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SPANISH GOVERNMENT, TOURISM SECTOR CONCERNED ABOUT DWINDLING SUMMER TOURISM

MADRID : Tourists are no longer flocking to Spain's beaches in record numbers because of mounting competition from neighboring countries as well as a strong European currency, prompting the Spanish government and tourism professionals to rethink their strategy in that sector.

The traditional form of beach holiday is "on the way out and experiencing difficulties", Tourism Minister Jose Montilla said this week.

He said although he believed holiday makers -- the majority of them Britons and Germans -- would continue to invade the country's sun-drenched coastline and once-wild Balearic and Canary Islands en masse, the sector was showing signs of trouble this year.

"We need to make an effort so that tourism is no longer seasonal in Spain" and is attractive year-round, he said.

Spain is the world's second most popular tourist destination after France and tourism accounts for 12 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

The industry, however, has been faced with growing competition recently from markets deemed more "exotic" as well as a strong euro and a poor economy in some of the countries from which tourists to Spain traditionally come.

Montilla said tourism centered around gastronomy, cultural events, spas and nautical sports could be developed along with business travel and international conferences.

His concerns are shared by Exceltur which groups 29 Spanish tourism companies.

Jose Luis Zoreda, the vice president of Exceltur, last month said his company had reviewed downwards its predictions for the summer season. He said a mere 1.4 percent increase in the number of tourists was expected this season compared to the previous year.

Tourists are also spending less.

Zoreda said between January and June of this year, the average spending by a foreign tourist in Spain went down by 2.2 percent to about 696 euros (860 dollars), a figure similar to that in 1999.

"The time has come for us to seriously reflect on the current situation," he said, adding that the difficulties could not only be attributed to economic reasons.

Barcelona's daily El Periodico said one of the reasons tourists were spending less was because many now owned homes in Spain and no longer needed to pay for room and board.

It said last year more than 10 million travelers to Spain had stayed in their own home or apartment or that of a friend, a figure double that of seven years ago.

Last year, Spain welcomed 52.47 million tourists, a slight increase of 0.28 percent over the year 2002.

- AFP