

CATALONIA, A TOURIST COUNTRY

by Jaume Font*

‘A country’s international prestige is directly related to its prestige as a tourist country’.
*Antoni Muntanyola: L’organització turística de Catalunya [Tourism Organisation in Catalonia],
 Barcelona, 1932.*

Introduction: milestones in the development of Catalan tourism

This article briefly reviews the historical development of tourism in Catalonia, understood as an important productive sector in the context of the country’s economic structure, both in terms of contribution to GDP and the generation of employment, and also seen as a factor for innovation and territorial balance. Aside from this role as an economic driving force, tourism is very valuable socially and culturally in as far as it allows access to relaxation and holidays and becomes a powerful tool for the exchange of culture and knowledge between peoples.

It must be said from the start that tourism in Catalonia has a long tradition, which is not always recognised and sufficiently valued. The fact is that, at the beginning of the 20th century, there were already excellent resorts in Catalonia, such as Sitges or S’Agaró, as well as the city of Barcelona, which were compared with the prestigious destinations of the

French *Côte Bleue* and the Italian Riviera. Later, various governments of Catalonia, first the Commonwealth of Catalonia (1914-1923) and then the Republican Government (1931-1939), undertook a tourism planning policy that would be cut short by the Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco’s dictatorship. Finally, the tourism boom of the second half of the 20th century arrived, during which Catalonia and the rest of the peninsular Mediterranean coast became one of the top world destinations for sun and sand tourism. In summary: from a practical point of view, three stages can be distinguished in the history of Catalan tourism development:

- 1) The first stage with the forerunners or predecessors of modern tourism, occupying almost the entire history of the country, but in the strictest sense running from the end of the 18th century to the last third of the 19th century.
- 2) The second stage considered as the full development of elitist, aristocratic and bourgeois tourism which,



in the case that concerns us, broadly covers the period from the last third of the 19th century to the first third of the 20th century. During the last part of the period, the first social visions of tourism appear.

3) The third stage begins after the parentheses of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the Second World War (1939-1945), with the appearance of mass tourism and the consolidation of Catalonia and the peninsular Mediterranean coast as one of the great destinations of European tourism.

It hardly needs be said that the development of tourism in Catalonia has also been conditioned by some highly favourable geographic circumstances. In this sense, the country's strategic location, on the Pyrenean isthmus; its situation as a corridor with a triple orientation: European, Iberian and Mediterranean; and its diversity of landscapes, should be highlighted. Many travellers from all periods and origins have highlighted the Mediter-

ranean character of the country, the good climate, the luminosity of the landscape and, in general, the Mediterranean features which, in and of themselves, make Catalonia very suitable for tourism. Many travellers also stress the original character of the country, the existence of its own language and the way the Catalans themselves have historically upheld their own identity. Generally, the country has been explained in different ways depending on the period. During the 18th century, enlightened travellers came to construct a true 'white legend' about Catalonia; by contrast, during the 19th century, the country was often seen as a wild, inhospitable environment, immersed in endless fratricidal wars.

From the distant predecessors to the appearance of the romantic tourism of the 19th century

The predecessors for modern tourism must be situated in the period of Enlightenment of the 18th century



and the appearance of romantic tourism in the first half of the 19th. This is the period of the 'Grand Tour', which all English gentlemen had to embark on to discover the world, and also the era of the enlightened travellers of the 18th century, who were to have their counterparts in the romantic travellers of the 19th. They were times when tourism, understood in a broad sense, developed quickly alongside growing industrialisation and the appearance of fast, efficient forms of transport, such as steamships and railways.

For many enlightened travellers passing through Catalonia, the country was seen as an exception within Spain; they usually highlight the hardworking

nature of the Catalans, the wealth and power of Barcelona and a relative situation of opulence and wellbeing. Examples, can be found in the writings of two authors of the time: the Englishman Arthur Young (1787) and the Castilian Francisco de Zamora (1785-1790).

When the 19th century arrived, the romantic travellers fixed the types and trends of bourgeois tourism, along with more than a few national stereotypes. These were times when Greece and Italy (from Tuscany and Venice to Sicily) became fashionable, and when stereotypical Spanish characteristics were established by writers, travellers and artists like the Englishman Richard Ford (1796-1858), the Frenchman Alexandre de Laborde (1773-1842) and the American Washington Irving (1783-1859). The common denominator of their writings (and those of others like Prosper de Merimée) is the exotic, orientalist charm of the Spanish south, particularly Andalusia. In this context, Catalonia and Barcelona are hardly noticed, as they are a long way from these Spanish stereotypes that have lasted to the present day. When they do speak of Catalonia, many travellers, by contrast, underline the wild nature of the region and its inhabitants, stubbornly fighting endless civil wars, about which well-known figures such as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote sensationalist reports.

From the emergence of bourgeois tourism in the 19th century to the appearance of social tourism

The stage of full development of aristocratic and bourgeois tourism broadly falls, between the last third of the 19th century and the first third of the 20th. In Catalonia, the outstanding milestones during this stage are the two

big universal exhibitions in Barcelona, in 1888 and 1929. These were times when there were constant improvements to the means of communication and transport, increasingly facilitating the expansion of tourism. It is the period of the great transatlantic liners, such as the famous Titanic, and of luxury trains, such as the legendary Orient Express described by Agatha Christie, culminating in the appearance of the car and of air transport at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Catalonia, the improvement in transport had a notable effect on the development of tourism. Aside from Barcelona, which received a great boost from hosting the universal exhibition of 1888, the first Catalan tourist destinations were established during the last third of the 19th century. This is the case with Sitges, which was very well connected to Barcelona by rail and which became an intellectual and artistic focal point, with the *Art Nouveau* gatherings promoted by Santiago Rusiñol. The Barcelona bourgeoisie, in particular, made the spas and the first summer holiday centres fashionable, both on the coast and in the nearby Pyrenees. This is the case with La Garriga, Caldes de Montbui, Caldes de Malavella and Sant Hilari Sacalm, mountain villages like Camprodon and Puigcerdà and coastal resorts like Calella, Blanes and Lloret de Mar. With the arrival of the 20th century, the first investments were made aimed at attracting international tourism, with the construction of the *Hostal de la Gavina* complex at S'Agaró, while the Costa Brava was christened as a tourist branding exercise (1909). In those days, the Costa Brava shamelessly imitated the French *Côte Bleue*, while S'Agaró advertised itself on posters as a 'sunny winter resort'.

The administration's interest in tourism gradually increased. From the

beginning, local institutions set up *Societats d'Atracció de Forasters* (Foreign Tourism Attraction Societies) and, later, the *Sindicats d'Iniciativa* (Tourist Information Bureaus), of French origin, particularly in destinations which had begun to stand out, such as Lloret de Mar. Tourism policy was given a decided boost by the recovered institutions of Catalan self-government: the Commonwealth of Catalonia between 1914 and 1924 and the Republican Government between 1931 and 1939. Despite their brief duration, the two institutions carried out notable tourism planning work.

THE COMMONWEALTH WELL UNDERSTOOD TOURISM'S ROLE AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVING FORCE

The Commonwealth well understood tourism's role as an economic driving force and determinedly promoted it. In those days, the car was beginning to play an outstanding role in tourist expansion (the Royal Automobile Club of Catalonia was established in 1906), and this encouraged the Commonwealth to establish inns located at strategic points on roads in the Pyrenees, such as the La Bonaigua Pass and Collada de Toses. These were the immediate predecessors of the Spanish *paradors*, or roadside hotels.

In turn, the Republican Government undertook a decided policy of tourism planning and promotion through the Catalan Tourist Board (OTC). The management of the Tourist Board was entrusted to Ignasi Armengou (1895-1954), who ran it effectively, and the quality of the posters and promotional material it published were outstanding. In fact, it was a period in which there was an awareness that tourism had to be developed carefully, with criteria that

we would now call sustainability, organisation and territorial balance. This is well reflected in Antoni Muntanyola's work, *L'organització turística de Catalunya* (The Organisation of Tourism in Catalonia), of 1932, which describes the country's huge tourism potential, compares it to that of other European countries and ends by putting forward a model for the organisation and management of Catalan tourism. That same year, the GATCPAC architects formulated the *Ciutat de repòs i de vacances* (City of Relaxation and Holidays) project, linked to working-class leisure and holidays, which was a pioneering step in the field of social tourism.

THE MEDITERRANEAN CORRIDOR MOTORWAY BECAME ONE OF THE GREAT EUROPEAN TOURIST CORRIDORS

Unfortunately, the work of the Republican Government was cut short by the outbreak of the Civil War and the imposition of Franco's dictatorship, as it was a model effort in many senses. Among other consequences, the dictatorship would lead to the exile of many of the professionals who had promoted the tourism policy of the Republican Government, including Ignasi Armengou, the director of the Catalan Tourist Board. It is probable that, had there been democracy and had the country been able to rely on professionals of his calibre, the chaotic tourism model of *desarrollismo* (structuralist economics) would not have become established.

The expansion of mass tourism during the sixties and seventies

Tourism's third stage begins after the parentheses of the Civil War

(1936-1939) and the Second World War (1939-1945). The Marshall Plan and the European economic miracle would allow a spectacular development of mass tourism in Catalonia, Spain and Europe. This was basically due to the increase in living standards and the consolidation of the welfare state in Western Europe, with practically universal access to paid holidays for European workers.

It is a stage characterised by unprecedented exponential growth in mass tourism. It starts with the Stabilisation Plan of 1959, which represents the adoption by the Spanish Government of an orthodox monetary policy and the acceptance of the recommendations of international economic bodies concerning the orientation of economic growth towards innovative sectors such as industry and tourism, rather than Franco's obsession with agriculture. This change of orientation would continue through the promulgation of successive 'development plans' and would, among other consequences, lead to the beginning of an unprecedented rural exodus and start off the Spanish tourism boom. It was a boom brought about, among other factors, by the improvement in air transport, the establishment of charter flights and the construction of the Mediterranean corridor motorway, from La Jonquera to Alicante, which would become one of the great European tourist corridors.

All this growth was carried out without planning and without the democratic control of local councils and institutions. These were times of *laissez-faire*, leading to the massive occupation of the Catalan coast. This is the case with certain sectors of the Costa Brava, the Costa Daurada and the Barcelona coast (El Maresme and El Garraf); only the coast of the Ebre region would remain somewhat removed from this



process of intensive occupation of the coastal area. It was the period of ‘Spain is different’ and structuralist economics, which would, over many decades, consolidate a tourism model based almost exclusively on sun and sand.

This ‘single crop’ tourism remained practically unchanged until the Barcelona Olympic Games (1992), except for the isolated development of snow tourism in the Pyrenees (Vall d’Aran, La Cerdanya, El Pallars) and the continuation of traditional destinations such as Montserrat, Vall de Núria, Castellar de n’Hug and Rupit, which would notably increase their visitor numbers with the generalised car ownership of the sixties and seventies.

The current stage, by contrast, is characterised by the diversification of the tourist products Catalonia can offer, which include conventional sun and sand, snow and mountain tourism, active and nature tourism and cultural tourism. Finally, regarding tourism development in Catalonia, both in the past and the present, the principles and values set forth by Antoni Muntanyola in his work, *L’organització turística de Catalunya*, with a quote from Miquel dels Sants Oliver, are still valid: ‘What is right for a people, just as for individuals, is to be themselves, without ceasing to exist, to grow and to improve’. And this is what I believe should be done in terms of tourism.

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