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25 de Enero de 2006

Spain still second-favorite tourist destination in world

Industry group sees further rise in overseas visitors, fall in receipts

El Pais Spain | A. SIM

Madrid

The number of foreign tourists to Spain is expected to grow to 57.9 million this year, but tourist receipts are estimated to fall in real terms, according to the industry group Exceltur.

Spain received a record 55.6 million overseas visitors last year, consolidating its position as the second most popular destination in the world after France. At the same time, foreign income generated by the industry last year rose 4.5 percent to €46.1 billion, second only to the United States. The increase, however, was largely the result of the greater number of visitors, with average spending down 2 percent at €855, while the average stay fell to 10 days.

Exceltur said it expected the pattern of last year to continue in 2006, "with further increases in overseas arrivals, without changes in the trend of tourist receipt nor the pattern of spending." The association estimated that total nominal receipts this year will increase by 3.1 percent, which, after factoring out forecast inflation, would translate into a fall in real terms of 0.4 percent. Spending per overseas visitor is expected to fall by 4 percent in real terms.

Exceltur noted that inland tourism and domestic tourism is growing strongly, while "there are still no clear signs of a recovery in the *sun and sand* destinations." However, Spain continued to benefit from its reputation as a "secure" overseas destination, it said.

The association's measure of the gross domestic product of the tourist industry is estimated to show an increase of 2.8 percent, down from 3.1 percent in 2004 due to "deceleration in the Spanish market."

Exceltur's report coincided with the release of estimates for last year for the tourist industry by the Madrid-based World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). According to the United Nations agency, the number of international tourist arrivals grew 5.5 percent in 2005 to over 800 million, despite a number of terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

The organization remained reasonably upbeat for next year in the face of the ongoing threat of terrorism, rising interest rates and inflation and the spread of avian flu. "In spite of the current uncertainties, I am confident that tourism and all its stakeholders will weather the storm - if it does come - in the best possible way," said Francesco Frangialli, the secretary-general of the UNWTO.