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Spain Looks to Sell More Than Its Sand and Sun

By RENWICK McLEAN

MADRID, Sept. 2 — With hotels reporting some 40 percent of their rooms unoccupied this season, and, for a second summer, many rooms empty even in the hotels that line Spain's famed beaches, government and industry officials say it is time to scrap the recipe that has built the country into the world's most popular tourist destination after France.

"The model of beaches and sun has been exhausted," a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce said. "We need to look at alternatives," she said, adding that when government officials return from vacation in September, the ministry will begin exploring ways to promote Spain's cultural, historical and architectural sites, as well as its food and restaurants. The spokeswoman said ministry policy prevented her from being quoted by name.

One uniquely Spanish event, the running of the bulls in Pamplona, draws thousands of tourists every year, Americans in particular. Bullfights, which are drawing protests from animal rights groups, are unlikely to be promoted.

There are many alternatives, however. Spain has nearly 40 entries in the United Nations' list of the world's major cultural and natural landmarks, more than any other country except Italy. These include the Roman aqueducts in Segovia, the Moorish fortress Alhambra in Granada, the medieval walled city of Ávila, and the Gothic cathedral in Burgos.

Madrid has three of the world's premier art museums within a half-mile stretch — the Prado Mu-



Xabier Mikel Laburu/Bloomberg News

The beaches last month in Girona, Spain. Hotels have reported high vacancy rates for a second year.

A move to promote art and history as beach luster fades.

seum, with collections that include paintings by Goya and Velázquez; the Reina Sofía Museum, with the works of Picasso and Joan Miró; and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, with exhibitions that span six centuries of Western art.

Tourism accounts for 12 percent of Spain's \$890 billion gross domestic product and supports 10 percent

of the work force, according to government figures. Spain draws more than 50 million foreign tourists a year, more than any other nation except France, according to the World Tourism Organization.

But more than 60 percent of hotels on the coasts expect summer sales to drop this year, according to Exceltur, an association of Spanish tourism companies. Government figures from June, the latest available, show that foreign visits to Spanish hotels were down 4.6 percent compared with June 2003. And last summer, the number of tourists coming to Spain fell nearly 3 percent, to about 24.5 million, ac-

cording to the tourism ministry.

"In some cases it's a tragedy, because some hotels get 80 percent of their business in the summer," said Domingo Luján, general manager of the Hotel Spa Porta Maris in Alicante, on the southeastern coast.

Many industry executives have been encouraging the tourism ministry for years to broaden the focus of its promotions to include more than beaches, and the ministry's spokeswoman agreed that "Spain has many advantages that have not yet been exploited."

But others are fearful of any shift

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of emphasis. "The beach is fundamental to Spain," said Rafael Villegas, the chief of reservations at the Hotel Balcón de Europa in Nerja on the southeastern coast. "Other forms of tourism are important," he said, but "the reason people come here is because we offer the sun."

Government officials say that the shift does not mean they will abandon the coasts, and they expect the beaches to remain the most important tourist draw. But they say that the only way to keep the industry growing is to promote other attractions as well.

It is not clear how much money the government is willing to spend to bolster tourism. So far, it has talked only vaguely of new marketing campaigns and efforts to help the industry evolve toward higher-end tourism that would bring in more money per visitor.

Some hotels, like Mr. Luján's spa, are already adapting by marketing themselves to business clients or clients who want the beach to be only part of their vacation.

Critics of any shift away from a promotional focus on the beaches say that two summers of declines hardly constitute a crisis. Also, they



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Industry executives have encouraged Spain's tourism ministry to broaden the focus of promotions.

point out that tourism in Spain's low seasons has been on the rise, helping to offset the summertime drops. And tourism by Spaniards within Spain remains strong, thanks in large part to the solid economy. This has helped

offset the summertime drops in foreign tourists.

Still, government and other industry executives say that the summertime declines indicate that the core of Spain's tourism business has hit a ceiling.

Part of the drop results from high gasoline prices and stagnant economies in countries like Germany, a major source of Spanish tourism, they say, but the far more important reason is that there are powerful new competitors — countries where the costs of doing business are much lower than in Spain — like Bulgaria, Croatia, Tunisia and Turkey.

Formerly these countries were seen by many Westerners as politically unstable, said Mr. Luján, the manager of the spa in Alicante. "Now they are more stable, and they are back."

"Countries on the Adriatic Sea, like Croatia, offer sunshine and very low prices," the spokeswoman for the tourism ministry said. "Spain cannot compete with them by lowering prices" for beach holidays, so in September ministry officials will begin meeting with industry executives to map out a strategy to promote its cultural and historical attractions.

Making matters worse, Spain's loss of business has occurred just as the hotel industry has increased its

Other beaches, soon in Eastern Europe, begin to draw tourists

supply of rooms by the thousands a result, vacancy rates have jumped.

Some hotel executives began making the changes in the market a year ago, and have begun adapting.

Mr. Luján's hotel, for example, offers not only access to the beach but also conference facilities, exercise equipment and extensive spa services.

"When we founded the hotel in 2002," he said, "we were looking for an alternative." Business at his hotel over the last two months is about 5 percent from last year, Luján said, but since his hotel draws guests all year long, he said the drop would be manageable.

But for hotels that rely primarily on the allure of the beach, a drop in guests during the summer poses a serious threat, because the business cannot be made up during the rest of the year, he said.

"You can't recover the lost business," he said. "An empty bed is forever."