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**The location of tourist accommodation in Santiago de Compostela from a client perspective.**

Limited tourist space is one of the main problems faced by small cities like Santiago de Compostela (Spain), our case study. Here, decentralisation would help expand it to include new sectors of the city currently not engaged in tourism. In this sense, the research presents an analysis of the ratings on Booking.com of all tourist accommodation that guests give to their location at two different times. The aim is to enrich studies concerning the destination management and planning improving satisfaction, heritage conservation and maintenance of traditional uses. The main data sources are ratings Booking.com. As a result, although accommodation in the immediate environment of the cathedral predictably gets the highest scores, there are nuances which open up the possibility of decentralisation beyond the historic city centre. We note two sectors beyond the old city which are especially important in bolstering the establishment of new tourist accommodation.

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Key words: Accommodation; Booking.com; Location; Santiago de Compostela; Historic City Centre.

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## **Introduction**

Santiago de Compostela, further referred to as Santiago, is a small Spanish city located in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The city is tackling significant challenges in the sphere of tourism. Heavy pressure on limited tourist space is a major problem (Santos and Pena, 2014; Castro, Lois, and Lopez, 2015). Although the city has tried to solve it through the offer of new attractions or the determination to generate other tourist nodes, results have not been satisfactory (Otón and Lois; Santos and Lopez, 2015). The increase of accommodation in the historic city centre bolsters functionality and contributes still more to the expansion of tourism in this urban sector.

The location of tourist accommodation is important for the management of visitor flows and the relationship that these visitors establish with the whole of the city (Urtasun and Gutiérrez, 2006). Given the constant increase of hotel accommodation, in this article, we will discuss the perception of guests in regards to the location of tourist accommodation, in order to contribute to market-oriented accommodation management. For this, we will use the location ratings given to these establishments on the Booking.com website. Although Booking.com has the classification for several features of the hotels, such as cleanness, friendliness of staff, convenience, facilities, room design, reputation, we focus our attention on location rating indicator as it is relevant for the purpose of our research.

The results of our research might be of great interest for territorial agent and policymakers, as they will contribute to demonstrate that there are areas of the city, outside the historical centre, with great potential for tourist accommodation. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the improvement of regional tourism management and its results regarding satisfaction, heritage conservation and maintenance of traditional uses.

## **The hotel location in Santiago**

Regarding locational theories, the more classical Weberian school analyses conferred great importance on means of transport, fundamentally the railways. In general, proximity to resources was the main issue to be taken into account. With travel costs being minimised both in terms of time and money, subsequent development permitted the focus to shift to other elements such as accessibility or economies of agglomeration.

In the case of Santiago, this process can clearly be noted as hotel location fits the criteria developed by those theories. On the one hand, there are establishments close to raw materials, i.e., resources. For example, we refer to all those establishments found in the historic centre or in the proximity of large facilities such as hospitals, conference centres or university campuses. On the other hand, we may refer to a location in relation to city gateways, such as the bus and railway stations, the airport and the main access roads. However, in Santiago it is necessary to make some nuances: in terms of attracting accommodation, the former bus station was more important thanks to its central location in the square connecting the historic centre with contemporary development beyond the old city walls. This very central position allowed these establishments to remain despite the relocation of the bus station from Plaza de Galicia to the periphery of the city in the 1970s.

In turn, the railway station opened in its current location in the 1940s had the main disadvantage of being flanked by railway lines on one side and by a high-capacity road forming part of the city's bypass on the other. This physical barrier discouraged urban development until many years later. In any event, once that main road was crossed a small axis was created of accommodation accumulating around facilities such as the military barracks up to establishments in the Plaza de Galicia and extending into the old quarter.

Thus, the location of hotels in Santiago at the macro level does not provide too many surprises. There are no major differences with the description of Calle (2002) in his book on

tourism and the historic city centre or with the work of authors such as Shoval and Cohen (2001). Neither are there many differences with the conclusions of Ashworth (1989), and Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990) who introduced the Central Business District (CBD) as an element attracting hotels that overlaps with the historic city centre. In the case of Santiago, the Plaza de Galicia would act in this way, given that it faces the urban sector where the majority of trade, banking, and specialised services are concentrated.

Despite the passage of time, the contributions of Ashworth (1989), and Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990, 2000) and their Tourist-historic city model still make a lot of sense in the context of a medium-sized heritage city such as Santiago. The historic city is at least in part being defined by tourist demand and that the tourist city is in part delimited regarding the location of historic attractions. For the classification of commercial classification establishments in historic cities, hotels are indicators of the intensive use.

Problems arising from the strict planning regulations imposed on the city's historic sector and the pedestrianisation of this space do not seem to have posed an obstacle to the growth of tourist accommodation. On the one hand, satellite car parks at the edge of the historic city centre, and short distances mitigate that disadvantage. On the other hand, the role played by pilgrims and the importance of air travel as a means of getting to Santiago both reduce dependence on the car.

Ashworth (1989) discusses the possibility that travellers staying in more peripheral establishments fail to visit the historic city centre. In the case of Santiago, we believe this option must be rejected. Figures from the Santiago Tourist Observatory indicates that in 2015, 96.5% of the total people surveyed visited the cathedral and its environment. As already noted, the hotel trade located beyond the urban centre is fundamentally linked to groups of company employees and is fed by conference attendees, organised groups who cannot be accommodated by the historic centre's small hotels, and business tourists.

## **Literature Review**

The location of tourist accommodation is a very important variable when choosing a hotel, and it is a part of the customer choice mix (Arbel and Pizam, 1977; Verma, 2010). Yang, Luo, and Law (2014) have tried to collect the scarce and dispersed existing academic literature on this subject and synthesise the studies published in four main models. They also noted the importance of location both for the success of the hotel and the destination, also linking it to urban and regional planning.

Shoval et al. (2011) analyse hotel location in Hong Kong and its influence on tourist behaviour. These authors note the lack of significance that has been given to this type of study. Furthermore, they point out that the spatial and temporal response of tourists is determined by the location of the accommodation. While it is true, as they point out, that the destination's iconic attractions are visited regardless of the location of the establishment, the same does not occur with other secondary resources. In general, they provide valid evidence to support the idea that distance is a significant factor for the visit and therefore the location of hotels is important for destination management.

Unlike the study by Shoval et al. (2011), which analysed the behaviour of the tourist based on hotel location, we aim to evaluate the rating given by the visitor to the location of the accommodation. We analysed how the tourist perceives the facilitation and stimulation by the hotel of his/her experience at the destination thanks to the particular location in the city. This change of research perspective is possible thanks to the development of social media providing the customer with a voice. The business owner is no longer the only person who gets to make decisions. Rather, it is now easy to view the tourist's opinion of such a strategic issue as location. The traditional role of word-of-mouth (WOM) has now been replaced by e-WOM (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). The capacity of e-WOM to influence consumers

has been studied by authors such as Bronner and de Hoog (2011), Gutierrez, Parra and González, (2014), Blal and Sturman (2014), Phillips et al. (2015), Filieri and McLeay (2014), Lee and Ro (2016), and many others. Park and Nicolau (2015) cite a Pew Research Center report which asserts that 60% of consumers take scores and comments into account when seeking a product. These authors suggest that the characteristics of tourism itself (experiential, intangible and heterogeneous) make it very difficult to assess the quality of the product prior to consumption and thus information is even more necessary, turning the internet into an ideal tool for tourism (Bonson, Carvajal and Escobar, 2015). Serra and Salvi (2014) claim that tourism is strongly influenced by the e-WOM, and the hospitality sector is probably the most affected.

These studies emphasise the capacity of social media to affect the establishment's reputation and influence the decision to buy. In short, they examine how social media affect the hotel's profitability and thus its business strategies. In this context, unlike variables such as price, quality or services, location is a fixed factor that cannot be changed once the business has been established. This immutability gives location a unique value, even if it is true that it can be manipulated by offering particular transport services or pressurising the authorities to improve the urban. For destination management, the location of accommodation can be central to tackling issues related to tourist mobility, as may be inferred from the research of Shoval et al. (2011). In their analysis of the hotel sector in Hong Kong, Chu and Choi (2000) refer to the attributes perceived as important by customers when making their choice of accommodation. In both their literature review and their analysis, convenient location appears as an important factor, especially for business travellers rather than leisure travellers (for whom the value of location is surpassed by value for money). Also Dolnicar and Otter (2003) point out that "convenience of the location" is the most important criterion when choosing accommodation. This is not the conclusion reached by Barsky and

Labagh (1992), who claim location is more important for the leisure traveller than for the business traveller.

Chan and Wong (2006) base their study on frequent independent travellers in Hong-Kong. They discuss the role played by the price of hotels when choosing an establishment relative to other factors. For these authors, without that price variable, convenient hotel location and good hotel service are more important factors when choosing a hotel. Cetin and Dincer (2014) emphasise the importance to a hotel of its social and physical environment (the second aspect, the physical aspect, referring to its location). Indeed, one of the results emerging from their survey of customers of five-star hotels in Istanbul is that one of the highest averages corresponds to the item “The surrounding natural and cultural resources are impressive.”

## **Methodology**

From a methodological point of view, we turn to the Booking.com website, which is regarded as one the world’s most important hotel booking website. The existence of a numerical rating is important to allow comparisons to be easily made. Furthermore, scores can only be left if the customer has already booked a stay. These last two features distinguish Booking.com from other websites where anyone can leave a score or a numerical rating is replaced by an evaluation of a more qualitative nature. However, authors such as Mellinas, Martínez and Berna (2015) warn that the distinctive features of Booking.com’s scoring system have a clear tendency to inflate results; although they do point out that the scale used need not pose a problem for research. This upward variation is important to the extent that negative information seems to have a stronger influence on consumer decisions than positive information (Park and Nicolau, 2015).

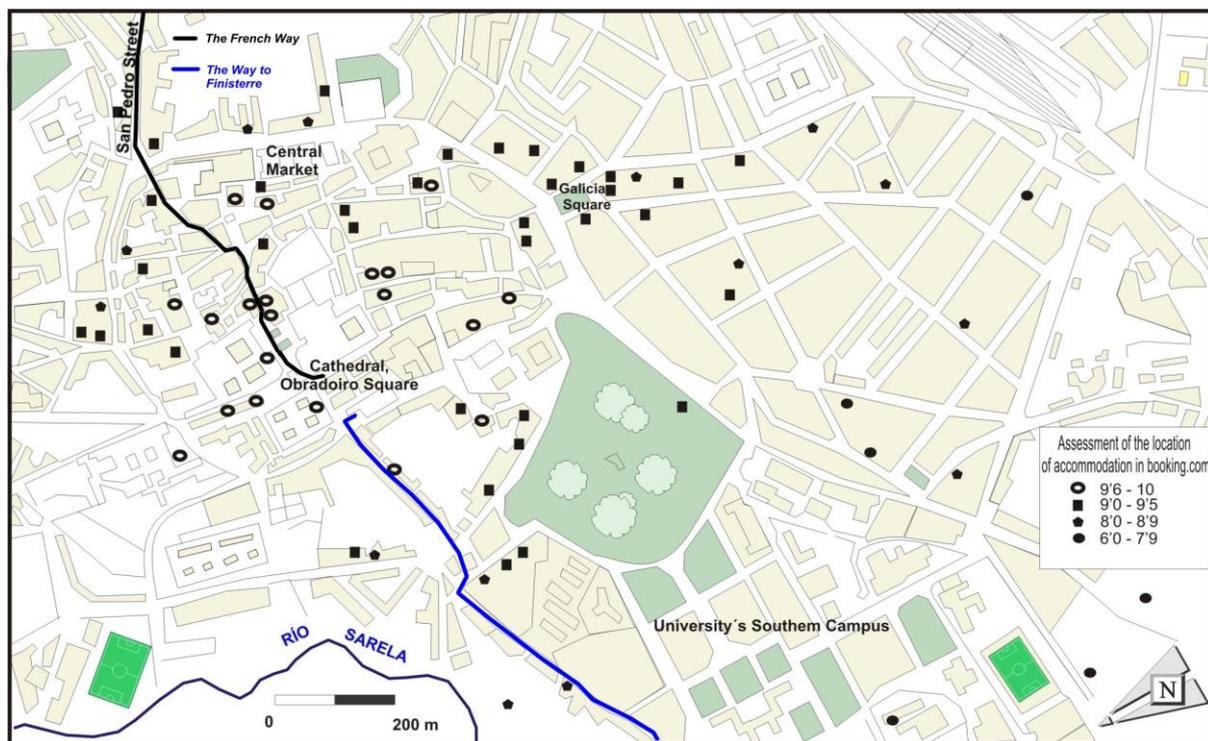
Gutiérrez, Parra, and González (2014) analyse the importance of authenticating identity in the online rating of hotels, comparing TripAdvisor's and Booking.com's results. They tested the hypothesis that authenticating identity encourages higher scores. They also start from the assumption that establishments with a lower number of ratings have more negative e-WOM. The results of their study indicate that Booking.com's ratings were always higher than TripAdvisor's ratings, thus confirming the hypothesis.

In the case of Santiago, the figures from the city's tourism observatory show that by 2015, 60.1% of visitors had organised their stay via the internet, an increase of 20% compared to 2011. The purchase of accommodation is undoubtedly one of the most significant decisions and requires time and information (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). In this respect, Filieri and McLeay (2014) cite the importance of product rankings as the most powerful information tool, permitting a quick overview to be obtained of the main characteristics of a product in situations when there is a lot of choices, helping to save time and facilitating comparisons.

For this article, we have proceeded to the analysis of the scores of all tourist accommodation in Santiago at two different times. In the first phase, in February 2015, we selected the nearly 100 establishments that were on offer and whose results are shown in map 1. A year later, in April 2016, we have repeated the same operation, which allowed us to compare in map 2 the updated results and incorporate almost 30 new establishments. The total number of ratings in the first stage was quite high: on only 9 occasions did it not reach 100 ratings, while 20 establishments had more than 500. In the second phase this volume had significantly increased, with half of the accommodations exceeding 500 opinions. Among the new additions of 2016, those establishments with less than 30 opinions were excluded, as the vast majority had over 100 comments.

## Results

Hereafter, we will analyze the main data obtained from removing the 2015 information (Map 1). These will serve as a reference to see the development that has occurred until 2016 (Map 2).



**Fig. 1** Assessments in 2015.  
(source: proper elaboration from Booking.com).

An analysis of the map 1 gives at least a general idea. Densely concentrated accommodation in the historic centre gains high ratings, thus confirming the important role played by proximity and integration within the tourist space (Lee, Kim, Lee and Kim, 2010). As we move away from the centre, both in a southeasterly direction toward the railway station and towards the west along the urban stretch of the road towards Finisterre, a prolongation of the Way to Santiago towards the “end of the world” which has become highly popular with pilgrims in recent years. We note that the scores are slightly lower. Off the map, there are large hotels next to facilities such as the conference centre or the main

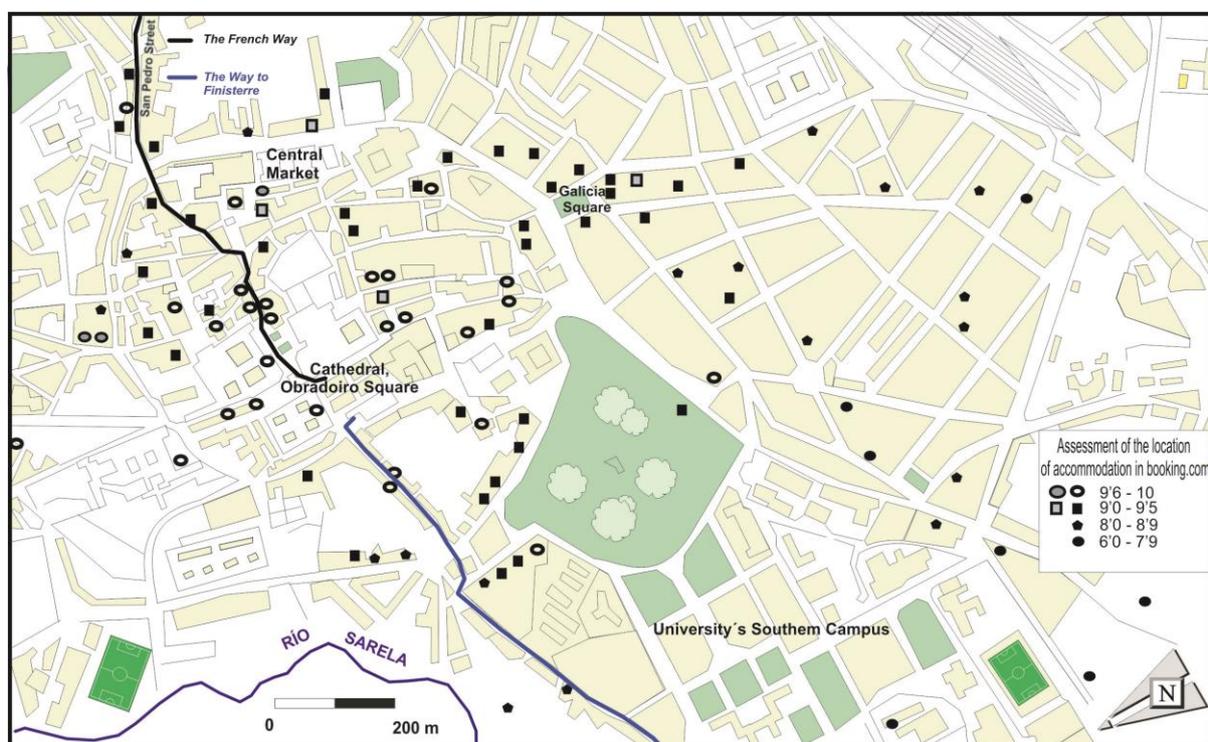
access roads into Compostela. In these cases, scores are always below 8, although with some nuances deriving mainly from the issue of whether or not they are situated on a main road. There are just two exceptions rated between 8 and 8.5. One of these exceptions is an eccentric but highly rated establishment focused principally on religious tourism whose identifying characteristics are a chapel, extensive gardens, a spectacular view over the city, and free bus transport to the centre. The other exception is a hotel specialising in hydrotherapy and relaxation therapy, where tranquillity and contact with nature are precisely one of its strong points.

Hence in almost all cases, the location score is affected by distance from the historic city centre. However, we note at least a couple of important nuances. Firstly, the environment of the cathedral combines both the highest hotel density and the highest scores. Secondly, the northeast sector stands out in both respects.

It is not unusual for proximity to the cathedral to be the highest-rated location. Indeed, it is the central point considered by Booking.com when indicating a reference to the distances of the hotels. However, clarifying the issue affecting the density and evaluation of the northeast sector is somewhat more complex. There are at least two explanations. The first refers to the value of land, a variable already noted by Ashworth (1989). It is the southern part of the historic centre which has been most heavily renovated in recent years through the process of gentrification and the establishment and preservation of buildings performing symbolic functions. Apart from the cathedral, this area is where there is greatest concentration of tourists. By contrast, the northeast sector has a less commercial density while maintaining a more traditional residential use.

There is one more element that in our view is important to understanding these results. The map shows us that there is an axis along the final urban stretch of the Camino de Santiago. Many of the northeast sector hotels are located along this axis and its immediate

environment. We even note some continuity toward the west in the direction of the road towards Finisterre. But the Camino itself is not only what is attractive but also the quality of the urban context, as Cetin and Dincer (2014), Ashworth (1989) and Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990) have already noted when they cite the nice location at the edge of the historic city centre. In fact, we find accommodation very close to the Camino whose location is less valued because it is found in more degraded neighbourhoods.



**Fig. 2** Assessments in 2016 (Shaded symbols mean change of category)  
(source: proper elaboration from Booking.com).

The comparison with data from 2016, which is shown in map 2, allows us to obtain very interesting information. Perhaps the most relevant is that location is a stable variable. Between both dates, only 50% of the establishments modify their score against other items that move between 70% and 80%. Also, the average level of variation is the lowest of them all. This means that, with very few exceptions, hotels vary one decimal up or down. Although they mostly do it in a positive sense, this trend is not as obvious as in the other variables. For

example, regarding the location, the relationship between positive and negative changes is 1.55 in favour of the former. For the free Wi-Fi it is 4.58 and for the staff 6.55. These data confirm that location is a variable that has a limited capacity for change and on which the business owner can barely influence once they have invested.

In relation to the new establishments that have appeared in 2016, the existing trends are confirmed. Higher ratings are given in the main streets of the historic center, as well as in the direction towards Finisterre; this axis is also reinforced eastward, on San Pedro street, which represents the entry point of the French way. Also, the surroundings of Plaza de Galicia continue to get relatively high scores.

Although in general, the values descend as we move away from the tourist area, there are a few notable exceptions. The case already mentioned of a spa located on the outskirts of Santiago, which had a score in the range of 8 to 8.9 is reinforced with the opening of two rural tourism establishments which are situated in the same range. Therefore, they are consistent with the motivations of those who seek that type of establishment.

The results show that location is a variable with reasonably positive ratings: the city's small size encourages higher scores. Indeed, the average is very high at 8.8. Another important element is that 57.5 % of establishments have a score of 9 or above on location, much higher than the percentage of establishments above the same threshold in the second-placed category (cleanliness with 41.4%) and especially the last-placed category (free wi-fi with 6.0%). Therefore, our analysis of these ratings needs to be much more nuanced. Park and Nicolau (2015) provide evidence that extreme scores are more useful and less ambiguous for consumers.

On the relationship between location and number of opinions, we have already noted how Gutiérrez, Parra, and González (2014) emphasize that when the volume of the latter is high, the scores tend to be higher to neutralise the negative opinions. In our case, we cannot

identify this relationship between more opinions and better scores. However, it is true that, in general, by incorporating data from 2016 and therefore a substantially higher number of opinions, the trend is always upward.

## **Discussion**

Ratings given to hotels in Santiago on the Booking.com website are largely in line with the criterion of proximity to the historic centre, and more specifically, proximity to the cathedral. However, there are two elements distorting this pattern based on location: the value of land and the presence of the final stretch of the Camino de Santiago. As a result, neither the sector of the historic city centre under greatest pressure from tourism nor the “area of overlap” between the historic city centre and the CBD proposed by Ashworth (1989) received the highest scores.

The symbolic value of the streets and squares to the south of the historic city centre hinders the establishment of hotels due to the pressures exerted by the performance of other functions, including the satisfaction of cultural and upmarket housing needs. Meanwhile, that “area of overlap” between the business district of Compostela and the old quarter gets slightly lower scores, despite being physically very close to the cathedral and despite remaining very dense in tourist accommodation. The fact that this area around the Plaza de Galicia falls outside the old city walls introduces an environmental variable. Given that the historic city centre is pedestrianised, this vicinity registers the city centre’s heaviest road use generating noise and traffic jam (Otón and Lois, 2013).

Although proximity to the cathedral is a generally valid criterion in understanding hotel scores, we have not found a direct proportional relationship to distance. Ratings of location fall relatively quickly towards the southeast as we approach to the new districts. Meanwhile, ratings stay relatively high in places where there remain certain traits less typical

of a standard city, such as light road traffic, traditional buildings, and spacious green zones. In this context, the tourist appreciates authenticity more by their expectations and stereotypes (Wang, 1999). Equally, the physical and social environment of which Cetin and Dincer (2014) talk about is important. There is a tendency either to occupy peripheral sectors of the historic centre where there are still abandoned buildings, or even to go beyond the city walls, specifically in a northwest direction following the road toward Finisterre. Similar growth towards the east along the final stretch into the city of the Camino de Santiago has not occurred, due to the intense use of that urban sector for residential purposes.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the change represented by the augmentation of one of the city's traditional gateways. The high-speed train, the significant modernisation of the Galician railway infrastructure and the future conversion of the railway station into an intermodal hub, all open up interesting possibilities for hotel location. At present, the axis from the Plaza de Galicia (on the edge of the historic city centre) to the railway station is characterised by a high density of hotels whose ratings decrease significantly the further we get from the old quarter. The enhancement of this access together with planning changes encouraging a notable reduction of road traffic, for example, may doubtless significantly alter perceptions of hotel location.

## **Conclusions**

The growth in tourism experienced by Santiago in the last 25 years has triggered the expansion and diversification of the range of hotels, apartments and lodgings offered. The typology of hotel locations is reasonably consistent with the six types described by Ashworth (1989) in his classification: a) historic city location; b) railway station locations; c) along many access roads; d) cluster of small hotels and pensions in nice areas; e) the zone of overlap between the historic city and the modern commercial city; f) peripheral locations.

In this context, an important node has been generated linked to the accommodation of visitors inside the historic city centre, which does not exactly coincide with the zones of greatest tourist pressure. To some extent, we are witnessing a process of functional specialisation expanding toward the more residential sectors of the historic quarter. This expansion toward the northeast has reached as far as the Central Market, which forms the heart of a dynamic shopping area for the local population and is in the process of becoming an important focus of tourist attraction.

Santiago's tourism strategies include spatial decentralisation proposals focussing on the creation of new nodes on the periphery of the historic city centre. Their success has so far been limited, and pressure remains on the environment around the cathedral, which is increasingly being expanded by new hotels, apartments or lodgings. Chu and Choi (2000) point out that the most iconic attractions can attract tourists regardless of hotel location, while visits to less unique sites are highly constrained by the location of such accommodation. Therefore, tourist management must include aspects related to the location of these establishments.

It is true that accommodation in historic cities has itself become an experience to the extent that they are more than facilities offering accommodation services (Cetin and Dincer, 2014). These establishments benefit from a unique urban environment, proximity to the main attractions, contact with the everyday life (e.g., the Central Market), the opportunity to meet other pilgrims, and often a quiet environment, as there is little traffic in the streets despite the location.

From our analysis of the accommodation ratings, in the future, there are at least two nodes with the capacity for growth beyond the historic city centre, which would help to alleviate the pressure on this urban sector. The first is towards the northwest, where the Camino leaves Santiago towards Finisterre (as shown in the maps). This is a traditional

neighbourhood with low building density and spacious green areas. It is relatively close to the historic centre. Scores on location left on Booking.com are high, in some cases even in the highest bracket. In our opinion, this node will be able to turn into an axis that extends to the East of the city, at the entrance of the Camino de Santiago. This potential change is today reinforced with the opening in this urban environment in October 2015 of the new Pilgrim office which is already generating a point of concentration of pilgrims, with a likely impact on the accommodation. Therefore, in addition to the influence of the market forces and government policies in the hotel's location (Yang, Luo and Law, 2014) there are other institutions such as the Church.

The second node that we point out for future capacity, toward the south/southeast, is located in a traditional hotel zone extending from the former Plaza de Galicia bus station to the railway station. As we have noted, loss of points based on location accelerates as we move away from the historic centre. The area has interesting potential because the future intermodal transport hub will create a major gateway, allowing a currently almost disconnected sector of the city to become incorporated into the city's tourist space. One of this area's main weaknesses is the intensity of road traffic, especially in the vicinity of the Plaza de Galicia. However, studies like the one by Wait (2000) indicate that it is possible to generate authentic environments that favour a tourist use according to what is expected from a city like Santiago. In this context the role of the accommodation in relation to the management of tourism spaces is important.

In this article, we have demonstrated that the perception of the location of tourist accommodation has stayed fairly stable over time. The location of the establishments is not only important for customers, but also for the management of the destination and the city, as pointed out by Yang, Luo and Law (2014). The scores in regards to location by visitors on platforms such as Booking.com, allow us to obtain relevant information for the planning of a

tourist destination, thus helping to solve some problems derived from tourism pressure on the historic city centre, while the tourism space expands. In the case of Santiago, the proposal by Ashworth (1989) and Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990) generally remains valid. The two axes that we have found for the hotel expansion outside of the historic city centre respond, with certain nuances, to the scheme developed by these authors.

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