

EVENT TOURISM: THE SPANISH CRUISES IN THE INAUGURATION OF THE SUEZ CANAL OF 1869

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Organising a pleasure trip to attend an event of interest has been and continues to be an extremely widespread resource. Indeed, many of the first and now famous projects organised by Thomas Cook midway through the 19th century were embarked upon in line with this formula. The close relationship between an organised trip and an event is also apparent in boating excursions. Recent studies show that in the first half of the 19th century, the launching of a warship in the United Kingdom used to be a good excuse to promote a short getaway on board the first steamships. To encourage sailing for pleasure among the elite of that time, the Spanish shipping companies often followed this *modus operandi* too. In February, 1861, for example, the company *Antonio López* tried to organise a «pleasure trip» to Tetouan, on the occasion of the Spanish troops' recent conquest of the Moroccan city. However, all the ventures completed in Spain to start up a long cruise in that period failed. The lack of clientele was generally the reason given by the shipping companies to cancel the trip. The expeditions that were organised to attend the inauguration of the Suez Canal in November, 1869, can be included in this context. Extensively covered by the media, the historic event involved the arrival of around 120 merchant ships to Egypt, according to the statements from sources of the period.

There are two parts to this article. In the first part, the main events that occurred while the canal was being built are set out, and the extraordinary impact that these had on public opinion are highlighted. In the second part, the paper focuses on two travelling projects that were undertaken in Spain. It is a well-known fact that the British government set up a new means of communication with the colonies in Asia in 1840. Created as a way to avoid having to go around the Cape of Good Hope, the *Overland Route* was planned out in the following way: a steamship owned by the shipping company *P&O* brought the United Kingdom and Egypt together by means of a monthly service between Southampton and Alexandria. After that, the voyage continued on board small riverboats to the city of Cairo. From there, a convoy of carriages and camels crossed the desert to get to the port of Suez, on the shore of the Red Sea, from where another boat owned by the same company set off to Ceylon. The shortcut highlighted two very different things. Firstly, it proved that the route used was the right one. Passenger transportation and the postal service benefited

enormously from this. Reducing the distances drastically cut down on travelling time and regular communication was guaranteed for the first time ever. But the land route through Egypt was not very effective for freight traffic due to the numerous transshipments. The «*conversion of that overland route into a ship route*» was therefore absolutely essential. The construction of the canal, which officially started in April 1859, was avidly covered by the press that soon defined the «great venture» as the ultimate «event of the century». Consequently, various cruises from French and Italian ports were started up. In the transalpine country, for example, it was a liner shipping company that organised a «*viaggio speciale*» for Egypt. Pursuant to the praxis of the period, the company *Raffaele Rubattino* proceeded to reduce the maximum accommodation capacity of the boat. With port of departure from Genoa, the planned itinerary of the steamship included stopping off at the ports of Livorno, Naples, Messina and Alexandria, before arriving at Port Said on the 16th. This was very different from what Thomas Cook's agency had on offer in the United Kingdom. Instead of beginning a cruise, the famous entrepreneur came up with a complex but very appealing tourist package deal, in which holidaymakers would travel to Egypt using the regular line shipping and railway services. According to the negotiated prices agreed upon with the different transportation and accommodation companies, the travel agency was able to offer the subsequent attraction of discovering different places in mainland Europe, before reaching the port of Brindisi (Italy) and then board a steamship to sail directly to Egypt at a much better price.

As for the first Spanish venture, there is evidence of such in the endless advertisements in many national newspapers. Titled *Istmo de Suez*, the advertisement was aimed at all the country's social and economic elite, who were obviously not distinguished for being weathered travellers. To this end, information points were set up in different towns, where individuals could find out about the trip and actually pay to go on it. In exchange for 1.750 pesetas, the anonymous organiser offered a 40-45 day voyage departing from Valencia that included a stop off in Port Said to take part in the grand inauguration of the Canal. It also gave travellers the chance to enjoy long stopovers in the ports of Civitavecchia, Naples, Palermo and Alexandria. The steamship would stay in each of these ports for as many «days as necessary» so that the travellers could really get to know the cities, and go on all the relevant visits. Nevertheless, after carrying out an in-depth analysis of the shipping and maritime reports concerning the Valencian port traffic, which were published in the local newspapers, there was no mention of any operation scheduled to depart on the foreseen dates. It all seems to point to the fact that the organisers did not manage to get together the minimum number of participants, in accordance with a clause established in the advertisement about the trip. Furthermore, there are no traces of it going through the Canal in any of the testimonials or accounts of voyages.

With regard to the second initiative, the Mediterranean crossing included stopovers in the Italian ports of Genoa, Livorno, Civitavecchia, Naples and Messina. But despite the itinerary, this proposition was clearly much different from the model that the other organisers adopted. Especially in terms of the local nature of the project. The only type of publicity resource used, according to the facts, was one poor advertisement that appeared in the Barcelona newspapers from the 19th of October 1869, that is, very few days before the voyage was scheduled to begin. Presumably it focused on a very small target audience

in the geographical area. Moreover, the technical features of the means of transport are striking. Apart from its low tonnage, the *Pelayo* ship was a merchant steamship that was mainly used for freight traffic. After analysing the shipping and maritime reports of that era, it was obviously a *tramp* steamer, as there were very few passengers on board. In spite of this however, the *Pelayo* was the only Spanish-registered merchant ship that finally took part in the inauguration of the Canal. Sources mention its arrival at Port Said in the afternoon on the 16th of November, 1869, and its participation in the official parade of vessels that covered the route to the Suez Canal.

The key to success of the *Pelayo* steamship cruise -the first and only one of its kind that was organised in Spain in the 19th century- was the extraordinary effect that the inauguration of the Suez Canal had at that time, as it was an event that was capable of motivating a small amount of clientele of that era to take part. Nevertheless, other factors that nowadays affect the decision to organise a cruise, such as the itinerary, the places to visit, and then the features of the ship, did not play a decisive role on this occasion. The price of the trip is not thought to have had much importance either. When all is said and done, the only ones that could access such an exclusive product were the members of the elite that had no personal obligations, and a very high, if not unlimited purchasing power. For this reason, the decision of the ship-owner of the *Pelayo* to cash in on the operation, by combining the pleasure trip with freight transportation and other passengers among the different ports of call is considered to have been very wise, unlike what had been planned for the Valencia expedition. In short, those who boarded the *Pelayo* ship on the 29th of October, 1869, did so to become part of an historic event, while making the most of the circumstances of the organised trip and not vice versa. In fact it is not a coincidence that, until the 1920s, there was no other long cruise organised in Spain. This scenario is clearly the contrary to what happened abroad. In the context of the expansion of the shipping business that was represented by the building of a new generation of ships especially designed for passenger transportation (the ocean liners), various liner shipping companies started to promote long pleasure expeditions among the foreign well-to-do classes, without having to make sure that the voyages coincided with a major event. In the last quarter of the 19th century, and even more obviously in the early 1900s, the long elitist cruises from New York, Hamburg, Southampton or Marseille, among other ports of shipment were quite common. In general, at this time it was a seasonal phenomenon, as the crossings were organised when there was the least liner shipping traffic. This basically satisfied the demands of the companies to find another market niche, to try and compensate for their excess tonnage. In short, while the standing of the cruise line business was growing abroad, the Spanish elite continued to be unaffected by the phenomenon. Until well into the 1920s, seafaring voyages for pleasure in Spain basically consisted in local boat excursions.

