

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

COASTAL DESTINATIONS IN THE AGE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES. THE CASE OF TORREVIEJA (ALICANTE, SPAIN)

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a new scenario for tourism, especially marked by sustainability, digital transformation and governance, discussions continue on the model of coastal destinations to adapt to processes of change; while, after the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of supply is reactivated, and the problems of saturation tend to reproduce themselves (López Palomeque *et al.*, 2022).

Instead of the theoretical postulates, especially those related to the life cycle of the tourist destination, which predicted the inevitable decline of mature destinations in the Mediterranean region, other approaches have been emerging, based on the analysis of the specificity of these consolidated destinations and the role of intervention strategies and instruments aimed at the renovation and requalification of the tourist destination (Vera and Baños, 2010). A line of action involving public and private stakeholders will be essential

to maintain the dynamics of the country's main tourist destinations and to address their spatial and environmental degradation.

Medical and wellness tourism is an opportunity to diversify tourism and qualify coastal tourist destinations, as in the case of Torrevieja, attracting a type of tourism with higher purchasing power that increases the income derived from tourism and the opportunities for socioeconomic development of the municipality. Medical and wellness tourism emerges as an optimal typology for the creation of a tourism model in the terms indicated above (Braçe *et al.*, 2023). This includes both the health offer available for tourism consumption and the health offer adapted by the tourism system itself (Hersch, 2021).

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to analyse the recent evolution of coastal tourism and their present problems, as well as the potential of health and wellness tourism to qualify and diversify coastal tourist destinations. To achieve the proposed objectives, this article is mainly based on the analysis of the related scientific literature by means of an exhaustive content analysis.

In this regard, this study uses as a case study the municipality of Torrevieja, a paradigm of a Mediterranean coastal destination that is undergoing a radical transformation, both functionally and morphologically, because of the emergence of tourism and the development of second homes (Vera *et al.*, 2016). In this way, the content analysis technique is applied to the destination.

First, the participatory diagnosis phase of the tourism sector developed in 2018 is analysed, which included a shared diagnosis with all the social agents that work and are related to the tourism phenomenon in Torrevieja to know the problems and causal relationships that allow us to investigate the challenges that this destination faces in terms of tourism.

For the analysis of public policies, we used the Torrevieja Tourism Development Strategy, developed by a multidisciplinary group of researchers in 2020, which provides a clear vision of the destination and its future lines of work. In the analysis of this strategic tourism tool, special attention is given to the vision provided to health and wellness tourism.

Before planning a strategy for a product oriented to health tourism, it is essential to conduct a diagnosis, together with a systematization of the actions planned by public policies in the destination, highlighting all the factors involved in the implementation of this product (Di Clemente *et al.*, 2014). To carry out this diagnosis, a methodology based on the application of the SWOT tool (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, and Opportunities) was chosen.

The objective of this analysis is to highlight the external opportunities and threats, as well as the internal strengths and weaknesses of the sector under analysis or of the product to be introduced in the market (Chang and Huang, 2006). In the case of health tourism in Torrevieja, it is essential to identify the potential offered by this municipality in terms of the tourism sector and to highlight the main challenges that may hinder its success.

3. RESULTS (SWOT ANALYSIS)

Weaknesses

A notable weakness is the reduced availability of hotels. Torrevieja represents 20% of the second homes in the province of Alicante (López de Zamora et al, 2022) and only has 13 hotels (most of them two- and three-star and only one four-star hotel), which do not reach a total of 2,000 beds, since it is a tourism model focused on the residential tourism.

The diagnosis carried out on the local development model, since the emergence of mass tourism, highlights numerous dysfunctions in the urban space and the prevalence of purely economic principles in the way of acting, with a tourist accommodation system clearly biased towards second homes.

In addition, the municipality of Torrevieja presents other limitations, including the lack of specialization and development of specific tourist products, as well as its scarce promotion in tourist markets. Other weaknesses of the local model are the problems derived from the high density of construction together with the lack of green areas and open public spaces, as well as the conflicts in intra-urban circulation and the deficiencies in parking, both public and private, in addition to a tourist image associated with massification.

Strengths

This municipality is considered a reference in the denominated residential tourism, due to its comparative advantages (climate, coast, cultural and gastronomic offer) and the role of companies specialized in the promotion of the residential product on a large scale, which is why it attracts a high number of international tourists. In the specific case of the health tourist, the climate is a fundamental attraction, since it represents a basic input in the choice of destination (Martin, 2005).

In relation to healthcare, the hospital offer is significant, including the Hospital Universitario de Torrevieja, which brings together a wide range of services and medical professionals. In addition, it also provides private centres such as the IMED polyclinic and the Quirónsalud Hospital, which is a private centre of international prestige that uses state-of-the-art technology, which has become a reference for oncology patients and attends an important volume of foreign patients who reside all year round, temporarily or who come to this municipality for this particular purpose.

Another strength of the Torrevieja destination lies in the connectivity and accessibility of transportation, being connected in less than an hour with the international airport of El Altet (Alicante), with public transport service operating all year round. In the same way, the communication by highways and expressways allows connection with the high speed railway stations of Orihuela and Alicante.

In this same order of strengths, the volume of foreign tourists from Northern and Western Europe, with salaries or pensions higher than the average in Spain, is essential, allowing the development of a network of services to meet the demands.

Equally important, when talking about local strengths, is the fact that one third of the municipality of Torrevieja is surrounded by the Natural Park of the Lagunas de La Mata.

Particularly significant from a health tourism perspective is the Laguna Rosa de Torrevieja, known for its salt extraction, which offers unexploited potential for health treatments through brine and mud.

Threats

At this point, the main threat comes from competing destinations, such as Valencia, the Balearic Islands and Tenerife, which are operating platforms aimed at promoting health tourism, such as Spaincares, a cluster specializing in this market, which brings together tourism and health entities. Por lo que, es significativo al respecto que los destinos indicados cuenten así con promoción específica y diferenciada como destino médico o de bienestar. Therefore, it is significant in this sense that the destinations indicated above have a specific and distinguished promotion as a medical or wellness destination.

In the same province of Alicante there are facilities dedicated to health tourism, both medical (hospitals and clinics) and spa/rehabilitation and wellness (Hersch, 2021), whose environment is similar to that of Torrevieja, as coastal tourist destinations and residentialism of foreign origin, but with fewer problems of overcrowding and better tourist image than Torrevieja.

Opportunities

In the global context, it is perceived (UNWTO, 2019), a boom in health tourism, which brings together different types of tourism that have as their primary motivation the contribution to physical, mental and/or spiritual health, through medical and wellness activities that increase the ability of people to meet their own needs and function better as individuals in their environment and in society.

In this context, two typologies of tourism associated with health tourism stand out: medical or health tourism and wellness tourism. Health tourism can be a potential opportunity in Torrevieja, taking profit of the growing demand, diversifying and complementing the current tourism model, while helping to de-seasonalize the more traditional tourism offers (EOI, 2013).

Furthermore, in addition to the issues discussed in the SWOT, it is necessary to point out the possibilities that could be opened for health tourism as a result of its integration, as a product, in the local Tourism Development Strategy.

Thus, when focusing tourism policy actions, a specific section is included (Tourism Development Strategy, 2020) dedicated to health-wellness tourism, considering the increase in demand for this typology of tourism and the process of configuration of health tourism hubs in Spain, among which is the province of Alicante, for which there is also a non-profit association called *Mediterranean Health Care*, which brings together some of the most prestigious hospitals and private health centres in this province.

In the case of Torrevieja, the actions are being undertaken by a private hospital that has provided health care for almost a decade while working with companies to organise travel and accommodation, both for patients and their families, with a special focus on international tourism. This emerging product could become a consolidated product as long

as other health centres in the municipality are integrated and by working together with hotels that offer wellness services and spa or health and beauty centres.

In addition to considering the potential of the Laguna Rosa for health tourism, the singularity of this space in which the therapeutic and cosmetic uses of the brine and peloids stand out, could generate economic projects, as long as there is investment to undertake these initiatives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Mediterranean coastal tourist destinations are in a phase of consolidation, framed by different theories and explanations detailed in a multitude of scientific literature. For decades, these successful destinations have begun to reveal negative externalities derived from the urban-tourist development model and its lack of planning. Thus, environmental, social, and economic problems arise, most of them caused by the impact derived from the construction and real estate exploitation of tourism. At the same time, new patterns of tourist consumer behavior and products emerge that may help to qualify these models, since the analysis and study of the case of Torrevieja have shown the existence of high potential resources that can become a catalyst for change. Therefore, we find ourselves with kinds of tourism with high rates of growth and differentiation, the development of which can lead to improved competitiveness in coastal tourism.

In the restructuring processes of consolidated coastal tourist destinations, it is necessary to create alternatives that activate socioeconomic development, among which health and wellness tourism stands out, given the existing socio-demographic profiles and the increase in these new demand segments.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to develop a network of specialized and quality health-care resources and infrastructures that meet the needs of both domestic and international health and wellness tourists. Furthermore, the local tourism system should be strengthened and adapted to the medical and wellness tourism sector. Torrevieja displays a series of potentialities and attractions, together with the need to reconvert its offer, directing it towards a tourist segment, attracting new investments, generating high-quality employment and, in conclusion, making a commitment to a sustainable future. For this purpose, as stated in the Torrevieja Tourism Development Strategy, it is necessary to develop endogenous resources that provide differentiating elements and constitute competitive advantages to attract entrepreneurial talent and generate qualified employment. One of the main pillars of tourism renewal policies is the development of a new tourism development model based on health care and improved wellbeing, which includes both residents and visitors.