



Trends and seasonal variation of tourist demand in Spain: The role of rural tourism



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ABSTRACT

Demand for tourist services is characterised by strong seasonal variations, despite various policies and commercial strategies employed by tourist companies. Using data collected over a 14-year period starting in 2001, time-series analyses were conducted to identify the trend and the presence of seasonal variations. Results show that rural tourism had a relatively stable pattern and a sustained growth rate during the period of study, which suggests that it is advisable to promote rural tourism as one of the formulas for fostering stable regional development.

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1. Introduction

Rural tourism has witnessed constant growth in Spain during the last decade. The aim of this study is to identify the current trends peculiar to the Spanish tourism demand. This paper analyses the role that rural tourism can play in regional development and the domestic economy. We carried out a study of the trend in tourist demand in Spain for the period 2001–2015, with a specific focus on existing seasonal variations.

Tourism in Spain is highly seasonal. This poses difficulties for the directors of tourist service enterprises and particularly affects the management of human resources, which has an impact on the quality of service and the company image. At the same time, the fall in profits due to the inability to optimise the use of resources and capabilities during the less active periods, has a negative impact on regional economic development. Despite the fact that seasonal variation is one of the most salient features of the tourist industry, it is still understudied (Higham & Hinch, 2002). Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff (2005) note that there is a lack of consensus on the exact definition of seasonality with reference to tourism.

Moore (1989) defines seasonal variation in demand as the displacements produced in a period of time, during a particular time of year, which occur in a similar fashion every year. Hylleberg (1992) exposes that seasonality is the systematic intrayear movement caused by changes in the weather, the calendar, and timing of decisions, directly or indirectly through the production and consumption decisions made by the agents of the economy.

López Bonilla & López Bonilla (2005), Allcock (1994) and Butler (1994) understand tourist seasonal variation as the temporary imbalance caused mainly by the higher incidence of tourist activity in certain periods of the year and in which factors of both supply and demand are involved.

García & Grande Esteban (2005) point out that knowledge of tourist demand is essential for the appropriate design and adaptation of rural tourist products to market demand; this knowledge also facilitates the design of medium and long term strategies which will enable us to find new ways of developing rural areas. Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff (2005) note that relatively few authors have closely examined ways of quantifying and comparing empirical seasonality patterns.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we describe the variables studied which make up the different types of accommodation, with special reference to rural tourism; then, we describe the methodology and the results of the seasonal variation analysis of tourist demand; finally we discuss the results and the conclusions of the research study.

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2. Types of tourist accommodation: special reference to rural tourism

Tourist accommodation can be classified into four main types: hotels, campsites, tourist apartments and rural accommodation. These are defined as follows by the “Instituto Nacional de Estadística” (INE, 2015):

1. Hotels: this category includes all hotels registered as such in the corresponding registers of the Tourist Boards of each Autonomous Region. These are establishments which offer collective accommodation services for a charge, with or without other complementary services (hotel, apart-hotels, motels, hostels, guest houses, etc.).
2. Tourist campsites, refer to plots of land with limited boundaries, equipped with the necessary services. They offer, on a regular basis for a stipulated rate, outdoor accommodation for a limited time for holiday or tourist purposes, with clients staying in mobile homes, caravans, tents or other similar mobile elements.
3. Tourist apartments: rented accommodation which is let out on a regular basis for temporary board and lodging, including apartments, chalets, villas and bungalows.
4. Rural accommodation: houses and cottages providing tourist accommodation for a charge, with or without complementary services and registered in the corresponding “Registro de Alojamientos Turísticos of each Autonomous Region”.

According to the Rural Tourism Planning Manual (Instituto de Estudios Turísticos, 1994), rural tourism depends on the natural, geographic and ethnological features of each country and this makes it difficult to achieve a consensus regarding the conceptual boundaries. There is no academic or legal consensus regarding the concept of rural tourism, but it can be broadly defined as tourism which takes place in rural areas (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). This definition is the same as that provided by the European Community (Farmaki, 2012). There is not a consistent definition of rural tourism in the case of Spain (Barke, 2004). Table 1 shows a sample of the many existing definitions.

According to the “Instituto Nacional de Estadística” (INE, 2015), rural accommodation refers generally to those establishments offering tourist accommodation for a fee, with or without additional services and which are registered in the corresponding “Registro de Alojamientos Turísticos of each Autonomous Region”. The rural establishments studied have the following characteristics:

- a) they are situated in a rural environment,
- b) they are buildings with an architecture typical of the area or are in buildings which maintain active agricultural operations (agrotourism), and.

- c) they offer a number of vacancies and rooms for the limited lodging of guests, and combine certain infrastructure and basic provision requirements.

There are many types of rural tourism activities present in different localities in Spain (Barke, 2004).

An increasing number of studies have begun to highlight the value of quietness in natural environments (Klijn, Buij, Dijkstra, Luttk, & Veeneklaas, 2000; Pan & Ryan, 2007; Votsi, Mazaris, Kallimanis, & Pantis, 2014). Tourism has long been considered an effective catalyst of rural socio-economic development and regeneration. Throughout Europe, in particular, tourism has been widely promoted and relied upon as a means of addressing the social and economic challenges facing peripheral rural areas, primarily those associated with the decline of traditional agrarian industries (Cavaco, 1995; Hoggart, Buller, & Black, 1995; Opperman, 1996; Williams & Shaw, 1998; Sharpley, 2002; Panyik, Costa, & Rätz, 2011; Kompplula, 2014).

3. Methodology

In this paper we analyse the seasonal variations affecting tourism in Spain during the period from January 2001 to March 2015.

We use data from the survey of hotel, apartment, campsite occupancy and rural tourism accommodation carried out continuously by the “Instituto Nacional de Estadística” (INE). The purpose of the survey is to study the behaviour of a series of variables, which show the basic characteristics (supply and demand) of the sector. One of the main aspects examined was the number of travellers, a variable which enables us to show the trend in demand. The INE (2015) defines the figure of “traveller” as the number of people who stay one or more consecutive nights in the same place.

Crouch (1994) argues that the number of tourists is generally the basic unit used for measuring tourist demand. In our study, among other variables, we examine the number of travellers staying in each type of accommodation, but we could also calculate the seasonal variation in demand in relation to other more specific variables, such as those referring to overnight stays, points of departure, average stay, reasons for travelling or average expenditure of the tourists.

Taking into account the high level of seasonal variation existing in the tourist sector (Kulendran & Wong, 2005), in order to make a correct analysis of the series, it is necessary to separate these variations. The procedure, which allows us to isolate the seasonal component, is based on the breakdown via moving average. In our case, the series analysed have a periodicity of 12, since we have all the monthly data. In this way the seasonal component is a factor by which we multiply (or add if the scheme is additive) the seasonal adjusted series to give

Table 1
Examples of definitions of Rural Tourism in Spain.

Bardón Fernández (1990)	Accommodation, installations, leisure facilities, natural and architectural resources present in predominantly agricultural areas.
Blanco Portillo and Benayas del Alamo (1994)	Recreational and tourist activities carried out in natural rural areas including all types of adventure and sports tourism.
Galiano (1991)	Rural tourism and all sports, cultural and hunting activities carried out in the rural environment.
Gannon (1994)	The range of activities and amenities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their areas in order to generate extra income for their businesses.
Gilbert (1992)	Journey or overnight stay in a rural agricultural or natural area.
European Communities Commission(1990)	Tourist activities in a rural environment. A tourist activity carried out in a rural area, consisting of integrated leisure activities, for those whose aim is contact with the local environment, and which is interrelated with the local society.
Crosby and Moreda (1996)	A type of tourism which takes place in non urban areas and which has a completely different development model to mass coastal tourism.
Fuentes García (1995)	Tourist activity which takes place in rural areas, consisting of integrated leisure activities, for those whose objective is contact with the local environment, i.e. nature, gastronomy, traditional architecture, folklore and popular traditions, and which is interrelated with the local society.
Mediano and Vicente (2002)	Rural tourism refers to that which affects all type of tourism in the rural environment.
Secretaría General de Turismo (1992)	Recreational activities, accommodation and related services located in the rural environment, aimed mainly at city dwellers who are seeking holidays which bring them into contact with nature and the local people.
Traverso Cortés (1996)	Sustainable tourist activity in a rural environment.
Valdés Peláez (2004)	Tourist activity taking place in the rural environment, whose main objective is the search for tourist attractions associated with rest, the countryside, traditional culture and escape from the crowds.

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