

INNOVATING TO ENCOURAGE TOURIST COMPETITIVENESS IN ‘LA MANGA DEL MAR MENOR’ (MURCIA)¹

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Mar Menor (‘small sea’) is separated from the Mediterranean by a spit of sandy land, 24 kilometres long and 500 metres wide. La Manga reveals itself as a superimposed shallow spit of sand, resulting from the deposits that the swell of waves and the sea currents have left on a previous substratum of a diverse geological quality. The result is a narrow, almost continuous, piece of land connecting the northwest side of Cabo de Palos with a part of the coast mildly elevating itself north of El Mojón, the historical borderline between Murcia and the region of Valencia. As such, this is a best physical space for ‘sun and sand’ tourism as well as exceptional for the practice of nautical sports. In fact, it has become the main tourist resort of the region of Murcia, attracting a high number of holidaymakers from Spain and abroad. The progressive exhaustion of potential urban land, and the necessity to change the model which formerly contributed to shape it as a tourist resort, have led to the implementation of innovation strategies which aim to encourage a renewed tourist competitiveness for the area.

In the 1960s, La Manga became a tourist resort of national interest resulting from of a tourist-development policy enacted by the government under Franco’s regime. The first hotels were then built. At the same time, the single private holder of all realty in La Manga was allowed to develop urban properties after the former rural soil was redesignated by the local governments of the two municipalities in La Manga, namely San Javier and Cartagena for the northern and southern parts of it respectively. In the late 1960s the increasing construction of households and apartments began, which has continued ever since, stimulated by the physical characteristics of the territory which allows houses to be built near the seafront.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the aforementioned estate development was not accompanied by new hotel constructions, which has resulted in the establishment of La

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Manga mainly as a seasonal residential area. In the early years of this century, however, two new luxury hotels were open and some former high-quality ones were wholly or partly refurbished

La Manga, surrounded by two sea-waters of different characteristics (Mar Menor and Mediterranean), enjoys exceptional maritime qualities for the practice of all kinds of nautical sports. The shallow waters of Mar Menor, together with the constant blowing of soft winds from the East, make it exceptional in this respect. The Mediterranean has astonishing under-sea landscapes, within reach of the shore and, as a result, has become a first-class international referent for the practice of scuba diving. The environmental balance of both maritime spaces is now safeguarded by protection policies.

A Plan to Encourage Tourist Competitiveness in La Manga was launched in 2010 with the aim of overcoming the seasonality of tourist and residential activities, basically concentrated in the summer. In view of the optimal conditions for the practice of nautical sports, the Plan concentrates on the promotion of this type of tourism for the period 2010-2013. It contemplates an investment of three million euros in twenty-two actions whose final aim is to reinforce La Manga as a tourist destination. The mutual contribution of the National Government of Spain, the Regional Government of Murcia and the local governments of both Cartagena and San Javier, have made it possible.

All actions in La Manga del Mar Menor agree with the general pattern of transformation of seaside tourist resorts in Spain and are connected to strategies and policies that, having started in different periods of our recent history, coexist nowadays.