decisive motivation for a few tourists around the world (DEBARBIEUX, 1995; GODDE, PRICE & ZIMMERMANN, 1999; JOKINEN AND VEIJOLA, 2003). The search for mysterious and spiritual values, the physical and psychic boundaries put to the test and the subjective self-assertion are elements associated with voluntary and temporary displacements to remote places and, especially, mountains (STRONZA, 2001). It is in this sense that the reported field experiences are analyzed through a perspective of adventure tourism in contexts of nature. The aspects related to the authenticity of the tourist experience and its liminal character are highlighted in the study, regarding the emancipatory and favorable status of the alteration of the mental states that are proper to the tourist enjoyment (ALMEIDA AND PINTO, 2017, 616).

In the context of adventure tourism, and even in more general context, the mountains have peculiar characteristics. They can be seen as spaces of contemplation or sources of inspiration for writers and painters (GODDE, PRICE & ZIMMERMANN, 1999). Mountains can be perceived as frightening places, sources of disturbing and dangerous experiences

(TEMPEST, STARKEY AND ENNEW, 2007), but can also be sites of union, creativity and self-realization (STURDY, SCHWARZ AND SPICER, 2006; SIMPSON, STURGES AND WEIGHT, 2009). But also, and especially, they are considered as sacred places, sites of power and spiritual ablution (KEITH, 1988; JOKINEN AND VEIJOLA, 2003). In the past, the local mountains that, by themselves, generate a mysticism around them, were places defined as perfect to harbor mysterious and magical forces, animals and monsters with supernatural powers, giving rise to mythical narratives that last in time. For this very reason are also attributed to the mountains terrifying definitions – as to natural phenomena such as volcanoes, strong winds, avalanches, fog, glaciers – as having divine manifestations (DEBARBIEUX, 1995).

All this mystique around the mountain space, including the physical effort to exploit it, favors a characteristic mental state that attracts an important contingent of people year after year to enjoy the recreational period in the Highlands of Scotland. It is in this sense that this work aimed to verify the main motivations and origins of travelers who chose *bothies*, rudimentary mountain shelters made of wood or stone located in the Highlands of Scotland, initially built as shelters for workers or pastors as places of leisure enjoyment. Over the course of five months, research was carried out with those tourists who traveled from their societies of origin to submit themselves to the harsh climate conditions, that combine the freezing cold, the storms and snowstorms, with the absence of electricity and sanitation facilities, or even of a simple bed for rest.

This work uses a mixed research methodology in the empirical field, guided by a theoretical framework formed by the specialized literature on tourism – with emphasis on the dimensions of experience, adventure and mountain – and on anthropological studies of ritology, to better understand the conduct and guidelines of bothies' users, thus discussing some aspects related to the profile of these tourists. The text is divided into an introduction to the theme for the reader, a brief literature review dealing with the theme, the methodological design of the research carried out, the discussion of the results and the final considerations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Mutana and Mukwada (2018), there is no concrete definition for mountain-route tourism, but descriptions such 'trails', 'byways', 'themed routes' are all images of mountain routes. The authors define mountain route tourism as descriptions of activities of travelers who enjoy tourism products found along a pre-determined mountainous course or direction. Also, they also state that the

Development of mountain routes should be done with a close understanding of the expected quality of tourist experiences, yet without overlooking the fact that the mountain environments are fragile. When visiting mountain destinations, tourists often demand luxuries like those in the metropolis yet will eventually avoid over-developed mountain destinations (Mutana and Mukwada, 2018, 63).

Also, Smith and Diekmann (2017) argued that “most people need a chance to escape, relax and recuperate on holiday, being episodic happiness and hedonic pleasures an integral part of this, but a time might come when more long-term, self-development or transformation outcomes are desired”.

The mountain provides to the travelers a wide range of emotions which constitutes a difficulty of definition of the tourism product itself. Intangibility and diverse intrapersonal perceptions put this theme in a perspective of contemplation and alienation that, according to Vidon and Rickly (2018) is an ever-present component of the human condition and that contributes significantly to touristic desires for escape, rejuvenation, and existential experiences. In this context it is important to mention that the mountain can be considered as an object to be rescued by the tourist in the extent of his personal needs of development and inner growth. Besides here, in great measure, the difficulty of its position.

The question of the search for authenticity in tourism, one of the key points for its spread as a global phenomenon, can be linked to three lines of discussion, according to Reisinger and Steiner (2005). One of these lines of research focuses on authenticity as a romantic problem as a reaction to the modernist-industrial experience: a search for the Traditional, in a projection of images of small-scale societies as static worlds, frozen in a remote and bucolic past. This perspective emerges from the controversy between Boorstin (1961) and MacCannell (1976). For the former the whole tourist experience is superficial and inauthentic and formed by pseudo-events, being only variations of unfolding mass society and consumers.

On the other hand, for the latter, the tourist is someone who seeks an authentic world situated necessarily outside (geographically and socially) of its routine life. For the author, this modern pilgrim, ideal-typical of the middle classes of the industrial West, would find in the other ethnic, historical or telluric fields these genuine forms of life. However, it recognizes that in the list of available options to the tourist, along with authenticity, there would also be a commercial simulacrum staged in the tourist destination (MOUTINHO, 1987; SMITH, 1989).

Another axis of discussion on the subject proposes that the authenticity would only be a symbolic figure, a projection of the tourist gaze, impelled by western stereotypes (URRY, 1999). In this way it would be more appropriate to think of authenticity in the place and/or the space in itself, but in its senses: instead of the authenticity manifested in an empirical manner, it would be, like a phantasmagoria, projected in its meanings. And in this context would be fundamental the media and publicity in the configuration of the eye of the beholder (GRABURN AND BARTHEL-BOUCHIER, 2001).

Finally, we would have a line of thought – aligned with a postmodernist perspective – that understands authenticity simply as something not significant in the context of tourist fruition, since the tourist would be much more interested in an intense hedonistic experience than in a quest for a deeply existential experience (COHEN, 2005). This approach approximates to a certain extent Elias and Dunning's propositions about the senses of excitement in leisure times through what the authors define as a controlled lack of control (ELIAS AND DUNNING, 1992). The problem of authenticity in tourism, that is, the ontological nature in a relationship between visitors and who is visited, is necessarily linked to the general characteristics of the tourism activity.

The tourist experience can be seen in three dimensions: a temporary distance from the daily spaces, the consumption of goods and services that satisfy the needs and motivations of the tourists and the experience of a tourist gaze, motivated by the desire to see different realities which contrast with those of everyday life (URRY, 1999; PEREIRO, 2009; SANTANA, 2009).

In other words, the intensity of the tourist experience, the length of staying away from home, the amount of cultural distance between the destination and the society of origin, the socio-

psychological propensity of the tourist to the acceptance and enjoyment of new experiences and acquisition of new standards of conduct, the personal satisfaction of the experience lived in the tourist period of time and the desire to repeat it, are factors that can be combined in such a way that the tourist can change his own ordinary conduct in the society in which he lives.

For some authors (LAGUNAS, 2007) the tourist experiences a condition that is characterized as liminal (from the Latin limen, meaning border or limit), as it distances itself physically, psychically and socially from its place of origin, meaning that there is an external or peripheral condition to the day-to-day, separated from the obligatory tasks of everyday life (TURNER, 1974).

In 1982, the same author highlighted that liminality eventually takes on an appropriate definition to describe the transition phase in the initiation process, alike the boundary between the separation of adolescents from their social environment and their incorporation into adult life. With the same analogy, Gennep (1960) describes rites of passage as certain stages that occur in various different circumstances throughout people's lives, such as adolescence, marriage, stages in formal education, first job, first home, immigration and so on.

Such contexts would follow a procedural logic composed of three well-defined parts: i. Separation, that is to say, the momentary withdrawal from ordinary life; ii. Liminal Period, the experience of extraordinary or sacred experience; and iii. Re-assimilation / reintegration, the return to the ordinary or profane world, already as a bearer of a status different from that which they had in the initial stage (GENNEP, 1960; TURNER, 1982; SEGALLEN, 2005).

According to Zhang and Xu (2019, 84),

Physical and social toursapes have positive effects on liminal experiences, and socially symbolic and natural toursapes have positive effects on emotional arousal and liminal experience. Emotional arousal mediates the effects of socially symbolic and natural toursapes on liminal experience, and tourists' sensation-seeking motivations have a positive significant effect on those liminal experiences.

It is from this perspective that the British anthropologist Nelson Graburn considers tourism as an incidental ritual that can be apprehended from the methodological model of the rite of passage as shaped by classical anthropology. In this way, the tourist activity would be

presented in a cyclical and temporary way as a period of time away from ordinary life. It would therefore be permissible to view tourism as a modern sacred journey. And its fruition, an experience within a liminal time (SMITH, 1989; Lagunas, 2007; Pinto, 2011; 2021).

In this way, the practice of tourism in the context of the Scottish Highlands can be related as a search for an authentic and deep earth connection within this kind of sacred tourism journey. Similar motivations are found in the election of destinations with religious appeal or with a view to pilgrimage (ALMEIDA AND PINTO, 2017).

### 3. CASE STUDY: *BOTHIES* AND HIGHLANDS

Mountains can be perceived as frightening places, sources of disturbing and dangerous experiences (TEMPEST, STARKEY AND ENNEW, 2007), but can also be sites of union, creativity and self-realization (SIMPSON, STURGES AND WEIGHT, 2009; STURDY, SCHWARZ AND SPICER, 2006). From the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, Romanticism signals a change in the meaning of mountains in common sense. Once seen as places that inspire fear and restlessness, the mountains come to have a complicity with those who seek solitude and distance from modern society with philosophers, at this time, finding an understanding for their interpretations and arguments about human existence (SCHNEIDER, 2007).

It is from the realization of this transformative/disturbing potential that the research here described was developed and aimed at understanding the experience of voluntarily occupying small shelters of wood or stone in mountains of difficult access (*bothies*) in the Highlands of Scotland, in precarious sanitary conditions, without any comfort and totally at the mercy of the harsh climatic conditions. The *bothies*, originally farmers and shepherds' shelters, existed so that farmhands on large farms and remote estates or for those working in the quarrying industry or building dams amongst the vast and long mountains could have a place to rest or to stay in the vicinity, since transport links would have been completely impossible at that time. It should be noted that the arrival of cheaper vehicles, agricultural machinery and better transport links meant that it was no longer necessary for these people to reside in these farthest corners of the country. The population gradually began to abandon

these refuges, the extraction of stones mainly in Scotland fell into disuse and the districts were no longer inhabited (SMITH, 2015).

When going to a *bothy* it is important to recognize that there will not be the usual facilities and amenities. The absence of taps, sinks, even beds in some, electric power and even if there is a fireplace, the lack of fossil fuel can be a reality since many are in places where there is no vegetation in the surrounding area.

The *bothies*, on general, have a platform where people can sleep, but in case the shelter is too crowded, the reality of having to sleep on the cold, damp stone floor may even be a fact. Water supplies should be taken into account during the length of stay because there is often no source of drinking water, not even in the wider area. Few are the *bothies* that have, in terms of sanitary facilities, more than a spade for covering the faeces.

So, on icy and rainy days as they occur in two thirds of the year in Scotland, facing the adversities of nature armed with a spade in order to meet physiological needs, are part of the experience for those who choose to have a *bothy* experience. Figure 1 represents a distribution of *bothies* according to geographic division of the United Kingdom (UK). It is possible to note that *bothies* are mostly distributed in Scotland (zones 1 to 7), but also in the north of England (zone 8) and still some in Wales (zone 9).

Figure 1. Location of *bothies* in the United Kingdom



Source: Mountain Bothies Association.



#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The target population in this work are the users of *bothies* (or mountain shelters) and, as a basis for answering the questions in the questionnaire, only one subject used mountain refuges outside the UK. Although the network of *bothies* is present in most of Great Britain, only zones 3, 4 and 5 represented in Figure 1 were selected to initiate field research, based on the proximity of the University of Highlands and Islands (in Scottish Gaelic Oilthigh at Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eilean), in the town of Fort William (An Gearasdan) where the five months of research took place.

Initially and prior to the collection of information, 50 questionnaires were indicated as a sufficient number to represent the sample and, once the questionnaire collection window was finished, this number was eventually found to be attainable. The time window for collecting questionnaires ran from mid-April 2015 to the end of June 2015. Once the ideal target audience was located, the snowball sample method (BABBIE, 1995) was used to expand the sample, inviting respondents to recommend others who fit the research objective to be part of the sample. While the number of informants to be recruited depends on when is achieved the theoretical saturation of the phenomenon, it is, however, generally the nature of in-depth analysis of interviews that guarantees a greater amount of quality data, this being possible with a small number of participants. In general, a sample of ten individuals is suitable for phenomenological interviews (BOYD, 2001; CRESWELL, 2007). Of course, depending on the nature of the event and research objectives, this example can be easily expanded.

The questionnaires were applied online, using mainly digital platforms such as the group of users of *bothies* in the UK, the Facebook social networking site, by sending emails to mountaineering clubs, associations of outdoor sports and contact with nature, and finally through the University Campus address in the city of Fort William, Scotland. The online questionnaire was forwarded by the Board of Directors of the University to various research stakeholders. Around 150 emails were sent in order to have a sample that included different groups and thus, that had a more heterogeneous results. Nevertheless, the initial experience

in the field demonstrated that this is not a mass tourism and that it was not frequent to find people in the *bothies* so, after about 2 months of data collection the number of completed questionnaires was fixed at only 50.

It was not intended to bother who was at the shelter and much less to create an interrogative environment to perform a questionnaire. From the beginning, it was believed that in order to get truer and more emotional responses it would be necessary to question informally and thus, we needed a user of the *bothies* to make the questions. Initially, the method of data collection was expected to be through on-the-spot interviews or rather personally interacting with the respondents in the *bothies* around a campfire with informal questions and obtaining records and notes throughout conversations. However, after 10 initial attempts, this hypothesis *in oco* was replaced by the online questionnaire method. Among several reasons that led to the investigation procedure being changed, the main ones were the difficulties of access, scarce transportation resources, difficulty in finding tourists in *bothies*, a lack of answers to questionnaires due to fatigue at the end of the day and difficult meteorological conditions. The climate in the highlands of Scotland is famous for its adverse conditions practically all year round, where also during the spring it is possible to find snow still in many mountains. The 10 initial attempts ran between February and April with very harsh weather conditions, reason why shelters were practically empty. Thus, as a way of circumventing these points, a questionnaire was developed based on a digital platform that could be sent to interested parties at any time. The field trips continued in the expectation of finding users inside the mountain shelters but this time with the purpose of being able to disseminate the questionnaire. It was also intended, informally, to collect information that would make the investigation richer and more detailed, making it easier to comprehend some answers given in the questionnaires, and helping in the accomplishment of the work.

Emphasizing the questionnaire, it was elaborated in the online Google Docs platform with the address <http://goo.gl/forms/F4j4cpwnFn>. Having been applied only in the UK, the language in which the questionnaire was developed was English. It consisted of twelve questions, four of which were open-ended answers related to the central theme of this work, phenomenology, enabling feedback to be obtained regarding the experience of the respondents with all the details they could remember.

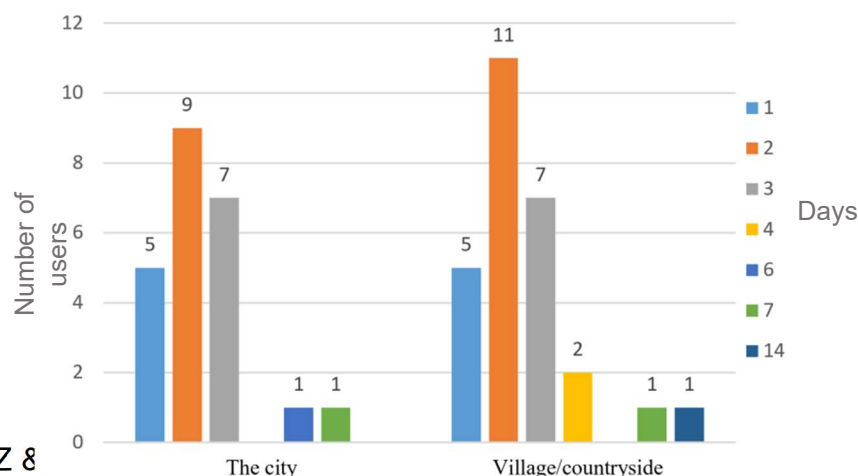
Following the original design of the research project, the four open-ended questions and personal opinion were analysed in two ways: i. The cross-checking of keywords in the answers of the various elements of the sample; ii. Analysis and citation of narratives of the sample.

## 5. FINDINGS

The sample of this investigation turned out not to be equally representative with regard to gender. Which in itself is already relevant data regarding the bothies' user profile. Thus, 70% of the sample was male and the remaining 30% were female. According to Figure 2, 88% of the respondents spend one or two nights in the *bothies*, being the greater use of these mountain shelters over the weekend.

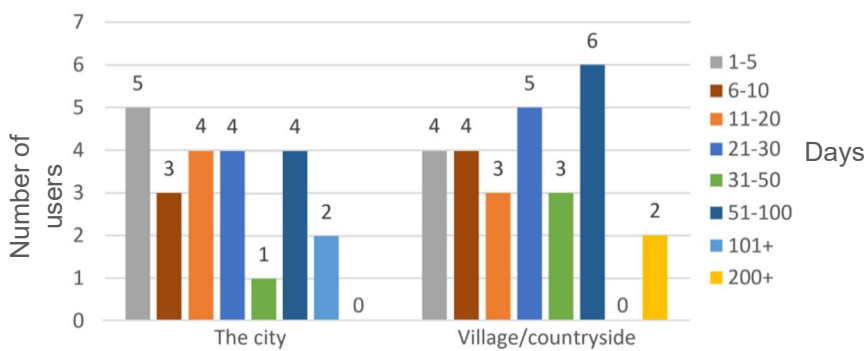
As the sample strongly reflects a population of 30-55 years of age (data not shown), it indicates that most of them are professionally active individuals reserving the weekends (one, two or even three days) for leisure pursuits, among which are the desire to go out and explore the nature. It was also possible to compare the two variables shown in Figure 2, the place of origin of tourists and the length of stay in the *bothies*. The purpose of this comparison was to see if the inhabitants of large urban centres spent more days away from home than the inhabitants living in a village or rural area, seeking to justify whether the stressful and overly frenetic lives of those living in cities would lead to a longer presence in the use of *bothies*. However, the main conclusion retrieved from this analysis is that those who live in rural areas are those who spend more days outside their residence.

Figure 2. Place of origin of tourists and length of stay in the *bothies*.



This work also aimed to understand if the total number of nights spent in *bothies* are related with the origin of people. In Figure 3 it is possible to note that the same amount of tourists from both origins spent their days on bothies until 21-30 days. After that, the values differ whereas more people from the village/countryside spent between 51-100 days on *bothies* and only them spent more than 200 days, contrarily to the ones, only from the city that spent more than 101 days.

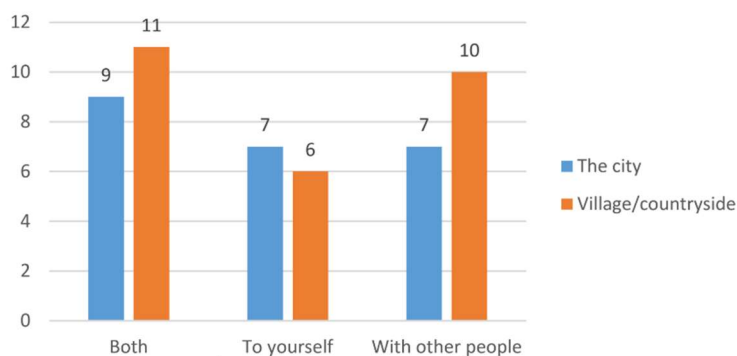
Figure 3. Place of origin of tourists and days spending on *bothies* up to the present.



Source: Self elaboration. Fieldwork

In the present research, it was analysed if people preferred to stay on *bothies* alone, with other people or on both conditions, depending on their origin. A quick analysis of Figure 4 enables a few conclusions to be drawn. People don't seem to prefer an exclusive approach of the *bothy*, as seen by the higher amount of people that chose "both", comparing with the other two conditions. The origin of people seems mainly to affect the preference for staying with other people, where there is a bigger difference between data. Moreover, tourists from the village/countryside seem to have a greater need for company when on *bothy* use.

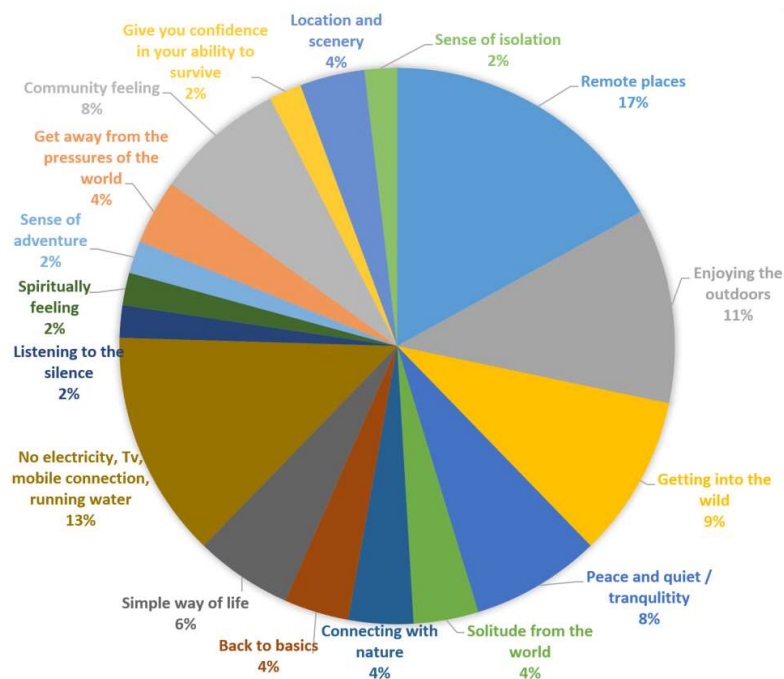
Figure 4. Place of origin of tourists and preference of *bothy* use.



Source: Self elaboration. Fieldwork

Figure 5 shows the most common answers obtained to the question “Regarding the reasons that led you to use a *bothy* for a stay, what motivates you to use one and what is the most incredible thing you can gain from the experience when using one?”. A pattern was observed, in the sense that the most obtained answers were related with the solitude obtained when using these shelters. Undoubtedly, tourists tend to seek this experience to be alone (“peace and quiet” in blue), while “enjoying the outdoors”, in grey, and “getting in the wild”, in yellow, in the remote areas, in light blue, of the UK. Being without electricity and running water seems also to affect greatly the choice of undergoing in such adventure.

Figure 5. Motivations of tourists to use *bothies*.



Source: Self elaboration. Fieldwork

Prior to the analysis of all results, expectations were that it would be the residents of large cities and bustling urban centres who would spend the most days and nights using *bothies*. Surprisingly and in contrast with what would be expected in the common sense, it is not the

inhabitants of the big cities who seek the withdrawal provided by the stays in the Highlands. It is the citizen of the small localities that feels a greater need for the social separation provided by the mountain and the *bothies*, and also that spend more days outside their residence. This seems to be a flagrant contradiction present in the literature (Krippendorf, 1986; Mathieson and Wall, 1990).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Without prejudice to the assumption of other vectors, such as the economic, an understanding is needed of why the search for strict isolation is more attractive for the country dweller than for the city dweller. This may due refer to the traveller's search for a more authentic reality, with reference to a present past, embodied in the socially shared memory. And in the *bothies* there is a vigorous confrontation of a Spartan reality, the reaffirmation of the local identifying character itself as a factor of attractiveness. This is supported by the work of Malheiros, Lourenço and Almeida (2016, 72), where they state that

Although environmental, cultural and social characteristics are constitutive and differentiating elements of places, it is precisely their identity that confers originality and uniqueness to places and distinguishes them from others. It is in this context that other fundamental concepts for this theme emerge: authenticity and identity assumption.

In face-to-face interviews with users of *bothies*, the value attributed by them to outstanding and authentic experiences stands out. The more intense the experience, the longer it will be remembered. When the sentimental value of the experience represents a higher level, it will serve their personal enrichment, leaving the need, the eagerness to experience again this strong contrast/spatial and temporal transition.

It is in this sense that, from the point of view of the activity of tourism, the relationship between liminality and mountain is accentuated. Given the radical nature of its inclement weather conditions, the mountain is par excellence the place where identities can be challenged or even transformed, where subjective positions cease to be sustainable and people become susceptible to the marks of extreme experience. The connection between mountain and liminality as facilitating agents of impetuous emotional states, and by more

introspective antitheses, is evident in the present work. In other words, it is demonstrated that the *bothies* are only a pretext recovered by the tourists as a liminal object for their personal development. It will be opportune and interesting to continue investigating similar contexts by fostering knowledge within the scope of the liminality and its meaning and scope within the tourist activity.

The isolation and transgression can be equated as intensifying factors of the Tourist Experience. The analysis and interpretation of the Tourist Experience in the three phases that define it, as much in material terms as on an emotional level, thereby gains an added importance: antecedence and motivations, the actual experience, the memory and integration. Therefore, the transcendence of the experience lived in the *bothy* clearly marks the extramundane space/time that characterizes the tourist activity. Beyond that, according to the reports, this experience imprints a distinctive and indelible mark on the subjectivity of adventurous tourists.

This research about the tourism experience in rustic shelters in the Highlands of Scotland also aggregates different notions of tourism, namely the form of separation (ROJEK, 1993), the reaction to contemporary urban-industrial society (KRIPPENDORF, 1986) and the search for oneself through values associated with the authenticity of one's experiences (COHEN, 2005). These concepts, rather than being complementary, become convergent.

This study had some limitations that derive essentially from the scarce bibliography about shelters and mountain tourism and also from adverse weather conditions to develop these investigations. Furthermore, we dealt with tourists who were not very prone to provide interviews. More research is required to better understand the meaning of *bothies* and others rustic shelters use that are frequent in the mountains all over the world.

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