

TOURISM IN FRANCE FACES UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION



While the number of foreign visitors is beating records in France, professionals in the sector and the government are trying to redirect flows into the territories, to avoid a two-speed tourism in France.

France is more than ever one of the world's leading tourist destinations. With 90 million foreign visitors in 2018, **the 100 million mark set by the government should be reached by 2020**. But the influx of visitors also points at the threat of overflow.

The development of low-cost travel and the enrichment of the middle classes in emerging countries are already putting pressure on some European tourist destinations. The "drunk tourists" and the transformation of their city into a museum have used up the patience of Barcelonans and Venetians. In Lisbon or San Porto, demonstrations have broken out against the explosion of rents and the transformation of housing into short-term tourist residences.

France appears to have been spared for the time being. However, some Parisian attractions, such as the Louvre Museum or the Eiffel Tower, are reaching their saturation point. "For the moment, we cannot talk about over-tourism, but the density is high in some places and we must anticipate," explains Jean-Virgile Crance, head of the GNC (Groupement national des chaînes).

For the actors in the sector, more than mass tourism in France, the main problem is its concentration. "Basically, we have 80% of tourist attendance on 20% of the territory," notes Jean-Luc Michaud, founder of the Institut du tourisme (IFT), in charge of two missions on the subject by the government. "This distribution has been stagnating for years and is a serious handicap for rural or medium mountain areas," adds Jean-Virgile Crance.

87 million foreign tourists arrived to France in 2017; thus the 90 million threshold should be exceeded in 2018. In the two summer months alone, the number of overnight stays for international customers increased by 5.3% in one year, while it fell by 1.2% for French customers.

But the good figures of the French tourism industry hide significant disparities. Business and congress tourism and luxury hotels are on the rise, which mechanically benefits the Île-de-France region and the coastline of the Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur region.

Thus, the Ile-de-France region achieved a historic total of 17.1 million hotel nights in the first six months of the year (+4.1% in one year), despite the SNCF strike, while Paca reached 10.1 million nights, the highest number in ten years.

Bordeaux, the Alps and the Loire Valley are also doing well, but outside this half-dozen attractive territories, the number of visitors is rather low, especially on the Atlantic coast and in rural areas.

The risk: to find oneself with a two-speed France. On the one hand, metropolitan areas, particularly Paris, "invaded" by holidaymakers, and on the other hand, rural areas outside international circuits and deserted. "Today, we are losing tourist capacity," says the National Federation of Outdoor Hotels (FNHPA), whose campsites are mostly located far from the cities.

Every year, some 200 country hotels close their doors. "10,000 viable establishments" (hotels, restaurants and country bistros) could be added to the list in the coming years, says Roland Héguy, President of the Union des métiers et des industries de l'hôtellerie (UMIH) and the Confédération des acteurs du tourisme (CAT). "It changes the balance of the villages," he laments. "I'm surprised sometimes to walk through an entire department without finding an open coffee shop."

Hoteliers' fears are now greater as the online rental champion Airbnb is now openly competing. In addition to launching a programme to promote "local, authentic and sustainable tourism" in early 2018, the American firm has recently joined forces with the Eure-et-Loire Departmental Tourism Development Agency.

"They saw that there was a weakness, so they seize every opportunity," tackles Roland Héguy, who advocates the creation of a sixth category of hotels (next to the five-star hotels) to offer more flexibility to very small establishments, and wants to lower the threshold of 120 rental days per year.

"Today, a young person who is starting out must already take out 400,000 euros," continues the head of UMIH. And how many hotels in rural areas rent 120 days a year? The company manager, who has just renovated everything to get his two stars, finds himself with empty rooms in August...

The Elan law, definitively adopted by the Senate last week, tightens the framework for short-term Airbnb-type rentals and increases penalties, both for websites and owners.

Parliamentarians validated the ban on renting one's main residence for more than 120 days a year in cities that have set up an online service to register short-term rentals. Announcements must also include a registration number obtained from these services.

A private individual will be liable to a fine of up to €10,000 if the threshold is exceeded, and up to €5,000 if there is no registration number. Websites will be able to pay up to €12,500 per property if this number is missing and up to €50,000 if they refuse to block ads longer than 120 days.

It should be recalled that in the municipalities not concerned, a declaration by the town hall is in any case mandatory beyond 120 days of rental. It is up to the owner to authorize or not to authorize the owner to temporarily change the use of the property and to exploit it as a tourist furnished property.

An imbalance that the government seems to be aware of. "International tourists, who are driving growth, tend to visit the most famous places," Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, Secretary of State to the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in charge of tourism, acknowledged at the beginning of the month.

To distribute flows more evenly and irrigate the entire territory, the tourist destinations "must develop direct connectivity between the major airports in French metropolitan areas and the major world nations," he proposed. The Confederation of Tourism Actors says nothing else, tackling the "hypertrophy" of the Paris financial center and calling for an increase in traffic rights for regional airports.

"Tourism is a land use planning problem," says the WCB. And to warn: "We must distribute tourists intelligently throughout the country. Before we end up with a touristophobia."

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