



*Wine stands out at tourism fair as Spain reflects upon new ways to attract tourists with tight pocket books. (Cristina Mateo-Yanguas/GlobalPost)*  
[Rethinking Spanish tourism](#)



*The Spanish government spends money and thinks creatively to counter a drop in foreign visitors.*

By [Cristina Mateo-Yanguas](#) - GlobalPost  
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MADRID — The free-flowing wine last week at FITUR, one of the world's biggest international tourism fairs, did not make for bacchanalia. But glass after glass did add up to a demonstration of one way that Spain plans to prop up its tourism industry, which has taken a hit in the global economic crisis.

Sunny Spain drew more than 57 million foreign visitors in 2008 — 11 million more than its population, according to the World Tourism Organization. Those numbers made Spain the second-most-visited country in the world, after France. Impressive as that seems, Spain's foreign visitors dropped last year and were down a full 12 percent in November 2008 from November 2007. The numbers confirmed the industry's gloomiest expectations: The economic downturn and the sector's own challenges have cast a dark shadow.

Tired locations like the overbuilt Spanish coastline are suffering the most. "Consumers are more demanding. They have more alternatives, a larger supply," said Jose Luis Zoreda, CEO of Exceltur, a tourism business association. "We need to offer value added, more experiences, more emotions."

For example: Spain has been making wine for 3,000 years, but only now do Spaniards see wine as a tourist attraction. In Alava, the "Enobus" now cruises from one winery to another all day long. Passengers can hope on or off as they like on a wine route that winds through village roads and stops at establishments that are sometimes generations old.

Spain's central government does assign 90 million euros (about \$117 million) annually to tourism promotion. Exceltur reports that regional governments add on and sometimes even exceed that amount. Andalusia, for example, spends 150 million euros (about \$195 million).

One way those dollars are spent is to promote themed routes for visitors to follow.

To attract visitors outside of regular tasting hours, wineries in Navarra hold classical music concerts inside their cellars. Many Navarra wineries lie on a route promoted as the "Cellars of Saint James' Way." The initiative invites visitors to warm their spirits with spirits.

Melilla, a Spanish enclave in the North African coast, offers a Temple Route that takes visitors to the Or Zoruah synagogue, the Mandir Hindu temple, the Zauia Alauia mosque and the church of the Purisima Concepcion, to showcase the town's multi-faith identity. The Almodovar Route in Castilla-La Mancha includes the places the film director visited while he grew up in the land of Quixote or used as movie locations.

If any town has a thrill to offer the world, it is Pamplona in Navarra. Folks lined up at its stand in FITUR to run the bulls — virtually — on a treadmill while wearing a mask that put them in the middle of the action. Encarna Picas, 32, told me, catching her breath, "That was awesome, but I'm so exhausted." But since the festival only lasts a week, Pamplona is looking for other ways to draw tourists year round. "From Fiesta to Calm" celebrates the 50th anniversary of Ernest Hemingway's last visit to the region, with a route tracing the American author's favorite spots in the area — from Pamplona to quiet fishing spots in the Pyrenees to the Irati Forest.

Businesses must demand even more investment and involvement from the central and regional administrations, Zoreda said. He pointed to Bilbao, a town with barely any tourist attraction until a branch of New York's Guggenheim Museum was built there, in a soaring Frank Gehry-designed building. The initiative had a multiplying effect on other businesses catering to tourists, and the town was completely transformed.

"It's a good case in point of public action," Zoreda argues. "Something like that should be done on the Spanish coasts." But where to start on coastline stretching longer the U.S. eastern seaboard? Zoreda says, "We have homework to do in our sun-and-beach products, but public budgets are not up to the challenges we face."

With the numbers of foreign visitors declining — [the collapse of the English pound has hit the Spanish coast particularly hard](#) — one strategy businesses at FITUR were trying was convincing Spaniards to vacation close to home. (The economic downturn is affecting Chinese tourists as well, some of whom flocked to [Harbin's ice and snow festival](#) this winter instead of venturing abroad.)