

Costa del Sol News

The Costa del Sol moving forwards as a tourism destination

THE Costa del Sol is on the road towards its future as a tourism destination somewhat different than in the past. World tourism is constantly changing, and the only way to stay ahead of the game is to change with it. With new destinations opening up in other parts of Europe and the world at accessible prices, it is essential for the Costa del Sol to adjust its offer to suit the holidaymaker of today, and this is exactly what the sector has been doing over the past four years.

The Internet has had a profound effect on international tourism, as much on the Costa del Sol as in any other part of the world which lives off the sector. Low-cost air travel is another revolution that is particularly relevant to the Costa del Sol, with half of all tourists who stay here arriving on low-cost flights. And finally, we have the increasing tendency towards independent travel; the wide-spread rejection of package holidays in favour of the more do-it-yourself kind.

Recent statistics show that the move away from the mass tourism of the past fifty years has shown positive results.

The final stage of this renovation of the tourism sector comes in the shape of the so-called Qualifying Plan by the Junta de Andalucía. Translated into figures, this means an investment of 335 million euros by the Junta over the coming four years in these new forms of travel.

First steps are to renovate the different tourism destinations in the region, improve the environment, modernise tourism companies, work towards sustainable tourism and recuperate the cultural identities of the various destinations.

There have been profound changes in the tourism sector during the past regional government legislature, both by the public administration and by private companies, all seeking new ways of attracting and keeping a larger share of the tourism market. This market has been adversely affected by the opening up of new destinations in other parts of Europe, and by the loss of market share by the big tour operators. The Internet has played its part too, and the Costa del Sol has been forced to come to terms with this new form of travel self-service.

The Costa del Sol has gained more than 1.3 million tourists since 2003, from 8.5 millions in that year to 9.2 in 2006. This has meant tourism income amounting to 8,058 million euros for the province of Malaga.

Entry point

Malaga Airport is the principal port of entry for tourists to the region. Last year, a total of 6.5 million tourists came through this airport, against 5.7 millions in 2003, which was the year with the highest increase since 1998. Passengers from the United Kingdom are in the majority, with a figure of 2.4 million in 2003 rising to only 2.5 million last year and showing a trend that is continuing into this year, according to figures from the Costa del Sol Tourism Observatory.

Our destination has lost part of its international market quota in this period, although this loss has been alleviated somewhat by the increase in national tourism to the region. At the beginning of this legislature, 76 per cent of all tourists arriving at Malaga Airport were foreigners, while the figure for 2006 has dropped two percentage points,

according to the same source.

One of the really big changes over recent years in tourism on the Costa del Sol has been the renovation of the hotel sector. At the beginning of the last legislature, there were 372 hotels in the region with a total of 70,739 beds. Last year, the Costa del Sol had 435 hotels offering more than 83,000 beds, which brings the total figure to 145,000, taking into account beds available in establishments throughout the province that are not registered as hotels.

This huge increase, which began to slow down last year, has meant that hotel occupancy rates have dropped almost 2.5 points, the figure now standing at 60.5 per cent. Overnight stays in hotels have increased at a slower rhythm in this period, by 700,000 this year and almost reaching the figure of 15.5 million overnight stays. Growth in this sector has been slower than in other sectors, going from 5.1 per cent in 2003 to 2.8 per cent last year.

Hotels in the province have gained on other tourism lodgings such as apartments and houses for rent since 2003, with more people choosing the luxury of a hotel over the cheaper apartment stay.

The one thing that has not changed, however, is the fact that tourism is still the principal driving force behind the economy of the province of Malaga. More than 76,075 people worked in a total of 8,775 companies in the tourism sector last year, against a figure of 45,000 in 2003.

Two models

The hotel sector has also had to battle against the growing trend of recent years towards residential tourism in the province of Malaga. As it happens, while the residential tourism sector is slowing down, the hotel sector is becoming more consolidated. As a destination, we have had to diversify our offer, and in that period there has been a rise in the cultural tourism sector. In 2003, this part of the market hardly deserved to be referred to as a sector, being outside the ranking of the top seven reasons for travel to the Costa del Sol, according to surveys carried out at the time. By 2006, the main reason tourists came to the Costa del Sol was to relax and have fun, and the second reason was cultural. It was important to break the pattern of sea and sand tourism, which is mainly seasonal, and apart from culture, we now have a very strong golf tourism sector, with 57 courses and 900 holes in the region, and a strong nautical sector, with a total of 4,444 berths in pleasure ports up and down the coast.

Tourists are also more active these days. An average of seven in every ten make excursions, which is three more than four years ago. This is no more than an indication of the efforts being made to keep up with changing tastes in international tourism. Almost eight out of every ten tourists are concentrated in four destinations: Torremolinos, Benalmádena, Fuengirola and Marbella, a situation which has remained unchanged since 2003.

In this legislature, the Costa del Sol has been given a new lease of life, overcoming the competition of cheaper resorts in other countries and establishing a reputation for diversity, quality and less seasonal dependency. The new high-speed train, the enlargement of the airport, the new Malaga ring road and improved port facilities have all contributed towards making the Costa del Sol a competitive destination.

Malaga firmly established on the tourist map

Malaga city, considered by the Exceltur group as the Spanish city whose tourism has grown most last year, has occupied a more important place on the tourism map in recent years than ever before. This is largely due to the opening of the Picasso Museum, which has acted as a motor to the local tourism economy, changing the general concept of the city from being a satellite of the Costa del Sol to being a tourism destination in its own right.

The number of visitors to the city grew last year by 40 per cent, helped by the recent trend towards weekend trips around Europe. The new Congress Hall has also helped put Malaga city on the tourist map, as well as the new high-speed railway line and the improved port facilities.