
Foreign tourist arrivals in Spain fell by 2.6 percent in 2008

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Foreign tourist arrivals in Spain fell 2.6 percent to 57.4 million in 2008 from the record set in the previous year, the tourism ministry said Wednesday, blaming the global economic slowdown.

MADRID—Britain was again the largest single market, with 15.7 million Britons arriving, down 3.0 percent from a year earlier, ahead of Germany with 10.0 million, down 0.2 percent, and France with 8.1 million, down 8.5 percent.

Secretary of State for Tourism Joan Mesquina predicted the "negative tendency" in arrivals would continue during the first months of 2009 since the drop picked up pace during the final months of last year.

"There is a great lack of visibility for the year ahead," he told reporters when asked for a forecast for the number of arrivals for all of 2009.

The number of arrivals from Britain alone fell 14.9 percent in December over the same month in 2007, according to the tourism ministry figures.

The weakening of the pound to near-parity with the euro has led many Britons to shun Spain's beaches and bars in favour of sunshine destinations outside of the eurozone such as Turkey and Egypt, which have become much cheaper.

No British tour operator has scheduled flights this winter to Spain's Balearic islands of Mallorca, Menorca and Ibiza due to the slump in demand, according to Spain's main tourism trade body Exceltur.

Last week the trade body, which includes Spain's main airlines, car hire companies, hoteliers and travel agents, predicted Spain's tourism income would fall by 5.7 percent in 2009 over the previous year.

Spain is the world's second biggest tourist destination after France. The tourism sector accounts for about 11 percent of the country's jobs and gross domestic product.

The country has recently been trying to promote more upmarket tourism, even though the country is known largely as a destination for budget package tours.
