

Tourism in the Mediterranean: Safeguarding Heritage or Destroying the Environment?

Panorama

Mimoun Hillali

Institut Supérieur International du Tourisme (ISIT),
Tangier

Med. 2008

Tourism and heritage have merged together in the Mediterranean to provide an exceptional environment that supports the blossoming of holidays, leisure and play. This suitable marriage between the mobility of amenities and the cultural and natural heritage is undoubtedly beneficial for the regional economy; but that does not prevent serious concerns at an environmental level from being raised.

Indeed, the development of tourism in this outstanding region of the world represents a multifaceted activity. On the one hand, it has been the constant and productive phenomenon of the 2000-2007 period, despite the consequences of 11th September 2001 and its dreadful knock-on effects for the Mediterranean. In fact, tourism successfully embodies an excellent economic, social and cultural interface among its three shores. Thus, it contributes to bringing together the large number of different cultural and ethnic mosaics that characterise the Mediterranean's perimeter. In this regard, tourism has found the way and proved capable of overcoming religious, social and political difficulties (the flare-ups in the Balkans, conflict in the Middle East, terrorist attacks from time to time). On the other hand, this success, whilst remarkable, is to some extent tarnished by the many instances where the environment has been degraded and attacked (uncontrolled urbanisation, solid and liquid wastes, overuse of water). The evidence points to tourism eating away at the very foundations of its potential; in other words, it is constantly feeding off its underpinning qualities.

And it is easy to see why opinions differ when it comes to the global impacts of tourism. Uncritical supporters of globalization hold that it is the expected price

248

to be paid to consolidate and make permanent a success that is so socially and economically beneficial for the peoples of the Mediterranean. Champions of the environment, for their part, denounce the outrageous commercialisation of a heritage that deserves to be classed in its entirety as humanity's world heritage.

The Mediterranean: A Tourist Ocean, an Area of Effervescence and a Reservoir of Hope

Tourism, in keeping with its ambiguous image as a re-activator of economies and as "falsifier" of cultures, simultaneously reassures and disturbs. Does it personify a little-loved (harmful activity) but highly desirable (profitable economy) sector in the collective unconscious?

In any event, it is currently the sole domain in which differences, inequalities, divergences and even conspicuous contradictions are subservient to the "Royal Highness" of tourism. A social predisposition – and the material malleability of all these dynamics and contradictions – towards things being expressed if not unanimously, at least with understanding, is proof that the solutions to other problems in the Mediterranean are well and truly to be found. In fact, the real problem is more than anything the lack of political will of the states around its shores and, consequently, that of the international community. It is time, at the risk of offending common courtesy, to go beyond the accepted views from positions that are constrained by "political correctness", but are proving sterile in the light of past experiences and practices. It is thus time to challenge attitudes without harming sensibilities. It needs to be proclaimed loud and clear that untrammelled capitalism and blind fanaticism are ticking bombs for our shared region and its future.

TABLE 32 International Tourist Arrivals by Region and Sub-region in 2000, 2006 and 2007

Regions	Arrivals 2000	Arrivals 2006	Arrivals 2007	Part 2007	Increase 06/05	Increase 06/07
World	682.0	846.0	898.0	100.0%	5.4%	6.1%
Europe	391.0	460.8	480.1	53.7%	5.0%	4.2%
Northern Europe	42.6	54.9	56.0	6.2%	7.2%	2.0%
Western Europe	139.7	149.8	155.0	17.3%	5.0%	3.5%
Central/Western Europe	69.4	91.3	92.8	10.3%	4.0%	1.7%
South Eur./Mediterranean	139.3	164.8	176.3	19.6%	4.7%	7.0%
Asia-Pacific	110.6	167.8	185.0	20.6%	8.0%	10.2%
North-East Asia	58.3	94.3	104.2	11.6%	7.8%	10.6%
South-East Asia	36.9	54.0	60.4	6.7%	9.5%	11.8%
Oceania	9.2	10.5	10.7	1.2%	0.4%	1.4%
South Asia	6.1	9.0	9.7	1.1%	11.9%	7.8%
Americas	128.2	135.7	142.2	15.8%	1.9%	4.8%
North America	91.5	90.7	95.0	10.6%	0.9%	4.7%
Caribbean	17.1	19.4	19.3	2.1%	3.4%	- 0.9%
Central America	4.3	6.9	7.7	0.9%	10.4%	11.1%
South America	15.3	18.7	20.2	2.3%	2.4%	8.4%
Africa	27.9	40.9	44.2	4.9%	9.9%	7.9%
North Africa	10.2	15.1	16.4	1.8%	8.4%	8.5%
Subsaharan Africa	17.7	25.9	27.8	3.1%	10,8%	7.5%
Middle East	24.4	41.0	46.4	5.2%	7.8%	13.4%

Source: UNWTO, January 2008.

It is for that reason that the activities of tourism and hospitality exert such a fascination both because of their significance and diversity and because of their authenticity and profitability. They contribute markedly to consolidating the influence and image of the “Mediterranean” destination branding. Proof of this is the fact that it takes the lion’s share of world tourism arrivals: out of 989 million international tourism arrivals in 2007, the Mediterranean Basin managed to capture some 300 million arrivals with revenues¹ in excess of 250 billion US dollars. Europe and its Mediterranean shores stand out for their achievements in terms of tourism. “Europe, the top destination region in the world, with over 50% of all international tourist arrivals, recorded in 2007 a growth that exceeded the average and achieved a total of 480 million tourists. Destinations such as Turkey (+18%), Greece (+12%) and Portugal (+10%) or Italy and Switzerland (both +7%) are evidence of the positive effect of the continuing reactivation of the region’s economy in 2007” (UNWTO, 2008).

In any event, this tremendous economic gap has the merit of cushioning a whole range of political shocks

and economic crises that have either been experienced as harmful or perceived so by the peoples and populations of the Mediterranean.

Tourist Flows, Leisure Mobility and Economic Migrations

At a geopolitical level, the closure of borders on the northern shore strikes a discordant note in this concert that can be classed as “harmonious” by virtue of the blossoming of intercultural dialogue and a coming together among its peoples. It is also an infringement of the ideals of globalization that gives praise to the free circulation of people, goods and capital.

But despite these unequal exchanges, tourism can rightly be considered to be a profitable economic and socio-cultural interface that is shown to be a unifying force in terms of its wealth-creation and pacification successes, in contrast to the outbreaks of violence and clashes of a social, political and economic nature in the region.

¹ Data on international tourism revenues remain patchy as the majority of countries have only provided figures for the first quarter of the year. At the same time, in order for the analysis to be valid, there is a need for data on exchange rates against the dollar and on inflation. It would therefore be premature to go into too much detail. World and regional estimates will be analysed fully in the next Barometer release, which will appear in June 2008.

Notwithstanding a number of instances of brutality and periodical terror attacks, the importance and quality of tourist activities and infrastructures developed around the Mediterranean basin are a way of taking a stand against the geopolitical myopia currently being exhibited. This lifebuoy has arrived in time to rescue what could yet be rescued in a region losing impetus, weakened by economic stagnations and political upheavals, in a climate of chronic instability.

The mobility of leisure activity in the Mediterranean region constitutes the salient aspect of North-South relations even if such movement is currently only in one direction. For this reason, relations between the two shores, as regards as South-North movements, remain uncertain due to the rigidity of anti-immigration policies.

In 2007, the Mediterranean appeared in the socio-political map as a uniting feature and at the same time as a demarcation line. Consequently, clandestine migrations tend to be the counterbalance to one-way tourism.

“The Mediterranean received 58 million tourist visits in 1970 and 228 million in 2002. It will be the destination for 396 million in 2025, of which 312 (close to 80%) will be concentrated along the shores.” (www.tourisme-solidaire.org/2008/med.asp). For 2007, optimistic estimates talk of 300 million tourists, of which 240 million have stayed on a coast known for its fragility and rarity. It is estimated that over one thousand kilometres of exclusively tourist Mediterranean beaches were built-up in 2007. This unattractive “costalisation” is beginning to pose a problem for certain European countries within the EU (Spain, France, Italy, Greece...), which are starting to be less reluctant to opt for the demolition of “illegal” or “dangerous” buildings. In other words, the unwelcome pressure that mass beach tourism is placing on the coastline constitutes a gradual threat to the environment.

In addition, tourism generally stretches along the northern shore, notably in Europe’s Latin countries (France: 82 million tourists, Spain: 63 million and Italy: 48 million) according to first estimates. This prime world destination is an “inbound and outbound” area for tourists and at the same time a high revenue geographic region. On the contrary, the southern shore, a receiving zone par excellence, is completely under European influence, both from the tourism and economic perspective. Europeans make up between 50 and 60% of the tourist clientele on the southern shore (Egypt: 56%, Morocco: 62%, Tunisia: 71% and Turkey 47%).

In the Near East, 2007 was a gloomy year for countries bordering the Mediterranean. The Israel-Lebanon war (added to the “permanent” Israeli-Palestinian conflict), Hamas taking control of Gaza, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the attacks at Sharm-el-Sheik in Egypt and the impasse of the Iraqi war seriously limited travel to that region. It could even be concluded that this situation of instability – as well as the political upheaval in the Balkans – contributed to boosting tourism to the Maghreb in 2007: 7.5 million arrivals in Morocco (+14%), 7 million in Tunisia (+8%) and 0.9 million in Algeria (+6%). Egypt beat all records with 11 million arrivals (+22%).

But the Middle East overall is, one way or another, overcoming the gloomy prospects attributable to its many conflicts. “It achieves a total of 46 million international tourist arrivals and continues to be one of the tourist success stories of the last ten years, and that despite permanent tensions and threats. This region is in the process of becoming an established destination, with its number of visitors rising much faster than the world total. In 2007, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were among the principal destinations in terms of growth.” (www.veilleinfotourisme.fr).

The Price of Success: Serious Threats to the Environment

“The Mediterranean, an interior sea of 2.9 million square kilometres, is bordered by 30,000 kilometres of coastline of varying importance. The most open and accessible of them are increasingly being subjected to strong demographic and urban pressures (rural exodus and rampant urbanisation), which endlessly feed the various socio-economic activities (industrial, tourism and port activity). In coastal areas, these activities can exploit appropriate facilities, access to external markets and a skilled and readily available workforce.” (Hillali, 2003)

Practically all the islands, the regional seas and the entire coast of the principal tourist destinations are seriously under threat

However, in a report made public in 2007, the WWF sounded the alarm and warned of the danger of an-

archic tourist development in the Mediterranean basin. Thirteen sites identified by the organisation were included in the index. Biodiversity is seriously threatened there: practically all the islands (the Balearics, Corsica, Sardinia, Cyprus...), the regional seas (Alboran Sea, the Aegean, Tyrrhenian Sea, Ionian Sea...), and the entire coast of the principal tourist destinations are seriously under threat. The report also makes clear that "tourism is a very significant source of water over-consumption; thus, while a Spaniard uses 250 litres per day, a tourist in Spain will use an average of 880 litres" (WWF, 2007). In the Maghreb, this relationship is of around 150 litres per day for domestic usage as against 500 for tourism.

The Blue Plan too gives warning of the excesses due to pollution. The Rome call (December 2007), at the initiative of the French President and the Spanish and Italian heads of government, seeks the establishment of a "Union for the Mediterranean" in the hope of revitalising the Barcelona Process that dates back to 1995 (cf. the convention on the protection of the Mediterranean marine and coastal environment). At first sight, this would appear to set up a function that duplicates the Process. The direction was confirmed in mid-March 2008 by the 27 States of the EU. This protocol deals with the integrated management of coastal zones and issues of climate change in the Mediterranean. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 80% of pollution in the Mediterranean is linked to land-based activities. The facts, indeed, attest to it: the environment and sustainable development are increasingly the issue of the day in the Mediterranean.

During the course of these meetings, "representatives of all subscribing parties to the Convention (21 countries in the Mediterranean regional neighbourhood and the European Union), members of the Secretariat (MEDU), of the Regional Action Centres (RAC), NGOs and other institutions, tried to pool their efforts in order to achieve the Convention's chief objectives of improved protection, meaning conservation and sustainable development, of the Mediterranean marine environment and coastal region" (www.cop15map.com/es/inicio.html).

According to UNEP, in 2007, "the area of protected marine zones in the Mediterranean is less than 0.5% of the total area of the basin (4%, if the Pelagos sanctuary is included). Yet the objectives set by the Convention on biodiversity (CBD) are for 10% by 2012. The 7 EU countries involved (Cyprus, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Slovenia) did not achieve

the CBD objectives even though these are the best-protected coasts." The absence of reliable statistics for the countries of the South and East of the Mediterranean only permits approximate estimates to be made and these suggest that the situation is far from being satisfactory (www.plongeur.com/magazine/2008/01/17/conference-aire-marine/).

Heritage and Tourism: A Dream Environment as much as a Risk Environment

Tourism, now deeply rooted in the Mediterranean environment, is seen as being a considerable asset as much for the receptor populations as for tourists. It is a necessary but vital evil. For that reason, it should not be forgotten that "travel is a life art but also a necessity for survival. Being an economic necessity for the deprived, a psychological necessity for the affluent" (Michel, 2004), tourism operates as a suitable meeting point between the needs and expectations of visitors on the one hand and the facilities and services offered by receptor communities on the other. This convergent interest, manifested in the profitable synergy between supply and demand, makes for tourism as an activity that promotes harmony and is unfaltering in its progress, overcoming economic crises, ethnic tensions and ideological or religious conflicts.

This convergent interest, manifested in the profitable synergy between supply and demand, makes for tourism as an activity that promotes harmony and is unfaltering in its progress, overcoming economic crises, ethnic tensions and ideological or religious conflicts

It should be said that the tourist industry is supported in its conquest of spaces, economies and market shares, in short in its quest for success, by structural, social and historical elements that have proved more resilient than circumstantial crises and acts of violence. Needless to say, the present, whatever may be thought by those suffering from historical amnesia, beholden to a profitable but essentially abusive materiality, derives its legitimacy and validity from the past.

“The whole history of technological and scientific discoveries since the Renaissance shows that method, experience and organization have replaced a purely creative approach which was quite often home made and based on an idealised view of humankind. The vision of Mediterranean people is mainly based on senses and they have, perhaps more than anybody, a need for emotion – a quality (or a defect) which was probably heightened by the Renaissance” (Reiffers, 1992). Emotion, sensitivity and feelings are sentiments particular to human beings, through which brotherhood and friendship, hospitality and solidarity still have a sociable and anthropogenic meaning capable of restraining voracious appetites that are ruled by purely mechanical calculation. Some of these austere materialists, made ill by heartless accumulation, come to treat themselves to a therapeutic cure in this “open-air clinic” known as the Mediterranean. And it is understandable that tourism, a fun and playful activity par excellence, finds significant resonance in a social, cultural and heritage context made up of a threefold combination that is both attractive and evocative: surroundings, society and heritage. Adding to those assets are a benign climate, human warmth and the calmness of the sea. Has something truly new been created here?

Conclusion

What conclusion can be drawn from a development of tourism split between optimism and pessimism? It must be that these days there should be no surprise in seeing this modern-age sector nourished by age-long socio-cultural factors (an authentic heritage, cultural plurality, ethnic diversity) and natural features suited to life in the open air (diversity of scenery, mildness of climate, a tame sea).

That said, water is the element that remains the linchpin on which the future of tourist activity will rely. The coastal fringe, while undoubtedly rare, constitutes the second limiting factor for tourism and at the same time proves to be a polarising feature (sedentary tourism) and a vector for distribution (passing tourism). “But, some will say, does this Mediterranean that is redolent with history, heterogeneous, dispersed, with its draw from the North in terms of its prosperity, still deserve to be regarded as more than a physical entity? Will it be able to rely more on humans and less on nature to become once more, if not the centre of the world, at least a region that, bit by bit, builds up its knowledge, consolidates its economy and renews

its culture?” (Reiffers, 1992). While it is hard to give a straight “yes” or unequivocal “no” response to this question, above all we must not abandon the humanist (or humanitarian) hope that recognises the potential and actual value of the women and men of the Mediterranean. The reason for hope rests on the fact that over the millennia they have provided a lead to humanity in periods of darkness! There is nothing to prevent a consciousness being reawakened and minds stirred tomorrow by a shared interest that crystallised around projects of general appeal; the fact that the spark is taking time to rekindle may be the result of an unfortunate setback, but that should not be interpreted by any means as the loss of will or ability of the Mediterranean people to apply their ingenuity and take the future into their hands.

Another issue, another point of interest, the components that make up heritage as a whole, – be they dispersed or concentrated, physical or intangible, old or recent – are constituted into sensitive resources or products that need to be managed with the greatest of care, discernment and, above all, of love, without sinking into a sterile environmentalism. Because, by the very fact that these resources range across values that are simultaneously exceptional, age-old and rare, they run the risk of excessive economic exploitation, speculative abuses, selective indifference and ruinous neglect. Hence the role of considered planning for a sustainable development.

The Mediterranean tourist space in fact exists over an immutable life span that verges on the timeless. These components together contribute to the flourishing of vacationing and leisure while ever protecting the region from being buffeted by shocks or from decline dictated by fashion. The Mediterranean’s tourist activity is a constant that stands up to the unexpected in defiance of passing circumstances. It is up to us, therefore, to ensure that it endures.

References

- HILLALI, Mimoun. *Le tourisme international vu du Sud*, Essai sur la problématique des pays en développement. Sainte-Foy: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2003.
- MICHEL, Franck. *Désirs d’ailleurs*. Editions PUL Quebec, 2004
- REIFFERS, Jean Luis (dir.). *La Méditerranée économique*. Centre d’économie et de finances internationales. Paris: Editions Economica, 1992.