

TOURIST TRIPS AT THE DESTINATION AS A MEANS OF REGIONAL COMPLEMENTARITY AND DIVERSIFICATION OF CONSOLIDATED TOURISM DESTINATIONS. STUDY OF BENIDORM AND ITS AREA OF INFLUENCE¹

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The consolidation of tourism in different regions of the Mediterranean, based on the maximisation of the ecological and environmental resources of the climate and the coastline, has led to a profound reorganisation of the territorial structures of these spaces. Investments, economic initiatives and the generation of employment have become concentrated in a narrow strip along the coast, which has generated a saturation of numerous stretches of the coast with urban and tourism development and the configuration of conurbations that longitudinally occupy the sectors closest to the coast. This process is similar, or even more accentuated, on the Spanish Mediterranean seaboard where tourism has accelerated the process of transfer of assets from inland areas to the coast. These transformations began in the first half of the twentieth century with the crisis in traditional agriculture, giving rise to an intense social, economic and demographic contrast between both areas, discernible in the depopulation of inland districts and the subsequent inability of those populations to maintain a diverse system of services and facilities, a fact that nourishes the differences between developed and underdeveloped regions.

On a regional scale this phenomenon is observable even in regions with a great diversity of resources and strong products that are not linked to the coast (urban and mountain tourism). The region of Valencia, and in particular the province of Alicante, shares the characteristics of these dual models in which tourism activity has become a key to understanding the socio-economic, demographic and, in short, regional reality. In the

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process of implementation of tourism on the coast the inland areas, as a *hinterland*, have for the most part played a supporting role, with a limited and secondary functionality. One of the functions of these inland areas close to coastal tourism nuclei consists of acting as suppliers of attractive natural and cultural heritage which may generate the appearance of small flows of almost spontaneous visitors, encouraged by the enjoyment of the natural and cultural resources.

Despite the weak articulation between the coastal and inland areas, resulting in a series of negative repercussions, both regional and sectoral, since the last decade of the twentieth century there have been signs pointing to coastal-inland complementarity via the search for formulas for integration between the adjacent inland spaces and the coastal tourism destinations, as one of the possible strategies for renovation and/or restructuring of the mature sun and sand tourism destinations. In these processes the resources offered by these inland areas – natural and cultural heritage, landscape – could be incorporated as recreational products that complement the products of the coast. This is a strategy that embraces the adaptation of consolidated coastal destinations in view of the tourism scenarios defined by the new demand trends, associated with the postmodernist cultural change. Among other lines, this strategy incorporates actions to enhance natural and heritage resources for tourism and recreational use, the appraisal of new resources or the incorporation of the destination in the supralocal space. Furthermore, this is a line of action that obliges reflection with regard to new governance formulas and management tools since the scales of operation go beyond the traditional local framework, with sub-regional scales being more appropriate. Moreover, the objectives should go beyond the adaptation of the beach destinations to the new situations deriving from these scenarios and incorporate guidelines to regain territorial equilibrium in such a way as to allow tourism to act as a true factor for social improvement.

In the case of Valencia, for the Marina Baixa district, the area which provides the territorial scope of this study, the behaviour of the tourism supply and demand in Benidorm differs considerably from the rest of the district and the province, owing to the dynamism of its supply and its integration in the tourism market, and this means that the possibilities of tourism complementarity between the municipalities that make up this space are numerous. Tourist and residential activity is concentrated on the coast but a growing trend is apparent of diffusion towards the municipalities located slightly further back, integrated in a mountainous hinterland of undeniable environmental and landscape value which, in turn, enables the development of specific types of tourism (rural, nature, active tourism, etc.) as well as their traditional function as trip destinations. Indeed, one of the common manifestations of the relationship between the tourism of the coast and the hinterland areas is revealed in the flows of trippers generated by the coastal tourism nuclei to the nearby areas. These are spontaneous flows via individual trips, commonly associated with the hiring of vehicles, or groups taking trips organised by local agencies for in-bound tourists, that incorporate attractions normally linked to natural, cultural, and landscape resources and even the traditional character of the area.

In this context, the main objective of this article centres on analysing the phenomenon of tourist trips in the province of Alicante, particularly those which irradiate from the great Valencian tourism and leisure destination, Benidorm, and on identifying the causes

that determine the intensity of the use by tourists of the heritage resources in the trip phenomenon of this destination. For this purpose, a study has been conducted of the catalogues of the local agencies that organise trips and of the promotional channels of the local public bodies. This analysis highlights the positive effects on the tourism model that have been derived to date from the development of the trips, the threats and risks that arise as a result of the large numbers of visitors and the pressure on localities and resources that, in the majority of cases, have not incorporated management and planning criteria for these activities, as well as the potentials and opportunities that may be obtained in the short and medium term as a result of the integration of new resources in the territorial-tourism system via the articulation permitted by this network of tourist trips.

Lastly, with the aim of showing more clearly the reality of the cultural heritage in this frame of work, attention has been given to two case studies, of two destinations located in the municipalities of Castell de Guadalest (inland) and Vila Joiosa (coast), situated in the Marina Baixa district and therefore in the regional sphere of influence of the leisure metropolis of Benidorm. These two cases have contributed in different ways to providing tourism resources for the trip phenomenon but they reveal important differences in the intensity of use by tourists, deriving from the particular characteristics of the processes of heritage development performed in each case and in relationship with those processes of enhancement, in the opinion of the authors, different scenarios are presented with regard to the future.

Thus, the consumption of trips in areas close to the destination of accommodation is one of the most classic formulas of complementary recreation in the mass beach tourism model. Practically all the tourism regions of the Mediterranean and the islands offer this type of leisure as a complementary component of the holidays in the chosen destination. Despite this, they have barely been given any attention in the scientific studies of tourism and especially from the point of view of territory. This is a recreational offer that has been incorporated in the beach product since the first stages of development of the third leisure periphery in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, with the objective of complementing the basic offer of «sun and sand» with additional elements and offers related with the local folklore and culture, loaded with undeniable traditional character which contributed added value to the basic beach holiday product. The most highly-demanded trips in those first stages included visits to the main cities of the province (Alicante, Elche), outings to places and towns close to Benidorm based on the existence of varied resources with natural and/or cultural value (El Castell de Guadalest, Fuentes del Algar), picturesque activities and those full of traditional character or, outside the local area, visits to cities in other provinces and regions (Valencia, Murcia, Madrid, Toledo). The offer of trips, as well as the basic resources and destinations included in them, has been expanded by building on that initial base while, from the point of view of behaviour of the demand, an increase is detected in the number of trips taken. However, despite the increase in trip activity in this area, it is appropriate to say that the potential and accessibility of the resources do not constitute sufficient conditions for the incorporation of new resources. In addition to the adaptation and enhancement of the resources with a view to their being visited by tourists, tripping requires a certain critical mass of commercial apparatus and services – restaurants, shopping – which many of the inland towns and villages lack. From the

business perspective of the organisers and travel agencies, the absence of this supply of services that would complement the consumption of the resource is considered one of the most important restraints to the expansion and renewal of the trips offered, together with the lack of signposting and tourist information.

These factors determine that, despite the potential of the inland areas, there is very little innovation in the creation of offers, which have been limited for many years to practically the same circuits and places. On the other hand, the lack of techniques and instruments for tourism management both on the local scale – assessment of potential of the resources, studies of carrying capacity and flow management, interpretation techniques – and sub-regional – creation of institutional frameworks for collaboration between municipalities, joint management bodies – heighten these weaknesses and threats.

CONCLUSIONS

The actions for the recovery of cultural heritage as a strategy for change in consolidated tourism destinations has been underway in Spain since the end of the twentieth century. This strategy is aimed at the qualification of the recreational experience, the recovery of local identity and the improvement of the image of the destination. These actions for recovery and rehabilitation of heritage for the purpose of tourism allow the enhancement and integration of new resources that have been insufficiently exploited, since tourism provides them with added social and economic value in such a way that it can contribute to the preservation of the environment and heritage and collaborate, therefore, to increasing the environmental quality of the affected locations. Furthermore, these actions may generate important regional synergies between coastal and inland spaces via the dissemination of the positive effects of tourism towards areas of the hinterland given the diversity and conservation of the heritage resources found in these environments. Likewise, the use of these resources should not be limited to tourism activity. Their enhancement as a result of the introduction of tourism allows the incorporation and maintenance of new activities and alternative uses based on local leisure, environmental education or cultural visits and it may have a knock-on effect on other local and regional activities such as transport, the hiring of guides, restaurants or shops.

Tourist trips operated from the coastal tourism municipalities have become, since the commencement of mass tourism, one of the mechanisms that have driven these relationships between coastal destinations and inland areas.

On the basis of the empirical study performed, it has become apparent that the location of varied resources in the municipalities of the hinterland, which initially do not have sufficient potential to generate local tourism development, constitutes the original factor that has justified the creation of this offer as a complement to the beach holiday. Secondly, accessibility and the availability of a critical mass of services have been identified as key elements in understanding the expansion of the trip map and the inclusion on it of different municipalities and resources.

However, the efficiency of these products as a means of renewal of the consolidated destinations is questionable. The limited renewal in the trip catalogue is notable, and it has been spatially limited for many years to practically the same circuits and places.

Likewise, there is little innovation with regard to resources and their type and with regard to the techniques and tools used for interpretation and cultural diffusion. In short, the same schemas and mechanisms that served as a foundation for the creation of these complementary offers continue to be reproduced.

The spaces that receive these trips, especially in inland areas, benefit from the creation of recreational products based on the principal resources that generate the flows as well as from limited commercial dynamics, activated in times of greater influx of visitors. There are, however, limitations and problems that hinder the optimisation of these visits and which may represent threats to the host structures:

- High pressure owing to the numbers of visitors to which some resources are subjected, which may generate problems of degradation and banalisation, even a certain museumisation as occurs in the case of some historic town centres.
- The excessive functional specialisation and economic dependency that may arise in destinations that receive large numbers of trippers, as well as great dependency on a single source of demand.

Ultimately, tourist trips continue to be presented as an adequate formula that provides a means of differentiation of the conventional beach tourism model. However, to proceed in that direction it is essential to incorporate true objectives for spatial development on a regional and sub-regional scale and instruments for regional tourism planning. In the case of Valencia, the Tourism Space Plan of the Valencian Community (Plan de Espacios Turísticos de la Comunidad Valenciana) defined the line of action in this respect by establishing a delimitation of tourism spaces, capable of being assimilated into true geographical planning areas on a sub-regional scale and involving different actions aimed at strengthening the dynamics of coastal-inland regional and tourism complementarity in order to contribute to the diversification of the offer of both areas and to changes in the seasonal timing of tourism activity.

Having recognised that need, it would be necessary to develop the management bodies and the appropriate working tools: the creation of commonwealths or other bodies on a supra-district scale to be responsible for that management; studies to assess tourism potential, carrying capacity and tourist flows for which it is necessary to solve the serious deficit of information, both quantitative and qualitative, regarding the phenomenon analysed.

In short, sectoral tourism actions need to be integrated in the regional policy, to enable progress, by means of the strategies of complementarity, in the double objective of sustainability of the coastal tourism destinations and a fair regional balance.

