

# SPAIN'S MASS TOURISM: ECONOMIC ENGINE, LOCAL STRAIN, AND WATER STRESS



Every year, Spain sets a record for the number of tourists. It seems that this trend will continue: by July, the country had already hosted 58.1 million visitors – a new record – and the number of tourists per year could exceed 100 million by 2026. From an economic point of view, these figures are undeniably positive: in 2024, tourism contributed 12.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (more than double that of 2021) and generated more than 2.7 million jobs in Spain (12.3 percent of total employment). In this sense, it is one of the most important pillars of the Spanish economy.

On the other hand, the economic benefits of tourism are contrasted by its impact on the social fabric and the environment. While large cities are being transformed with the arrival of tourists, their unique character disappears, becoming similar to other tourist destinations. **Furthermore, rising property prices - which also hit a new record in 2024 - and the conversion of housing into tourist use leads to the displacement of residents.** Residents see their daily lives change due to mass tourism: conventional shops are replaced by commercial establishments geared towards tourists, noise and activity predominate, and the use of public spaces is geared toward satisfying visitors' needs. This has created a significant amount of negative sentiment towards mass tourism, reflected in recent anti-tourism protests and the emergence of the term "tourismphobia".

## Water Stress at the Worst Time of Year

The consequences of tourism are also especially serious in the natural environment, particularly in terms of water resources. The period when most tourists visit coincides with the driest months of the year, and they tend to concentrate in areas with the least amount of rainfall and the highest evaporation rates. After June, the level of water in reservoirs drops while thousands of pools are filled up and the seasonal population of many municipalities increases.

At the national level, the pressure of tourism on water resources seems limited. Only a small amount of water – about 130 cubic hectometres per year (excluding tourist housing) – is devoted to the needs of tourists, compared to agricultural use, which amounts to around 22,000 cubic hectometres per year, and urban water supply, which represents 17 percent of total consumption.

However, the temporal and spatial concentration of demand means that, at a local level, the pressure can be much higher. Tourism is mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean coast, Atlantic Andalusia, the Balearic Islands and the large cities of Madrid and Barcelona, which are part of the 43 percent of Spanish territory subject to extremely high water stress. During periods of low rainfall – which are frequent in these areas – a sudden increase in demand or a decrease in quality can lead to a sudden shortage of water.

The statistics reflect the weight of tourism in these areas: 63 percent of the municipalities with more than a million overnight stays are located in high or extremely high water stress areas and a further 35 percent in medium-high water stress areas. Of the 69 percent of the overnight stays recorded between June and September – the period of the year when water availability is most limited – take place in these areas of high water stress. The contrast between the number of tourists and residents

is even more striking: in Jávea (Alicante), a town of some 20,000 inhabitants, almost 284,000 tourists stay per year; in Ciutadella (Menorca), there are almost 16 times as many tourists as residents; and in Roses (Girona), almost 17 times as many.

## **Sprawling Models and Coastal Transformation**

The high number of tourists generates a particular type of urban sprawl that takes up a considerable amount of natural land. Detached houses and villas are promoted as a superior tourist experience outside the city, with water consumption sometimes four or five times higher than in vertical construction. The proliferation of private swimming pools also affects the natural balance: the ratio of inhabitants to pools in many provinces along the Mediterranean coast is more than 20 inhabitants per pool, far below the national average.

The natural environment also bears the mark of decades of mass tourism, both in terms of its transformation and the impacts on water resources. The occupation of the coast has led to the burial of dune fields and lagoons, the modification of natural drainage systems and the alteration of the natural dynamics of ravines and streams. As a result, during the rainy seasons in autumn and winter, these rivers overflow their banks and reveal the risks deriving from the improper occupation of these sensitive areas.

## **Aridity is the Spanish Norm**

The distribution of tourism in regions of low water availability reflects the broader characteristics of Spanish society. **Contrary to what is believed, 80 percent of the Spanish population live in arid areas.** This figure is explained by the particular evolution of the Spanish population, which has historically tended to concentrate in non-arid areas. Nevertheless, Madrid, Barcelona and large parts of the Mediterranean coast are located in arid areas, as is 67 percent of the territory of Spain.

The challenge of desertification and mass tourism cannot be resolved by ignoring the characteristics of these areas. Appropriate territorial planning must be established to balance the demand for water, promote greater efficiency and leave a proportion of available water for ecological functions that guarantee the well-being of society.

Date: 2026-09-21

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/spains-mass-tourism-worsens-the-water-shortage-news15625>