

Competitiveness of Small Rural Tourist Establishments in Northern Norway

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Abstract: Competitiveness is a severe challenge for rural tourism including factors like authenticity, clean nature, and sustainable use of the environment. In this project, we collected data from six small rural tourist establishments in Northern Norway, three lodging activities and three tourism service providers. We compared and interpreted the competitive situation using two types of indicators: Porter-type strategy indicators based on structured interviews and financial Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The theoretical discussion of the competitiveness of rural tourist establishments shows large differences in the understanding of competitiveness, depending on different theoretical frameworks and measurement methods. The results indicate that the KPI-based indicators are more relevant for short-term financial structural changes, one of them being how to develop products/niches that can be profitable for the company. The questionnaire-based analysis adds a longer-term perspective, introducing marketing options, key personnel developments, and environmental considerations. The important competitive factor, how to even out seasonal changes, is the best example where both types of analysis are applied. The novelty of this study is that the Porter-based strategic considerations often contain too much “wishful thinking”, while the KPIs point at rural tourism variations in profitability, and many businesses make too little money and have solvency issues, which indicates that they should focus more on survival. Of course, all companies, including rural tourism, must have a vision, but that must be based on a reasonably sound financial situation.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Competitiveness, Porter-based Indicators, Northern Norway

1. Introduction

According to the World Tourist Organization (2026), international tourist arrivals, measured by overnight visitors, increased 4% in 2025, and the level in 2025 exceeded pre-COVID travel. The recovery after COVID has shown uneven development, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2024), with challenges such as the increase in travel costs, geopolitical risks, environmental/sustainability requirements, and staff/competence shortages.

Tourism can be divided into many subgroups, and in this study, we focus on rural tourism. There is no commonly accepted definition of rural tourism; see Rosalina et al. (2021). In this study we adopt the following definition: “rural tourism as a form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture, nature and heritage of rural regions” (Pröbstl-Haider 2014, p.1).

In our study, we have a wide understanding of rural tourism to include all forms of tourist activities in rural areas, including the utilization of natural resources, cultural heritage, rural buildings, and village traditions. Local products are important to illustrate the rural region’s identities and respond to the needs of visitors in terms of accommodation, catering, leisure activities, entertainment, and various nature-related services for sustainable business and local development, as documented in studies such as Roman et al. (2020) and Villanueva-Álvaro et al. (2017). In recent years, rural tourism has been considered a forward-looking strategy, creating jobs, promoting the socio-economic development of disadvantaged areas, and contributing to strengthening the rural region’s economic base.

Rural tourism has been considered differently in developed countries, such as Norway, compared to Asian countries, such as Indonesia; see Utami et al (2023). In richer countries, rural tourism is important for an even distribution of growth and access to sustainable use of nature. In developing countries, rural tourism development is often considered to be an engine of socio-economic growth, by reducing poverty, creating jobs, and developing infrastructure. In this project, we adopted the perspective of presenting authentic nature/culture-related experiences integrated into local culture, aimed at contributing to sound business development and stable local development in a developed-country environment with a well-built societal infrastructure.

2. Conceptual Background and Literature Review

2.1 Rural Tourism Trends

Several academic contributions deal with the developing trends in rural tourism, and a summary can be found in the books by Roberts et al. (2017) and Lane and Kastenholz (2018). The increase in rural tourism is due to changes in the leisure habits of tourists, and a larger segment of tourists now values rural and natural spaces with scenic experiences combined with local culture. A second development trend is the significant improvement in infrastructure, such as transportation systems, both in terms of quality and availability. The emergence of eco-entrepreneurs has also increased the number of rural tourism companies (Villanueva-Álvaro et al 2017).

2.2 Sustainable Rural Tourism

Sustainable rural tourism development is dependent on the successful interaction between the social balance in rural areas, the preservation of the environment, and the economic efficiency of tourism activity; see Fons et al. (2011). Sustainability arguments often focus on preserving biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources, leaving them undamaged for future generations. While the rural tourism facilities are related to a particular geographical area environmental restrictions may be imposed on this. But rural tourism is also dependent on the situation in the broader area, for example rural fishing.

Sustainable rural tourism in a competitive business environment must increase the professionalization of their products through learning and internalizing the quality process and by strengthening their brand in the market. Quality standards can improve direct viability through the implementation of specific measures, such as environmental certifications. Norway has a certification system called Miljøfyrtårn, in English, Eco-Lighthouse (<https://eco-lighthouse.org/certification-scheme/>), which helps companies document their social responsibility and work systematically with sustainability in areas such as the physical environment, waste, energy, procurement, and transport. It also provides advantages in public procurement processes and is used in marketing and branding.

2.3 Rural Tourism Competitiveness

A large number of studies on competitiveness in rural tourism have had two different focuses. The first is labeled tourism destination studies, which often use Dwyer and Kim (2003) as the theoretical and methodological platform to ask the question of how well one region (as a unit) is able to compete as a tourist destination. This type of analysis has a combined territorial and tourist activity focus and usually looks at the meso level and how the collection of tourism-oriented activities with all amenities (including public sector infrastructure) can develop as a tourist destination; see Chin (2022).

The second focus analyzes the competitiveness of single tourist-producing units, as in this study. These two types of studies are often intertwined; tourist destination studies can have partial analyses assessing the competitiveness of single units in the region. Further, in single tourist business studies, we can find strategic arguments for how businesses can enhance their competitiveness by developing regional cooperation; see Ogutu et al. (2022).

A large number of empirical applications with tourist businesses focus on competitive analysis, using economic theory based on competitive advantage, such as Porter's Five Forces Model; see Porter (1980). The original five forces included the threat of new entrants, the bargaining power of buyers, the bargaining power of suppliers, the threat of substitute products, and the rivalry among industry competitors. Porter developed this analysis as an alternative to neo-classical economic theory, where markets (in the longer run) would be in equilibrium. Porter's competitive analysis has been discussed and extended, and Nyanga et al. (2020) added three components: (1) digitalization (or more in general, IT and AI interactions), (2) globalization, and (3) deregulation (sometimes extended to public sector interventions).

The competitive analysis of rural tourist establishments often aligns with the resource-based view (RBV), developed by Barney (1991; 2001), where businesses use their individual specific resources and try to make them as difficult as possible to copy. Most rural tourism establishments actively try to stay in their niche, which is also dependent on the qualifications of the employees; see Ogutu (2023). Therefore, in addition to the eight forces formulated above, we also specify employee competence as one of the factors central for developing a competitive advantage.

The other focus of competitive analysis is the financial performance, taking as a starting point the firm's accounts. Financial key performance indicators (KPIs) are quantifiable metrics used to evaluate businesses' financial health and track progress toward strategic goals. There are suggestions for the selection of financial KPIs in all standard business finance textbooks, and Maftei and Butnaru (2023) and Ponce et al. (2023) give a thorough review of the use of financial KPIs in tourism. Based on these reviews, we selected the following indicators:

- Total return in % (Profitability);
- Operating result in %;
- Return on equity before tax in %;
- Liquidity ratio;
- Equity in % (Solvency);
- EBITDA in 1000 NOK.

This selection is convenient because these numbers are publicly available in Norway, as all limited liability companies send in their official yearly accounts to a central register, and then they are freely available to download without any restrictions. In addition to the KPIs, we also added the total annual sales as a proxy for the size of the company operations.

Several studies provide results from financial studies of tourism, including rural operations, such as Samad (2022), Maftei and Butnaru (2023), and Ponce et al. (2023). The first conclusion is that most of the businesses are very context-dependent; so, it is difficult to draw general conclusions based on numbers. Some trends seem to be large variations in profitability, a strong desire to stay in a sheltered niche, and the importance of evening out seasonal variations. Since most of the activities are small in scale, another general problem is capital structure with low solvency.

Based on the discussions above, we formulated the following research questions:

- How do the strategies of rural tourism companies align with market and sustainability challenges?
- What can the financial indicators tell us about rural tourism companies' development?
- Do the strategic plans of rural tourism companies pay sufficient attention to the financial situation?

3. Empirical Part and Methods

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, there were six participating establishments, three lodging activities and three tourism service providers, all in the rural part of Nordland county in Northern Norway. They are situated in scenic landscapes, where authenticity and closeness to nature are integrated into the local culture as an important part of the tourist experience. The key information about the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Businesses participating in the study.

Name	Characteristics	Capacity
Lodging Activities		Number of beds
Kjerringøy Bryggehotel	Hotel and sea houses, boat/fishing activities	50 beds
Kjerringøy Rorbu center	Hotel and sea houses, boat/fishing/mountain activities	40 beds
Saltstraumen Hotel	Hotel with fishing activities, close to a huge maelstrom	60 beds
Tourism Service Provider		
Karl Erik Haarr Museum	Museum with cafeteria and cultural activities	Maximum visitors on a high season day: 150
Kjerringøy Handelssted	Refurbished trading post with cultural activities	Maximum visitors on a high season day: 400

Name	Characteristics	Capacity
	and traditional lunch serving	
Elvegård camp and fishing	Camping site and fishing center	(1): Visitors coming to fish: max 50 a day (2) Renting out spots for camping: max 60

For data collection, we conducted a structured interview with the managers, starting with Porter's five forces and adding three factors to obtain the eight forces model from Nyanga et al. (2020). In addition, we included a human resource competence factor. We asked the managers to evaluate the importance of the statements below to characterize the competitive situation of their business.

3.1.1 Statement 1: Threat of Substitute Products or Services and Threat of New Entrants

This statement covered two factors in Porter's model and all the participants had quite similar points of view because the tourist experience services are closely linked to authenticity in nature and culture. The Saltstraumen Hotel and Elvegård camp and fishing are located only a few hundred meters from the largest maelstrom in Europe, and just a few hundred meters away and there are also excellent possibilities for fishing cod. Kjerringøy Bryggehøtel and Kjerringøy Rorbu center have lodging in refurbished old houses. So, the participants shared the opinion that substitute products and new entrants were a minimal threat. The situation for these businesses is similar to several of the rural tourism projects noted in the literature review—these types of products are nearly impossible to copy.

3.1.2 Statement 2: Bargaining Power of Buyers and Marketing

Here, we adopted the original statement from Porter and added marketing, with the intention of obtaining information on what characterizes the demand side and how to attract customers. The rural nature/environmental oriented tourism in our project has two demand groups. One is travelers who use their own cars travelling from one place to the other reserving a room/sea house a day or two in advance. The other group consists of people (or smaller groups) who plan in advance to stay, often for a week, to enjoy nature, fishing, and culture. The latter group is the most important, and the presentation/booking site on the internet is the major source of marketing. Demand is mainly based on fixed pricing with some possibilities for group rebates. The price level is in the upper middle class, and all the lodgings said that the bargaining power from the demand side was negligible. This subgroup of natural explorers appeared to focus mainly on authentic natural experiences and not that much on price.

3.1.3 Statement 3: Bargaining Power of Suppliers and Supply Chain Aspects

All activities here are small-scale operations with mainly local suppliers and limited dependence on larger supply chains. Food/meals, were often based on traditional dishes well integrated with the local society and local suppliers. This was a clearly non-problematic competitive advantage.

3.1.4 Statement 4: Rivalry Among Existing Competitors

From the responses to this statement we got one clear message. There are minimal, close to non-existing, rivalries between the establishments; in fact, the opposite is true. The lodgings actively market the cultural offers of the tourist service providers. All the organizations are within driving distance of each other, and they have a cluster cooperation ideology.

3.1.5 Statement 5: Digitalization and Technology

This aspect has grown considerably in importance for tourism in general, as well as for small-scale rural tourism. As a part of marketing, the booking pages must be professional, including videos presenting the experiences. There must also be professional follow-up of the tourists after they have visited the site. All lodgings requested the e-mail address/social media connection from customers to keep in touch and present their new attractions and possibilities. One current strategic change in tourism is the professionalism on social media and the importance of more personalized services.

3.1.6 Statement 6: Public Sector Interventions

In the new eight forces model, one keyword was deregulation; however, we changed this to public sector interventions, since we are working with rural establishments that depend on the utilization of nature/environment. Tourism now focuses on how the sector deals with environmental aspects, and if this does not occur in a sustainable way, rural tourism will not grow. All participants stated that it was in their interest to comply with environmental regulations, and all establishments said they had a reasonably good relationship with the local environmental authorities, mentioning very few conflicts.

3.1.7 Statement 7: Globalization

This relates to the challenge of reaching potential customers on the internet.

3.1.8 Statement 8: Manpower Challenge

Since the resource-based view is a theoretical basis for this study, we added a question about human resource challenges. Here, the answers are divided into two groups. The tourist service providers need skilled labor in all positions. They have a multitask utilization of labor, since the establishments are small, and all have fewer than six employees. These personnel are mostly locally recruited and have background knowledge about the cultural heritage. The lodging activities are different: they have to cover several different functions, including skilled functions such as managerial, chef, economic/administrative/IT, and less skilled functions like cleaning. Lodging reported problems with recruitment on both levels, to find the right staff and to have a low turnover. All organizations also reported problems with seasonal variations, which again raise challenges for stable part-time workers.

3.2 Financial Accounts

According to Norwegian legislation, all limited liability companies must send their accounts to a central register (Brønnøysundregisteret, <https://www.brreg.no/>), and from this register (with a few exceptions), it is possible to download all the companies' official accounts. In this project, we downloaded the accounts, including a readymade set of key performance indicators (KPIs), as presented in Table 2, for all the companies, except Kjerringøy Handelssted, because they are organized as a public foundation owned by Nordland County.

The profitability, through the KPI, is defined in the traditional way as the percentage of profit divided by the total capital. The profitability is low for all activities except Elvegård camp and fishing. Traditional lodging has quite high fixed capital costs and is dependent on evening out the seasonal variations, which has been difficult. Elvegård has a much lower share of fixed cost and can manage changes in activity more easily. EBITDA stands for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization, which focuses solely on the company's core business performance. This metric is low compared to the annual total sales for all companies, in line with the low profit margins, except for Elvegården.

The liquidity ratio is defined as the total current assets divided by the total short-term liabilities; here, Saltstraumen Hotel and Elvegård have a satisfactory liquidity situation, while the others do not. The capital situation, defined as the equity in % of the total capital (total equity and debt), is satisfactory for Saltstraumen Hotel, while this metric for Kjerringøy Bryggehotel and Elvegård is low. This is a serious problem for Kjerringøy Bryggehotel, because as a traditional lodging facility, they have a quite high fixed capital cost, while for Elvegård, this is less of a problem, because their capital costs are low with little invested fixed capital.

The real problem for all lodging activities is that they make little money from running operations on a yearly basis, as seen by comparing the EBITDA to the total annual sales and to the return on equity before tax in %. The Saltstraumen Hotel is better than the two others because they have a sounder capital base, decent liquidity, and a positive return after tax. Elvegård has KPIs on a good level compared to rural tourism in general in Norway, and they can recirculate their profits to somewhat improve their capital situation.

The Karl Erik Haarr Museum is a different type of activity with income mainly from café sales. They also receive some grants from the public sector as a part of their museum activity; so, they cannot be compared directly with the others, but they are in a problematic economic situation.

Table 2: Financial information for participating activities, downloaded from Brønnøysundregistrene
<https://www.brreg.no/> 10.05.2026.

Criterion	Kjerringøy Bryggehotel	Kjerringøy Rorbu center		Saltstraumen Hotel	Karl Erik Haarr Museum	Elvegård Camp and Fishing
Year	2022	2021	2022	2023	2021	2023
Total return in % (Profitability)	-1,3	3,3	-24,8	5,9	-4,0	13,0
Operating result in %	3,8	5,2	-67,9	3,4	-4,3	22,5
Return on equity before tax in %	-8,5	5,8	-66,2	8,1	n.a.	45,2
Liquidity ratio	0,88	1,85	0,11	2,69	0,17	2,03
Equity in % (Solvency)	18,6	48,5	29,3	61,7	-53,7	19,8
EBITDA in 1000 NOK	472	241	-1 546	480	-59	1 606
Annual total sales, 1000 NOK	12 336	4 675	2 898	13 996	402	5 016

4. Discussion

From the literature review, we see that rural tourism tries to diversify and niche orient their products as much as possible, and the more differentiated the rural experience is, the less worried the established producers are of competing products and new entrants. We see, in our case, as in others mentioned in the literature review, that, when the experience niche is as narrow, the producers can charge a price higher than for standard rural lodging. But the price range the companies have in our study is limited and the companies must focus on a sound financial development to strengthen competitiveness.

The demand is based on dedicated visitors and a fixed price system. Booking is largely based on the internet, and the managers emphasize the importance of professional presentation of their products, especially the closeness to authentic natural experiences. The supply chain is largely handled locally, which is a part of the marketing strategy of local cultural integration, parallel to what we find globally. Local cooperation has also led to a situation where we have close to no rivalry among the producers. Local links and suppliers can, on the other hand, be vulnerable because they are often based on micro businesses based on 1-3 employees that suddenly can disappear.

These businesses state that, without a clean and sustainable nature, future possibilities will be difficult to develop. Some of the participants, especially in lodging, expressed that some of the public regulations were too costly; otherwise, the cooperation with public regulators seemed to be positive. In general, the impression is that a positive cooperative regime between rural producers and public regulators is a competitive advantage, which is not generally in line with several international studies. The businesses also expressed concerns with high costs of adapting to new eco-oriented regulations like reducing energy use and waste reductions.

Human resources, according to the WTO (2024), are one of the crucial future challenges for tourism to develop, which is valid for rural tourism as well. The study Ogutu et al. (2023) focused on the possibility that human resources can be a problem or an advantage depending on how the issue is handled. The problem fundamentally varies between countries; in Norway, the competence issue is handled well by specialized training courses in secondary education and the possibility for firms to receive public support for on-the-job training. The problem in Norway is the availability of a sufficient number of employees, while in other countries in southern Europe, there are available human resources without sufficient competence/training. In a narrow environmentally specialized niche (like the Norwegian), all employees must have a reasonable level of sustainability knowledge and cultural skills. For the lodging activities we saw a trend in developing multi-job competence, as mentioned in WTO (2024), which did strengthen the argument for the necessity of evening out seasonal variations.

The main scientific novelty of this study is that the financial key performance indicators of rural tourism firms differentiate from how Porter-based competitive analysis can be interpreted. According to the results from profitability and the relation between EBITDA and total sales, only Elvegård has a satisfactory return. All firms state that they need to even out their seasonal variations and strengthen the environmental profile of their products, and all firms state that they plan to stay and develop in their niche. But only Elvegård can suggest medium investment plans with a reasonable share of self-financing. The lodging activities differ; Kjerringøy Rorbu center must formulate a strategy to avoid bankruptcy. With the terrible results in 2022, the economic situation suggests the company must be able to increase sales without any costly investments. Saltstraumen Hotel has a low EBITDA but a quite solid capital structure with good solvency and relatively low capital costs. They can invest some in product diversification; however, they must obtain new equity because their profitability is low, which does not allow larger increases in capital costs. Kjerringøy Bryggehotel is not experiencing an acute crisis, but the main strategy must be to strengthen their position in their niche by increasing sales. Their solvency and liquidity are too low, and they must change to positive profitability and use this to improve the capital structure.

5. Conclusions

This study, supported by others in the literature review, repeats the statements found in most business economics textbooks: one must have a strategy (vision) about the development of the company, and one must conduct yearly financial management while achieving the goal. Our study has six participants and must be interpreted with this limitation. But especially the niche argument is univocally presented by all participants and hints in the same direction as other studies. Porter-based strategy studies suggest several actions to take in rural regions to promote rural tourist growth. The most important seems to be to develop in their niche. Other strategies are directed at the public sector, with actions like complying with environmental regulations, and measures for employee competence development. Cooperation with tourist NGOs and local communities is also important. However, regional tourist companies must have a solid economic basis to contribute to return to the owners and rural development utilizing their potential. This study shows the importance of being able to simultaneously handle two aspects, follow a creative vision of product and company development and at the same time secure a sound profit level and capital structure. In developing rural tourism based on authentic natural experiences, strategy-oriented studies are valuable for the business sector, NGOs, and the public sector. However, our study shows that suggestions from strategy formulations often are not in line with business financial reality.

Ethics Declaration

The structured questionnaire used in the project is approved by Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. All participants in the project have given written confirmation for the answers from the questionnaire to be used in the project.

AI Declaration

We declare that no AI tools are used in the development of the paper.

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