

# EUROPE AT THE SEASIDE. THE ECONOMIC HISTORY OF MASS TOURISM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

## THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

The beginning of mass tourism can be found in the first appearance of seaside resorts in France and England, a process linked with the development of public transports systems and efficient (and cheap) railway networks, which linked the industrial towns and capitals to the beaches. Economic development and new industrial relations, as well as new types of contract for employees, which included holidays, encouraged the growth of this process in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, other more socio-cultural factors, such as new attitudes toward and increased interest in sport and fitness, played a decisive role in encouraging more people to use their vacations as a time to discover the seaside and to relax and enjoy the sunshine and all the other amenities of seaside resorts.

Most books on the history of tourism agree on the leading role of the Mediterranean area as the first mass tourism destination area. Today this region counts 22 countries, whose common characteristic is their border with the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout its history, its population growth has fluctuated nonetheless, with the passing of the centuries the population has greatly increased, leading to the creation of a strong network of cities stretching from the coast to the remotest corners in valleys and mountains. Given the Mediterranean's fragmented geography, different cultural groups have emerged. For millennia, these cultures have taken advantage of the relative ease (=agio) of maritime communication, leading to the creation of a common fund of cultural, religious, and symbolic elements, and shared behavior patterns in relation to the environment. Through agricultural activities and livestock farming (=allevamento di bestiame) in areas that were barely suitable for human occupation, a fragile balance was maintained between man and nature that lasted for centuries. This balance is now threatened by the unprecedented urban growth of the last four decades. At the beginning of the 1880s, no Mediterranean city's population reached one million inhabitants. Istanbul, which was the capital of the Ottoman Empire, was the most populated city, followed by Naples, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, and Barcelona. Just over a century later, 14 cities in the Mediterranean have over one million inhabitants, 1/3 of the world's tourists come to the region and over 45000 sq. km are occupied by tourist accommodation facilities and associated infrastructure.

Initially, cities grew by expanding into areas that adjoined the existing early twentieth-century nuclei, which had been created by industrial development. But during the post-war European reconstruction, including the increased income of the European population, the massive use of individual means of transport and the social organization of work, transformed the concept of rest into a new activity, as well as generating a different type of urban development. Near coastal and inland areas were colonized as the industrial economies of Europe grew due to domestic migration. At first, this led to isolated building developments, scattered here and there, comprising

separate dwellings (=abitazioni), second homes, and tourist or hotel complexes. Over the years though, these areas have become denser, forming the tourist resorts, particularly along the coast. This process, which was first identified in the late nineteenth century in Liguria (the Riviera), in Provence, and especially in the Cote d'Azur, speeded up in the 1950s, with mass tourism initially making an appearance on the Catalan coast (the Costa Brava) and later in Greece and the Balearics (Mallorca), before extending along the Spanish Mediterranean coast, the Italian Adriatic, and finally some area of northern Africa (Tunisia, Morocco).

The Mediterranean Basin is the world's leading tourist destinations. A large part of the economic activity of the Mediterranean region is based on tourism services, with important repercussions: annually, tourism expenditure in these countries accounts for about 3.7 percent of the GDP. There is a variety of tourism:

- Traditional sun and sand destination (Spain, Turkey, and Tunisia)
- High cultural and heritage-based (France and Italy, and Greece)
- Coastlines mainly visited for vacation or leisure purposes
- Other incentives are gradually gaining ground, such as health tourism or travel for professional or business purposes, helping to diversify destinations and customer profiles

European are the most frequent visitors (Accounting for 9 out of every 10 tourists), with the Americans lagging far behind (less than 5% of tourists). More recently, a boom in tourism from Middle East and Southeast Asia has been detected. Today, the Mediterranean offers a total of seven million tourist beds in accommodation centers mainly concentrated in France, Spain, and Italy. However, several factors seem to indicate changes for the future.

As an international tourist destination, the Mediterranean is without doubt starting to lose ground. The most crucial variables are:

- Tourist expenditure has remained stable, with a slight downward trend
- There has been a change in the composition of tourism issuing markets to the Mediterranean: tourism from traditional issuing markets (Europe and America) has slowed, given the almost unchanging trend in international tourist travel, and the market share of both has fallen in comparison with new Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian markets. The number of European and American visitors to the Mediterranean rose by 37 percent and 22 percent respectively, whereas visitors from the Middle East and Southeast Asia went up by 136 percent and 115 percent, respectively. This indicates the existence of potential new customers
- A change can also be observed in European tourists' choice of destination. The Europeans, the Mediterranean's main market, are tending to opt for different Mediterranean tourist centers from the resorts. In the span of just few years, the number of European visitors to other countries in the Mediterranean has doubled. France, Spain and Italy accounted a large part of new customers, but they were also shared by Turkey, Greece, Egypt, and Tunisia. As a result, the three leaders experienced a slight drop in their market share.

These features affect another key vector- investment – as slower rise in the number of tourist beds in traditional destinations can be observed as opposed to a clear rise in emerging destinations.

Mass tourism is gaining in importance from a macroeconomic perspective, but its heavy environmental impact is also on the increase. Furthermore, some areas have reached their saturation point. The real estate sector and, above all, the building industry have benefited from the urgent need for new infrastructure.

The tangible success of the Mediterranean Basin has been the result of a series of variables and the interaction of multiple actors, such as:

- Entrepreneurs
- Hotel groups
- International travel agencies
- Specialized and non-specialized workers
- Local, regional and national government

Entrepreneurial capabilities and styles emerge as key factors in understanding the long-term performance of the main actors. The business approach throws light on understating successful as well as unsuccessful stories. Travel agencies, hotel, and tourism groups reproduce the national business models:

- The managerial enterprise with its large bureaucratic and strong financial structure in France, UK and Germany
- The family business with its limits in Southern Europe, in Italy and Greece, while in Spain the emergence of medium size or even large groups is one of the main characteristics even in this sector of the modernization process

For a long time, in the pioneer era, during the major upsurge of mass tourism in Europe, family firms were dominant everywhere. The tourist appreciated the warm approach of the family running the hotel or the resort. Then the tour operators, the charter flight companies, the travel agencies multiplied their efforts, following the increase in the standard of living in Western European societies. Mass tourism and its increasing demand for better quality and cheaper prices played a crucial role in changing the mentality of the social and economic actors in these sectors. Some countries (i.e. Portugal and Greece) tried to cope with the new demands and styles of mass tourism and huge efforts have been made in the infrastructure of these countries, under the pressure of the big international tour operators and the use of EU regional funds; others tried to multiply and diversify what they were offering outside the traditional structures (Spain). Italy shows different patterns because the logic and the culture of family business still dominate. Few groups have emerged as national and international actors, and even they succeeded, they remained in a relatively secondary position in the relationship with the big names in the European sector. Vacations are a framework in which seaside activities are just a part of the time devoted to relaxation; increasing priority is given to dance halls, night clubs, water parks and many other attractions, as well as activities like gymnastics, karaoke, and so on. The Italian beaches are less popular with foreign tourists, although they are, with some difficulty, resisting this trend in terms of the home market. Foreign tourists tend to associate Italy more and more with culture and towns of art and historical importance (Rome, Florence, Venice; etc.), reducing Italy's importance as a traditional summer destination.

Another element directly connected with the emergence of mass tourism is, in a way, its opposite: elite tourism. The diversification of the offer and the competition of more exotic places outside the Mediterranean Basin have contributed to readdressing part of the tourism and flows in this direction.

The environmental impact has contributed to a massive change in the priorities and thus the structure of the costs in the tourism industry. The merge of the environment question in the tourism industry has reinforced the need for strict coordination between different levels of responsibility. Environmental and tourism policies are not at the top of the political agenda of national governments in Southern Europe. The situation is slightly better where local or regional governments have more power to intervene directly in such issues. For many years some of them appear to have

been extremely interested in modernizing their tourism policies while respecting the environment. Local government, politicians at national level, opinion leaders and jet-set people seem to be interested in discussing the uses and abuses of mass and deluxe tourism in the Mediterranean area. There is a urgent need in creating a more consensual evaluation of the vision necessary to develop a tourism policy with a good balance among mass tourism, environmental preservation, economic development, and sustainability.

## 1. FLYING VISITS: THE GROTH OF BRITISH AIR PACKAGE TOURS

Two interwoven threads (= fili collegati) in the economic and social fabric of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are:

- The development of the international tourist industry
- The growth of commercial air transport

With the development of the international tourism, air travel became popular and democratized, with the tourist replacing the businessman as the typical passenger. Air transport caused a revolution in the use of leisure time combined with the rising levels of disposable income and an improvement in technology, it allowed workers of the industrialized nations of the northern Europe to travel south for vacations.

Britain is the pioneer of the mass air travel industry. The British air tourism in the Mediterranean took off in the 1960s thanks to a combination of economic, social, and technological factors influencing both the demand and the supply. Tourism became cheaper as it became faster.

### Tourist Demand in Britain

Before World War II, only few Britons took vacations abroad. Many workers could not afford to take vacations at all and for those who could, domestic resorts by the seaside like Brighton, Blackpool, and Scarborough, or regions of natural beauty like the Yorkshire Dales, the Lake District, and the Norfolk Broads, were sufficient to provide a break away from their places of employment. By 1945 many lower and middle-income Britons had travelled abroad for the first time with the armed forces, and many more had become familiar with aircraft and air transport. Then in the twenty years of the economic growth that followed the war, their living standards also rose (car and electrical goods, an annual vacation of 2 weeks abroad). The new British tourist, however, remained suspicious of travel abroad and worried about encounters with foreign officials, foreign languages, foreign culture, and foreign food. For the average working or lower-middle class Briton, abroad was an intimidating concept and they just need a Fordist solution to their demands and they found it in the inclusive tour. Inclusive tours were not new – Thomas Cook had pioneered them in the 1880s. What was new was their combination with air transport. Not only it was faster than transport by train and ferry, but it was also much cheaper and reassuringly (because with inclusive tours people did not have to make individual arrangements or deal with foreign officials). The new British Tourist, visiting Spain for the first time in the 1960s. Just as the inclusive tour and the chartered jet aircraft were key technological development for Spanish tourism, so the resort of the Spanish Mediterranean coastline and the Balearic Islands, was a key element in the demand structure generated by the new British tourist in the 1960s. Unlike the traditional overseas resort in France, Italy, or Switzerland, Spain developed spontaneously as a tourist destination, based on jet aircraft, its low cost-of-living, and the active

encouragement of the Franco regime. The Spanish aimed for mass and low-cost tourism . As the pioneer high-speed tourist destination, Spain was immensely successful and the number of foreign visitors it received rose rapidly.

### Tourist Supply in Britain

Tourism Supply consist of accommodation and transport, plus ancillary services such as restaurants and souvenir retailing.

After the World War II, three British state-owned flag carriers emerged from legislation passed by the Labour government in 1946. The government expected that in the post-war world Britain's civil aviation effort would be the exclusive responsibility of these nationalized airlines and it awarded them monopolies to carry out scheduled services in their designated areas. Civil Air transport evolved from 1945 to 1965 in a manner that the politicians of the late 1940s di not envisage: they did not foresee the democratization and huge expansions in international air tourism. Initially, independent British airlines were precarious. Typically they were the creation of an ex.serviceman who has managed to