

Cultural Tourism in the World

Heritage Cities of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean

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The Organisation of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation bringing together the cities, in which are located inhabited sites inscribed as a cultural property on the UNESCO World Heritage List. They are what is commonly referred to as World Heritage Cities.

The Southern Europe and Mediterranean Region of the OWHC has its Regional Secretariat in the city of Cordoba, and includes the 57 World Heritage Cities from Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Malta and Portugal. After the Second OWHC Regional Conference for the region, the following technical commissions were set up: the Town Planning and Rehabilitation Commission, which will be coordinated by the French city of Lyon; the Tourism Commission, coordinated by the Greek city of Rhodes; the Funding Commission coordinated by the Portuguese city of Evora, and the Culture Commission, which will be coordinated by the Italian city of Naples.

Based on the criteria of the value and distribution of Cultural Heritage over a given area, the World Heritage Cities of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean lead the world in cultural heritage tourism, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Most of the region's protected sites and cities are amongst the most valuable natural and cultural treas-

ures on the World Heritage List. The wealth of this region is well recognised on an international level, as reflected by the fact that 57 cities have been recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Cities. More than a half of all cities and sites included on the World Heritage List are found around the Euro-Mediterranean area, making it the world leader in terms of Cultural Tourism.

The potential of Cultural Tourism in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean has not been fully realised until now. The dominance of sun and beach type holidays has traditionally relegated cultural tourism to the «back seat» in most Southern European countries. However, over the last few years, cultural tourism has begun to bloom, and travellers are beginning to rediscover not only the wealth of culture and buildings that these cities possess, but also a wide and attractive range of tourist and cultural attractions based on, or supported by, this cultural heritage.

The distinction of *World Heritage*, as conferred by UNESCO, brings a seal of prestige that places these cities on the map of the great cultural tourist routes, and thus provides considerable assistance in their development and promotion. The creation of theme-based products has managed to make the concept of historic heritage more accessible for a wider number of potential visitors. World Heritage cities act as a magnet for cultural tourism, but they urgently need the cooperation of all sectors in order to make this a sustainable form of tourism. They need a Plan of Action for tourism.

The member cities of the OWHC make up a magnificent network of historical cities and monuments. They are able to

focus on enriching and providing access to all of the new and varied tourist attractions that are emerging in the area, and which are of so much interest for these regions on a local level.

In the Principles of the Cultural Tourism Charter, tourism is seen as one of the most important vehicles of cultural exchange, one which should be managed in a sustainable fashion, for the sake of both our own generation and future ones. In order to achieve this, and to guarantee that visitors' have had worthwhile, pleasant and satisfactory trips, the efficient and effective planning of conservation and tourist projects in Heritage Cities is essential. According to statistics provided by the World Tourism Organisation, in the year 2003 France received 75.5 million visitors, an increase of 3.4 % on the previous year, Spain received 48.2 million visitors, an increase of 3 % on the previous year, and Italy received 41.2 million visitors, an increase of 12.8 % on the previous year. These three countries attracted the highest number of visitors in Europe, with figures matched only by the United States.

In order to give a better idea of the importance of tourism in our region, of the 23 million beds on offer in hotels and similar establishments around the world, approximately 30% can be found scattered around the countries making up the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The central governments of the southern European countries have been developing a series of similar, if not identical, action plans and policies over the last few years. The stagnation in growth of the sun and beach type holidays; changes in visitors' tastes towards urban tourism, rather than the seaside, the countryside or the mountains, and

the delicate global situation which is engendering significant changes in international tourist movements around the world, are just some of the common problems that these governments are attempting to overcome, in one way or another.

Seen from another perspective, the strong growth in international tourism predicted over the next twenty years will inevitably entail a reconfiguration of the world tourism scene, with an overall loss of market share for European destinations being predicted. Hence the need to encourage tour operators to develop intra-European packages, to take utmost advantage of the wealth and diversity of the culture and heritage of member countries.

Recent statistics covering the countries in our region, and thus our cities, show a sharp fall in visitor numbers from the United States and Japan, and an increase in tourists coming from other parts of Europe itself – mainly from France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Great Britain and Greece. They also show an increase in urban tourism compared to beach, mountain and countryside destinations.

And as for the appeal of the World Heritage cities, the numerous monu-

ments and historical buildings, together with the urbanism of the historic cities themselves, provide first-class attractions for cultural tourists. Furthermore, the Euro-Mediterranean region forms one of the major concentrations of museums and works of art in the world.

It is extremely important that we provide a professional and detailed display of our heritage, through various types of attractions, such as for example: themed evening tours to historic town centres, extended opening hours of museums and monuments adapted to visitors' needs, exhibitions in various types of places, such as train stations, airports, shopping centres or in the streets themselves, specific Cultural Conferences, and Cultural Weeks dedicated to a specific artistic period, etc

Apart from the many monuments and museums, member cities of the OWHC also programme a series of cultural events of undoubted quality throughout the year, many of which have become true products of cultural tourism, events such as: Grand Exhibitions; National and International Festivals of Music, Theatre, Cinema or Dance; a wide and varied range of Concerts; themed Cultural Weeks; Religious and Folk

celebrations, and other Popular Celebrations which represent the various ways of life, customs and cuisine, etc.

If we were to undertake a detailed study of the cultural tourism on offer in the World Heritage cities of our region, we would find such interesting examples as the following: medieval markets, historic, gastronomic and cultural evenings, themed equestrian shows, falconry displays, street theatre in local streets and squares, dramatised themed visits to historic town centres, cultural theme parks, medieval tournaments and jousting, displays of medieval war machines, medieval fiestas, «Son et Lumière» spectacles in medieval settings, parades, celebrations of Roman, Sephardic, Arab-Andalusian, medieval, baroque and renaissance life and times, etc.

We have not only the opportunity, but also the responsibility – and this is a reflection that should include all of the tourist industry – of projecting our social reality to the outside world, to promote the wealth of European culture, and to convert it into profitable tourism. Such tourism, managed in a sustainable fashion, should also guarantee the conservation and enhancement of our heritage.