



# Buggy rides as a tourist attraction in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil

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**ABSTRACT:** Adventure tourism in Rio Grande do Norte (RN) is favored by its geography. One activity in this category, and the object of study of this research, is buggy riding. The aim of this research was to analyze how buggy riding emerged and developed as a tourist attraction in RN, identifying its characteristics and potentialities through interviews with professionals who work in the area. In terms of methodology, the research is characterized as exploratory descriptive, and qualitative in nature, conducted through structured interviews with professionals who conduct buggy tours in RN, most of them working for over twenty years in the region. As results, we point out the positive views regarding buggy tours as an attraction in RN, as well as aspects of its evolution. This demonstrates the importance of this activity for the state, not only for tourism, but for the whole network that is benefited through it.

**Keywords:** Adventure Tourism ;  
Buggy Tour;  
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## INTRODUCTION

Tourist activity has existed in society for many centuries, since the earliest people felt the need to move from one location to another (Ignarra, 2013). Over the years, new concepts and sectors have been created in this area. The practice of tourism is increasingly present in people's lives, as it is common to seek leisure as an escape from the reality, or for relaxation (Campos & Maia, 2015). However, among the more than one hundred and ten tourism segments that exist, according to Panosso Netto & Ansarah (2009), the study will focus on the segment of Adventure Tourism, since this is related to buggy riding, which give visitors an emotional thrill and a rush of adrenaline.

The practice of tourism activity is increasingly common in Brazil. According to data from the Empresa Brasileira de Infraestrutura Aeroportuária - Agência Nacional de Aviação (Civil Brazilian Airport Infrastructure Company - National Civil Aviation Agency) - ANAC, in 2019, there were more than ninety-five million scheduled domestic flights in Brazil, carrying around 104.4 million passengers. After the travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, approximately 62.6 million domestic trips were completed by domestic companies in 2021. The indicators for December 2020 show numbers closer to pre-pandemic levels (Panrotas, 2022). It is clear, therefore, that tourism is a major contributor to the Brazilian economy.

According to an article published on March 15, 2019 in the newspaper Folha de Londrina - O Jornal do Paraná, tourism generated US\$ 8.8 trillion in GDP worldwide, and was responsible for 319 million jobs. Thus, it is increasingly important to analyze the practice of tourism, which is increasingly appearing in various sectors, as it brings benefits for a wide range of sectors, including: hotels, travel agencies, and other sectors directly and indirectly linked to tourism.

According to an article published in the Tribuna do Norte, in 2020, Natal is the eighth most sought-after destination among Brazilians. The city is famous for its beautiful dunes and beaches, and dune buggy tours have become the favorite activity among visitors. Buggy riding featured for the first time in the soap opera Cambalacho, then in the soap operas, *Tieta do Agreste*, *O Clone*, *Flor do Caribe* (Lima & Silva, 2019) and *Chiquititas*, the latter with scenes recorded in the dunes of the Genipabu and Jacumã Lagoon (Prefeitura Municipal do Natal, 2015).

The study of this topic is, therefore, relevant to the social environment, as tourism is considered one of the main economic activities of the state of RN (Prefeitura Municipal do Natal, 2014). The population should be knowledgeable about such an important economic activity, as it is not only the buggy tour

operators who benefit, but an entire network of services, whether directly or indirectly, such as hotels, tour or travel agencies, taxis, workshops, gas stations, and others.

Data from the Ministry of Tourism (MTUR) estimates that in 2022, tourism will be responsible for 3.63 million jobs. Companies such as hotels, travel agencies, airlines, transport companies, and restaurants all directly generate tourism-related employment (Brasil, 2013). Also, according to economist Ivanilton Passos of the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), more and more autonomous jobs are being generated that depend on tourism. Because tours often make several stops along the way, at each stop the visitor engages in activities not directly included in the tour, generating indirect jobs, e.g. to see lakes, restaurants, zip-lines, dromedaries, and others.

The study aims to analyze how buggy rides emerged and developed as a tourist attraction in Rio Grande do Norte. The guiding question of the research is: how did the activity of buggy riding first develop and how did it become a tourist attraction in Rio Grande do Norte?

### The practice of tourism

Besides being desired by most people, tourism has become almost an obligation for some sectors of society, especially trips abroad, which for many, are a mark of social prestige, since not everybody can afford to travel abroad. Travel is also considered a way of gaining knowledge, combined with leisure (Oliveira, 2016).

Tourism to Brazil has increased, and it is now one of the world's main tourist destinations, due to its privileged characteristics in terms of its geographical diversity, climate, culture, historical cities, and other aspects (Neto, 2002).

Since ancient times, humans have felt the need to move to other places, although not always for the purposes of leisure (Ignarra, 2013). For centuries, tourism has been practiced worldwide, whether for fun, studies or even work. According to Barreto (2008) man has always moved, whether temporarily, or to migrate to other places.

For tourism to begin to be understood and valued by society, several transformations were necessary over time. Different factors led to the beginning of world travel, such as: the crusades, the Olympic games, maritime expansion, and others.

Several years later, with the Industrial Revolution in England in 1760, new means of transportation were created with the advent of the railways, making travel faster and more comfortable. The English would send young people on a Grand Tour of Europe to complete their education, giving them an experience that was both culturally and educationally enlightening. However, it is believed that modern tourism, as it is known



today, only began to be practiced effectively and profitably in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Thomas Cook began to offer organized trips to Europe, taking people to visit places that are today known as famous tourist spots (Machado, Bazotti & Vianna, 2014).

In Brazil, tourism began to develop with the arrival of the Royal Family and the opening of the shipping ports in 1808, which increased the flow of foreign visitors, bringing with them some European habits and boosting import and export trade, thus creating tourist activity (Machado et al., 2014). The number of foreigners arriving on Brazilian shores, through diplomatic missions, scientific expeditions or business trips, increased steadily (Confederação Nacional do Comércio, 2005).

Another important factor for the growth of tourism in Brazil was the "economic miracle", which brought several investments, both domestic and foreign, based on optimistic economic and business prospects, among them tourism services, which became an important economic activity for the development of the country (Müller, Hallal, Ramos & Garcia, 2011). However, unlike the scenario in Europe, tourism in Brazil was purely linked to leisure, with no educational or cultural ambitions (Barreto, 2008).

"To attract these foreign tourists, EMBRATUR (Empresa Brasileira de Turismo), created through Decree-Law 55 of November 18, 1966, invested in the positive dissemination of Brazil's image abroad, exalting the city of Rio de Janeiro, carnival and women" (Müller et al., 2011, p. 693).

However, while visiting Brazil, travelers began to be enchanted by the exuberant flora and the natural beauty of the country, influencing more people to travel; not only those interested in commerce, but also zoologists, botanists and naturalists (Pires, 2001). This increase in tourism required improvements in the infrastructure of cities, investments in the hotel sector and training of qualified labor, with Brazil being the first country to create a higher level course in tourism. From there, the sector began to be seen as a serious and professional economic activity (Müller et al., 2011).

According to the MTUR (Brasil, 2006a), the main tourism segments in Brazil are: Social Tourism; Ecotourism; Cultural Tourism; Study and Exchange Tourism; Sports Tourism; Fishing Tourism; Nautical Tourism; Adventure Tourism; Sun and Beach Tourism; Business and Events Tourism; Rural Tourism; Health Tourism. This segmentation organizes each area based on its characteristics and identity elements. However, this does not mean that a product can only offer activities related to a single segment. Sun and sea tourism, as well as adventure tourism, are related to the object of study of this research and will be addressed in the next topic.

### **Tourist activity in the Sun and Beach and Adventure**

### **Tourism segments**

With the evolution of technology, when planning a trip it has become usual to search the Internet when planning a trip, looking for information about the destination, prices, tours, and "what to do" in the chosen destination. Studies show that the most relevant factor when choosing a destination is the tourists' own motivations (Kim, Cheng, & O'Leary, 2007).

"Destination image" is of paramount importance for the development of tourism activity, acting as a means of differentiation between competing destinations. Understanding the image, and how it influences potential tourists, is a challenge for destination marketing" (Pereira, Ferreira & Frio, 2017, p. 57). When choosing a particular tourist destination, besides personal influence and other types of motivations, the potential tourist will analyze the destination image, evaluating the possible activities/tours they can do there, often using the Internet, making observations and creating expectations through images.

The image of Brazil as a tourist destination is linked mainly to its natural beauty, such as beaches, sunshine, fauna, flora, and waterfalls, and its cultural manifestations (Dantas & Chagas, 2009). Sun and sea tourism is prevalent throughout the Brazilian northeastern coast, with its beautiful beaches and sunshine practically all year round. Due to the growth of this segment, it has become necessary to implement tourist facilities geared towards activities in these places, bringing changes in the quality of life of the local population and transforming the urban space (Novaes, 2012).

Sun and Beach Tourism is conceptualized by MTUR, as "tourist activities related to recreation, entertainment or rest on beaches, due to the joint presence of water, sun and heat". It includes tourist practices such as: operation and agency, transportation, accommodation, food, reception and driving of tourists and other complementary activities (Brasil, 2006c, p. 43). It is a type of tourism that is "in great demand, especially in the northeastern region due to the hot climate during much of the year" (Melo, Vanzella & Brambilla, 2019, p. 01).

Sun and beach tourism is characterized by the use of natural attractions (Beni, 2001; Ignarra, 2013). In 2010 the MTUR, in a booklet on the segment, contextualizes the aspects that relate directly to the practice: "recreation, entertainment and rest, which are linked to fun, distraction or contemplation of the landscape" (Brasil, 2010, p. 17).

In the case of dune buggy rides, the beach is the natural resource visited by tourists, besides the dunes and lagoons. The route taken is prepared in advance, and aims to give the tourist experience of different



places with the most varied landscapes. Silva (2013, p. 51) supports the preservation and planning of natural resources in the practice of sun and sea tourism:

"The country is emerging in nautical tourism and sun and beach tourism, with countless possibilities for growth. These segments must be explored with social and environmental responsibility, knowledge and respect for coastal ecosystems, taking advantage of the scenic beauty of natural environments, which drive tourism and boost the economy in these destinations." The majority of activities linked to the segments of Sun and Beach and Adventure Tourism give visitors direct contact with the natural environment. Any activity carried out in an environmental area needs a team to take care of all aspects, from the sale of the package to the organization of the place, receiving visitors, and training professionals to work in this area (Machado, et al., 2014).

New leisure and sport alternatives in natural settings are expanding rapidly, but always adjusting to the demand and the profile of the visitors who seek this activity. However, unlike mass tourism, there is a greater interaction of the tourist with the environment, requiring an adaptation of the programs to adjust these interactions according to expectations. Therefore, study of this segment is needed, to better understand how individuals behave when engaging in these activities (López-Richard & Chinaglia, 2004).

The practice of adventure tourism, besides favoring contact of the tourist with the environment, can also benefit from a positive relationship between the visitors and the driver or guide, enabling an exchange of experiences and a spirit of friendship. This intense participation of the tourist is, therefore, part of the essence of this segment, requiring greater care in the management of tourists, to ensure their physical and emotional comfort and safety, while providing pleasure during the activity (Brasil, 2006a).

"Besides occupying a prominent place in the Brazilian economy, the tourism sector is in a process of full expansion. The diversity of Brazilian landscapes and the countless possibilities for exploitation of the sector have given rise, in the course of this process, to several tourism segments, such as adventure tourism" (Santana, Santos & Delvizio, 2016, p. 54).

With the growing fame of buggy tours in the capital of RN, the adventure tourism segment attracted the attention of various people, becoming one of the factors that led to a significant rise in tourism. Data that confirm this were released by the MTUR, and also through international associations such as the Adventure Travel Trade Association - ATTA (Uvinha, 2008).

### **Tourism in RN: overview of Buggy Tours as a tourist attraction**

Tourist attractions are divided into categories and are given a classification (Ignarra, 2013; Leask, 2008). One concept of tourist attractions is that of Owens, Anderson, Birdy & Stone (2021, p. 199): "those places of culture, heritage, nature or activities that attract people to visit". The authors further establish five main categories: 1. Heritage attractions; 2. Amusement/entertainment attractions; 3. Recreational attractions; 4. Commercial attractions and 5. Industrial attractions.

The tourism offer has a set of elements, among them: tourist attractions, tourist services, public services, basic infrastructure, management, brand image and price. The concept of tourist attraction is complex, since the tourist's perception may vary among the elements of an attraction (Ignarra, 2013).

"The attractions are related to the tourists' travel motivations and the evaluation that they make of this element. It is usual that elements that make up the daily lives of people living in a certain location do not draw their attention and are extremely attractive to visitors who do not participate in this daily life" (Ignarra, 2013, p. 53).

Rio Grande do Norte has an ideal geography for the practice of adventure tourism, as it is rich in natural attractions, such as: mountains, dunes, grottos, caves, waterfalls and other sites for those seeking action. Over time, new routes and adventure destinations were discovered, crossing mangroves, cliffs, salt pans, colorful dunes, and fishing villages, all of which can be accessed by a 4x4 buggy. Most of these places are ideal for beginners or more experienced riders. Due to its attractions, the main tourism segments that exist in the state are: adventure tourism; tourism of sun and sea; ecotourism; and business and events tourism. Buggy tours are, therefore, one of the main tourism segments in the state.

In early 2018, the number of foreign tourists to RN grew by 19.56% compared to the same period in 2017, representing an increase of 5.5 million more for the economy of the state (Tribuna do Norte, 2018). These data further reinforce the importance of tourism for the state.

The city of Natal, located in RN, is a much sought destination by Brazilian and foreign tourists. Due to its geographical location, the state is known as the "corner" of the country and the continent, with a long coastline extending approximately 400 km, one of the most well-known coastlines in the country (Secretaria Municipal de Turismo - SETUR/RN, 2017).

The Traveler's Choice Awards survey, based on the evaluations of internet users from all over the world through TripAdvisor, placed Natal/RN in eighth place among destinations on the rise, with the first positions going to Cabo San Lucas in Mexico, Corsica in France and Doha in Qatar. Brazil has five attractions in the world destinations list of the TripAdvisor site: Chapada dos Veadeiros National Park in Goiás (GO) and the cit-





ies of Campos do Jordão in São Paulo (SP), Natal (RN), Armação de Búzios in Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and Ubatuba (SP) (Panrotas, 2021a).

The city of Natal/RN has natural potential for tourism. Beaches and weather are the main motivations of tourists who visit the city. According to an article published in G1, the RN capital was the third most sought after destination in 2019 between the months of June and July (information released by MTUR). With the expansion of sun and sea tourism in the state of RN, society needed to adapt to this activity, both in the capital Natal and in the surrounding municipalities, to meet the tourist demand and cater for the leisure needs of the population, thus developing the city's economy (Lima, 2018).

Soon, tourism became the economic mainstay of the "Sun City", as Natal became popularly known. One of the strongest influences for this tourism sector are the professional buggy drivers, who explore the territory of the state, taking visitors to enjoy natural attractions, making buggy tours even more valued in Brazil and worldwide (Costa, 2016).

Data from Forward Keys and Emprotur (Empresa Potiguar de Promoção Turística) highlighted the performance of the Natal/RN destination in the Brazilian domestic market, which in June 2021, reached 108% of the demand for 2019, being classified as the most resilient Brazilian domestic destination (Panrotas, 2021b).

In a survey conducted with tourists visiting the city of Natal/RN, visitors expressed surprise at coming across so much natural beauty, which is little publicized; the image that people from other regions of the country have is that it is a city of poverty and extreme drought. Another positive point mentioned by the interviewees was the hospitality and warm reception of the people of Natal (Kiyotani, 2019).

Based on the above, Sun and Sea tourism has become the main tourism attraction of the city of Natal/RN, and one of the main economic activities of the state, generating jobs for thousands of people. Buggy rides are an important part of this scenario, and have led to the capital becoming known as "buggy capital of the world" and "Natal, city of the Sun".

In 2020, the demand among visitors to carnival in Natal/RN was significant, attracting around 240 thousand spectators, according to the Natal City Hall. In a survey conducted by the Department of Tourism (DETUR) of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, the festival was rated as good, great or excellent by 97% of tourists who took part, and brought around 18 million in revenues (Portal da UFRN, 2020).

A survey conducted by Fecomércio RN during the 2016 carnival showed that besides enjoying the carnival in the capital, 24.6% of visitors intended to visit other locations during the carnival period, highlighting other municipalities and beaches in the state (Fecomércio

RN, 2016). However, after the 2020 carnival, tourism was completely closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. After the period of social isolation, according to an article published in Tribuna do Norte (2020b), 42% of tourism businesses will not reopen, as it was of the sectors that was hardest hit, and it may be one of the last to recover.

However, the sector has had some encouraging news, such as the Travel Safety Stamp, with RN becoming the Brazilian state to receive it. For the stamp to be awarded, strict protocols had to be met, such as requirements on sanitary safety, health, social distancing, and others (Tribuna do Norte, 2020c). Another positive factor for tourism in the state is that after the exit of the RN Tourism Resumption Plan, a survey conducted by Fecomércio found that 55.4% of people intended to travel to the country after the pandemic (Fecomércio RN, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that for buggy rides to take place in Natal/RN, professional buggy drivers are needed, who have qualified through courses and received authorization from SETUR. The activity is also regulated by state law 8,817 of 2006. There are currently around 700 accredited buggy drivers (Costa, 2016).

"Recreational transport involves manageable efforts and risks, which may vary in intensity depending on the activity and tourists' disposition. They vary in several aspects in the places where they are used, as they require safety procedures, the use of appropriate equipment, and the required skills in relation to the risks between driver and tourist. This type of service should be monitored, supervised and inspected by competent bodies, following the rules and regulations for the safety of all those involved" (Timbó & Portuguez, 2014, p. 03).

Bearing in mind the data above, when going on a buggy tour, the tourist does not drive the vehicle himself/herself, which is a positive factor for those no experience in this adventure segment, since many visitors like to venture into the unknown and actually feel excitement, but do not want to feel terrified. Moreover, they expect the trip to end within a prearranged schedule, and return to their homes (Buckley & Uvinha, 2011). Therefore, buggy riding is an activity that is suitable for all types of tourist who, besides having adventure, can also have contact with nature and enjoy diverse landscapes.

## METHODOLOGY

The study analyzes the activity of buggy riding in the state of RN and the perspectives of professionals working in the area, who have followed the progress of this activity. In terms of objectives, the research is classified as exploratory and descriptive. According to Gil (2002), exploratory research aims to provide a link with the



problem, making it more understandable. It may also involve interviews with people who have had direct experience with the problem in hand. In turn, descriptive research consists of describing the characteristics of a given phenomenon.

As regards its methodological approach, the study is classified as qualitative research, which consists of data collection performed by the researcher directly in the problem environment, maintaining direct contact with the object of study, without using statistical data as a form of analysis (Prodanov & Freitas, 2013).

In order to analyze the progress of the buggy touring activity since its emergence in the city of Natal/RN, the interview method was used. This is a procedure for collecting information in which the researcher guides the questions put to the interviewees, with the aim of investigating some issue (Duarte, 2004). Interviews were conducted with professionals working with buggy tours, who have been working in this segment for at least ten years. Twenty buggy drivers who met all the criteria established by the researcher were invited, but five of them did not complete the interview script, resulting in fifteen validated interviews.

A standardized or structured interview was used, with a script established in advance. In this type, the researcher is not free to change the questions according to the situation, with all the interviews following the same script (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003). The information gathered through the interview cannot be measured or expressed through data and numbers. However, it can be described through interpretations in collection techniques such as interviews, observations, and content analysis (Martins & Theóphilo, 2009).

The qualitative interview method used is important for understanding the narrative of the interviewees, as well as other factors, such as their life experiences and understanding of the world (Bastos, 2005). This study used the technique of content analysis. According to Bardin (2002), interpreting the data collected is the main stage of a research, and seeks to understand the studied environment.

The interview script was composed of six open questions. Interviews were conducted individually, following the same sequences of questions in each interview: 1) How long have you been working in the profession? 2) Since you started working in the profession until today, have there been any changes, either positive or negative, in your working environment? If yes, what changes?; 3) In your opinion, are buggy tours the most sought tourist activity in Natal-RN, or is there another activity that competes directly with it?; 4) Do buggy tours take place in a standardized way or does buggy driver follows his own way of working?; 5) What do you think needs to improve in your profession so that it has a good work environment, favoring everyone in the category? and 6) What are your perspectives for the

future of this profession?

The participants were asked to answer the questions via audio, however only 5 of the 15 respondents used audio as a response; the other 10 responded via text messages. The interviews took place between the period June 20-23, 2020.

Due to the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus Disease-19 (Covid-19), for the safety of the researcher and the invited participants, the interviews were carried out through the social network platform WhatsApp, using Word to transcribe the answers of each buggy driver interviewed. Each answer was then analyzed individually.

In order to maintain the interviewees' privacy, their names were not revealed so that there would be no expectation of response, which will be indicated during the work through letters only.

## RESULTS

This topic will focus on the results obtained through the interviews conducted with the buggy drivers in Natal/RN, seeking to analyze the data collected, focusing on the initial specific objectives, and showing the different perceptions of the buggy drivers in relation to each theme addressed.

### Evolution and changes to the buggy tours in Natal/RN

To understand the changes that have occurred since buggy tours first began to operate in Natal/RN until today, some of the pioneering buggy drivers were interviewed, including several who had been in the profession for at least thirty-seven years, such as the creator of the activity in the city. However, only two of the interviewees said they had worked with the activity for less time, with 10 years in the profession.

With the analysis of the answers, despite being a qualitative interview script, in which the data collected in the research are descriptive (Prodanov & Freitas, 2013), it was possible to identify a pattern in the answers in relation to the changes that occurred in the buggy tours.

Analyzing the answers given by the fifteen participants, it was noticed that thirteen of the interviewees said there had been significant changes in the activity, either positive or negative. It was also found that the two buggy drivers who claimed there had been no changes were the only ones who had worked in the profession for 10 years, i.e., they had not followed the historical evolution of the buggy tours since the activity first started.

Based on the analysis of the responses given, the thirteen buggy drivers who had been in the profession for at least twenty years mentioned, overall, the same changes, generating unanimity, and one of them summarized and described their answers in a simplified



way, mentioning the positive change in the activity:

"The legal safety of the category, with the creation of Law 8,817, which regulates the profession in the state and the entire legal system, this brought a breakthrough when buggy drivers started to have red plates and their vehicles characterized. I see this as a very positive point for the category" (Buggy driver K, research data, 2020).

Law 8,817, mentioned by the research participants, regulates the administrative permissions for the Buggy-Tourism service in RN State, constituting it as:

Non-essential activity, considered of public utility, for the transportation of tourists and citizens interested in visiting and getting to know areas of recognized natural beauty, historical, landscape and environmental value of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, carried out by private individuals, at their own risk, through payment by the users (Brasil, 2006b, p. 1).

Besides the creation of the law mentioned by most of the interviewees, another point observed were the changes in the infrastructure in places that the buggy tours take place, such as the construction of the Newton Navarro Bridge, which allowed faster access from Natal to the North Coast, passing over the Potengi River. The construction of the bridge started in 2004 and it took six years to complete (RN Natal, 2019). Notably, the two buggy drivers who claimed there had been no positive changes in the activity only started working in the profession after the bridge was completed.

Another aspect mentioned in the interviews was the widening from one lane to two, of the Via Costeira, built in 1985, one of the main expressways that is part of the tour itinerary, The highway connects the South and East Zones of Natal/RN, and it is where the most famous and luxurious hotels of the city are located, with more than five thousand hotel beds (Tribuna do Norte, 2019). The highway also leads directly to the beaches, where tourists can enjoy the landscapes and scenic beauty. With the widening of the road and the construction of new hotels, it became much easier and more pleasant to follow the route of the tour.

### Features of the buggy tours in Natal/RN

With the rise of buggy tours in Natal/RN, a survey was carried out to understand if it is still considered the most popular tourist activity in the city. This answer was unanimous among the interviewees, where all of them affirmed that it is the flagship of tourism in the city. Some made a comparison with those who travel to Rio de Janeiro to visit Sugar Loaf mountain, as cited in the following answer:

"It is linked to Natal as Sugar Loaf Mountain and the Christ Redeemer statue are to Rio de Janeiro. Today the buggy tours are a fundamental part of the city. Of course, there are other attractions, but in my opinion, it

still continues to be the one that leads people to come to Natal. Everyone who comes here has the idea in mind of going on a buggy tour, with the wind in their face, passing the beaches with or without emotion. This is still very important in the city of Natal and is associated with our image of buggy tourism" (Buggy driver K, research data, 2020).

Another answer that attracted our attention was that of buggy driver N, who states that the whole tourism segment in Natal was discovered through the buggy:

"Yes, in my opinion, Natal was all discovered through the buggy, the whole tourism segment here is sold abroad first through the buggy, those who come from abroad want to ride in a unique kind of vehicle; they have never had the opportunity to ride on the beach, or on top of dunes. So for me the buggy is still the flagship of tourism in RN. Everyone who comes here wants to at least take a picture in a buggy, just like someone who goes to Rome and wants to see the Pope" (Buggy driver N, research data, 2020).

Besides conventional cars, other types of vehicle can also be used in tourism transport, such as buggies and jeeps (Palhares, 2002). Tourist activity brings several benefits to the region in which it takes place, not only in Natal/RN, but also in other locations. For example, a survey among workers in Porto de Galinhas found that tourism is essential for the development of the region, and to ensure the welfare of the native population that depends on it (Slob & Wilde, 2006).

Although all the interviewees agreed that buggy tours are the most sought-after activity, some mentioned that they are starting to see a decline in demand, with the entry of new competitors, such as 4x4 tours, which the buggy owners considered to be a direct competitor of the buggy tour. The 4x4 tour was quite strongly criticized by the buggy drivers, especially for not having the red plate as the buggies do, which are allowed by law. Interviewee I states that the 4x4 trail emerged because the buggy drivers abandoned the South Coast, resulting in the creation of this new route for the 4x4 rides. However, he criticizes the finishing point of these tours, at Malembá Dune or Búzios Beach; because the vehicle weighs around two tons, it has a direct impact on the environment. The buggies, on the other hand, weigh not more than 800 kg. However, as there is no inspection in this segment, the rides continue, and it is becoming more and more difficult to remove them, as they have been operating for more than ten years in the segment.

Regarding the buggy tour itinerary, the interviewees were asked if they all followed the same standard or if each one had their own style of working. Everyone agreed that there is a route to be followed, but the standard is not maintained, for several reasons. The following three responses summarize the main reasons for the lack of standardization of the trip.

"This standardization has existed for many years, and it occurs as follows: the buggy ride pass by nine beaches, four dune parks, and three lagoons, with stops for bathing. That is the itinerary of the tour, and we also go into the golden dunes, paying a fee that a part of this amount that is reverted to the Union. It turns out that some of our work friends don't go into the dunes behind Pitangui or into the golden dunes, and they cut the tour short. Nowadays we have added a stop at "Salu", which is a river where they serve lobster kebabs, shrimp and caipirinha at very affordable prices. So there is a standardization that is complied with by most, but also a non-standardization, which is complied with by some of the buggy drivers, who do not sell the tour at the normal price, so they end up taking away from the tourist. This is a very serious thing, because when they sell the tour they offer everything, but when they actually give the tour, they cut the itinerary short" (Buggy driver I, research data, 2020).

"The buggy tour departs from several different places, such as hotels, agencies, and guesthouses. The standardization would be very good if it existed, and it does exist when it comes to the route, everyone complies in relation to this, which in the case of the route leaving Natal consists of: passing through nine beaches, four dune parks, and three lagoons. However, in this itinerary the buggy driver can create alternative routes, enriching or impoverishing the tour. The more capricious ones try to add more things, while those who are only interested in the commercial aspect and gaining money try to shorten the tour, earning the same amount as those who make the complete tour. Actually they earn more, it becomes unfair, because he earns the same amount for doing less, but the buggy drivers who care about the destination and the buggy tourism segment try to offer a better tour, and end up spending more fuel to earn the same amount" (Buggy driver K, research data, 2020).

"We have a corridor of natural beauty, so we always have to adapt to the position of the tide and movement of the dunes. It also depends on the profile of the passengers; for these reasons, we adapt the tour according to all these situations" (Buggy driver M, research data, 2020).

Given the answers presented, it was clear that all professionals interviewed have a standard route to be followed, but each one does it their way or the way they think will suit their customers. However, some of the interviewees alleged that a minority of drivers use this de-standardization in bad faith, trying to shorten the route and make the tour quicker, hurting the tourist, who does not know the route and ends up paying for something that was not provided.

### **Perspectives of the buggy owners**

With the Covid-19 pandemic that has affected the entire economy of the country and with the resumption of tourism in 2022, the professionals interviewed who work directly with the buggy tourism category are optimistic about their professions. The perspectives were mostly negative, considering that the interviews took place in 2020, where many were concerned about how the market of the segment would be.

When asked what could be done to improve the whole tourism buggy category, making a better working environment for everyone to enjoy, two solutions were cited by most of the buggy drivers: creating a single line, and implementing a ticket system. The single queue would occur as follows:

"Our dream would be a single line, in which all 712 buggies ride the same, as follows: if CVC needs fifty buggies, it would put the first fifty in line and so on. That way, the people who worked that day, the next day would be at the end of the line, so everyone would run the same, if I worked today, tomorrow I'm down there, if there is a tour I'll work again, but first I would have to follow the line" (Buggy driver I, research data, 2020).

Besides Buggy driver I, the single queue system was mentioned as a solution by most of the interviewees as a great implementation, as it would give all the drivers the same opportunity to work, and not just a few, such as the older ones or those with more contacts, while newer ones, or those without connections with agencies and hotels, might spend weeks without any customers, becoming frustrated with their work.

Another solution mentioned by some of the interviewees was to create a system of tickets or vouchers, to standardize and tabulate the price of the tour. This would prevent some of the drivers undercutting on price by shortening the route, or exploiting the tourist by selling for absurd prices, as mentioned in the following answers:

"Just the fact of implementing a single line or tickets for the tourist would improve everything, because from the moment you are well paid the environment improves, there would be no need for anyone to give rides below the price, because it would be a fixed price and it would favor everyone in the category" (Buggy driver I, research data, 2020).

"Unification of prices on the part of the vendors and the buggy professionals themselves" (Buggy driver J, survey data, 2020).

"I believe that a ticketing system for the tours, the creation of a voucher, would favor everyone in a collective way, because we go through several environmental areas, and so it would be a way of controlling the tours and organizing the prices to ensure equal division" (Buggy driver K, research data, 2020).

Several other solutions were mentioned by a minority of the respondents, such as: always respecting the tour-





ist; cleaning the beaches and streets so that the tour becomes more beautiful and pleasant; strict inspection resulting in the standardization of the tour; improvements in the tourist points; taking the buggy tours to other countries; requalification courses for the professionals working in this area; recognition of the buggy drivers' legislation at federal level so that they are entitled to benefits such as pensions and others.

In view of all these solutions, the interviewees were asked what prospects they expected for their profession; however, although all of them were very fulfilled in their work, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the answers were mostly negative, since tourism was one of the most affected areas.

A common response was the lack of unity in the category, with six of the interviewees stating that more harmony among them would be necessary for the activity to flow better. Thus, a need to unify the category was seen, as shown by some answers like: "I believe that with the union of all, it would be possible to achieve at least single and fair values, so that we would be able to offer comfort and safety to the tourist!" (Buggy driver C, survey data, 2020); "I hope that in the future there will be more unity among professionals, so that everyone can be favored" (Buggy driver D, survey data, 2020); "That there is more unity for all those in the category and the tourism agencies of the RN State" (Buggy driver E, survey data, 2020); "If there is no unity for these problems to be solved, it will end up in a stalemate, with no solution" (Buggy driver G, survey data, 2020).

Unity within the category, as well as instituting some of the solutions mentioned, could bring significant improvements, impacting the quality of the service provided. "It is of utmost importance that the buggy tours are offered with quality, so that users will recommend them and return to the state. Tourist services encompass a wide range of activities that meet the needs of tourists in the most diverse segments" (Fecomércio RN, 2021, p. 03).

The pessimistic perspectives due to the pandemic were evident in the following answers: "It's getting more difficult each day" (Buggy driver A, survey data, 2020); "With all that has been happening it is difficult to have a perspective for the future" (Buggy driver F, survey data, 2020); "Very challenging, because of the rising increase in the structures of all the beaches (hotels; increase of bathers on the beaches), which is why we will have to adapt and improve our service concepts" (Buggy driver M, survey data, 2020).

Despite this, there were some positive responses, with the interviewees stating that the buggy tours will have a positive future, even in faced with the current situation, due to the strength of the activity in our state, as can be seen in the following answers: "If we do not change, we will be just another attraction in Natal, I

believe that after this pandemic the buggy tours will be renewed, we will be more concerned with the professionals, with our future and we will know how to be more united" (Buggy driver B, research data, 2020); "I believe it is a profession that his here to stay, but it will have to change to be able to compete in the labor market" (Buggy driver K, research data, 2020). In addition to these, according to the Buggy driver H, his perspective is that he will always work in this profession, because it is a dream come true for him.

"It was the profession I fought hard to get into, I have had a buggy since I was 13 and I thought it was great to see one of the pioneers driving the buggy, seeing the images of the ride on the dunes on television. So, in 1991 I took the buggy driver's course and passed, after that I never stopped and my desire is to be working like our founder Roberto Lira" (Buggy driver H, research data, 2020).

The report on the users' profile and satisfaction with the buggy rides demonstrates the importance of buggy drivers for tourism in RN (Fecomércio RN, 2021, p.3):

The tourist activity provides countless benefits for the state of RN and a good part of this is due to the work of the buggy drivers, who explore the territory of the North of Rio Grande do Sul, enabling tourists enjoy the natural attractions of the region. Therefore, these professionals have a strong influence in promoting the tourism sector in the state, and quality is a key factor for this work to be even more valued by tourists from Brazil and around the world.

Thus, it was identified that some of the professionals feared for the future of the profession, and the relevance of the participation of the buggy owners for RN tourism, but many expected a positive change, with expectations being more or less equally divided between these two extremes. The results of this article can be replicated to other research, in order to investigate possible improvements in the vision of professionals who work in the area of tourism.

## CONCLUSION

Through this analysis, it was identified that since buggy tours were first started in RN, there have been several positive and significant changes for this profession to become what it is today. These changes have not only benefited the practice itself, but a whole network that is related directly or indirectly to buggy tourism.

The Buggy Ride in Natal/RN is a consolidated attraction in the state, with a significant demand by tourists. The state has natural resources suitable for the good performance of the practice, such as dunes, lagoons and beaches, which are part of the routes from the south coast to the north. To identify how the buggy tour is featured as a tourist activity in RN, it was found that despite the existence of direct competitors, buggy



tours are still the most sought after activity among visitors. It was also found that all the buggy drivers have a standard route which they are supposed to follow, but each professional has his differential and works according to the profile of the tourist.

Some possible solutions for improving the activity of buggy tours in the state were mentioned by the buggy drivers, such as: having a single line for the services, to prevent many drivers getting now work; implementing tickets or vouchers in order to set a standard price for the tours; strict inspection in the standardization of the tour; improvements in the tourist attractions of the city; promotion of the buggy tour in other countries; requalification courses for professionals in the area; and having regulation at federal level to give buggy drivers recognized rights. Some of these solutions would positively impact the lives of the buggy drivers and could result in the improvement of services provided.

Regarding the trends and perspectives of the profession in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the interviewees were pessimistic about the future of tourism activity. However, some stated that they believed in the potential and renewal of the buggy tours after the pandemic. All the interviewees wished for greater unity in the category, to facilitate its development.

For further studies, an analysis of the impacts of the buggy tours in the economy of the state is recommended, showing the main segments benefited, highlighting and valuing the importance of the activity, as well as of the role of marketing in the planning of Natal/RN, showing the perceptions of tourists about the buggy tour as a brand of the destination. The case study can be replicated in other cities and tourism segments, in order to analyze and develop potential tourist activities.

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