

SPANISH TOURISM PROFESSIONALS ARE AGAINST MANDATORY FACE MASKS



After over a year of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the tourism industry is in desperate need for good news. But instead, the new measure that requires mandatory face masks in all open spaces in Spain is seen as an unexpected blow to the industry. Until now, the state regulation only imposed masks in open-air if a distance of one and a half meters could not be guaranteed.

The ruling approved by the Spanish parliament went mostly unnoticed, even after its publication in the Official State Gazette, until the Spanish newspaper El País covered the news. **The face masks on beaches ruling are expected to deter those who are planning to travel to Spain, and businesses have expressed their concern for an industry that contributed 12% of the country's GDP before the pandemic.**

“We are going through a nightmare that threatens to end thousands and thousands of jobs and businesses. And now they want to turn beaches into open-air field hospitals,” says José Luis Zoreda, vice president of EXCELTUR, a non-profit Spanish tourism association that represents tourism professionals of all sectors.

Those in the industry disagree with the measure, and did not even know of its existence until the Official State Gazette publication. “Holy Week is already a lost holiday. The important thing now is to prepare for summer. And for this, we must achieve high levels of trust for foreigners and domestic travelers to visit us,” explains Zoreda, who does not believe that this type of measure, which he regards as “improvised”, points to this direction.

However, the association has not only condemned the mandatory use of masks. Images of parties in tourist accommodations of cities like Madrid and the new measure that forces those who cross the French border by road to show a COVID-19 negative test result are also heavily criticized by EXCELTUR. “We ask that state policies support tourism, and more coherence in the measures [since] many of them are contradictory,” adds Zoreda.

The Valencian Community, Baleares and Andalusia Also Disagree

It is not just EXCELTUR that criticizes the mandatory mask ruling for public spaces regardless of social distancing. The announcement was also closely followed in the most tourism-dependent regions. Hosbec, Benidorm's hotel association, has said the measure is “exaggerated”. “The security measures that were taken last year to split beaches into zones, enforcing social distance and monitoring compliance with regulations proved to be effective,” says Nuria Montes, general secretary of Hosbec. “In 4x4 meter areas you can socialize while keeping distance. We do not understand why a mask is going to be mandatory for sunbathing,” she adds.

In the Valencian Community, the use of face masks in outdoor spaces, including beaches and swimming pools, was already compulsory regardless of keeping distance. This was announced since February and will be in force until April 12. Only those taking a swim are exempt.

On the other hand, some regional associations and tourism professionals are more sympathetic towards the government's decision. While still being caught off guard by this new measure, the hotel

industry in Mallorca rules out that the mandatory mask on beaches will discourage travel to Spain. Despite not openly criticizing the measure, the industry asks the central government to communicate the decision to tourist markets, especially by launching information campaigns to avoid confusion.

Last year, when the mandatory use of masks was established in the islands, the Balearic Hotel Chain Association reported cancellations and a drop in bookings from the United Kingdom and Germany. Meanwhile, the Mallorca Hotels Federation supported the idea of masks not being mandatory on beaches if a safe distance was maintained.

In Andalusia, Juan Zapata, president of the Federation of Hotels and Tourist Accommodation (FAHAT), says that the mandatory face mask ruling is “tolerable”. “In Andalusia we already had to go to the beach last year wearing a mask, a measure well received by tourists, taking into account how grave the situation was,” explains Zapata.

“What really worries hoteliers is the progress of vaccines and travel restrictions, because without travel there is no tourism,” he says. According to FAHAT, 80% of the 500,000 hotel rooms in Andalusia are currently closed, with only 10,000 rooms of the 20% open being occupied.

The president of the Malaga Beach Business Association, Manuel Villafaina, believes that restrictions make visitors uncomfortable; especially in outdoor places where social distancing is possible. “When you go for a walk, the logical thing is to wear the mask, but if you are in a hammock two meters from the other person, it is not logical. There are some who feel uncomfortable and prefer to stay at home,” says Villafaina, whose organization represents 1,100 businessmen of hammock beach bars and resorts.

Meanwhile, Iván Periano, president of the Cádiz Beach Bar Association, is sure **that beaches will be crowded this summer “with or without [mandatory] mask”**.

“We must be aware of the situation we are in, in the middle of a pandemic; that’s why I think that the mandatory face mask will not make people stay at home. It has been a very hard year for us. With the time and capacity restrictions, many of the beach bars decided not to open because they couldn’t pay the bills. This year we still don’t know what will happen. We make decisions every 15 days, depending on how the situation evolves”, he says.

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