

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# TOURISM AS AN EXPLAINING FACTOR FOR TERRITORIAL IMBALANCES: THE EXAMPLE OF THE ISLAND OF LA GOMERA

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

La Gomera is one of the eight Canary Islands, an archipelago considered one of the most important touristic destinies of Europe and of the world. Its importance as a tourist region lies mainly in its geographical position (close to Europe) and its magnificent natural attractions, with the climate and its coasts being its main attractions, although in recent decades other natural resources of great scenic and cultural value have been added, in line with current post-Fordist trends diversifying its tourist offer. Other aspects to consider are the safety of the destination, both from an environmental and social point of view, and the moderation of consumer prices compared to the places of origin. However, La Gomera is considered to be one of the „smaller islands“ within the archipelago, both from a socio-economic and tourist point of view. It is not comparable to the tourism values offered by islands such as Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote or Fuerteventura.

### 2. OBJECTIVE

From the 1950s onwards, a process of territorial polarisation began in La Gomera, which has been intensifying over time until the present day. This polarisation is characterised by the concentration of the main economic activities in a few areas on the southern coast, as opposed to the rest of the island. The origin of these changes had to do with large landowners of agriculture and fishing industry in the south of the island, who changed their economic orientation from the 1980s onwards towards tourism. These geo-economic changes derived from tourist activity are what we have set out to explain in this article, and to show how this activity has deepened the difference between the southern coastal localities and those in the north and inland, areas which now only set a scenic backdrop for tourists staying in those areas. From our point of view, the tourism model implemented

in La Gomera continues to maintain an internal territorial imbalance in terms of wealth distribution, being incapable of generating the development of rural areas characterised by a state of social and economic precariousness.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

For the development of this study we have consulted various bibliographical sources, multiple programmes and action plans applied on the island regarding tourism and action strategies in the rural environment, and field work. We consider these sources to be essential to carry out a study of these characteristics in an area such as La Gomera, an island which has been little studied and for which there is a lack of certain data necessary for a deep study. With all this information we have been able to argue the analysed process developing various statistical tables and graphs, as well as the cartographic representation of different variables.

### 4. RESULTS

The Canary Islands is an archipelago considered to be one of the most important tourist destinations in Europe and the world. According to the data offered by the World Tourism Organization for 2018, only 23 countries exceeded the number of visitors received by the islands (15,559,787), a small archipelagic space of only 7,447 km<sup>2</sup> of land area. Thus, international destinations such as Vietnam (15.5 million), Indonesia (13.4), Morocco (12.3), Egypt (11.3), Ireland (10.9), Australia (9.2), Tunisia (8.3), Argentina (6.9) and Brazil (6.6), among others, received fewer tourists than the Canaries. This gives us an idea of the quantitative importance of the archipelago as a tourist destination in the international context.

La Gomera is one of the so-called “smaller islands”, a description that embrace several connotations: small size (370 km<sup>2</sup>), small population (21,503 in 2019), low GDP and low GDP per capita (404 million euros and 18,785 euros respectively), etc. And from a tourism point of view, it cannot be compared to the values offered by tourism on islands such as Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote or Fuerteventura. It is divided into six municipalities, those in the north: Agulo, Hermigua and Vallehermoso, and those in the south: Valle Gran Rey, Alajeró and San Sebastián, where the capital is located. It is in these last three municipalities, where the most of the population and economic dynamics (linked to tourism) are currently concentrated, while those in the north have been economically and demographically stagnant since the 1980s, when agriculture went into crisis and tertiary sector activities and construction emerged.

La Gomera's tourism model, although based on the traditional „sun and beach“ concept, differs in some respects from that of the so-called „tourist islands“ of Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. These islands are characterised by overcrowding, while La Gomera, La Palma and El Hierro have much less tourist pressure.

The beginnings of tourism in La Gomera can be dated back to the late 60s and early 70s of the 20th century. The main destinations were San Sebastián and Valle Gran Rey, and somewhat later the southern town of Playa de Santiago was added. It is in these three

areas where almost all the island's tourist activity is still concentrated, based on the „sun and beach“ model. They constitute more than 90% of the island's tourist accommodation, in contrast to the northern valleys and inland areas, where there is only a small, scattered supply of rural tourism. This concentration of accommodation on the coast in these three southern municipalities is a clear indicator of the socio-economic polarisation which La Gomera has been suffering for several decades and which is now being reduced by promoting new forms of post-Fordist tourism (rural tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, sports tourism, etc.) with the aim of revitalising rural areas in crisis. And, in this sense, the landscape - both natural and humanised - is the fundamental element of the new tourist orientation. The old rural farmhouses, the formidable system of terraces (many of them abandoned and in ruins), the natural landscapes (protected or not) and the extensive network of paths (nowadays used for hiking) are part of the current offer of „what to see“ or „what to visit“ in La Gomera. In the absence of other types of leisure, culture, etc. that the island can offer, its landscape is the main attraction from a tourist point of view. This landscape has become a sort of territorial heritage in which the natural elements are inseparable from the anthropic ones, as it is impossible to understand the Gomeran territory without mentioning the profound transformation it has undergone by the island's society over the course of several centuries. A transformation that was carried out by agricultural activity and which has now almost disappeared, negatively affecting the traditional rural areas, where emigration and the ageing of the population mark the future of these places. In view of this, the local administrations are proposing to reverse this dramatic situation by focusing on tourism linked to nature and the activities carried out in rural areas. A rural environment that is now offered as a bucolic image of its productive past and to which huge amounts of public money are being allocated, not for its production, but to maintain its landscape as a tourist resource, proposing a kind of „museumisation“ for the delight and enjoyment of tourists, mainly staying on the coast.

Having neglected the productive aspect of the rural environment, it is now a question into the new economic concert as a tourist consumer good, as a territorial heritage reduced to its landscape and heritage values. This is a trend that has arisen in post-industrial societies regarding the rural world and environmental values, and which has led to a functional reorientation of the rural world. This is the ideology defined by the European Union since the Cork Declaration in 1996, also included in documents such as The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and which focus on promoting the diversification of the economy in those areas in crisis, such as rural areas. However, in this case, this multi-functionality of the rural environment is disappearing in favour of tourism. Although this activity can be an essential channel for the economic diversification of these areas, in La Gomera it seems to be the only one. And the results are not improving the lives of the population.

Most of the “consumers” of these rural areas are the so-called “excursionists”, i.e. a type of tourist who stay on the neighboring island of Tenerife and who visit the island every day, returning to Tenerife in the evening. According to some studies, this type of visitor (299,141 in 2018) does not bring many benefits to the local economy, their level of spending tends to be low, an aspect that can be deduced from the limited commercial offer that exists in these areas, the only places with a certain dynamism beyond the island's

capital and southern tourist centres. And this has largely determined the tourist model of La Gomera, as a complementary destination to Tenerife, as a sort of “theme park” for the thousands of tourists who stay in the south of the island and who contribute very little to the economy of La Gomera, especially in these rural areas which continue to stagnate economically and socially.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Tourism has been the activity that has driven the Canary Islands’ economy towards unprecedented levels of development. From being an eminently rural region, in just two decades it became to being overwhelmingly based on tertiary activities, with tourism as the driving force behind these changes. However, tourism development has not been equal or balanced in all the islands. There is a group, the so-called “tourist islands”, which fiercely absorbs the benefits and detriments of such activity, leaving others, such as La Gomera, to function as complementary or, at best, alternative spaces to these main islands.

La Gomera’s tourist model is also based on the “sun and beach” concept, which has generated a territorial polarisation that continues to expand over time. In contrast to the economic and social concentration in just three points along the island’s southern coastline, there is a large semi-populated area which coincides with the areas of long-standing rural tradition, which is promoted as a tourist resource with scenic and heritage connotations. However, tourism has not succeeded in revitalising these areas. Their current image continues to be common from socially and economically depressed areas, as these spaces have been marginalised by a tourist model that only considers them as picturesque places to offer tourists staying on the coast, who pass through these places every day to go on excursions and take photographs of their rich natural and cultural heritage, but without contributing anything substantial to the economic support of their inhabitants.