

LA PALMA REPORTS HOTEL OCCUPANCY RATE OF LESS THAN 15% DUE TO LAVA RIVER



Hundreds of residents on the Spanish island of La Palma left their homes last week as a new river of lava from the erupting volcano threatens to engulf another neighborhood on its possible route to the Atlantic Ocean. Tourism is one of the victims of the current situation and hotel occupancy goes down.

So far, the lava has destroyed more than 1,400 buildings, including homes, farms and other structures, and has covered 656 hectares (1,621 acres), of which 90 (more than 200 acres) were dedicated to banana cultivation. No deaths or other personal injuries have been recorded.

The tourism of La Palma faces the beginning of its high season with a hotel occupancy rate of less than 15%. While at the beginning of the eruption the "volcano tourism" and the novelty of the event filled hotels and apartments, only a few weeks after the Cumbre Vieja endangered the sector.

However, the departure from the island of most of the journalists and experts who had travelled to cover the news has now emptied the hotels and tourist establishments.

Jorge Marichal, president of Ashotel, said that the situation of the hotels on the island has been strange. After the first flood of journalists, experts and technicians who came to the island to cover the news left, the consequences of the volcano eruption are now getting noticeable, he says.

Hotel occupancy is around 10-15% and Marichal estimates that they have lost about 80% of their usual income. Now the winter's high season is coming, he says, but they will have to face it with a very weakened sector thanks to the pandemic and now because of the volcano.

In addition to the absence of foreigners, there is also the havoc left by the lava. The lava flows cut roads and communications, leaving several parts of the island completely inaccessible. Several hotels and two apartment complexes are already cut off. This, "plus the hotels within the security perimeter" that are not allowed for tourists, is making the sector lose millions.

Another concern for hoteliers is the airlines and air traffic. The island is only accessible by air and, if due to wind changes or an increase in eruptions the airlines decide to cancel their arrivals, the traffic to and from the island would be almost non-existent. Depending on such an unpredictable phenomenon means that economic losses can grow exponentially or last long enough to sink the sector. "The biggest enemy of economic investment is uncertainty," says Marichal.

Because of that, the hoteliers of La Palma have proposed to the Canarian Ministry of Tourism a series of measures to attract visitors. **The first thing now is to help people who still need it, says the president, but then you have to rebuild the economy as the island depends on tourists and agriculture.**

Experts propose to the regional government a series of measures to attract visitors, including the creation of tourist value around the volcano phenomenon. They also propose a specific plan to promote the island, an infrastructure plan and some containment measures such as the extension of

the ERTES and mortgage grace periods for hoteliers.

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