

Cantabria A move to replace sun, sea and sangria with a more cultured view

According to local mythology one-eyed monsters are supposed to stalk the sweeping green slopes of Cantabria's mountain ranges, attacking travellers unlucky enough to cross their path.

For a region reputedly home to such inhospitable monsters, Cantabria manages to attract hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors each year in search of natural beauty, rather than beaches and cheap cocktails on offer elsewhere.

While Spain has long specialised in offering foreign tourists the simple pleasures of beach and sun, a sharp drop in visitors has forced a rethink for an industry that accounts for 12 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

The sector, long one of the pillars supporting Spanish economic growth, has been forced to lay off 180,000 workers since 2008, with the once-bustling coastal resorts falling quiet. Regions such as Cantabria, able to attract higher-value visitors in search of cultural attractions, have suffered less than those reliant on package holidays.

Once a relatively under-visited part of Spain, an increase in the number of tourists lured to Cantabria has seen investment in hotels and golf courses when developments across the country have been put on hold.

Locals say the popularity

of the region's mountain valleys, part of the Picos de Europa that straddle the north of Spain, has resulted in several large hotel redevelopments to cater for the new wave of "cultural tourists".

Mari Angeles Cabo, director of the Hotel Aliva, located close to the cable car in the Picos de Europa, says over the past two years there has been a large increase in the wealthy taking short holidays.

"What we are seeing is the old type of tourism, based around cheaper apartments and beaches, being replaced by a type of tourist that wants to know more about the country, and its people," she says.

"We have many more people coming from England, France and the Netherlands who are passionate about hiking and the mountains. Most of these people would be considered quite well-off, and they usually make short visits for two or three days in the summer."

Other Cantabrian hotels, such as the hotel Balneario de Fuente Viesgo, have achieved fame across Spain because the national football team stayed there.

Philip Moscoso, a professor specialising in the sector at the Iese business school, has argued that the old Spanish bulk tourism model of "playa y sol" must change if Spain is to

continue to rank as one of Europe's most visited countries.

"Spain has the cultural assets, but we still need to work on commercialising these," he says.

"Economically, cultural tourism is much more attractive than *playa y sol*, but the marketing needs to improve as well, as we are not currently making as much of these as much as possible."

A study last year by the Cotec foundation concluded that Spain had a lower number of tourists visiting



Philip Moscoso says Spain needs to market its cultural assets

the country for primarily cultural attractions than France or Great Britain. This, the report argued, was because Spain was failing to preserve and promote its heritage sights as effectively as others.

The success of undifferentiated mass beach tourism is often based on price: Brits and Germans in search of a tan in Spain's south are less concerned with cultural attractions.

However, budget airlines have helped new, often cheaper competitors such as Turkey and Bulgaria snatch away more of this market, in spite of the brief fillip

beleaguered Spanish hoteliers received this year after the Arab Spring saw tourists relocate holidays from north Africa to Spain.

Such competition, combined with large levels of oversupply of hotels and overdevelopment in parts of the country's southern coastal stretch, mean that experts argue that Spain must move towards a tourism model that sells its own unique characteristics.

An increase in the number of Chinese visitors to Spain seeking out museums and other heritage sights is expected to help to further rebalance the sector. More than 300,000 Chinese tourists visited Spain last year, with this level expected to exceed 1m within five years.

However, as an increasing number of hotels in regions such as Cantabria seek to cater to a different type of tourist, there is the possibility that this shift may be to the detriment of Spain's beach tourism.

"That is a key question, if they will start to compete against each other," says Prof Moscoso.

"We do not yet know whether this will sit alongside bulk tourism, or replace it. But whatever happens, I think we will see more people realise that higher-value tourism is the better option."

Miles Johnson