

Looking for paradise: images of the Spanish lifestyle

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Abstract — Residential tourism development seems to be an unstoppable phenomenon in the Costa Blanca region (Alicante, Spain). The number of second homes owned by overseas citizens is steadily increasing, and the projections show that this trend will continue in the next few years. Our goal is to find out what European citizens' main reasons for choosing this region are. Tourists usually speak about the 'Spanish lifestyle' as the area's main appeal, but what do they mean by that? We will see how 'siesta', relax, sun, sand and sea are the key elements of this successful destination. We have chosen a qualitative approach to probe into the motivations of these residential tourists..

Index Terms — Qualitative research, residential tourism, sociology, Spain

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1 INTRODUCTION

The shores of the Mediterranean Sea are the world's leading tourist destination, the residential tourism model being one of its most important aspects. The profound technological and social changes that have redefined the perception of distance between centres of origin and destinations [1] have also led to a new kind of human mobility, residential tourism, that is changing the physical and social appearance of the Spanish Mediterranean coast. Residential tourism is a genuine type of mobility in which we can see features of mass tourism, migratory processes and the property business. Michael Hall points out the great importance that residential tourism has in the development of local economies and draws attention to how little the authorities sometimes seem to appreciate it [2].

The residential tourism model on the Spanish Mediterranean coast is based on the transformation of natural coastal areas into built-up areas with buildings of low and medium height intended to be sold or rented out to tourists by real estate agents [3][4]. The owners of these households usually have their official place of residence in other European countries, or in the northern and central

regions of Spain. They spend relatively long periods of time in their second homes which leads to, particularly during the holiday season, a complex 'compulsion to proximity' [5]. It is interesting to note the fact that foreign tourists are prone to forming communities located far from the town centre, and spend about the same number of months away in their countries as in these second-homes. Their per capita income is higher than the indigenous population's average per capita income, which they hardly relate to [6]. With specific reference to Portugal, although it can equally be said of Spain, Michael Hall emphasizes as a significant phenomenon the fact that tourists purchase a second home, set to become a temporary residence after their retirement, in the same area they had previously visited, once or on several occasions, during their holidays [2].

This paper focuses on the borderline between tourism and migration. In this sense, we could say that "new mobilities have emerged which confuse the conventional divide between migration on the one hand and other forms of human spatial mobility on the other, travel, tourism, circulation, commuting" [7].

We see tourism as an intensification of movements, that is, travel to far away destinations is becoming increasingly frequent and faster. However, there is a model of, let us call it tourism development, with contrasting behaviour. It is an infra-mobility phenomenon: the so-called tourist-residents spend long periods of time in their second homes and do not show typical "tourist

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behaviour” as regards their use of tourist services and the frequency of their sightseeing trips. They prefer to stay in the housing estate where they bought their house and use all the services available there. Moving house becomes more and more difficult since most of these tourist-residents prefer to buy their house rather than rent it for reasons we will be discussing below. They could be defined as “house-bound” tourists, that is, they are no longer tourists because they are more or less permanent residents and their mobility is limited due to several reasons that we will also be discussing.

One of the best examples for studying the issue of mobility in terms of migration is the Spanish Mediterranean coast. Over the last decades, this area has become one of the most appealing regions for EU retired migrants. The onset of this flow of immigrants dates back to the 1960s, starting a phenomenon that, until that moment, had been almost non-existent. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, retired EU immigrants accounted for a considerable part of the growth of the overseas population: up to 30% of the total overseas population living in Spain in the 1980s [8]. During the early 1980s the coastal areas of the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands and the Mediterranean region drew such large numbers of retired Europeans that they gathered in homogenous groups. Over the last decade, this process has generated entire communities of German and Nordic citizens, particularly in some Mediterranean coastal towns [9].

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the arrival of retired EU citizens on a large scale was the first wave of the international immigration process in Spain. In spite of that, the research carried out is insufficient. This lack of bibliography and statistics is due to two main reasons. Firstly, the positive image of these immigrants and the immigration phenomenon among the host population. Secondly, with the enforcement in 1993 of the free movement of people from within the European Union across its internal frontiers, these citizens are no longer required to hold a residence permit in order to stay legally in any other member state of the Union. As a result, these residents are not included in statistics provided by the Spanish Home Office [8].

Finally, we might think that the local census would provide us with data regarding the number of EU immigrants. However, it has

been estimated that for each European resident registered with the local council, there are three other residents who have not done so. Warnes [10] and López de Lera [8] in his thesis have studied this situation in Spain.

From the point of view of tourism research, it might be difficult to explain how despite the great tourism development experienced in Spain, that has had significant socio-economic and income redistribution effects, improving the image of the country around the world, there is a notable research deficit that is hindering the country's economic development and the implementation of new strategies in the tourist industry [6] [11].

Although international literature about the residential tourism phenomenon is extensive, especially by Anglo-Saxon and French researchers [12], it has been only recently that some researchers have started to focus on this sector and its impacts in Spain. This fact might have something to do with property developers, real estate agents, and local and regional politicians who are interested in drawing attention away from the excessive growth of the residential tourism phenomenon. The pioneering studies about this issue date back from the 1970s but it was not until the late 1980s, with the tourism crisis, that researchers paid more attention to it.

Therefore, our subject of study lies halfway between tourism and migration processes. In this sense, we find King's definition [7] very useful and we will consider the retired EU residents who live on the Mediterranean coast as migrants of free will', those who choose to migrate to satisfy largely non-economic life-choice ambitions - for a better education, or to retire to a pleasant scenic or climatic environment.

1.2. The Costa Blanca

Since the 1960s the coastal area of the Alicante province has been known as the Costa Blanca. Nowadays, tourist industry advertising focuses on this “brand” when talking about the whole province. The population registered in 2003 was 1,632,349 inhabitants; the density 280.6 inhabitants/Km² in an area of 5,817.5 Km². These are the official figures but it is estimated that the actual population during summer peak periods exceeds 2,500,000 inhabitants [13].

This region is a paradigmatic example of mass tourism development, more particularly

residential tourism development. The tourism industry has been for over 40 years the leading economic activity in most of the province's towns. We must consider tourism as an industry that provides services and that is related, to a large extent, to the property development business. Thus, we cannot distinguish tourism and urbanisation processes when talking about this region's development [6] [14].

The coastal towns have opted, since the start of their tourism activities, for a development model based on what is known as residential tourism or "property tourism". Mazón and Aledo [3] define this concept as that segment of the tourism industry that focuses on the construction, promotion and sale of property for residential tourists. These houses are part of the self-catering accommodation supply. They are privately owned, located mainly in coastal areas and, in most cases, are put on the tourism market through non-official channels (Spanish authorities have created an official register of property for tourism purposes. Those houses in this register are considered, for statistical purposes, tourist apartments. Most dwellings used as self-catering accommodation are not registered). The urbanisation initiatives have traditionally been focused on foreign, residential tourists, particularly from the Scandinavian countries, Germany and the United Kingdom.

There are two exceptions in the Alicante province to the residential tourism development: Benidorm and Alicante itself. Benidorm is a leisure town par excellence and the main tourism centre in the region of Valencia. Alicante has developed as a regional service centre. The city's hotel sector has benefited from this economic activity that has generated more business for it and has helped to boost its growth. Both in Benidorm and Alicante the residential sector has also developed.

The figures for the development of the residential tourism model in the Alicante province do not leave room for doubt. Whereas there are 400,000 residential spaces in Torrevieja and Benidorm, the former has 1,338 hotel beds and the latter provides 39,026 hotel beds [15]. These two towns are the best example of a dual development model. On the one hand, we have a mass tourist resort based on residential development, and on the other, there is a mass tourist resort based on hotel

development. In other resorts, like Santa Pola, the tourism supply consists of 125,000 residential spaces and 825 hotel beds [15].

The evolution of second home property in Alicante province is also enlightening. There were 41,297 second homes in 1960. In 1981 the number had risen to 686,332 houses, and twenty years later, in 2001, there were 1,008,909 second homes in the province [15].

2 METHODOLOGY

As we have mentioned above, our study is part of wider research. We considered that a qualitative, exploratory approach was necessary to analyse our subject matter before carrying out a quantitative analysis based on a survey. We conducted 15 in-depth interviews during the months of March to October, 2007.

We interviewed not only retired European immigrants but also several key informants with a good knowledge of our target population [16]. They included staff of the "Department for foreigners" of two local councils; editors of local English-language and French-language newspapers and magazines; real estate agents; translators, hotel managers and local councillors. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The qualitative data obtained was used to draw up the items of some of the questions in the survey questionnaire. They helped us to learn how the residents expressed themselves and included their use of the language in the questionnaire. They also helped us to enrich the analysis of the behavioural and cultural aspects of the mobility process.

The exploratory stage was useful to settle some issues about the target population of the study "Overseas residential tourism in Alicante". Thus, we decided to focus on retired citizens from European Union countries residing in the Alicante province. Even though some International Retirement Migration (IRM) studies have set 50 years as the minimum age to determine the population target [17], we decided not to set any limits for this variable.

3 WHY EU CITIZENS MOVE TO THE COSTA BLANCA

3.1 Destination features

Our aim is to define the ambitions that EU citizens settling in the Costa Blanca wish to satisfy. First of all, we will focus on their reasons related to the characteristics of the destination area. We assume that the factors that determine their decision to move abroad are not always well conceptualised or differentiated. They are connected in complex and variable ways [16]. In this sense, "the decision to move or purchase real estate in a tourism-related town is more complex than just visiting a place, enjoying it, and deciding to live there. Instead, seasonal home purchases are influenced more by economic conditions that determine investment risk" [18].

As regards the Costa Blanca, the following seem to be the main attracting factors for residents and tourists:

a) Climate

The Costa Blanca has exceptional climatic conditions: few other European regions have a mean annual temperature of 21°, more than 320 days of sunshine a year and the limited rainfall necessary for an outdoor lifestyle. The climate of the receiving region has been considered in many studies to be the most important pull factor for tourism. The weather (mild, sunny winters), together with the possibility of playing sports like golf, are quoted again and again as the main reasons for settling on the Spanish coast [6] [16]. Over 25,000 dwellings, in golf course resorts, were built in the Alicante province during 2003, whereas in 2001 only 14,000 were built [19].

b) Health

The link between climate and health-related issues is also noteworthy. It is a well-known fact that the search for a healthier place to spend some time has throughout history been one of the main reasons behind mobility, both for tourism purposes and to change residences.

c) Economic factors

The other main set of reasons refers to the standard of living and economic aspects, including income levels and house ownership rates. Many EU citizens think that overseas tourist properties, particularly those located in Spain, are an excellent investment option that

becomes a social condition symbol of the middle classes.

The standard of living that European residents can enjoy here with the state pension they get in their countries is higher than that of their Spanish counterparts.

It has been empirically supported that this fact has become one of the main reasons when it comes to making the decision to move and choosing the destination. Despite the fall in the exchange rate of pound to euro and the economic crisis Germany has gone through over the last few years, a "European" pension usually goes a longer way in southern Europe. *"Lodging is so expensive in England and they come here. Here they can get a house not only to own but also to rent. Anything is cheaper here, not only property but maintenance, too"* [English lady].

d) Previous tourism development

As in other places, the previous development of the Costa Blanca, particularly Benidorm, as a successful mass tourism destination seems to be a key element in explaining its later development as a residential destination.

Among other reasons, having previously visited the area plays an important role when it comes to choosing a place to live [20]. Besides, we should also consider other features of the destination that are a consequence of this previous development:

- Infrastructures (direct flights, low cost air companies, motorways...)
- Tourist promotion of the destination (destination image and branding)
- Fellow country people already settled in the area
- Amenities for foreign people (supermarkets, health facilities...) on the Costa Blanca are spread all over the territory.

In this sense, the property developers define and promote their product as a profitable investment, in a valuable environment (climate and landscape), with a high quality of life (peace and quiet, in a relaxed setting), and complementary amenities on the housing estates (golf courses, marinas) [14].

All in all, the Costa Blanca possesses the best conditions with its climate, prices, communications, socio-economic stability and infrastructure to attract this potential demand for homes. Real estate agents estimate that 320,000 foreign families will be interested in

buying a house on the Costa Blanca over the next five years. According to Ros, 800,000 inhabitants of the European Union have set their sights on Spain as the place to have a holiday home [19].

It is now time to include a socio-cultural approach in our explanation to better understand this phenomenon.

3.2 The Spanish lifestyle

The concept of quality of life appears in a rather vague way in many of the studies on tourism and migration. However, other studies carried out by social scientists, such as those on social inequality, see the quality of life as an operational concept that can be measured with statistical tools. In this paper, we are not so much interested in discussing the indicators of this concept, as in identifying what aspects determine that quality of life from the viewpoint of a European resident in the Alicante province.

This concept is so closely related with the concept "Spanish lifestyle" that they are very often used as synonyms. We will be focussing on the meaning these overseas residents give to "the Spanish lifestyle" concept.

It is easy enough to make broad generalisations about the Spanish lifestyle but this is, in fact, a rather complex issue. The search for the true Spanish lifestyle is done in different ways. At present, and according to the latest figures regarding the construction of second homes [4], most northern Europeans moving to inland Alicante would like to have their villas built on a private plot of land, in rural areas more or less isolated, and away from housing estates crowded with fellow country people. A similar process has been taking place in France and Tuscany with British citizens [17].

Talking about the subject of quality of life referring to the quality of life these European residents enjoy in Spain, this usually means for them a more relaxed life, lived at a slower pace, outdoors rather than at home. The concept is often associated with peace, nice people, culture, having a drink on a "terrazza"; *siesta*; *fiesta*... relaxed daily life, sun and sea. "When I tell people that I've lived in Spain, and enjoyed a quality of life that few other countries can match, I often get a response such as, "you're so lucky!" [English man]

Their description of the quality of life they are enjoying is sometimes related to environmental features other than the climate, and the sun and the sea. "There are mountains and green areas, and there's the nature reserve" "beaches are always clean. In Teulada there is a new promenade and the village is very nice...very beautiful promenade" [Real estate agent]

References to social relationship factors are also frequent. The three factors more often expressed by the informants are joining together in associations, taking part in cultural events traditional in the host population, and finally their need to make friends with their Spanish neighbours. The associations of foreign residents attract the locals' attention because there is not a long tradition of this type of social activity in Spain. These associations are funded by local authorities since they are seen as a means of encouraging the overseas residents' integration into the Spanish society. And these residents perceive them as something beneficial in their daily life:

"We have Belgian associations, there's one in Benidorm, another one in Calpe. There's a French association here in Javea, another one in Benissa and El Campello. They are people who have just moved here and want to do something. What do they do? Well, daytrips, they gather to have a meal, etc." [French lady]

"My neighbour is Spanish... I play sports with Dutch, German, Swiss people" [German lady]

Furthermore, social and cultural activities organised by local authorities have also become essential in the social integration process of these residents. The promotion of the local traditions, ceremonies and other events is being used in many towns as the main tool for their integration. In the words of a local councillor for a tourist town: "With these events we get the different national communities to meet each other, and we also get to pass useful information on to them " [Councillor]. According to another interviewee: "They are well integrated in the town thanks to cricket associations or Norwegian residents associations (some of them have over 200 members)" [Foreign citizens department staff]

Finally, one of the main goals of this new wave of overseas residents is to make Spanish friends. Another main goal is to learn the local language. However, several studies

[21] and the opinions recorded during our research show that the tourists' age and the shortages of the different education systems in regard to the teaching of Spanish as a second language are the pretext used by many overseas citizens, who take a long time before they start learning our language.

The Spaniards' friendliness, *"you're walking down the street and they greet you"*, defines an idealized image of the host population, particularly in inland towns.

An argument like *"An inland town is a place where you can walk to a café, a Spanish spot, or have Spanish and English neighbours..."* [English man] could be used to sell property in inland Alicante.

The overseas residents who settle on the coast are looking for a different type of *real Spain*. *"Sun and cheap beer"*, as someone working in a public office for overseas residents put it. The intense advertising activity that focuses on the wonderful climate and low prices draws residents towards areas separated by nationality. They feel safer living near fellow country people *"if other Norwegians have chosen to live here, they must have their reasons"*. They also have access to the health system and a leisure and shopping supply that meet their needs and likings. Because of these two factors some spots on the Alicante coast have become true luxury ghettos. Some of the respondents called these areas *"little England"*. *"When English people think about Spain they think 'sun', well, good weather, cheap prices. I think that's more or less it. What many of them are looking for is England with sun and cheap prices; that's exactly what they want in this area... There are many English people...and they are...they don't like speaking Spanish or mixing with Spanish people: they want England here"*. [Foreign citizens department staff]

The quality of services is seen as positive, although, as we shall discuss below, some of their demands have not been satisfied.

4 PROBLEMS AND NEEDS

Overseas residents do not always find what they are looking for in Spain. Their life in our country has its problems and difficulties. Most of the problems that we have identified during our research fit into two categories: on the one hand, problems related to the fast urbanisation process that is taking place and

their life in the housing estates; on the other hand, problems that stem from the difficulties in their cultural adaptation and integration into the Spanish society.

First of all, let us begin with the urbanisation process issue. It is unusual to read a newspaper in Alicante nowadays without being faced with news about this matter. They are usually articles that report abuse of laws committed by property developers. The urbanisation process on the Spanish Mediterranean coast is so fast and unplanned that it seems to be unstoppable. However, there are many associations, especially foreign citizens associations that, together with ecologists, are demanding a sustainable development of tourism facilities and urbanisation. The respondents unanimously agree in considering this the main problem the region is facing; a problem that affects not only foreign residents, but also every citizen.

This fast urbanisation process has caused a decline in the quality of the houses. *"...there are problems and delays in their construction"* [Real estate agent], particularly in the overcrowded southern areas of the province.

Several areas in the region have become overcrowded which is generating a constant search for authenticity and, in some cases, a refusal to take in new residents coming from other countries. *"Each person leaving their country to settle here wants to be the last foreigner to arrive"* [Translator].

The characteristics of these housing estates cause several problems. The public transport system cannot cover their spatial extent. In summer, residents encounter great difficulties in travelling to the shopping and leisure centres because the existing infrastructures cannot cope with the heavy traffic. The maintenance of these estates is rather costly so many of them are not kept in a condition as good as originally planned. This urban model also makes it difficult for public authorities to protect the citizens and the incidents regarding their security are on the increase, as informants point out.

Nonetheless, the everyday problems are mainly of another kind. We are referring to the problems related to the integration and cultural adaptation. Foreign people need to communicate in order to get public and private services. As we have previously mentioned, learning Spanish is something that many of

them will never achieve. Although, for some of them, this is not a problem:

"In Benidorm, for example, the English community is so, so large that they have everything. If they have a problem, they call an English electrician, if their water supply fails, they call an English plumber, if they need to do their shopping, they go to an English supermarket, where the staff is English and they can buy English products. In the evening they go to an English pub and the next morning, they get up and they go to an English badminton club. So normally, if they want, they don't need to speak Spanish at all or almost at all." [Newspaper editor]

"I think they come over with good intentions to learn Spanish and adapt to the Spanish culture. But they buy a house over here and their next door neighbour is from Manchester, and the other next door neighbour is from London and across the road lives someone from Dublin. So they don't need to speak a single word of Spanish. In some of the new estates there isn't a single Spaniard" [public office for overseas residents]

The Spanish civil service and the lack of translators and interpreters in the public services cause problems that go beyond the poor knowledge of the local language. Understanding the way our civil service works is one of the problems facing the overseas residents.

New, private agencies have appeared which specialize in dealing with the legal and administrative work foreigners require. Among them are young immigrants who cannot speak Spanish and want to set up a business, mainly to do with the maintenance of houses and estates. As they cannot manage in Spain, most of them eventually move back to their country. *"Most of the people that go back home are young people who come over looking for a job."* [public office for overseas residents]

Many of these residents do not know that it is mandatory to register with the local council. This fact causes different uncomfortable situations in their daily lives and becomes a very serious problem for local authorities. Local councils cannot document the actual number of people who live in the town which makes it more difficult for them to get the funds the locality requires. The associations and cultural activities we discussed above are helping local councils to know the

approximate number of overseas citizens and where they are located.

Problems between the different national communities are starting to arise. In those areas where large numbers of citizens from the same country have settled, others refuse to share their space.

One of the consequences in the near future of the facts we have mentioned above, as some of the informants expect, is that there might be a second mobility flow from the coast to inland areas of the region. With the profits obtained from selling their properties on the coast, these residents can buy another one, together with a plot of land, inland.

The respondents, maybe influenced by the news about this process, predict a fall in the number of German citizens settling in the region and an increase in the number of English residents. They agree with the predictions made by property developers that the process does not seem to come to an end in the short term. *"English, Dutch and German papers publish ads of houses for sale everyday"*. [Real estate agent]

What it is obvious is that the residents will be older and, therefore, new health and social systems will be required.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The lifestyle that European citizens look for when they choose to move to Alicante and settle there more or less permanently can be described in two different sets of characteristics: peace, quiet and rural life, on the one hand, and party, sun and sea, on the other. The particular area of Spain they choose to settle in depends on which one these two sets they prefer. In many cases, they have previously visited different areas as tourists and this allows them to gather details and information helpful for deciding where they want to move, according to their own idea of the quality of life. However, in other cases, some time after settling in Alicante the residents move elsewhere.

We would like to point out that a new form of mobility has been taking place over the last few years in our region and its significance is increasing. We are referring to those residents who live in Alicante and work in their home countries, thus commuting between countries on a regular basis. For many of these workers

this is an arrangement prior to their retirement, but in other cases, it is a more permanent way of life. This could be an interesting research topic that could help us understand the mobility phenomenon from a different viewpoint.

As a result of the exploratory study we have shown here, we have established the need to carry out analysis that takes into account the different problems that arise in coastal and inland towns in the Alicante province. The former have inherited important tourism development together with an urbanisation process that lowers the quality of the natural and built-up environments. The latter are drawing increasing numbers of overseas residents in search of the quiet and happy Spanish lifestyle that we have tried to identify.

Finally, the most useful conclusion we can come to is that the socio-cultural aspects define the quality of life and become a pull factor as important as the geographical and economic conditions of the destination. Therefore, the sociability variable must be taken into account in further studies.

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