

The persistence of the *sun and sand* tourism model

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Abstract

The Balearic Islands are one of the world's leading markets for sun and sand tourism. As an example of mass tourism with high environmental costs, they have been condemned by some authors as entering a final phase of decline. In this paper, the Balearic tourist market is analysed, posing three hypotheses: (1) During recent years certain characteristics of sun and sand tourism have changed, but the tourists' behaviour and needs are far removed from "new tourism" stereotypes. (2) As a sun and sand holiday destination, the Balearic Islands have undergone a considerable restructuring process directed at offering improved quality, and it is, in fact, a competitive destination. (3) The model's persistence, in the long term, must be based on the adaptation of the sun and sand tourism model within the framework of sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

Butler's lifecycle model (1980), which describes the growth, stagnation and decline phases of a tourist destination, can be understood not as a real evolutionary model but, as he puts it in his own paper, as a hypothetical cycle. What is really interesting about this model is not the existence of empirical evidence to support the shape of the curve, but rather the implicit warning to those responsible for tourism planning and development: "Tourist attractions are not infinite and timeless but should be viewed and treated as finite and possibly non-renewable resources" (Butler, 1980, p. 11).

The development of second-generation sun and sand tourist destinations was accompanied by considerable environmental deterioration. Between 1950 and the early 1980s, a standard mass holiday product was created, aimed at a very price-sensitive type of European consumer. This model of consumption underwent crisis in the late 20th century. Stronger demands by consumers, the greater importance of cultural factors, greater degrees of wealth, new habits, a shift in the value placed on environmental resources and changes in families' socio-demographic and cultural characteristics,

among others, have all led to the concept of a "new" consumer, who also requires a new type of tourist product. Not only has mass tourism today reached quantitative limits, it also has qualitative ones (Moutinho, 2000). The paradigm of "new tourism", as defined by Poon (1989, 1993), describes the "old tourist" as an inexperienced, standard, mass tourist in search of hot weather and a suntan within the framework of a rigidly packaged holiday. On the other hand, the "new tourist" is fundamentally different, being more experienced, more ecologically aware, more spontaneous and more unpredictable, with a higher degree of flexibility and independence (Poon, 1993). As stated by this author, "these new consumers want to be different from the crowd. They want to affirm their individuality and they want to be in control" (Poon, 1993). Although Urry (1995) takes a different perspective, he also maintains that there has been a shift from mass packaged tourism to "post-Fordist" tourism. Some examples of this "post-Fordist" consumption involve the rejection of certain forms of mass tourism, the multiplication of types of holidays based on life-style research or the rapid turnover of tourist resorts and experiences. Ioannides and Debbage (1997) summarise "post-Fordist" tourists as being independent, experienced, flexible travellers with more volatile preferences and a desire for "green tourism" or other alternative forms. The emergence of this new type of consumer combined with

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the environmental deterioration experienced by mass tourism destinations would force the latter into a phase of economic decline.

In this paper, we analyse one of the world's leading sun and sand tourism markets: the Balearic Islands. Cited as an example of a mass tourism destination with high environmental costs, the Balearic tourist market underwent a crisis in the late 1980s. According to some authors (e.g. Morgan, 1991), this crisis could be interpreted as a classic illustration of the theory of the product lifecycle. However, this decline, which seems to correspond to Butler's model, cannot be detected nowadays if the corresponding market data is analysed. In this paper, three hypotheses are upheld: first, that there is a "new sun and sand tourist" whose demands are not so different from the "old tourist". Secondly, that classic sun and sand destinations are still competitive, mainly due to efforts by the tourist industry and local government to restructure the market. In order to evaluate these two hypotheses, in this paper the performance of the Balearic tourist market during the 1990s is analysed, highlighting both weak points and its current more competitive aspects. The third hypothesis is related to the need for further reorganisation of the sun and sand tourism model, from the perspective of local sustainable development policies.

The structure of this paper is as follows: in the next section a brief outline is given of the difficulties that this model of tourism faced in the Balearic Islands in the early 1990s, whilst also pointing out its main weaknesses. Then certain factors that determine the reality of the Balearic tourist market are analysed, revealing, in the authors' opinion, the existence of a neo-Fordist sun-and-sand-type tourist: a consumer of a less standardised, better quality product. Finally, we discuss the need for the application of local sustainable development policies, by analysing the effect that environmental protection criteria can have on package holiday prices.

2. The difficulties of the sun and sand tourism model in the Balearic Islands

According to Priestley (1995), in the early 1990s Spanish mass tourism destinations, particularly the Balearic Islands, faced the following problems: in spite of an increase in the price–quality ratio, the cost–benefit ratio was decreasing; bad quality public infrastructure had been inherited and some fundamental problems, such as the availability of drinking water or sewage systems, had not been solved; accommodation was old and obsolete; territorial planning was non-existent, with an absence of investment on a local level; urban development was carried out in a haphazard, careless way, leading to over-development; and, due to their over-use, beaches, coastal areas, and natural resources

were all deteriorating. These destinations were, in fact, examples used by Butler to illustrate the post-stagnation and decline stages.

Added to all this, changes in consumer habits also seemed to cause other problems for the Balearic tourism model. The "new tourist" is described as more independent and experienced, with a respect for the environment and a greater awareness of his or her rights, demanding certain levels of quality in keeping with the price of the service provided (Poon, 1993). The tourist market is seen as being increasingly segmented, formed by groups with different interests and needs. At the same time, there are also changes in general behaviour patterns: there is an increase in the number of holidays taken per year and a decrease in the length of the holiday; more remote destinations are preferred; loyalty to specific holiday destinations is waning; and package holidays are rejected in favour of more individualised holidays (Poon, 1993; Urry, 1995). Travel motives are more varied, with a decrease in classic incentives such as a desire for sun and sand. Poon (1993) asserted that there was a clear rupture between the Fordist model of mass tourism (running parallel to the Fordist model of the industrial age) and the current post-Fordist model of the post-industrial age, based on the widespread application of new information and communication technologies, and that this would therefore represent the end of mass tourism.

Taking into account some of the above factors, several authors have emphasised the precarious situation of the Balearic Islands' tourist economy, maintaining that the islands are currently in the stagnation phase characteristic of second-generation destinations, beginning a downward trend which will not be halted by the application of active tourism policies since these will only serve to put off the industry's inexorable mid- or long-term decline. Morgan (1991) pointed out that attempts to update Majorca's image and give it a face-lift (and, by extension, attempts by many other Mediterranean coastal destinations) might not be successful and that the results could be dubious, even in the mid- and long-term. Morgan's arguments (1991) were mainly based on the tourism crisis that began in 1989, the year when there was a 6% drop in the number of foreign visitors to Majorca. The tourism crisis that characterised the period was not merely interpreted as the result of an economic crisis in the countries of origin and the considerably overvalued exchange rate of the peseta, but as a more or less explicit sign of the decline of this type of destination. Public sector initiatives focused on improving the resorts' environment and infrastructure, as well as taking further steps to control development, whilst the private sector developed a better quality product, directed at a type of tourist other than the "lager lout". According to Morgan (1991), even though consumers were demanding better

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