

# Bom Jesus do Monte: From Sanctuary to the Dynamics of Religious Tourism

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## Abstract:

With regard to the study of a place of worship and symbolism – Bom Jesus do Monte (Braga, Portugal) or Good Jesus of the Mount, in English, part of the category of “*sacri monti*” – we intend to investigate the evolution of the ancient practices of pilgrimage that are today assimilated into a context of modern religious tourism. With religious heritage believed to be the apex of the religious tourism product and structure, our study discusses all the other tangible and intangible factors that develop around it. As well as its inherently spiritual characteristics, the site’s religious heritage includes architectural, artistic, historical, symbolic and scenic elements that make it an important tourist resource for the region. The study also deals with the evolution of visitors’ motivations which involve, at Bom Jesus, a seasonal desire for purification in the sense of breaking away from urban routine; visitors view it as a resort or a place for entertainment. In its current state as a holiday destination with accommodation, Bom Jesus do Monte clearly reflects a tourism and hotel business setting that this article aims to present by following a historical narrative over time.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage Sites; Religious Tourism; Tourist Destinations; Resorts; History of the Hotel Business

## Resumo:

A propósito do estudo de um lugar de culto e simbólico, o Bom Jesus do Monte (Braga), inscrito na categoria dos ‘Sacri-Monti’, propomos dilucidar sobre a evolução de antigas práticas de peregrinação assimiladas hoje num contexto de turismo religioso moderno. Considerando-se o património religioso enquanto componente nodal do produto de turismo religioso e da sua estruturação, o nosso estudo perpassa todos os outros fatores que se desenvolvem ao seu redor,

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sejam eles materiais ou imateriais. O património religioso do Sítio, para lá da sua inerente dimensão espiritual, possui elementos arquitetónicos, artísticos, históricos, simbólicos e paisagísticos que o transformam num importante recurso turístico da região. O estudo incide igualmente sobre a evolução das motivações do visitante que significam no Monte o desejo sazonal de purificação no sentido de afastamento da rotina urbana e o assumem como espaço de entretenimento e vilegiatura. Prefigurando atualmente o estatuto de estância, o Bom Jesus do Monte revela com acuidade uma realidade turística e hoteleira que se pretende evidenciar aqui numa narrativa histórica diacrónica.

**Palavras-chave:** Lugares de Peregrinação; Turismo Religioso; Destinos Turísticos; Vilegiatura; História Hoteleira

**Resumen:**

En relación al estudio de un lugar de culto y simbólico, el *Bom Jesus do Monte* (Braga), registrado en la categoría de "Sacri-Monti", es centro de dilucidación sobre la evolución de las antiguas prácticas de peregrinación asimiladas hoy en día en un contexto de turismo religioso moderno. Teniendo en cuenta el patrimonio religioso como un componente nuclear del producto turístico religioso y de su estructura, nuestro estudio penetra en todos los demás factores que se desarrollan a su alrededor, ya sean tangibles o intangibles. El patrimonio religioso del Sítio, más allá de su dimensión espiritual inherente, tiene rasgos arquitectónicos, artísticos, históricos, simbólicos y paisajísticos que lo convierten en un importante centro turístico de la región. El presente trabajo, también incide en la evolución de las motivaciones del visitante que se dirige a el Monte. Estas significan principalmente, el deseo estacional de purificación con el fin de alejarse de la rutina urbana. Este espacio es asumido pues como lugar de entretenimiento y estancia vacacional. Actualmente, el *Bom Jesus do Monte* revela con exactitud una realidad turística y hotelera que se destaca aquí en una narrativa histórica diacrónica.

**Palabras Clave:** Lugares de Peregrinaje; Turismo Religioso; Destinos Turísticos; Estancia Vacacional; Historia Hotelera

## 1. Bom Jesus do Monte: a place of worship and symbolism

Located in the parish of Nogueiró-Tenões, in Braga, northeast Portugal, the sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte is part of a plot measuring 26.5 ha, at the top of a monumental staircase flanked by 19 chapels dedicated to the theme of the Passion of the Christ. The site also has hotels surrounding it, along with a conference centre, all within a lush wooded park with road access supplemented by a network of paths and a set of lakes and grottoes.

The sanctuary's origins take us back to the 14th century (Bezerra, 2002), although it only began to exhibit importance in the 17th century, when the Confraternity of Bom Jesus do Monte emerged (1629). The monumental nature of the religious buildings was only established at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, when the built structures were completed by a grandiose temple designed by the architect Carlos Amarante, from Braga. Considered by G. Bazin to be "*le sanctuaire le plus parfait qu'ait réalisé le christianisme*", and relevant for both its architecture and its sculptures, its influence can also be seen in the symbolisation of the spaces, in religious thought and in the patterns of popular piety (Almeida, 1990:69).

In line with several sacred mountains in Europe (Bazin, 1963), specially the Italian "prototypes", such as Santa Maria del Monte Sopra Varese (Barata, 1973) and the Sacri Monti de Piemonte e Lombardia, Bom Jesus was a place for rituals and worship framed in the "devotional acts of the Jerusalemites", as well as the devotional practices of the Stations of the Cross and the calvaries, the ceremonies of Lent and all the symbolism and religious mentality of the time.

The different authors of monographs on Bom Jesus, certainly thrilled by the place's wonders, concentrated on interpreting the reasons that led to the sanctuary's greatness, the reasons behind the works done there and the motivations for its dissemination throughout the Catholic world, above all in Latin; good examples of these monographs include those written by Diogo Pimentel (1861), Azevedo Coutinho (1905), Alberto Feio (1930) and Mónica Massara (1988). Bom Jesus do Monte, rightfully celebrated for the complexity of mankind's intervention in works of art or Nature (its noteworthy woods) is not limited then to the place where it stands. There are several sanctuaries in Portugal, Spain and Brazil whose creation or development have been partly or wholly inspired by it. But none has achieved its diversity and vastness.

This "asset" was recently included in an application to be considered "World Heritage" (Andresen, 2012; Oliveira, Gonçalves and Pereira, 2015) based on an argument that aims to show its unequivocal "outstanding value" by responding to some of the main criteria used to assess what makes something outstanding. Those criteria are:

- “To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius”;
- “To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design”;
- “To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared”;
- “To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history” (Andresen, 2012: 48; Unesco, 2011).

This process involved underlining the “integrity and authenticity of the asset”, its form and design which, despite the natural aesthetic diversity of each time period, presents itself as a “harmonious piece”. The process also highlights its formal structure, including its monumental Baroque staircase and the new church, which is linked to a dense religious narrative, and further underlines the existence of a range of harmoniously located hotel facilities that are well located around the site and the century-old funicular.

## **2. From sanctuary to resort**

The concept of sanctuary is linked to the temple and/or the sanctity of a place as the “focal point for pilgrimages” and is generally devoted to the worship of relics, the veneration of iconography of saints or dedication to Mary or Christ (Penteado, 2000). Bom Jesus do Monte fits into this last type of sanctuary, within the structure of a relic sanctuary and one of the most representative Portuguese sanctuaries dedicated to Christ.



**Figure 1. Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte: Stairway**

Source: Confraria do Bom Jesus do Monte



**Figure 2. Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte: interior detail**

Source: Confraria do Bom Jesus do Monte

It is not easy, however, to establish a narrative on the origins of the site as a place of pilgrimage, primarily because its roots extend back a long way in time. The most relevant aspects are documentary evidence from the modern era that attempts to demonstrate the sanctity of the place and the choice that would have been made by divinity to show believers to whom they should provide material and spiritual assistance. Bom Jesus do Monte grew in importance throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, which coincided with the outbreak of Christ-centric sanctuaries that followed popular devotion to the crucifix in Portugal. Generally located outside settlements, these sites became locations of intense religious fervour, particularly around the time of the celebrations of the Passion which, for Bom Jesus, was reflected in high

visitor numbers. After 1721, several chapels depicting scenes from the Passion were introduced, along with fountains and stairs, a terrace and a portico, all accompanied by the construction of the main church, whose work had stretched into the 19th century. In the archdiocese of Braga, the efforts that led to the success of this sanctuary of the Way of the Cross owe a great deal to the commitment of several prelates, particularly Rodrigo Moura Telles (Penteado, 2000).

Furthermore, sacral objects are constantly sought by pilgrims – a nodal feature of popular Catholicism – and this is exactly what happened with Bom Jesus (Penteado, 2000). In a clear reference to the geography of sacred places, Ferreira de Almeida comments that “heights and wonderment at the landscape favour the numinous, facilitate the possibility of hierophanies and may create a predisposition towards the sacred” (Almeida, 1994: 24).

Throughout the 19th century, particularly in the latter half, the sanctuary began to add a tourist and recreational function to its attribute as a place of pilgrimage. The growing inflow of pilgrims, particularly on holy days and Sundays, led the Confraternity of Bom Jesus (CBJM) to provide “Houses” consigned to traders who sold “bread, wine and straw for beasts” there (Capela, 1992: 96). Alongside this, the Confraternity also set up “sheds” for pilgrims “to spend the night and places to store their coaches and animals” (Peixoto, 2011: 177). But at the end of the 18th century, as confirmed by documents in the CBJM’s archives, there were several hostleries to host pilgrims “who were not equipped with the necessary things for them to be able to inhabit and remain at the quarters”. The same was the case for the whole of the 19th century, although the confraternity continued to support the construction of new quarters. Over time, Bom Jesus also began to represent a seasonal desire for purification, in the sense of breaking away from urban routine, and it became viewed as a space for entertainment. In its position as a holiday destination, Bom Jesus do Monte clearly reflects a potential for tourism and hotel trade “that appeals, above all, to private customers” (Peixoto, 2011: 179).

Of the roughly 80 sanctuaries that can be found in the north of Portugal (Noland and Noland, 1992), only Bom Jesus do Monte (Braga), alongside São Bento da Porta Aberta (Terras do Bouro), Nossa Senhora do Sameiro (Braga) and Nossa Senhora da Penha (Guimarães) possess all the following characteristics, which distinguish them from the others: i) A constant, significant inflow of visitors throughout the year; ii) Accommodation/catering facilities and other types of support for leisure and tourism; iii) Architectural and scenic heritage of national and international interest; iv) Constant religious services.

The liturgical celebrations helped create cyclical inflows of pilgrims that established a set of routes that gradually “delineated the religious territories” surrounding the sanctuaries. At the present time, unlike pilgrimages on foot, Bom Jesus attracts higher and higher numbers of

visitors who use their own forms of transport or come in organised excursions. In fact, another trend is the clear reduction in seasonality and dependence on religious festivities. On 5th July, 2015, the sanctuary's religious importance was strengthened when it was classified as a basilica on the wishes of Pope Francis.

The Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte gained further influence in Portugal when it was classified as a "property of public interest", in 1970. Currently visited by around a million people every year, it is a reference point for pilgrims, tourists and visitors from all over the world. The increase in demand for tourism has reduced its load capacity to receive visitors, particularly in summer, which led the confraternity to find new ways of managing visits to the site. Recently, in 2015, the confraternity made an investment of roughly two million euros to refurbish the site and improve visits. It has therefore further cemented its status as a tourist icon not just for the town but for the entire north region and even the country in terms of cultural and religious tourism. Moreover, its buildings and sculptures have turned it into a site of global relevance for Baroque art (Oliveira, Gonçalves and Pereira, 2013), so it should be promoted not only as a tourist destination but also as a place which has artistic content that improves knowledge about this considerable heritage value. The image of Bom Jesus with its staircases is, perhaps, the main image of the Braga brand and is reproduced in countless publications; it has even been used as the cover for international book editions, such as *The Grand Tour: Travelling the World with an Architect's Eye*, by Harry Seidler, for an edition published by Taschen, 2013.

Bom Jesus has established itself as one of the most mentioned places on the tourist trail in the north of Portugal. An analysis of tour operators' programmes and the individual tourists' movements show that Bom Jesus is usually included in the main tourist itineraries that run through Portugal and Spain, particularly those that connect Fátima to Santiago de Compostela and is included in the major tourist and cultural circuits of Europe.

### **3. Leisure infrastructure**

#### **3.1 From quarters to hotels**

For a long time, as the number of pilgrims increased, structures were progressively made available to provide accommodation, initially known as "quarters", "confraternity houses", "hostels" or simply "sheds", which gave support for pilgrims and had already been in place since the 19th century. Gradually, the names and quality of the infrastructures evolved, passing through the form of inns, hostelries and lodges before the appearance of hotels. In the

emblematic *Traveller's Guide*, by Azevedo Coutinho, Bom Jesus do Monte is presented as an attraction for its picturesque and religious features, appealing to "worshippers and tourists" alike (Coutinho, 1905). In 1930, Alberto Feio described Bom Jesus as: "A sanctuary of miracles and miracles of Nature, a holiday destination among the most beautiful in Portugal" (Feio, 1984).

The first decades of the 20th century were marked by some restrictions to the development of tourism in Portugal, namely due to weak points in the hotel sector. Raúl Proença, in his *Guide to Portugal* (1924), paints a portrait of the tourist country, stating that outside the "thermal spas and seaside destinations and two or three resorts, nobody stays at Portuguese hotels unless absolutely necessary, such is the discomfort and lack of cleanliness that most of them offer".

Even so, enhancement of the hotel facilities in the country was already visible in 1905, with the publication of the first draft law to grant tax benefits to companies that built accommodation establishments, although it was not widely applied. It was the Minister of Finance of the Republic government, Thomaz Cabreira, who took the initiative to propose the passage of a law that would establish considerable tax advantages for hotels to be built. It was, then, this legal regime, in force from 1914 to 1934, that was the context surrounding the increase in hotel facilities at Bom Jesus do Monte. Today, the site comprises four hotels – *Hotel Elevador*, *Hotel do Parque*, *Hotel do Templo* and *Hotel do Lago* – and a social, meeting and conference centre, the *Colunata de Eventos*. They have been managed since 1980 by the company *Sociedade Hotéis do Bom Jesus* (SHBJ), which is majority owned by the archdiocese of Braga and the Confraternity of Bom Jesus.

Looking back, from 1875 onwards, the main hotel at the resort was the *Hotel Elevador*, which underwent several transformations and changed name several times – *Grande Hotel*, *Hotel da Boavista* and *Hotel Higiénico* – and hosted the Portuguese royal family in the summer months. One of its operators, Manuel Joaquim Gomes, brought electricity to the site, along with other technological improvements. The Braga entrepreneur was a decisive figure in stimulating demand for Bom Jesus as a place for leisure and holidays, and the construction of the funicular, in 1882, a similarly relevant part of boosting tourism at Bom Jesus, is also linked to him. The transport infrastructure gave visitors in the 19th century an integrated transport system that connected Bom Jesus to Braga railway station.

Another good example of the connection between the site and the idea of a resort was the construction of the famous Chalet dos Benfeitores, a building that was initially connected to romantic, idyllic scenes in a rural and/or mountainous setting, but that began to be used frequently as accommodation at leisure and holiday spots. The structure was built in the last quarter of the 19th century, and was still in use during the first decades of the 20th century as a



support structure for the Hotel do Parque (Peixoto, 2011); it was a sign of the interest in the resort setting found in the many proposals submitted to the Confraternity to build and later run the other hotels at Bom Jesus. In this case, it was the joint-stock company *Hotéis Portugueses de Turismo*, which was founded in 1919 using capital from the Bank of Minho and several individuals, including Ernesto de Vilhena, Gomes e Matos, the count of Stucky de Quay and Estolano Dias Ribeiro.

Following the hotel's example, the others also began to carry out successive refurbishments and adaptations to the circumstances of the time; their management also passed through the hands of the Sopet Group before being taken up definitively by SHBJ. At the Sanctuary of Bom Jesus, primarily due to its foundation on a link to Christ, the transformations of the religious space were operated partly by the need to counterbalance the lack of a more pronounced worshipping tradition, as would normally be found at Marian sanctuaries. This explains CBJM's greater awareness of the need to maximise tourist resources at the site and further its (almost) inclusion in the perimeter of the town of Braga.

In 2009, SHBJ established a management partnership with the Convent of Tibães Hotel and, in 2014, with the Confraternity of Nossa Senhora do Sameiro, to run the Hotel João Paulo II. Throughout the Bom Jesus resort, there are approximately 200 rooms available, representing around 20% of all hotel rooms in Braga, and SHBJ is the largest hotel group in the district of Braga.

### **3.2 Funicular and access**

Manuel Joaquim Gomes (1840-1894), a businessman who looked to the future and had an avant-garde spirit, was a decisive figure in the increased demand for Bom Jesus in the tourism sector. As mentioned above, as well as the operator of the Hotel do Elevador, he was the main driving force behind the construction of the funicular. Bom Jesus' location at the top of a hill, with lush natural surroundings, always made access difficult. Over the last three centuries, the Confraternity has undertaken several projects to improve access to the Sanctuary. The increase in tourism demand in the 19th century meant that, in 1872, Braga Municipal Council proposed the construction of a horse-drawn tram line from the railway station towards Bom Jesus do Monte, a proposal that was completed in 1877 (Peixoto, 2012).

Construction of the Bom Jesus do Monte funicular was part of a strategy to improve access in order to upgrade and make economic use of the resort and, in 1883, *Companhia Carris e Ascensor do Bom Jesus de Braga* was founded with the aim of operating the network of "horse-

drawn tram lines” and the funicular. The horse-drawn tram operated by Companhia Carris de Ferro de Braga connected the town to the portico of Bom Jesus do Monte (Peixoto, 2012). Before the funicular was built, roughly 5000 visitors were recorded every year, as Antonio Menici reports in his book *Braga Contemporânea*, but this number rose to 100,000 in the year the funicular opened and 200,000 the following year. Currently, the Bom Jesus funicular transports more than 300,000 passengers per year, and reaches the maximum load it can carry in May, June, July and August. The Confraternity continues to maintain this mean of transport as a living museum with the same characteristics as its early days.

### 3.3 Motivations for visiting

Some studies have been carried out recently to better understand the profile and motivations of those who visit Bom Jesus. According to Figueiredo da Silva (2011), we cannot draw a conclusion as to a visitor profile but can instead establish a set of heterogeneous characteristics. Even so, one of the conclusions that the study found was that 99% of those surveyed were Catholic and only 1% had another religion. Moreover, although the religious factor is an important motivation for visiting, leisure is responsible for the same percentage, and curiosity about the site, the buildings and participation in festivities or religious celebrations are also factors to be considered. Roughly 80% of visitors state that the trip lasted only one day. Around 6% say that their trip was longer than three days. Almost 90% travelled independently, while the others were part of trips in organised groups. Visits to other religious tourism sites were made by around half of visitors, particularly those around Bom Jesus, such as the sanctuaries of Sameiro and Penha.

Regarding the customers profile staying at hotels at Bom Jesus, according to the annual report for 2015, most guests are Portuguese (49%), although the domestic market has been getting smaller in recent years. Spanish was the second most common nationality (18%), followed by English (14%), French (12%), Polish (4%) and others (3%). The average stay is 1.8 nights, reflecting the need to create strategies to attract people to stay longer on site. The number of organised groups that arrive on pilgrimages and use the hotels at Bom Jesus for accommodation or meals has been growing. The presence of new Polish, South Korean, Irish and Italian groups, always accompanied by a religion’s member, has further strengthened the trend towards demand for cultural and religious tourism and Bom Jesus’ strategic location between Santiago de Compostela and Fátima. (Grupo Hotéis do Bom Jesus (2015), *Relatório Anual de Atividade*, Braga: s.e.).

#### 4. Towards a tourist-religious development model

Religious tourism and the institutionalisation of tourism itself are deeply connected to pilgrimages (Stoddard, 1994). Over time and along the paths travelled by pilgrims, places to stay (lodges and hostels) and eat emerged so they could relax, spend the night and find food, drink and even supplies to continue their journey. The term religious tourism is today commonly accepted as a phenomenon that brings together religion and tourist activity (Guimont, 1997). Opening the space up to broader interpretation, the combination of motivations ends up contributing to resized transport and organised trips, a result of the evolution from pilgrimage to religious tourism, although motivation is confined to spiritual reasons here (Jackowski, 2000). Other authors connect the notion of religious tourism to two types of motivation: spiritual motivation and motivation related to a secular view of the destination (Vukonic, 1996). For others, religious tourism has “the same basic components as other types of tourism”. It stands out simply for the motivation behind it and is connected to a notion of cultural tourism (Solla *et al.*, 2008).

Nonetheless, for a very long time, pilgrimages have been characterised by the movement of people and the rituals that accompany them. Excursions and rituals evoke the relation with the sacred, and veneration and prayer in holy places are symbols of greater strength. Keeping promises, making offerings and requesting intervention from the holy in everyday life are more objective communication aspects since they take place in certain spaces. Two components usually correspond to a pilgrimage, one spiritual and one pragmatic. The former relates to a motivation that is the reason for the trip, the other is connected to the trip and the stay (Ambrósio, 2000). For most stakeholders who work at these destinations, religious tourism is viewed from an economic standpoint, as for most tourist products, which today have an impact on territory, on local and regional economies and on society. As a result, these religious tourism destinations are increasingly being studied, not only regarding their resources, but also in relation to their visitor flows, including the question of load capacity, together with special attention to the surrounding environmental area in order to achieve harmonious and sustainable development for the destination.

With the territorial component as a base, studies should consider, from the outset, the “origin and growth of religious destinations”, as well as their influence at local and regional levels (Ambrósio, 2014). They should also deal with variables connected to land planning (at municipal level), including infrastructure and facilities, but also the host community’s social formation, alongside major economic activities. These are the fundamental conditions for a study that

intends to deal with the “functional transformations” of those components and seeks to help develop a religious tourism destination. In fact, there are three major types of stakeholders who participate today in building these territories, specifically the Church, those involved in economic activities connected to tourism and the administration. As for the religious heritage itself, it is one of the product’s essential ingredients, since all the other aspects – tangible and intangible – develop around it. Religious heritage, which is the case for Bom Jesus, as well as the inherently spiritual dimension, includes architectural, artistic, historical, symbolic and scenic elements that transform it into an indisputable tourism resource at regional, national and even worldwide level (Pereira, 2006). For Bom Jesus in particular, the hotel business employs more than 100 people and has a significant real impact on local development.

We can say that religious tourism makes it possible to use religious heritage in two ways: for religious worship and for artistic worship, both using the same space and balanced as far as possible. We, therefore, favour the appreciation and use of religious monuments, which in the end benefits the different stakeholders involved and, above all, the diverse range of people who visit them. Religious heritage, when used and communicated better, can effectively be viewed from the perspective of the sacred or simply through a historical artistic vision, depending on the visitor’s choice.

## **5. Conclusion**

Since early on, pilgrimages have been connected to the desire for travel itself. Pilgrimages ended up influencing the development of religious paths and destinations. And while, at first, it was spirituality and popular religiosity that determined the motivations for pilgrims, Bom Jesus gradually turned into a place for a resort and, later, a tourist product. It has been demonstrated that the sanctuary is not a “hermetically sealed space” but instead a place that brings together religion and leisure, tourists and pilgrims. Otherwise, visitors to the sanctuary demonstrate a certain eclecticism in light of the available offer. The evolution and changes in infrastructures and services provided to visitors and the management model itself are the result of actions adjusted to the needs and characteristics of demand in order to maintain the site’s ability to attract visitors.

It is, therefore, necessary to keep analysing and studying the site from several perspectives since the socio-economic impacts generated by tourism today, even when discussing religion and spirituality, still also signify manifestations that are highly cultural in nature.

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