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TOURISM: BYE BYE SUN AND BEACHES, SPAIN SEEKS NEW MODEL



(by Paola Del Vecchio) (ANSAméd) - MADRID - It's not just the economic slump, but the failure of the 'sol y playa' model for tourism. Following a peak in 2007 with a record 59 million arrivals, Spain has witnessed a progressive decline in the number of tourist visitors to its sun-kissed beaches, with 2 million fewer heading their way in 2008 than during 2007. The trend seems to be getting worse: the downward trend was confirmed by the 12% drop in numbers in the first quarter of this year. This failure of

competitiveness, says an enquiry sponsored by Pais, has led the government to hit the subsidy button, doubling the budget set aside for this sector to 778 million this year. It is a sector which, alone, makes up 11% of the country's GDP and employment. Having been overtaken by the USA as the world's second-favourite tourist destination, Spain is trying to repair some of the damage done by years of systemic destruction of the natural attractions of its coastline, especially in areas such as Alicante and Almeria, to try and freshen up a product which was already losing its competitive edge compared to eastern destinations or the eastern Mediterranean, such as Istanbul or Egypt. The big sector operators, in a meeting of the Exceltur association, have decided on "a paradigm shift", capable of offering "a tailor-made experience for each visitor", as tourism lobby spokesperson, Jose' Luis Zoreda, put it. The new package is not based on tourist numbers but on their average disbursements pro capita. Having plumped for "intensive brickwork", says Josep Oliver, professor at Barcelona University, "implies that one single generation has used up a resource that could have lasted centuries or millennia". A paradigm shift is an objective which entails not aiming at the lower to medium tourist market, such as those of eastern Europe, but of aiming "to compete with some of the regions of southern Italy or of France". Positive examples of a change in this direction are the transformation of the Costa Brava, where for years now licences for tourist operators have only been granted to the highest quality organisations, or the virtuous development undertaken in the sector in Bilbao, with its construction of the Guggenheim museum. There has also been significant progress made over the past years in business and cultural tourism. To save Palma de Majorca a plan has been presented "for a complete renovation of the area, capable of boosting a new round of innovation and sustainability for the future," Zoreda explains. This is a public-private initiative, promoted by the Spanish government and that of the Balearics, for the renovation of 1,000 hectares, with 40,000 tourist posts and for 1.5 million visitors per year, in order to revitalise a destination which appears in terminal decline. The project entails the demolition of half of accommodation for 40,000 tourists, two-thirds of which consists of hotels of fewer than three stars. The estimated cost is between 2 and 3 billion euros, 70% of which will come from the private sector; even though only 8 million euros have so far arrived from the Industry Ministry for works to be offered for tender in the course of next week. In the medium term, the government is aiming at providing incentives for investment by businesses in the sector, above all by SMEs, through its Renew Tourism Plan, which has one billion euros in funding. A large amount of the financing will be dedicated to renovating hotels. But the outlook for the future remains hazy, under the black clouds of the economic recession.