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Tourism to the Canary Islands during the COVID-19 pandemic: making mobility ‘safe’ instead of halting it completely

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of the Canary Islands has implemented a strategy based on advertisement, economic diplomacy, and public health security to sustain tourist mobility, a vital element of the Islands’ economy.

Keywords

tourism, Spain, Canary Islands, COVID-19, patriotic mobility, travel corridors, safety

Theme

Mobility business

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The economy of the Canary Islands is heavily dependent on tourism. In total, some 350,000 families depend on this sector, which used to earn about 7 million euros a day.² This situation motivated the government of the Canary Islands to take different measures during the COVID-19 pandemic to not only advertise the Canary Islands as a safe destination, but also, make safety in the Canary Islands a reality. The regional government consequently presented three main objectives: firstly, to promote this destination as safe for domestic as well as international travellers; secondly, to strengthen diplomatic relationships with countries where the majority of tourists travel from; and, finally, to create a tourism sector where safety is a true reality. These measures became new parameters to articulate human mobility.

Promoting the Canary Islands as a safe destination

The fear of not receiving many international tourists motivated the regional government to convince nationals to visit the Islands. The government of the Canary Islands launched a promotional campaign directed to Spanish citizens highlighting the many beaches and natural parks that the Islands had to offer, specifically emphasizing that social distancing could be easily maintained: ‘enjoy more than 1,500 kilometres of coastline, and twice as many natural spaces’.³ Also, there was a focus on the benefits of maintaining distance: ‘from a distance, everything looks different and new horizons open up’.⁴ The main objective was to portray the Canary Islands as a safe, spacious destination.

The results went largely as expected: patterns of domestic mobility substituted for international mobility to the Canary Islands.⁵ As an interviewee stated, ‘there has been an increase in domestic tourists who have *partially* replaced international tourists’.⁶

However, some of the reasons why Spanish nationals decided to choose this tourist destination over others were not necessarily linked to government efforts. For instance, some Spanish nationals likely feared being trapped abroad if borders were to close.³ Also, restrictions in other countries made international tourism less appealing to them. These two factors reflect a limit on free mobility for these people, who enjoyed what we might call ‘partially restricted mobility’. Moreover, efforts came not only from the government of the Canary Islands, but also from the Spanish government promoting ‘patriotic mobility’. The Spanish president encouraged Spaniards to holiday within the

² Gonzalo del Moral, Ángela. 2020. ‘Canarias Fortaleza’, protocolos para viajar con el coronavirus [Fortress Canary Islands: protocols for travelling in times of coronavirus]. *RTVE, Viaje a Ítaca*. 18 July 2020. Available online at: <https://blog.rtve.es/viajesyturismo/2020/07/canarias-fortaleza-protocolo-viaje-coronavirus-podcast.html>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

³ Turismo de Islas Canarias. 2020. *Entra en fase tranquilidad*, nueva campaña destinada a atraer este verano al turismo peninsular. 2 July 2020. Available online at: <https://turismodeislascanarias.com/es/actualidad/entra-en-fase-tranquilidad-nueva-campana-destinada-atraer-este-verano-al-turismo/>. Last accessed 26 February 2021.

⁴ Islas Canarias Oficial. 2020. *Fase tranquilidad - Islas Canarias*. 7 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2fJ8z2ALss>. Last accessed 26 February 2021.

⁵ Martínez y Madrid, Edurne. 2020. Un verano diferente: turismo nacional y la mitad de los hoteles cerrados [A different summer: domestic tourism, half of the hotels closed]. *Canarias7*. 7 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.canarias7.es/economia/turismo/un-verano-diferente-turismo-nacional-y-la-mitad-de-los-hoteles-cerrados-EF9304868>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

⁶ Interview III, anonymous, conducted over the phone, summer 2020.

country in the midst of this crisis, in order to stimulate the national economy.⁷ Similarly, many Canary Islanders also chose their own home region as a destination. According to another interviewee, ‘regional tourism between islands has seen an increase’.⁸ Further research could evaluate whether patriotic feelings and feelings of cooperation were more common among tourists from the Spanish mainland or from the other islands.

The Canary Islands authorities also strove to promote the Islands to international tourists. For instance, they wanted to spread the perception that they were monitoring the internal movement of people once tourists were on the islands. At the beginning of the summer, tourists were even offered insurance to cover the expenses related to their stay should they have to quarantine.⁹ These efforts, however, were not as successful; the number of international tourists dropped dramatically regardless, largely due to quarantine restrictions imposed upon their return to their home countries.

Diplomacy and branding to encourage mobility during the pandemic

In ordinary times, most tourists who travel to the Canary Islands are British or German.¹⁰ The number of British tourists decreased due to the UK government’s policy mandating compulsory quarantine when returning to their country, despite the diplomatic efforts of the government of the Islands to obtain an exemption from this policy.¹¹ During most of the summer, Germany classified the Canary Islands as a safe holiday destination (unlike the rest of Spain).¹² However, on 2 September, the German government changed its classification to ‘unsafe’, resulting in a major reduction in the number of German tourists.

This series of events reflects the importance of labels and categories in halting mobility. Several countries have, since the summer, altered the labels on the Canary Islands, significantly affecting mobility patterns. For instance, the Canary Islands were removed from the list of safe travel corridors of the UK government, after being there for approximately two months. Many British people not only visited the Canary Islands while it was on the travel corridors list, but had also reserved flights for the Christmas break. These re-categorizations create diverse dynamics, the outcome of which is very dependent on personal attitudes, choices, and circumstances. Receiving the same sudden news, some people may decide to travel whilst others choose to stay.¹³

⁷ La Vanguardia. 2020. *Pedro Sánchez anuncia que España se abrirá al turismo extranjero en el mes de julio* [Pedro Sánchez announces that Spain will open to foreign tourism in July]. 23 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGNhAyPFK2g>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

⁸ Interview II, anonymous, conducted over the phone, summer 2020.

⁹ Alonso, Javier. 2020. *Canarias cubrirá los gastos de los turistas que contraigan Covid-19* [The Canary Islands will pay the expenses of tourists who contract COVID-19]. ABC. 7 August 2020. Available online at: https://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-canarias-cubrir-gastos-turistas-contraigan-covid-19-202008060215_noticia.html. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

¹⁰ Turismo de Islas Canarias. 2020. *Perfil del turista que visita Canarias 2019*. Available online at: <https://turismodeislascanarias.com/es/investigacion/perfil-del-turista-islas-canarias-2019-presentacion/>. Last accessed 26 February 2021.

¹¹ Europa Press. 2020. *Canarias pide que no se obligue a los turistas británicos a hacer la cuarentena* [The Canary Islands demand that British tourists are exempt from quarantine]. 26 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQovVkHbEa8>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

¹² RTVE/EFE. 2020. *Coronavirus: Alemania recomienda no viajar a España, a excepción de Canarias, por el coronavirus* [Coronavirus: Germany recommends not to travel to Spain, except for the Canary Islands, because of coronavirus]. 14 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20200814/alemania-recomienda-no-viajar-espana-excepcion-canarias-coronavirus/2040239.shtml>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

¹³ BBC. 2020. *Canary Islands: Thousands of Britons face Christmas isolation*. 11 December 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55271262>. Last accessed 19 February 2021.

Making the Canary Islands a safer place

Promotion work went hand-in-hand with regional efforts to maintain a stable situation. The Council of Tourism, Industry and Commerce of the Canary Islands provided guidance to tourist businesses with programmes such as ‘Canarias Fortaleza’ (‘Canary Islands as Strength’), a detailed protocol endorsed by the World Tourism Organisation, which analyses in detail the sanitary measures for 18 tourism-related sectors in the archipelago.¹⁴ These seemed to be rather effective, as some tourists acknowledged, but clearly not effective enough, as the number of COVID-19 cases has risen. This fact seems to have more weight on mobility than diplomatic branding and the promotion of the Canary Islands as a safe destination.

¹⁴ Gonzalo del Moral, Ángela. 2020.