

THE AWAKENING OF URBAN TOURISM IN SPAIN: SEASIDE RESORTS, LEISURE AND URBANISM IN A CORUÑA, 1900-1935

Elvira Lindoso-Tato
Margarita Vilar-Rodríguez
Universidad de A Coruña
elviral@udc.es, mvilar@udc.es

Despite its relative economic backwardness, Galicia occupied important positions in the Spanish tourist ranking during the first third of the 20th century. On the one hand, its highlighted leadership in spa tourism since the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, some Galician cities offered a wide range of hotel and restaurant establishments. At this point, two port cities stood out, Vigo and A Coruña, together with a city linked to religious tourism, Santiago de Compostela. This paper studies the case of A Coruña, a city located on a natural peninsula, that had at the beginning of the 20th century two important tourist attractions linked to the sea: an active port, departure point for Spanish emigrants to Latin American and more than two kilometers of urban beaches that were an ideal location for bathhouses and other leisure activities. In fact, from the port of A Coruña, more than a quarter of a million passengers embarked on the first decade of the 20th century; which generated effects of drag on a large number of hospitality and catering activities. In addition, the demographic and economic vitality of the city boosted urban expansion and a large number of leisure activities. A population and urban services in growth, a dynamic port, a monumental wealth that was beginning to be recognized and, especially, an urban coast constituted the main differentiating elements of the population. During these years, the Coruña municipality annexed peripheral neighborhoods, new avenues were drawn and paved towards the zone of the second expansion, where the constructions of increasingly high buildings grew, and the city was provided with basic supplies and improvements in the network of urban transport. A Coruña tried to join the tourist wave that began to bathe Spain since the late nineteenth century. In this way, the tourist stock of A Coruña during the first third of the twentieth century was structured around three key points: the bathhouses, hotel establishments and leisure companies, and the first urban projects associated with a new lifestyle urban.

Firstly, its wide coast, with two bays, served as the setting for the establishment and exploitation of a series of bathhouses since the 1830s. Bathing on the beaches and coves of the city was common since the nineteenth century. The first local bath companies started

operating under an administrative concession in the public domain and were subject to strict regulations that restricted the use and access to beaches for both businessmen and clients. In 1850, a public spa was built, promoted by the town hall, which was located on the Riazor beach in the outskirts of the city. These facilities disappeared without trace surely by the scourge of a storm. More success was achieved by the next municipal spa that was built on the banks of the same sandy area for charity purposes in 1874. The town hall handed over the service of the bath center to the private initiative on several occasions during the first third of the 20th century. This establishment competed with private bathhouses in the same sandy area installed with greater comfort since the last quarter of the 19th century. Two private establishments stood out for their entity and longevity: La Primitiva and La Salud. These facilities coexisted with other small bathhouses opened during the first third of the twentieth century. The urban growth liquidated these companies under Primo de Rivera's dictatorship when the old maritime stations were replaced by a new tourist model characterized by crowded beaches.

Secondly, holiday summers in Coruña began to enjoy increasing success since the late nineteenth century. At the first decades of the twentieth century we can find a lot of press articles, tourists guides, maps and almanacs published in the city that put in evidence the growing tourist attractions of Coruña in summer. The foundation of a special commission on "Paseos, Fiestas y Balnearios" in the city hall of A Coruña during the 1930s was another evidence of this. Two facts exerted a remarkable influence on the summer tourist campaign: on the one hand, the beaches and their seaside resorts and on the other hand, the summer parties -courses of bulls included- that enlivened the bathing season of its inhabitants and of the foreigners who visited the city. The main driver behind these festivities was the Mayor Juan Flórez who moved to 1850 the tradition of the parties of Maria Pita and the annual fair of Santa Lucia to the summer season. The tourist attractions of the city suffered a considerable improvement thanks to the urban growth and the possibilities of leisure. Along with the powerful claim of its bathhouses and its lively walks and gardens, the city had a bullring, theaters and movie theaters. Simultaneously, the aforementioned summer festivities were becoming more popular and sports societies and other clubs offered alternatives for outdoor recreation.

Although we lack statistics on foreigners, the written testimonies suggest that this incipient tourism was made up of both domestic and foreign tourists; especially English cruisers who on their way to the Mediterranean came to the city attracted by the visit to the tomb of their national hero, General Sir John Moore, located in the Gardens of San Carlos. Therefore, in the city we found with the two routes that the development of the European tourism of the time followed: one, the one of the tourists who moved to a unique destiny, normally coastal, and another, more dynamic, where the strangers performed sightseeing tours.

The municipal interest for integrating the city into national and international tourism from early dates was undoubted. Regarding the private sector, we find some great tourism initiatives along with other deep transformations in the hotel and leisure structure until the thirties, a trend that stopped in the middle of the decade. Thus, the offer of accommodation increased with respect to the early twentieth century and simultaneously grew the number of hotels with greater capacity and comfort for travelers. These establishments, whose

offer had been consolidated towards 1923, coexisted with a constellation of inns and pensions aimed at a more modest public and linked in many cases to the migratory current destined to America. A Coruña was presented in the first third of the twentieth century as one of the provincial capitals with the largest hotel offer after Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, San Sebastian, Granada and Malaga. The largest and most luxurious hotels were located in a small sector close to the Cantones and Royal street. Despite the increasing popularity of the Riazor beach, this area was still marginal for the hotel business.

Although its notoriety was far from that reached by others cities of the North, A Coruña began to enjoy some fame in tourist circuits. Its baths, especially in the Riazor area, and its Maria Pita parties attracted a cohort of faithful holidaymakers during the summer season. What effects did this coastal tourism have on the urban planning of A Coruña? Since the end of the nineteenth century, population growth was beginning to exceed the confines of the small peninsula that made up the original nucleus of the population. The answer was the growth towards the outskirts of the city. In this way, the urbanization plans of the two extensions were approved in 1885 and 1910 that drew the basic features of urban growth. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the city grew dramatically in height and area. On the eve of the Civil War, A Coruña constituted the Galician province with the largest housing stock in urban centers. In parallel, the urban expansion extended to the bordering municipalities, where the rural and maritime nature of the population was maintained, dotting the landscape of small fishermen's ranches surrounded by orchards. In fact, during the first third of the nineteenth century, the layout of the Riazor area was radically altered. The space that made up the private and municipal bathhouses was equipped with a series of services and infrastructures that integrated it into the urban network: sewerage, lighting, running water, demolition of old buildings to expand the Riazor platform -precedent of the current maritime promenade- and the installation of gardens that were changing the face of the northwest coast. The next step was to create a public park according to the project of the Ensanche, approved by Royal Decree of May 24, 1910. But, at the beginning of the 1920s, the approaches, that began to consider this coastal environment as an area of residential expansion and tourist activity, triumphed. Example of this strategic turn was the project of the garden city in the Riazor neighborhood.

The concept of garden city has its origin in the British social reformer Ebenezer Howard, who exhibited his urban model in 1898 with the publication of "Tomorrow a Peaceful Path to Real Reform", reissued in 1902 with the title of Garden Cities of Tomorrow. Howard proposed the construction of a new city model, capable of meeting modern economic needs but without breaking the relationship with nature. In effect, the garden city was considering a new conception of building and planning cities through single-family homes or cottages, which were considered as the ideal accommodation for all social classes. The garden city had to be completed with a set of elegant curves and harmonious streets planted with trees and lined with grass. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, this concept spread throughout the European continent, although each country adapted it to its own urban structure. The introduction of this building model in Spain followed its own guidelines, somewhat different from the general European model: it was always linked to the well-to-do classes and used to be located on the outskirts of cities -in the so-called urbanized parks-. Therefore, the majority of

construction projects for garden cities in Spain led to the creation of housing groups that ended up being destined to families of the upper-middle professional class. Imitating the European trends, they began to apply in A Coruña urban models derived from the English garden city that “sought to decentralize the growth of large cities and promote an offer of social housing for workers.”

But, as it happened in other Spanish cities, the European model was applied in a double slope in A Coruña. On the one hand, new neighborhoods of cheap single-family houses were built, such as those of the Campo de Marte. On the other hand, new residential neighborhoods destined for middle-upper class families were promoted, as was the case of Ciudad Jardín in the proximity of Riaza. The last project was promoted by a group of neighbors in the Circle of Artisans in November 1921 with a representation of the City Council, the press and other living forces. The promoter group was made up of men of great social and business prestige and, in some cases, heirs of family sagas that had contributed to the economic development of the city during some time. The social presentation of the urban project was received with great enthusiasm and the entrepreneurs pressed the town hall through the local press and different circles and associations of the city in order to reclassify the land and allow the construction of housing. For the most part, the members of the group were well connected with the business elites of the city, including a hotelier, and with the municipal corporation that had to approve building permits and finance the basic infrastructures of the new expansion. The construction of the first chalets began in March 1922. At first, the architects of the urbanization openly stated that Ciudad Jardín was not intended to be a residential neighborhood for the city's elites but that the goal was for any worker with savings and tenacity could access a house in the area. However, given the cost of new housing, many of its buyers belonged to the wealthy Coruña society at the time, including some of its inspirers. Far from its initial aspirations, the Garden City had become one of the most elite residential neighborhoods in the city in the unique setting of the Riaza maritime environment and, over time, acquired a central position in the city while the working neighborhoods tended to be confined in the outskirts. A similar behavior can be observed in San Sebastian where urban planning tended to reserve the coast for the residence of local elites and even tourists.

Overall, the study shows that in areas at first less touristic in Spain were also configured the basis of modern tourism at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this process, both private and public agents tried to value the competitive advantages of each territory. This development was anchored to urban growth, improvement in living conditions and the development of leisure culture. The Coruña case is revealed as an example that tourism in Spain during this period was an industry not only with potential, but with an effective impact on regional and local economic results.