

TOURISM AND HOTEL ACCOMMODATION IN CANTABRIA (SPAIN). SOME BASES FOR A REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF TOURISM ACTIVITY.

Carmen Gil de Arriba
Department of Geography
University of Cantabria

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism involves the provision of specific facilities (accommodation, catering, transport, entertainment, information, assistance, etc.). Therefore, the analysis of the hotel accommodation in an autonomous community can be considered as an instrument for measuring the volume and the importance of the tourist activity into a regional scale, so much from the territorial point of view as in economic and social aspects.

According to this hypothesis this study, referred to the Autonomous Community of Cantabria, is essentially based upon the analysis of the hotel sector, throughout last decade: its spatial distribution, municipalities and existing hotel areas, types and categories of hotel establishments, as well as more relevant features of the recent evolution and predictable future trends.

At the same time, the analysis of this kind of data is complemented with several aspects referred to the characterization of the hotel demand and to the levels of bed-places occupancy.

In Spain, from the 60s', as the importance of this sector of activity has been growing progressively, the requirements for various grades or classifications of tourist hotels and supplementary accommodations are laid down in regulations and the designation is thus protected by state and autonomous regions laws.

In Cantabria, the applicable legislation for the standards of accommodation and services to be provided is the Autonomous Decree 50/1989 of 5 July, about planning and classifications of hotel establishments and the Autonomous Law 5/1999, of 24 March, for Tourism Planning.

Between 1998 and 2007, hotel accommodation in Cantabria has experienced an increase of 33.1 % in the number of establishments and of 30.7% in the number of bed-places. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis reveals that this growth has not been homogeneous.

So, the aim of this article is to do a balance of the current situation on a regional scale and to establish some of the principal features and attributes that distinguish and define nowadays the tourist model in the Autonomous Community of Cantabria.

II. TERRITORIAL IMBALANCE OF HOTEL SUPPLY: ITS CONCENTRATION IN URBAN AREAS AND IN TRADITIONAL TOURIST RESORTS

In 2007 only twelve municipalities, from the hundred two grouped into the current autonomous community, accumulate 65% of the hotel establishments and 70.5% of the beds registered in Cantabria. Therefore, the regional hotel supply in Cantabria is spatially concentrated in traditional tourist resorts and in urban areas, because the accommodation has become largely oriented to the holiday trade.

Especially, in Santander, the capital, we can find the 16.1% of the hotel establishments and the 25.9% of the bed-places in 2007. Another out-standing examples from the spatial concentration of the hotel supply are the municipalities of Ribamontán al Mar, Arnuero, Noja, Laredo and Castro Urdiales on the Oriental coast of Cantabria, Suances, Santillana del Mar, Comillas and San Vicente-de-la-Barquera, on the Western littoral, and Camaleño and Torrelavega in the hinterland.

III. CATEGORIES AND TYPES OF HOTEL ESTABLISHMENTS. SPATIAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AREAS AND MUNICIPALITIES

Hotel spatial distribution in Cantabria depends on hotel categories. This paper investigates a model of geographic location according to the areas and municipalities. In general, mid range and low budget hotels are spatially spread, whereas higher star ratings tend to agglomerate in a minor number of municipalities. In this way, for example, 70% of four star hotels and 79.3% of four star bed-places are located in the twelve above mentioned municipalities, defined as those of major hotel concentration in the autonomous community.

Besides, in mid range hotels there is more frequently a lack of renewal or a certain obsolescence of the establishments; in some cases, reforms have not been performed during the last twenty years

On the other hand and in general terms, Cantabrian hotels are smaller, in capacity and in business size, than the Spanish average. This situation coincides with the predominance of family business, in opposition to the still very recent instalment of some hotel chains in the region.

IV. EVOLUTION SINCE THE LAST DECADE: DELAYS IN THE MODERNIZATION PROCESS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF A MARKED SEASONALITY

The registered evolution since the second half of the 90' has given rise to the opening of new establishments and to the incorporation of municipalities that previously lacked hotel supply. In consequence, there has been a redistribution of the percentages represented by the different hotel categories, with an increment of four and three star hotels. In 2007, four star hotels contributed to 23.1% of bed-places while three star hotels cumulate 32.4%.

The municipalities with a greater increment of the number of bed-places are Santander and Suances. Besides, other municipalities with a considerable growth in supply are Comillas, Piélagos, Medio-Cudeyo, Santillana-del-Mar, Los-Corrales-de-Buelna, Castro Urdiales, Corvera-de-Toranzo, Torrelavega, Limpias, Reocín and Valdáliga.

On the contrary, the supply of bed-places went down in some municipalities. This is the case of Noja, Arnauero, Laredo and Ribamontán-al-Mar. All of them have still a predominance of mid range and low budget hotels.

Against the apparent modernization process undergone by hotel accommodation in Cantabria, this article set up the idea that temporal variations in demand and in provision of bed-places have still negative effects on hotel accommodation. Furthermore, the supply of bed-places in January 2006 was 56.5 percentage points lower than in August of the same year. Besides, guest-nights spent in hotel accommodation establishments were three times bigger in August than in January 2006. Nowadays, the annual average length of stay in hotel establishments is about two nights.

V. CONCLUSIONS. TOURISM AND HOTEL ACCOMMODATION IN CANTABRIA. MAIN ASPECTS OF REGIONAL TOURIST ACTIVITY

At present, tourism represents about 15% from GDP (*gross domestic product*) in Cantabria and generates about twenty thousands jobs in the autonomous community. These distinctive features express the importance of regional tourist activity, in spite of the fact that the situation of Cantabria is behind others autonomous communities in Spain which can be considered as leaders in tourism: Andalusia, Balears Islands, Canaries Islands and Catalonia.

However, the recent evolution of tourist activity in Cantabria has increased spatial differences in the autonomous community, as for example between urban and rural areas or between mountain and seaside resorts. In this way, the implementation of some promotion politics has not been enough to diversify and to improve the hotel accommodation provision.

In addition, during the last years, the increase of tourist accommodation bed-places in Cantabria has been more important than the increase of total guest-nights. In this context, competition is growing up between hotel establishments.

In consequence, it appears as necessary to establish an agreement between public sector and private promoters, in order to resolve the conflicts derived from the present situation.

