

# Crises, Tourism and the Dynamics of Lodging Facilities in Natal/RN: Spatial Concentration

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revista

Geo 

USP

espaço e tempo

Volume 26 • nº 3 (2022)

ISSN 2179-0892

e-200920

## How to cite this research article:

COSTA, H. A.; FONSECA, M. A. P. Crises, Tourism and the Dynamics of Lodging Facilities in Natal/RN: Spatial Concentration. **Geosp**, v. 26, n. 3, e-200920, dec. 2022. ISSN 2179-0892. Available in: <https://www.revistas.usp.br/geosp/article/view/200920>. doi: <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2179-0892.geosp.2022.200920.en>



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# Crises, Tourism and the Dynamics of Lodging Facilities in Natal/RN: Spatial Concentration

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## Abstract

Over the last decades, financial and sanitary crises have affected global tourism. In addition to such general crises, Brazil went through an institutional crisis that had repercussions on tourism, since it led to a decrease in the population's consumption power. The tourism destination Natal/RN was heavily affected by these crises; therefore, the objective of the present study is to discuss how recent crises have impacted the tourism of the municipality through the analysis of the evolution and spatial dynamics of the hotels. The methodological procedures include bibliographic and documental research and interviews. The dynamics of lodging facilities in Natal was discussed, associated with tourist flows, job creation and periodic crises. The results demonstrate that the crises restructured the accommodation sector in Natal and there is a trend of spatial concentration towards the South Zone and the Ponta Negra neighborhood.

**Key words:** Crises; Tourism; Hotels; Urban Restructuring; Natal/RN.

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## Crises, turismo e dinâmica dos meios de hospedagem em Natal/RN: concentração espacial

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### Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, verificou-se a ocorrência de crises (financeira e sanitária) que vêm afetando o turismo global. Além dessas crises de âmbito geral, o Brasil passou por uma crise institucional que também repercutiu no turismo, posto que acarretou a diminuição do poder de consumo da população. Tais crises repercutiram significativamente no destino Natal/RN. O objetivo deste artigo é discutir como as recentes crises se manifestaram no turismo de Natal a partir da evolução e da dinâmica espacial dos meios de hospedagem. Os procedimentos metodológicos adotados incluem pesquisa bibliográfica e documental e a realização de entrevistas. Discutiu-se a dinâmica dos meios de hospedagem em Natal associando-a aos fluxos turísticos, à geração de empregos e às crises periódicas. Por fim, concluiu-se que

as crises reestruturaram o setor de hospedagem de Natal, e há uma tendência à concentração espacial em direção à Zona Sul, em especial ao bairro de Ponta Negra.

**Palavras-Chave:** Crises; Turismo; Meios de Hospedagem; Reestruturação Urbana; Natal/RN.

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## Crisis, Turismo y la Dinámica de los Hoteles en Natal/RN: Concentración Espacial

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### Resumen

En las últimas décadas ha habido crisis (financiera y de salud) que han venido afectando al turismo global. Además de estas crisis generales, Brasil atravesó una crisis institucional que también repercutió en el turismo, ya que provocó una disminución del poder de consumo de la población. Tales crisis tuvieron un impacto significativo en el destino Natal/RN. Los procedimientos metodológicos adoptados incluyen investigación bibliográfica, documental y entrevistas. Se discutió la dinámica de los alojamientos en Natal, asociada a los flujos turísticos, la generación de empleo y las crisis periódicas. Finalmente, se concluyó que las crisis reestructuraron el sector de alojamiento en Natal y hay una tendencia de concentración espacial hacia la Zona Sur y, en particular, el barrio de Ponta Negra.

**Palabras clave:** Crisis; Turismo; Hoteles; Reestructuración Urbana; Natal/RN.

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### Introduction

Studies have shown that crises periodically emerge in the process of capitalism evolution, causing spatial restructuring whose intensity is associated with the magnitude and depth of such crises. Harvey (2019) emphasizes the central role of the space in overcoming crises through 'spatial adjustment', which comprises changes in its form and content.

Tourism is highly vulnerable to crises, i.e., it is one of the first sectors to suffer retraction under sanitary problems (epidemics), political instability, wars, and social problems (violence, lack of security), among others.

For a touristic destination to be consolidated, there must be tourism demand and an appropriate infrastructure to receive the visitors. Therefore, lodging facilities (LF) play a crucial

role in the development of this activity, since they are geographic objects in the space, with the function of accommodating tourists in the sites visited. Thus, considering the Tourism Characteristic Activities (TCAs), the LF are essential for the tourist destinations to operate.

In the 80s, with the operationalization of the megaproject Parque das Dunas/Via Costeira<sup>1</sup>, Natal begins to stand out in the Brazilian northeast as one of the most important tourist destinations and to play a relevant role in the structuration of the tourism in Rio Grande do Norte state, concentrating most TCAs and redistributing the flow of visitors to other touristic sites in the state. It is a national tourist destination, and has attracted several investments in the accommodation sector over the last decades, which enabled the location to host the Fifa World Cup Games in 2014.

However, the recent dynamics of the tourism in Rio Grande do Norte was also affected by global and national crises, such as the global financial housing crisis (2007-2008), the political institutional crisis that resulted in the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff (2015-2016) and the global sanitary crisis caused by Covid-19 (2020-2021).

Along with the crises, a local event had direct repercussions in the tourist activity in Natal. It is the construction of a new airport, in the municipality of São Gonçalo do Amarante, in the metropolitan area of Natal, which caused an increase in the price of air tickets for travelers who intended to visit Natal, with a negative impact on the lodging sector.

Therefore, aiming to contribute to the debate on the relationship between crises and tourism, this article discusses how recent crises impacted the tourism in Natal and also their effects on the spatial dynamics of the lodging facilities.

## Methodology

Natal is one of the most representative tourist destinations in Brazil and one of the most prominent in the state potiguar, with an important hotel network. Thus, due to its tourist centrality, it is the empirical object of this study. Figure 1 shows the location of Natal, highlighting the Via Costeira, which plays a prominent role in the structuring of tourism in the municipality.

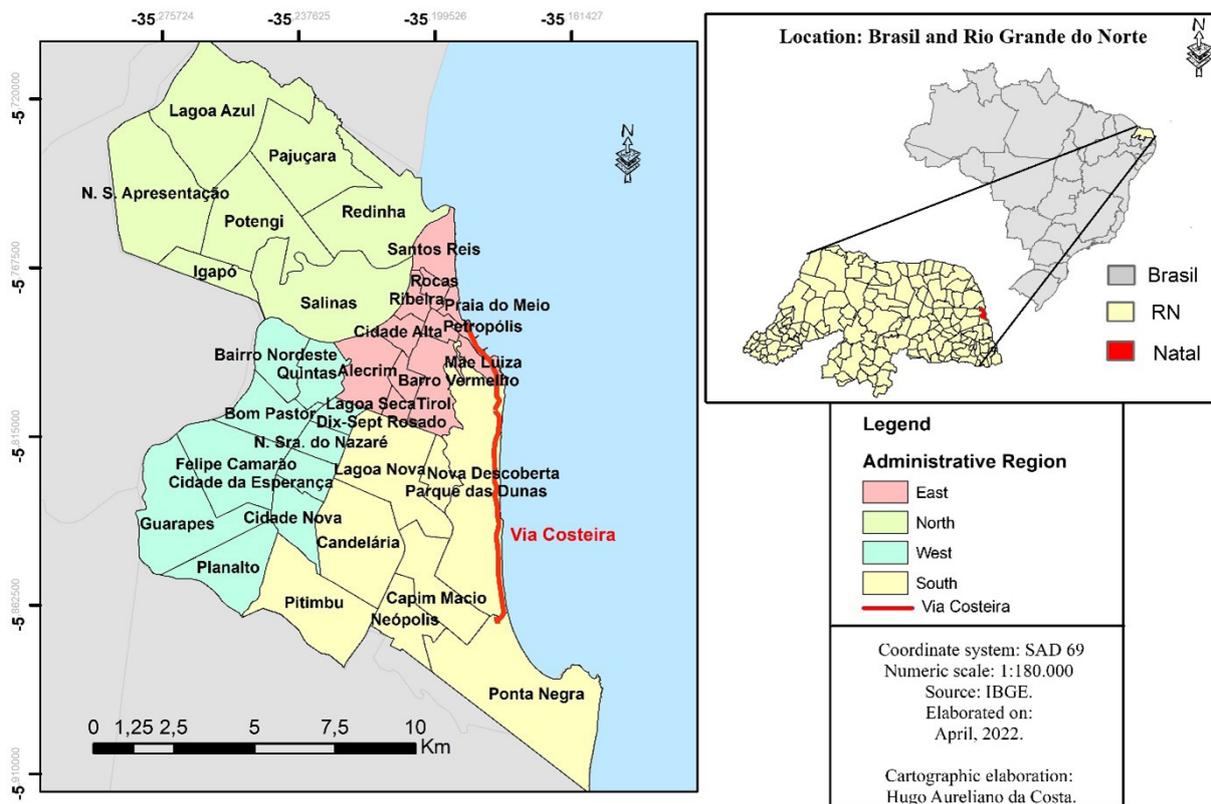
The time frame was set by the 2008 financial crisis, due to the intensity and magnitude of its effects for the tourism in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Since the conclusion of the first stage of the National Tourism Development Program Prodetur I/RN (2002), until the end of the crisis that strongly affected the global markets in 2008, the tourism of the state was going through a moment of expansion with the internationalization of tourist flows and the establishment of international hotel chains. This crisis was the first event to hit the tourism in Natal and represents an important milestone for the tourism in the city.

The methodological procedures comprised bibliographic and documental research and interviews, as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> About the implementation of this project, see the pioneer studies by Cavalcanti (1993) and Cruz (1995).

**Figure 1 – Location of Natal/RN, highlighting Via Costeira.**



Source: The authors, 2022.

- In order to obtain information about the LFs, we consulted data provided by the Department of Taxation of the Municipal Government of Natal (Semut) in April 2022 (verbal information)<sup>2</sup> and the Federal Revenue Service for data regarding enterprises whose main activity was “Hotels”, “Apart-Hotels” or “Guesthouses or Other Accommodations”. The name of the enterprise, the trade name, the year the activities were opened, the year the activities were closed (when this was the case), and the address of the respective LFs were verified. Thus, data were collected and treated from 590 LFs<sup>3</sup> that served as the basis for the information presented in this study.
- Additionally, reports were consulted to obtain the number of foreign investments in Rio Grande do Norte (RN) in the 2000s, as well as Volume III of the X-Ray of Hotel Chains (Goldner; Amazonas, 2007) to identify which national and international hotel chains were installed in Natal in 2006, the moment preceding the 2008 crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In some cases, opening does not necessarily imply the installation of a new enterprise. It is possible to have the sale of the LF with the change of the owner and the CNPJ, that is, one LF was closed and another was opened, however, the number of HMs does not change. Therefore, in addition to the number of openings and closings, the total number of LFs present in the urban fabric of Natal was also considered.

- In what regards the employment rate in LFs, data from Rais/Caged (Brazil, [n.d.]a) were consulted to identify the number of people employed in the lodging sector as of 2007.
- To collect data concerning the tourist flow, the following sources were consulted: previous studies (Cruz, 1995; Furtado, 2005; Fonseca, 2005), information by the Secretary of Tourism of Rio Grande do Norte (Rio Grande do Norte, 2001) - statistical yearbooks between 2001 and 2007 and data of domestic and international arrivals at the international airport of Natal between 2003 and 2020, available at the Ministry of Tourism through the statistical yearbooks.
- Finally, some qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives of tourism institutions in Natal, such as: the president of the Brazilian Association of the Hotel Industry in RN (Abih-RN), representatives of Emprotur/Natal, Fecomercio, as well as the quality manager of the Sehrs Hotel of the Catalan chain. These interviews were performed between March and May 2022 and aimed to understand more precisely the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in the hospitality sector in Natal.

Thus, these data served as a basis for the present study and was organized to demonstrate the evolution of tourism in Natal and the impacts of successive crises on the lodging sector of the city.

## **Crises in capitalism and spatial adjustment**

According to Harvey (2020, p. 83), “crises are real manifestations of the underlying contradictions to the capitalist process of accumulation”. They occur due to such contradictions and are necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. Therefore, crises are cyclic and have spatial implications, since they require spatial adjustment in order to be overcome.

Harvey (2020) identifies three types of crises: partial, transitional and global, with their own characteristics but one point in common: they redefine the social and spatial relations of the locations affected by them.

Contributing to the discussion proposed by Harvey, Smith (1988, p. 185) mentions the relevance of crises for capital accumulation:

No matter how destructive and disfunction they are, crises can be functional for the capital. The mergers, expropriations and bankruptcies, as well as the general devaluation (of goods, services, machinery and currency) and the destruction of the capital (either variable or constant) that follow the crises also prepare the ground for a new phase of capitalism development.

Soja (1993, p. 210) proposes a debate on how the urban form has been shaped by the crises of capitalism since the early days of industrialization. For this geographer, from the 20th century on, especially since the 1970s, there have been constant reformulations of the urban structure resulting from the eventual crises that occurred in these localities, which manifest themselves in “an evolutionary sequence of partial and selective restructuring” (Soja, 1993, p. 206).

Therefore, every time there is a crisis, there can be spatial changes (urban restructuring). The consequence of restructuring is the alteration of the spatial concentration and social centralization of capital in the urban space (Smith, 1988).

Harvey (2015) states that overcoming economic crises depends on “spatial adjustments.” But the consequence of the crisis, until it is overcome, is that “local alliances will have to be dramatically reorganized (...), technological embodiments are suddenly altered (...), physical and social infrastructures fully reconstituted (often due to a crisis in state expenditure) and the space economy of capitalist production, distribution and consumption are fully transformed” (Harvey, 2015, p. 541). Therefore, several changes occur during crises, and some activities that are more vulnerable to crises due to their own operating structure, as is the case of tourism activity.

Tourism is contingent upon the inbound agent, i.e., the tourist, and for this reason is also susceptible to economic crises. The spatial structure of tourism differs from other activities because, in this case, it is the consumer/tourist who moves. The commodity (tourist destination) is fixed. Therefore, when the inbound agents are in crisis, the destinations suffer the economic consequences.

According to the model for tourist area cycle of evolution established by Butler (1980), tourist destinations present stages of development, consolidations and stagnation, which can be followed by rejuvenation or decline.

The decline is usually associated with some crisis that causes a decrease in the number of visitors. Likewise, Prideaux (2000) states that the tourism development of a destination is related with the expansion of the hotel industry to accommodate tourists at local, regional, national and international levels. Each developmental stage comprises a new characteristic of the lodging sector. Following the peak of international tourism, there are 3 possibilities for the destination, namely: decline, stagnation and rejuvenation. Decline is linked to the possible crises that the decrease in tourism demand can cause. Therefore, tourist destinations become susceptible to crises and, when the number of tourists decreases, such destinations need to be reorganized, thus triggering a spatial restructuring.

From the beginning of the touristic activity to Natal, there was an increasing flow of visitors, attracting investors from the hospitality industry until the financial housing crisis 2008, which had a Strong repercussion in the local tourism. The local tourism then became vulnerable and subsequent crises significantly affected the hospitality sector, resulting in its spatial concentration.

## **Tourism expansion in Natal: from the implementation of Via Costeira to the crisis of 2008**

In the mid-1990s, the hotel complex Via Costeira started operating in Natal, with a great capacity to host tourists due to the number of housing units available in the LFs, in addition to a modern infrastructure and leisure areas (Cavalcanti, 1993; Cruz, 1995).

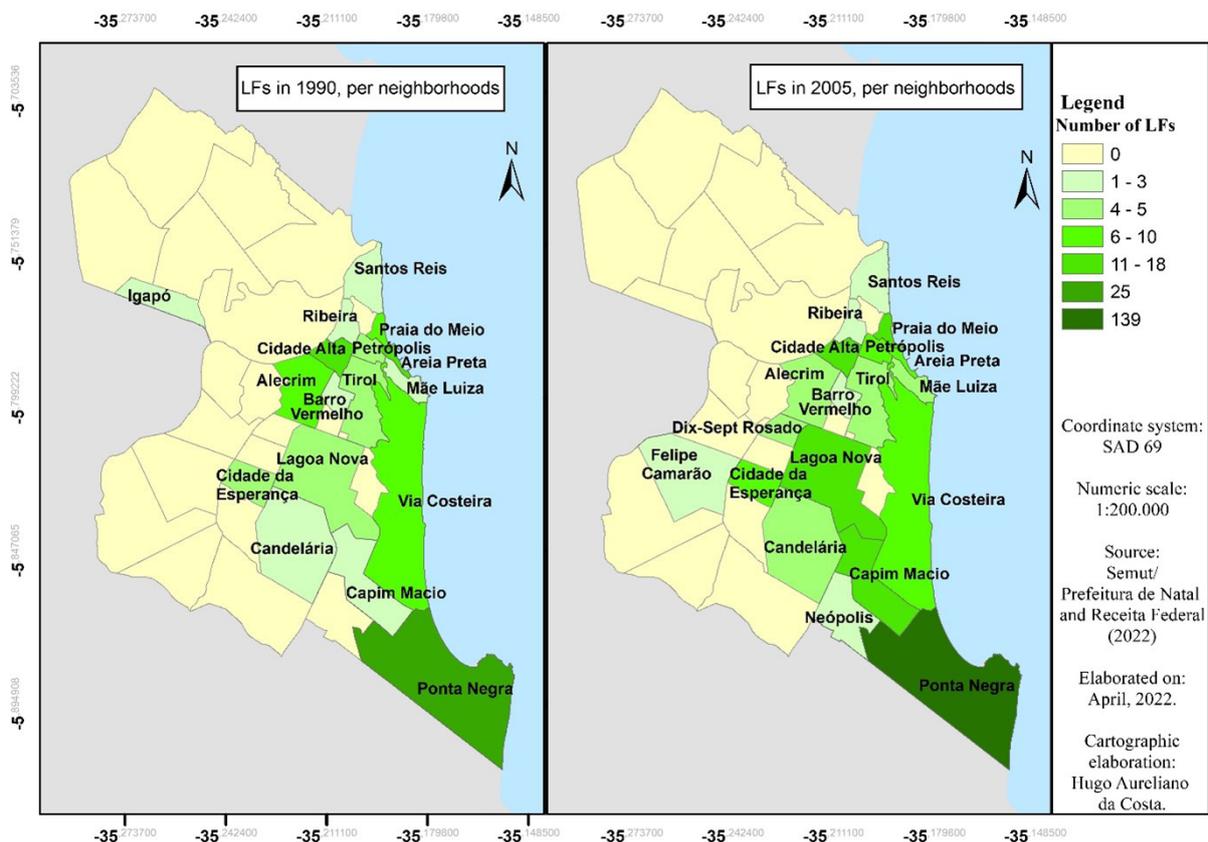
The tourism in Natal, until then little significant regionally and nationwide (Lopes Júnior, 2000), was consolidated with the implementation of the hotel complex Via Costeira, which in turn contributed to attract more tourists and, consequently, new LFs. Between 1987 and

1993, the flow of tourists, the passenger arrivals at Parnamirim Airport and the dollar revenue generated by tourism showed significant growth, indicating the expansion of tourism in the city during this period (Fonseca, 2005).

According to Semut (Table 1), in 1990 the city of Natal had 106 LFs, with 52% in the Eastern part of the city (56 LFs) and 41.5% in the Southern part. In spite of the representativeness of the Via Costeira, the number of LFs was still concentrated in the East Zone and the district of Ponta Negra started to emerge as a privileged location to receive investments in the hotel business, with 25 LFs, that is, 23% of the resorts., as shown in Figure 2 and Table 1.

The Tourism Development Program (Prodetur/RN), implemented between 1995 and 2002 (phase I), was another important landmark for the tourism in Rio Grande do Norte, since the investments provided by this program, i.e., the capitalization of the territory (modernization and expansion of the airport, roads, lighting and sanitation) were fundamental for the insertion of Natal in the international tourism market, particularly the European one (Fonseca, 2005).

**Figure 2 – Lodging facilities distribution per neighborhood in Natal in 1990 and 2005.**



Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>4</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.]b).

4 Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

**Table 1 – Number of lodging facilities per neighborhood in Natal – 1990/2005**

<b>Zone/Neighborhood</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>Balance (1990/2005)</b>
<b>South Zone</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>129</b>
Candelária	3	3	3	5	2
Capim Macio	3	7	11	12	9
Lagoa Nova	4	9	11	11	7
Neópolis	0	0	1	1	1
Ponta Negra	25	66	105	134	109
Via Costeira	9	9	9	10	1
<b>East Zone</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>12</b>
Alecrim	6	6	6	5	-1
Areia Preta	12	10	9	9	-3
Barro Vermelho	1	0	0	1	0
Cidade Alta	16	17	18	17	1
Mãe Luiza	1	2	3	4	3
Petrópolis	5	7	7	7	2
Praia do Meio	9	13	16	18	9
Praia dos Artistas	0	1	1	1	1
Ribeira	1	1	1	1	0
Santos Reis	1	1	1	1	0
Tirol	4	4	5	4	0
<b>West Zone</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
Cidade da Esperança	5	7	9	10	5
Dix-Sept Rosado	0	0	2	4	4
Felipe Camarão	0	0	1	1	1
<b>North Zone</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-1</b>
Igapó	1	0	0	0	-1
<b>Natal</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>150</b>

Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>5</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.]b).

The investments of Setur/RN, and the private initiative towards the promotion and publicity aiming at attracting an international demand in the 90s were also important to the local tourism expansion (Furtado, 2005).

Such efforts allowed a steady increase in the tourist flow, especially international tourists, since between 2001 and 2007 their participation practically doubled, and their percentage in the total flow increased from 9.55% in 2001 to 19.89% in 2005 (Table 2).

5 Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

**Table 2 – Tourist flow to Natal – 2001/2007**

Year	National Flow	%	International Flow	%	Total	%
2001	985,095	90.45	104,015	9.55	1,089,110	100
2002	882,227	88.25	117,467	11.75	999,694	100
2003	837,911	83.23	168,855	16.77	1,006,766	100
2004	975,296	81.13	226,915	18.87	1,202,211	100
2005	1,086,016	80.11	269,664	19.89	1,355,680	100
2006	1,147,221	83.54	226,012	16.46	1,373,233	100
2007	1,155,009	85.48	196,118	14.52	1,351,127	100

Source: Rio Grande do Norte, 2011.

There was an increase in tourism revenue and income generated by tourism activity in Rio Grande do Norte, and tourism became more representative in the state GDP in 2000 (Rio Grande do Norte, 2001). The data shown in Table 1 indicate an increase of 150 new LFs in Natal between 1990 and 2005, representing an increase of 141.5% in fifteen years. Figure 2 shows the spatial diffusion of LFs in the urban space of Natal between 1990 and 2005.

Regarding LFs, as demonstrated by the data from the X-Ray of Hotel Chains for the year of 2006, Natal presented 14 enterprises linked to big international hotel chains, such as Accor, Pestana, SEHRS, Best Western, InterContinental Groups and Golden Tulip, belonging, respectively, to France, Portugal, Spain, United States, England and Holland. Moreover, big national chains, such as Atlantica Hotels, Blue Tree, Littoral, Delphia and HWF were also operating in Natal, demonstrating the dynamism of tourism in this destination between 2001 and 2007. (Chart 1).

Therefore, the investments made by Prodetur/RN I contributed to equip the urban space of the city of Natal, improving tourist infrastructure and contributing to considerably raise the tourism indicators. International investments were relevant for the tourism of the state, which and manifested its dynamism in that period, indicating the success of this public policy that aimed at a better positioning of Natal in the market.

In 2005, Natal had 256 LFs, from which 134 were in the South Zone of the city, making Ponta Negra the main and most representative tourist area of Natal. Lopes Júnior (2000, p. 40) argues that “spatially, this process means a redirection of the city dynamics to the South Zone, with Ponta Negra, in one of the extremities of the Via Costeira, becoming the most representative district of the tourist urbanization in Natal”.

**Chart 1 – National and international hotel chains in Natal - 2006**

Chain	Name	Type	Classif.	Country
Accor Hotels	Novotel Natal Ladeira do Sol	Hotel	Midscale	France
Atlantica Hotels International	Quality Suites Natal	Flat	Midscale	Brazil
Blue Tree Hotels	Blue Tree Pirâmide Natal	Hotel	Midscale	Brazil
Grupo Pestana	Pestana Natal Beach Resort	Resort	Upscale	Portugal
Golden Tulip Chambertin	Ponta Negra Beach	Flat	Upscale	Holland
Golden Tulip Chambertin	Tulip Inn Potengi	Flat	Midscale	Holland
Golden Tulip Chambertin	Golden Tulip Interatlântico	Flat	Luxury	Holland
Serhs Natal Grand Hotel	Serhs Natal Grand Hotel	Resort	Luxury	Spain
Littoral Hotels & Flats	Littoral Maximum Flat	Flat	Midscale	Brazil
Delphia Hotéis	Delphia Paradise Residence Flat	Flat	Luxury	Brazil
HWF Hotéis	Natal Praia Hotel	Hotel	Upscale	Brazil
Accor Hotels	Ibis Natal	Hotel	Econ.	France
Best Western	Best Western Yak Hotel Natal	Hotel	Midscale	USA
Delphia Hotéis	Delphia Terrazzo	Flat	Midscale	Brazil
InterContinental Hotels Group	Holiday Inn Express Natal	Hotel	Econ.	England

Source: Goldner and Amazonas (2007).

## **Repercussions of recent crises on the tourism in Natal and the retraction of lodging facilities**

Until the year of 2007, tourism in Natal grew exponentially, with practically no retraction, and the tourist activity was selectively located in the territory, especially in the coastal areas. However, after this period, the lodging sector started to suffer the effects of successive global and national crises that affected the tourism in Natal, presenting retractions and spatial reorganization. It is important to consider the advent of lodging platforms in the market competing with the more traditional hotels, especially after 2008.

## **The global economic crisis of 2008 and the implications for tourism in Natal: the decrease in international tourist flows**

Studies have reported that the housing-financial crisis that emerged in 2007 peaked in 2008 is a result of the international financial deregulation, which, in turn, led to the intensification of speculative processes in global markets (Cano, 2009; Harvey, 2018).

The crisis, which started centralized in the housing market in the United States in 2007, quickly spread around the world through a financial and commercial network (Harvey, 2019, p. 117), hitting several locations despite their distance from the epicenter.

The tourist activity was one of the most impacted sectors, especially in those places dependent on the tourist flow coming from developed countries, where the crisis was more intense way. Natal suffered the impact of this crisis, with the retraction of the international tourist flow, which had been rising until then, participating with 20% of the total flow in 2005 (Table 2). In 2006, there was already a tendency to decrease, but as of 2008 the decline was exponential, as expressed in the international arrivals data of Table 3. However, the total flow remained ascendent due to the domestic demand.

**Table 3 – International and domestic arrivals in Rio Grande do Norte – 2003/2020<sup>6</sup>**

year	international arrivals	domestic arrivals	total arrivals
2003	44,994	391,537	436,531
2004	87,801	476,020	563,821
2005	111,800	497,244	609,044
2006	116,375	-	-
2007	107,472	-	-
2008	70,217	736,366	806,583
2009	53,447	885,446	938,893
2010	58,482	1,158,701	1,217,183
2011	60,706	1,233,113	1,293,819
2012	54,269	1,278,333	1,332,602
2013	46,455	1,156,649	1,203,104
2014	44,435	1,190,505	1,234,940
2015	42,249	1,247,031	1,289,280
2016	44,082	1,107,177	1,151,259
2017	40,468	1,147,630	1,188,098
2018	44,784	1,161,747	1,206.531
2019	44,557	1,108,631	1,153,188
2020	12,942	570,058	583,000

Source: Brazil (2020a, 2020b).

Previously to the full manifestation of the crisis, tourism was going through a good moment, mainly due to the representativeness of the foreign flow, and the means of accommodation had been having positive balances every year. However, the sudden decrease of this flow was reflected in the tourism of Natal with the closure of 44 LFs in 2008 (Table 4), leaving a negative balance of 23 accommodations, which represented a decrease of almost 8% of the total number of establishments. Based on the results for the year of 1990, this was the first time that a negative annual balance was reported for LFs in Natal.

<sup>6</sup> In 2006, there were 1,391,956 domestic arrivals and departures at Augusto Severo Airport. On Infraero's and MTur's websites there is no information regarding the specific number of arrivals and departures. The same applies to the year of 2007, with the movement of 1,578,369 domestic arrivals and departures to Rio Grande do Norte. That is why the information referring to landings was not inserted for the years 2006 and 2007.

**Table 4 – Evolution of lodging facilities in Natal/RN – 1990/2022**

year	total LF	opened	closed	balance
1990	106	-	-	-
1995	163	61	4	57
2000	219	57	1	56
2005	256	40	3	37
2006	275	20	1	19
2007	292	22	5	17
<b>2008</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>-23</b>
2009	277	17	9	8
2010	286	13	4	9
2011	304	22	4	18
2012	309	13	8	5
2013	312	14	11	3
2014	317	10	5	5
<b>2015</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>-15</b>
2016	308	19	13	6
2017	310	13	11	2
<b>2018</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>-54</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>-11</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>-5</b>
<b>2021</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>-22</b>
<b>2022</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>-4</b>

Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>7</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.]b).

Table 5 indicates the most affected destinations by the 2008 crisis, as well as the number of LFs closed in the period. From the total, 13 Natal neighborhoods showed a negative balance, including Ponta Negra, and only Via Costeira, where the best hotels in the city were located, had a positive balance, with 2 new LFs (Pirâmide Natal Resort & Convention and Wish Natal).

In what regards the formal jobs in LFs, there was also a small retraction. According to Rais/Caged (Brazil, [n.d.]a), in 2007 “hotels and similar” employed 4,768 people and in 2008 there was a decrease of 7% in the total, i.e., a retraction of 311 jobs (Table 6).

Therefore, the World Crisis of 2008 was the first moment in which the tourism activity in Natal was more seriously affected, presenting retraction in the number of LFs and jobs generated by this segment.

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

**Table 5 – Number of lodging facilities per neighborhood in Natal – 2007/2008**

zone/neighborhood	2007	2008	opened in 2007	closed in 2008	balance
<b>South Zone</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>-5</b>
Candelária	5	3	-	2	-2
Capim Macio	15	14	-	1	-1
Lagoa Nova	12	9	-	3	-3
Neópolis	1	1	-	-	0
Ponta Negra	160	159	13	14	-1
Via Costeira	10	12	2	-	2
<b>East Zone</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>-16</b>
Alecrim	6	3	-	3	-3
Areia Preta	9	7	1	3	-2
Barro Vermelho	1	1	-	-	0
Cidade Alta	17	16	1	2	-1
Mãe Luiza	4	2	-	2	-2
Petrópolis	8	7	2	3	-1
Praia do Meio	21	15	2	8	-6
Praia dos Artistas	1	1	-	-	0
Ribeira	1	0	-	1	-1
Santos Reis	1	1	-	-	0
Tirol	5	5	-	-	0
<b>West Zone</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>-2</b>
Cidade da Esperança	10	9	-	1	-1
Dix-Sept Rosado	4	4	-	-	0
Felipe Camarão	1	0	-	1	-1
<b>Natal</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>-23</b>

Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>8</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.]b).

## The national political crisis of 2015-2016: the high price of air tickets and the retraction of lodging facilities

After the impact of the 2008 world crisis, Brazil plunges into a period of stability until 2014, and there is a recovery of the hotel sector in Natal, with an increase of 48 LFs between 2008 and 2014. This satisfactory performance is largely motivated by the World Cup in Brazil (2014), as Natal hosted some games.

<sup>8</sup> Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

**Table 6 – Number of formal Jobs in LFs in Natal/RN – 2007/ 2020.**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Jobs</b>
2007	4,768
2008	4,457
2009	5,174
2010	5,408
2011	5,444
2012	5,889
2013	5,699
2014	5,566
2015	5,363
2016	5,018
2017	4,937
2018	4,479
2019	4,816
2020	3,578

Source: Brazil ([n.d.].)a).

However, as of 2015 the political instability in the country, triggered by the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, caused a devaluation of the Brazilian Real, retraction of the GDP, and increase in inflation. The national crisis contributed to the decrease in the purchasing power of the Brazilian population and the hotel industry in Natal suffered with this scenario, considering that the retraction of the international flow (2008 Crisis) made the destination more dependent on the national flow. With high inflation rates, domestic tourism tends to retract.

In addition to the crisis experienced in the country at that moment, another local factor contributed negatively to the tourism in Natal, with repercussions in its hotel industry: the substitution and transference of the main passenger airport. Until 2014, the airport was in the municipality of Parnamirim, near the South Zone (the most touristified area) of Natal. With the World Cup (2014), a new airport was inaugurated in São Gonçalo do Amarante (Figure 3) on 05/31/2014, i.e., in a distant location (about 30 km) and of more difficult access to the touristic areas of the city. Moreover, with the concession of operations to the private sector, the price of airline tickets had become the most expensive in the Northeast (Passagens..., 2021), making it difficult for the destination to compete, according to information obtained in interviews with the president of Abih and a representative from Fecomércio/RN.

**Figure 3 – International Airport “Governador Aluizio Alves” located in the municipality of São Gonçalo do Amarante/RN**



Source: Anac abre (2021)

Data from Anac (Brazil, 2020a, 2020b) indicate a downward trend in domestic and international arrivals at the international airport of Rio Grande do Norte. Between the years 2005-2007, there were as many as 100,000 international arrivals at Augusto Severo Airport, while between 2014 and 2018 this number did not exceed 45,000. The international tourism is not as representative as it used to be, and the national passenger arrivals stabilized as from 2013, but always presenting a tendency to decrease (Table 3).

Therefore, the national crisis, along with local factors (transference of airport operations), affected the tourist destination of Natal, where 32 lodging facilities were closed, with a negative balance of 15 LFs in 2015. This was the second time the segment showed retraction, with the closure of 66 companies in 2018, with a negative balance of 54 LFs in that same year (Table 4).

In the historical evolution of LFs in Natal, the year 2014 represents the best performance, with 317 establishments. This satisfactory performance of the sector is directly related to the fact that Natal hosted the World Cup games in that same year. However, in 2018, Natal had 256 LFs, i.e., 61 LFs closed, and in five years there was a retraction of 20% in the city's hotel network (Table 4).

According to Fecomércio's representative, the lodging platforms also contributed to the crisis of the lodging sector in Natal, and he mentions that “the biggest hotel chain in the world arrived six years ago, without any rooms, arrived in a network and it is the Airbnb [...] and this generated a very big debate in the hospitality sector, a great concern with this type of lodging”. To understand the magnitude of this platform, on October 15, 2022, Natal offered 449 accommodations on Airbnb, including 128 houses, 197 apartments, 15 guest houses, and 109 hotels. Therefore, it represents a tourist accommodation infrastructure with great representativeness, competing with the hotel sector itself.

Concomitantly, formal employment in the accommodation sector was also impacted. There was a significant decline in the number of employed staff between 2014 and 2018, with 1,087 fewer job positions, representing a decrease by 20% (Table 6).

Analyzing the spatial manifestations in Natal between 2014/2018, a retraction of LFs can be observed in 14 neighborhoods (Table 7). For the first time, the area of Ponta Negra presents a significant decrease in the number of LFs with 29 closures. In Via Costeira, Maturi Empreendimentos Turísticos Ltd closed in 2016 and the hotel Pestana Natal Beach Resort (Portuguese chain) in 2018, while the Atlantic Vacation Resorts Brazil Ltd (Pirâmide Natal Resort & Convention) declared itself not collectible in 2018. Thus, these data reveal the dimension of the crisis in this period, in which the most representative touristic areas of Natal were heavily affected.

Thus, the national crisis in this period triggered a spatial restructuring of the LFs in the urban space in Natal. Neil Smith (1988) states that, in the advent of crises, the capital tends to concentrate spatially. This is what happened in Natal, consolidating the South Zone of the city as the preferred location for tourism investments: in 1990, it represented 41.5% of the total number of establishments; in 2000 this number increased to 63.5% and in 2018 to 73.6%. Thus, the data reveal that there was a tendency of centralization and spatial concentration towards the South Zone and, especially in Ponta Negra, which counted for 62% of the LFs in Natal in 2018.

### **The sanitary crisis of Covid-19 in 2020-2022: the interruption of trips and the periodical mini-bankruptcy of lodging facilities**

The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic heavily affected the dynamics of global capitalism. Some sectors were more impacted because of lockdowns and the restrictions imposed by national and international sanitary authorities to decrease the global flow of people.

The technical environment allowed a “spatial and temporal compression” (HARVEY, 2014) and the political, cultural, social and economic integration in the context of globalization is extremely fast. Therefore, the flow spaces represent the dynamicity of the present economy, and the movement of individuals on land, air and water is ongoing across the world.

The globalization scenario favors the accelerated spread of viruses such as Sars-Cov-2, and tourism can potentially contribute to their proliferation, since it involves the circulation of people. The fact is that coronavirus spread worldwide, and the World Health Organization urged countries to establish travel restrictions. The international tourism, for example, had 900 million fewer tourists and lost US\$ 935 billion in revenue in 2020 due to the global flow restrictions (Pandemia..., 2020).

**Table 7 – Number of lodging facilities per area in Natal – 2014/2018/2019/2022**

zone/area	total LF in 2014	total LF in 2018	opened between 2015/2018	closed and/or suspended between 2015/2018	balance 2014-2018	total LFS in 2019	total LFS in 2022	opened between 2020/2022	closed and/or suspended between 2020-2022	balance 2019-2022
<b>South Zone</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>-42</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>-17</b>
Candelária	4	5	1	-	1	5	4	-	1	-1
Capim Macio	15	9	1	7	-6	9	11	2	-	2
Lagoa Nova	12	8	1	5	-4	8	9	1	-	1
Neópolis	3	2	-	1	-1	2	1	-	1	-1
Pitumbu	1	0	-	1	-1	-	-	-	-	-
Ponta Negra	189	160	48	77	-29	154	139	25	40	-15
Via Costeira	13	11	1	3	-2	11	8	-	3	-3
<b>East Zone</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>-16</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>-9</b>
Alecrim	4	3	-	1	-1	2	1	-	1	-1
Areia Preta	10	9	3	4	-1	8	6	-	2	-2
Barro Vermelho	2	2	-	-	0	2	2	-	-	0
Cidade Alta	13	6	1	8	-7	6	3	-	3	-3
Mãe Luiza	2	2	-	-	0	2	1	-	1	-1
Petrópolis	7	2	-	5	-5	2	2	-	-	0
Praia do Meio	18	17	4	5	-1	15	14	3	4	-1
Praia dos Artistas	1	1	-	-	0	1	1	-	-	0
Santos Reis	1	0	-	1	-1	0	0	-	-	0
Tirol	7	7	1	1	0	7	6	-	1	-1
<b>West Zone</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>-3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>-5</b>
Cidade da Esperança	10	8	-	2	-2	7	4	-	3	-3
Dix-Sept Rosado	4	3	-	1	-1	3	2	-	1	-1
Nazaré	1	1	-	-	0	1	0	-	1	-1
<b>Natal</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>-61</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>-31</b>

Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>9</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.]b).

<sup>9</sup> Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

In Natal, the number of arrivals in the international airport had an abrupt decrease. The number of domestic arrivals in 2019 was 1,108,631, in 2020 this number decreased to 570,058. As for international arrivals, there was a drastic reduction, i.e., from 44,557 arrivals in 2019 to 12,942 in 2020.

This negative context was also reflected in the reduction of 25% of formal jobs in LFs in Natal between 2019 and 2020, implying a loss of 1,238 jobs (Table 6). However, according to an interview with the Brazilian Association of Hotel Industries (Abih) representative, this scenario is even worse, because “70% of the employees of the RN hotel industry were laid off” during the pandemic. Data from the Social Information Annual Report and the Declaration of the General Register of Employed and Unemployed (Rais/Caged, Brazil 2022), shown in Table 6, refer to formal employment, and “the hotel industry also works with outsourced staff. Thus, if you consider the outsourced staff, you find such rate”, added the representative.

The ABIH representative ratifies the scenario of great difficulties for tourism in Natal: “The economy had been in recession for four years. The economy was in recession, so tourism was very bad”. Besides, “we strongly depend on domestic tourism”. The national crisis of 2015-2018 greatly affected the resumption of tourism, as well as “the air tickets to Natal [that] impacted tourism, [...] because the tickets were very expensive”.

The ABIH representative also mentioned a periodical ‘mini bankruptcy’:

“When the pandemic started, 95% of the hotels in RN state closed their doors. Why did they close? Because there was nobody to go in or out. If there is nobody, the doors close. It was a mini bankruptcy. The sector went bankrupt for at least five months. The few that stayed open did not pay the bills. The pandemic hit the hospitality industry very hard.”

Despite governmental initiatives for the hotel sector, most LFs were not benefited because of the difficulties of the documentation required. The ABIH representative added: “When you went to apply, there was a lot of documentation and the hotels could not even pay their taxes. The clearance certificates were negative.”

This unfavorable context that tourism experienced, added to the Covid-19 pandemic, contributed to the restructuring of the LFs in Natal. With the pandemic, several LFs closed or are until today with inactive CNPJ (Corporate Taxpayer Number) because they were in economic difficulties. According to the data shown in Table 7, in 2019 Natal had 245 active CNPJ and in April 2022 this number reduced to 214, indicating that 13% of these enterprises are with inactive CNPJ and/or closed<sup>10</sup>. According to the ABIH representative, this scenario is even worse, because many have not changed their CNPJ, since they were leased. The interview with the president of ABIH reveals that.

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the LFs with inactive CNPJ may be working, but only those with active CNPJ were considered. Anyhow, being inactive means that the enterprise is in financial difficulties and/or will be closed.

Some hotels in Ponta Negra were auctioned off, were leased. Many of them were leased and are not included in your data. [For example], the hotel is still there, a contract was signed, same as if I get this agency and lease it (...). I sign the contract and leave. For the people in general it will be the same. Many hotels were leased.

This is a very clarifying piece of information and the official data do not reveal such dynamics. Leasing was a very expressive event that occurred during this crisis period. According to the ABIH representative, “several companies manage hotels in Brazil”. Regarding the change of CNPJ (Corporate Taxpayer Number) and who is leasing, “it is not the real estate sector”, [...] “it is the hotel business itself”. In practice, by doing the leasing, the hotel will “remain open, the CNPJ will be active. I will manage that company, but it will not become my property. It is a contract where I assume the administration of the company [for years]. If it makes a profit or loss, either will be mine.”

Therefore, “many [hotels] are being leased, some are being sold. This has happened in the hotel sector across the world, and, in Brazil, the pandemic accelerated the process” (ABIH representative). Leasing is a common practice in the hotel business, and crises always show a tendency towards concentration and centralization of capital. Thus, it was no different with the crisis triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic.

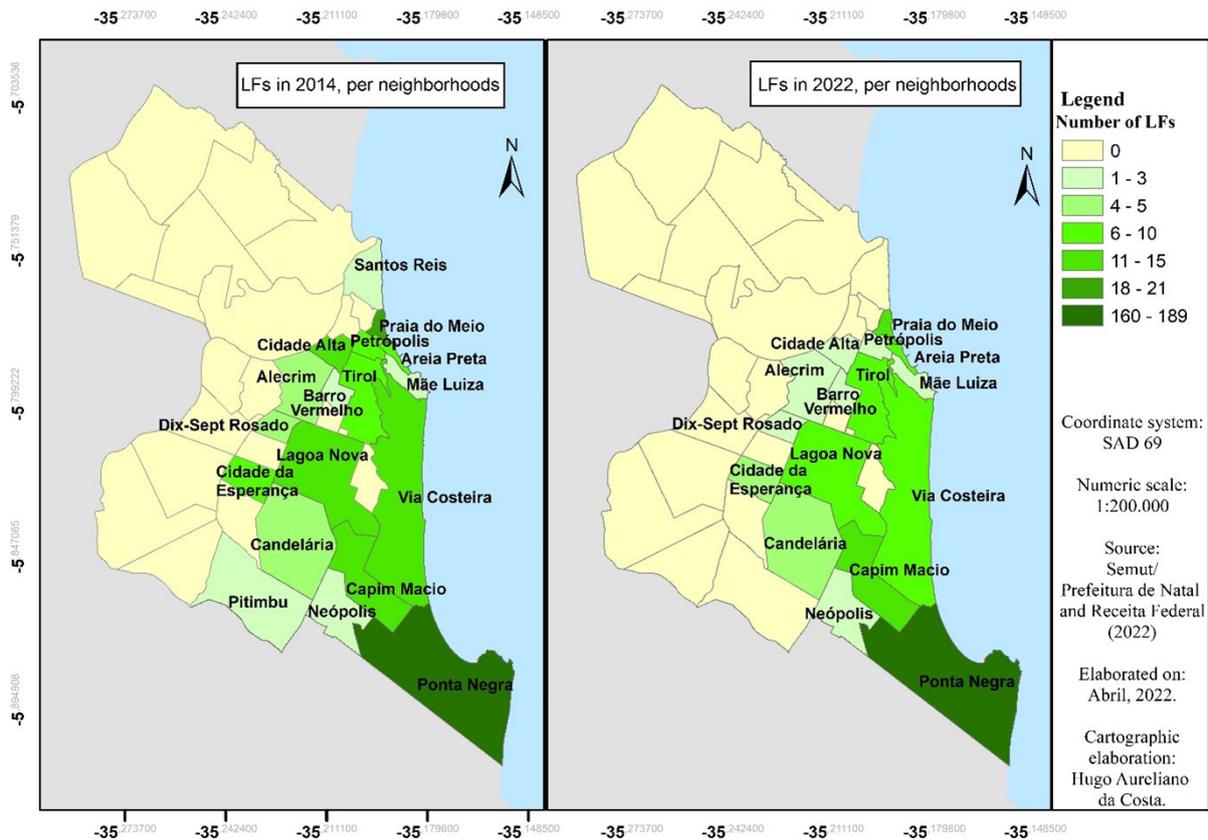
In Natal, in addition to the leases mentioned hereinbefore, there was a decrease of 31 LFs between December 2019 and April 2022. Almost all neighborhoods showed a reduction and tourism in Natal became even more concentrated in the South Zone of the municipality, representing 76% of the enterprises (Table 7).

In Ponta Negra, 40 LFs closed/suspended their activities, presenting a negative balance of 15 units in this period; however, despite this decrease, the concentration process continues to occur, and in 2022 this district had 65% of the LFs in Natal (Table 7). In Via Costeira, two hotels declare themselves non collectible in the year 2022, the Hotel Parque da Costeira Ltd., which during the pandemic became a field hospital to host health professionals, and the Pirâmide Palace Hotel Ltd.

Therefore, the pandemic crisis contributed to the continuity of the process that was already in progress, providing a higher spatial concentration of LFs in the South Zone of the city, especially in Ponta Negra. Figure 4 shows the spatialization of LFs in Natal at the best moment of tourism, the World Cup (2014), and the changes following the 2015/16 and 2020/22 crises.

Comparing the spatial distribution of the LFs in 2014 and 2022 (Figure 4), the numerical reduction and spatial retraction is noticeable, with some neighborhoods no longer appearing on the 2022 map (Santos Reis and Pitimbu), indicating that there are no LFs in more peripheral neighborhoods, while the remaining ones suffered a significant decrease. Praia do Meio and Praia de Areia Preta, in the East Zone, still had significant participation, and Ponta Negra and its adjacent neighborhoods in the South Zone (Capim Macio, Lagoa Nova) were elected the preferred locations for the LFs. Therefore, the global crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic redefined the spatial structures of the lodging sector in Natal.

**Figure 4 – Distribution of lodging facilities per neighborhood in Natal – 2014/2022.**



Source: Semut (verbal information)<sup>11</sup>; Brazil ([n.d.])<sup>b</sup>.

The data and the results provided herein demonstrate that the tourism in Natal has been going through acute crises since the World Cup in 2014, when Natal presented 317 LFs. Over eight years, this number was reduced by 103 establishments, and in April/2022 the tourist destination had 214 LFs, i.e., a decline of 1/3 in the lodging sector.

Furthermore, leasing has become a tendency for LFs experiencing financial problems, as remarked by Abih representative, which demonstrates that economic crises result in the spatial concentration of the capital and the social centralization of these enterprises (Smith, 1988).

Despite the critical situation of the tourist activity in Natal due to the pandemic, the business survey research in the sector of tourism agencies in Brazil indicates that Natal appears systematically among the first places in the ranking of the most popular destinations in Brazil in recent years: in 2019 it ranked 2nd; in 2020 it was the most popular destination, occupying the 1st place; in 2021 it was in 3rd place; and in 2022 it occupied the 4th position. Thus, even though a particular destination occupies a good position in the market, the hotel sector in Natal has been experiencing difficulties with the retraction of the companies operating in this segment. Perhaps one explanation for this contradiction is the insertion and significant growth of lodging platforms in the tourism market.

<sup>11</sup> Information provided by Semut representatives in Natal, April 2022.

## Final Considerations

The present study demonstrated how the lodging sector has evolved in Natal from the installation of the Via Costeira up to the present day. From 1980 to 2007, the tourist activity grew in a significant and continuous way in the capital of Natal with the arrival of national and international tourists, as well as with the constant increase in the number of LFs in the urban space of the city. This dynamic was partially interrupted by the global real estate-financial crisis of 2008, which caused the retraction of international demand and a decrease in the number LFs, which, for the first time, presented a negative balance.

In 2015, the national institutional/political crisis strongly affected the country's economy and the tourism in Natal suffered its effects with the stabilization and slight decrease of tourism flows and considerable retraction of LFs. The relocation of the international airport, motivated by the Fifa World Cup event also affected tourism in Natal, triggering the rise in airfare prices. In this same period, lodging platforms began to operate in the local market, competing with conventional hotels, which may have also contributed to accentuate the crisis in the sector. Despite this evidence, the discussion of the effects of hosting platforms in this segment will be the subject of further studies.

Before the recovery from the 2015-2018 crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted tourist travel in several locations around the world, including the city of Natal. This contributed to the drastic reduction of flows, reduction in the number of LFs and caused a reorganization of the sector, such as the practice of hotel leasing. It is important to highlight the crisis of the Via Costeira hotel complex, where four hotels were closed or declared not collectible in the period between the two crises (2015/2018 and 2020/2022), indicating that the hotel sector in Natal has been going through severe difficulties and consequent restructuring.

After each crisis, the lodging sector went through a process of spatial concentration, with the retraction of the LFs in the more peripheral and less touristic neighborhoods, while Ponta Negra became more central, i.e., this segment was then located in an increasingly selective way in the territory.

Therefore, the tourism in Natal was heavily affected by the crises and was restructured in the urban space in comparison with the spatial configuration of the 2000s. Tourism is a prominent activity in the Rio Grande do Norte, but the "Tourism Wave" is now weaker and spatially selective. After 2014, when the FIFA World Cup took place, there was a declining trend in the number of LFs, with a slightly positive balance in 2016 and 2017. Furthermore, there was a reduction of 1/3 of the total number of LFs in Natal over the last eight years (2014-2022). The retraction of LFs, combined with the decrease of formal jobs in the hotel industry and air flows, indicates that the main tourist destination in the state is going through stagnation.

Thus, urgent actions need to be taken towards the recovery of the activity. Crises also open new opportunities that might contribute to reintroduce the city of Natal in the tourism industry.

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### Authors' contribution

**Hugo Aureliano da Costa**: data collection, literature review, methodological development, treatment and review of data, cartographic elaboration, presentation and systematization of data and review and editing of the article.

**Maria Aparecida Pontes da Fonseca**: research design and orientation, data and literature review, methodological review and article review and editing.

### Article editor

**César Simoni Santos**

**Received**: 29 Aug. 2022  
**Approved em**: 11 Oct. 2022

COSTA, H. A.; FONSECA, M. A. P.