

NUMBER OF VISITORS IN CATALONIA FELL BY 11.3%, HARMING THE TOURISM SECTOR



The summer is over, while the tourism sector is running out of steam in Catalonia. The industry reported a decrease in occupation rates, reaching 5% in comparison to last year's figures. A report from the Generalitat de Catalunya (Government of Catalonia) reveals that Spanish tourists have become reluctant to visit Catalonia: dropping by

11.3% regarding the number of visitors compared to the rest of Spain, a decrease three times higher than visits by foreign tourists.

Particularly, coastal establishments in Barcelona and Tarragona have noticed the loss of customers. However, the sector was aware that reaching the excellent data perceived in 2017 was going to be next to impossible.

Àngels Chacón, Minister of Enterprise and Knowledge, already warned shortly after the beginning of summer that **resurrection of some destinations deemed as unsafe during recent years would have "consequences" for Catalan tourism sector**. Turkey and Egypt have regained their status as tourist attractions after years of distress and social uncertainty, which has motivated European tour operators—especially British and German—to reinvest in these Mediterranean destinations.

Numbers confirmed the forecasts, and Catalonia will close the present season with over 5% decrease in occupancy compared to 2017. The climate of tension has negatively impacted Catalonia and, besides the atmosphere left by the 'Procès', it has accounted for incidents with taxi drivers and the ever-present summer problems at El Prat airport. Hoteliers, suspicious of the commotion, had insistently warned of the possible consequences that unrest represents for tourism.

Once it was time to release the first balance sheets, the general director of the Barcelona Hotels Association (Gremi d'Hotels de Barcelona), Manel Casals, said in statements that the city "is not functioning as it should". An opinion shared by Enrique Alcántara, president of the Association of Barcelona Tourist Apartments (APARTUR), who points out that the tarnished image of Barcelona has caused a 5 to 10% drop in turnover of tourist homes at the end of summer.

For hotels located in the Catalan capital, the average occupancy rate has fallen to 80%, five points less than last year's, and Manel Casals insists that the decrease in the number of visitors is the result of a deterioration of Barcelona's reputation for people abroad. To explain, the director of the hotel association refers to "the strikes and delays at the airport," as well as "the increase in street vendors", while mentioning a supposed rise in citizen insecurity and the "conflict" led by taxi drivers in July.

The hotel occupancy in July in Barcelona was 91%, 0.7% less than last year, but the average price per room was 150 euros, 7% less than in 2017; in August there was 88% occupancy – 1% less – and 135 euros, 19% less, which implied a 20% reduction in turnover this month.

Despite the decline in occupancy, Barcelona was the Spanish city with the most overnight stays for July: reaching 1.8 million stays by foreign visitors and 233,749 by domestic travelers, according to data released by the National Statistics Institute (INE). For Casals, there is no relation between the drop in visitors and the so-called independence process, a reasoning questioned by several voices of the tourism sector. Among them is Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), who in his public statements has warned of this climate of political tension and its consequences for tourism.

A study on hotel occupancy prepared by the Generalitat reveals that the decline in Catalonia's tourism is much more marked for domestic tourists than those coming from abroad. While the drop of foreign tourists visiting Catalonia was 3.9% in July, tourism arriving from other areas of Spain deflated by 11.3%. According to the same report, **the fall in hotel occupancy in Catalonia led to a 6.5% decrease in overnight stays for the same month**, an unusual incident since no Spanish community registered a similar drop. The document also records that Madrid's occupancy benefited from a 4.8% increase regarding the number of visitors.

The study for the hotel occupancy rates that goes from January to July verifies that Catalonia's attractiveness for the Spanish traveler as a tourist destination is constantly slipping away: there are 5% fewer visits, while overnight stays contracted by 8.8%.

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