

THE SPANISH TOURIST COASTLINE AT THE CROSSROADS: BETWEEN RENEWAL AND CONTINUITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article is underpinned by the hypothesis that most tourist destinations in the Spanish coast are now in a situation of great uncertainty, since they are undergoing the profound changes recently observed in the global tourist scenario (the change of preferences of tourists and also the change of behaviour of the demand stand out)¹.

Such transformations have a clear reflection on the disturbing trend of some of the basic parameters that measure the health of the sector, such as the average stay of tourists, their spending, or the relative contribution of tourism to Spanish GDP. These variables have in recent years experienced stagnation and/or decreases that generate reasonable doubts in regards of the economic future of tourism in our coasts (Exceltur, 2005).

In this context, the way forward for the destinations is not as clear as it might first appear. In theory it is, but in practice it is not. The theory shows that corporate actors, public managers and other actors involved in the development of the tourist activity constantly resort to concepts such as quality, sustainability, excellence or competitiveness, but the daily practice of tourist management, both private and public, often differs from the real and deep meaning of these terms. The fact is, saying is one thing, doing another, or put in a less colloquial fashion the discourse is one thing and the strategies implemented by the destinations in order to grow or maintain their market share in a scenario of change and a high level of uncertainty are quite another.

Such strategies, in light of recent development of the major tourist destinations in the Spanish coastline, are many and varied, so as stated by Anton Clavé (2004: 316) «there are different solutions to the need to rethink the classic, conventional and undifferentiated sun and sand model», from those attached to models from the past to those introducing dynamics of change based in new criteria and contemporary paradigms.

¹ It should be noted that the effects of recent international economic and financial crisis on the Spanish coastal tourist destinations are not addressed in the article because of the lack of an adequate temporal perspective on the phenomenon and ignorance, yet, the scope real and the duration of the crisis in Spain.

2. STRATEGIES FOR RENEWAL AND CHANGE IN TOURIST DESTINATIONS OF THE SPANISH MEDITERRANEAN AND SOUTH ATLANTIC COAST

The evidence of crisis symptoms or even exhaustion of the traditional Spanish coastal tourist model, as proved by the evolution of some of the aforementioned variables, has a clear reflection on the loss of appeal of many traditional destinations and on the progressive deterioration of its competitive position (Prats, 2003). Faced with this situation and this undoubtedly worrying trend, many coastal destinations are putting into action certain strategies of restructuring, in both sectoral and spatial senses, aiming to meet the requirements of the new tourist scenario.

Following the issues raised by Anton Clave (op. cit.) on the recently observed changes in the coastal tourist destinations of Spain, we can say that they are undergoing major changes as a consequence of the implementation of three types of strategies or policies which, although with different starting points, coexist in the present moment:

1) First, we can point out a strategy focused on the renewal of the destinations and qualification of tourist establishments. This strategy, which starts in the mid-eighties of last century, splits into two major areas of activity that are directed basically, on the one hand, to the formal and functional improvement of the destinations, and, on the other, to the modernization and improvement of the quality of the accommodation.

2) Secondly it should be noted the strategy of adding new leisure and recreational products to destinations, a strategy that begins to be implemented in the early nineties and becomes widespread in the Spanish coast in the middle of the decade.

This option involves the gradual incorporation of new equipment and activities that enrich the offer of destinations and increase their appeal. In fact the four major objectives of this strategy are stated to be: diversification of destinations, differentiation, transformation of their image and reducing the seasonal nature of tourism.

3) Third and finally it's worth mentioning the sustainability strategy, which begins to be implemented in the Spanish coastal tourist destinations since the mid nineties. Overall we can say that this strategy has with more rhetorical than empirical contents, meaning that initiatives implemented have a limited real scope, especially if the results are compared with the significance and objectives of the theoretical paradigm on which they are based.

Obviously, interesting initiatives have been launched, among these initiatives stand out those that pursue protection and enhancement of natural and cultural attractions that reinforce the identity and differentiation of destinations. Likewise we can also observe the introduction of management tools and environmental monitoring by destinations, as in the case of the *Agendas 21 locales*, the *EMAS* regulation or the *ISO 14001* standards, but there is no doubt that the overall picture of sustainability of the Spanish coastal tourist destinations may clearly be improved.

Ultimately, strategies and measures outlined in this section are initiatives that contribute to the renewal and / or reorientation of the traditional tourist model that dominates most of the Spanish coast, which falls squarely in the theories on the productive and spatial restructuring of destinations in response to the challenges posed by the new tourist scenario (theories related to the concept of repositioning of destinations).

3. SIGNS OF CONTINUANCE IN THE PREVAILING TOURIST MODEL IN THE SPANISH MEDITERRANEAN AND SOUTH ATLANTIC COAST

Despite the strategies of change just mentioned, it is undeniable the survival or, better yet, the dominance of policies of a continuous nature that only reinforce the existing tourist development model in the Spanish coast from the mid-twentieth century, and is characterized essentially by intense processes of development of territory and the unquestioned dominance of real estate business and unregulated supply of accommodation over any other system component. Vera (2005: 108) captured very well the situation existing until recent times, saying that «we are at a stage where the undifferentiated and territory-consumer logic of real estate remains» and which clearly shows «rise of the residential function in tourist destinations of the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

The data on the levels and pace of developing in the coast stand out from all the evidences of the maintenance or intensification of the traditional model of tourist development in the Spanish coast. In this regard, it is noted the existence of an intense and accelerated process of «artificialization» of the coast in the last two decades, so that such areas grew by 20% between 1987 and 2000, which has had as one of the most notable consequences the fact that 34% of the first coastal kilometer was heavily developed in the last date of reference (and with forecasts of up to 50% in 2010) (Observatory of Sustainability in Spain, 2006).

It is interesting to mention that, within artificial areas, one of the fastest growing uses in absolute terms is linked to diffuse residential developments (including developments with the typical green areas and facilities that proliferate in coastal destinations). The growth of this type of area in Andalusia was above 6,000 hectares in the period 1987-2000, only surpassed by the communications infrastructure (15,056 hectares) and closely followed by under-construction sites (4,453 hectares) and sports and recreational facilities (3,370 hectares) (ibid).

But if the urban development and the building activity on the coast have grown at rocketing rates, even more worrying are the future growth forecasts that had been put forward until recent times. These forecasts threatened to treble the capacity of existing accommodation in the Spanish resort coast (from more than 13 million bed spaces in 2005 to nearly 40 million in the 2015 horizon). Obviously this scenario is unthinkable in the current economic crisis, particularly in the real estate sector, that affects Spain.

4. EMERGING TOURIST AREAS: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR THE REORIENTATION OF THE TOURIST MODEL IN THE COAST?

There is no doubt that emerging tourist areas, those right in the process of tourist development and posing significant growth prospects (and therefore with ample room for action from the territorial and sectoral point of view) are an excellent opportunity to implement the principles and criteria that underpin the new tourist model proposed for the coast, a model that essentially seeks qualification, diversification, differentiation and sustainability of destinations.

In theory, these spaces form an ideal testing ground for experimenting with different models of traditional tourist development as they provide important comparative and competitive advantages versus the consolidated or mature destinations. But despite these advantages, all indications are that a great opportunity is being wasted and that emerging tourist areas of the Spanish coast are not taking into consideration the lessons offered by the past. Data on coastal urbanization and housing reveal that the largest relative increases have occurred precisely in certain coastal areas considered as emerging from the point of view of tourism (Murcia, Castellon, Huelva), thus confirming the absence of a critical evaluation of the logics of how the more mature destinations work, and the problems noticed in them, so that patterns of action from the past tend to be reproduced wasting the possibility of redirecting the tourist model towards more interesting and sustainable directions (Prats, 2003).

The truth is that, despite the problems identified in the traditional model of coastal tourist development and despite the worrying diagnosis established and widely accepted on it, emerging tourist areas do not finish to bet on a change of model, instead they adopt a strategy that, even if including initiatives of qualification, diversification or differentiation, continues to rely extensively on the classic mechanisms of production of the real estate-tourist sector. This is due primarily to the stage where these spaces find themselves in the destinations life cycle, a clearly expansionary stage that suggests still ample room for growth before approaching saturation and the consequent tourist «un-qualification», as also explained in terms of short-term socio-economic profitability that until recently offered the real estate-tourist model (investment, employment, municipal revenues, etc.), making it difficult for municipalities to disregard this chance of growth.

In any case, it should not be forgotten that there are really interesting and innovative initiatives that point towards a change of model, that is, proposals or actions that seek to make effective the new to tourist development approaches, already identified, and that highlight the dialectic between renewal and continuance in many Spanish coastal tourist areas.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion we can say that the great changes that are noted on the tourist stage today are not unconnected to the Spanish Mediterranean and South Atlantic coastal destinations, which react differently to these new challenges.

Thus we see that there are destinations that adopt an attitude that could be described as an attitude of continuance, directed to strengthen the dominant model of tourist development on our coasts from the sixties, a model characterized mainly by the constant process of turning agricultural into building land, by the main role of real estate activity and housing for tourist use supply (at least until recently), by the economic dependency of municipalities to urbanism, and the indiscriminate repetition of urban and architectural models.

But not everything suggests continuance in the Spanish Mediterranean and South Atlantic coast, it is also noted the existence of destinations that choose change and reorientation of the traditional tourist model, as shown by the initiatives of urban renewal

and requalification, modernization of tourist establishments, incorporation of new recreational and leisure products to destinations, introduction of measures to increase sustainability, or application of new forms of tourist planning and management.

Finally one might make a brief reference to emerging coastal areas, those who have not yet reached a high degree of territorial and commercial building and therefore still have broad discretion in regard to its spatial and sectoral configuration. In the early years of this decade the path followed by these spaces doesn't seem to have been addressed to a paradigm shift in tourism, but rather have chosen to repeat and, if anything, *makeup* the dominant model, which raises reasonable doubts about the medium and long term future of these areas, beyond the uncertain present affecting real estate-tourist development initiated or planned in recent years, as a result of the difficult situation that the Spanish economy in general, and its real estate sector in particular, undergoes.

