

Will climate change hit Mediterranean tourism?

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Smoke from fires were part of the scenery for tourists on a ferry to Greece's Corfu island.

Destructive fires, temperatures topping 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) and tourists dodging possible catastrophe by staying home.

Will climate change end up transforming tourism—not least in the Mediterranean?

State of play

Regions which welcome a sizeable share of holidaymakers are also those hardest hit by climate change. In Greece, thousands of tourists have been evacuated in recent days from the islands of Rhodes and Corfu which have been ravaged by fires touched off by suffocatingly hot weather.

Rhodes' international airport has morphed into an improvised campsite flooded by disorientated tourists.

Other countries around the Mediterranean have also been hit.

In Spain, the thermometer has shot 15 degrees above normal summer season levels. Italy has also labored under heatwaves with the island of Sardinia melting under 48 Celsius while, on Monday, Tunis endured 49C.

Tourism plays a key role in the region's economies—the sector accounts for nearly a quarter of GDP in Greece and 12 percent in Spain.

Economic consequences

The soaring temperatures could turn off visitors.

For Jean-François Rial, who heads French travel firm Voyageurs du Monde, "global warming is going to render some destinations less and less visitable. The whole of the Mediterranean is concerned and yet it is the main destination of European travelers."

In Spain, "we're starting to hear tourists ask themselves" if they should be looking to spend their summer break on the Mediterranean coast, said Joantxo Llantada, professor at Madrid's IE Business School.

According to a recent note from Moody's, "heatwaves may reduce Southern Europe's attractiveness as a tourist destination in the longer term or at the very least reduce demand in summer, which will have negative economic consequences given the importance of the sector."



Tourists sheltered from the sun with umbrellas at the Colosseum in Rome.

No more sun worshiping?

Not so fast, suggests Hamit Kuk, who heads the association of Turkish travel operators.

"This issue is very important for the tourism industry—but it is not a problem if temperatures are very hot in Antalya because European tourists mostly prefer to see the sun," Kuk told AFP.

"We can look at the examples of Egypt and Dubai. In July-August there are temperatures of 45C and tourists still prefer to go there."

The president of Tunisia's hotel federation, Dora Miled, told AFP that to date "the heat has had no impact on tourism.

"If we have yet to return to 2019 activity levels ... that's above all mainly due to the high cost of air travel," said Miled.

Didier Arino, who heads the Protourisme travel consultancy in France, said, "When it comes to their holidays, people don't dream of a cool destination, they want good weather."

Even in Greece it is not certain that the fires will dissuade tourists from coming.

Kostas Chrysohoides, vice prefect of Dodecanese, an island group in the southeastern Aegean Sea that includes Rhodes, observed that "24,000 tourists arrived on Rhodes" between Sunday and Monday, fires notwithstanding. Only a handful canceled "as a precaution", he said.

Picking up the slack

Should it become next to impossible to visit a destination sweltering under abnormal temperatures holidaymakers could look further afield, suggests Jean-Francois Rial, who said "northern European destinations

are on the rise."

He suggested that Britain and Ireland could both gain in tourist traction.



Wildfires forced the evacuations of thousands of tourists from Greek islands.

Alternatives

One thing sector professionals agree on is that tourism will change. They anticipate that total visitors to the Mediterranean could rise—but reserve in seasons outside summer, boosted by increasing demand from pensioners.

"For now we have no worries about domestic market demand, but if the global climate crisis continues to escalate, we will have to review the summer and winter seasons," said Hamit Kuk.

In Rial's view, "that could perhaps be a chance to reduce 'over-tourism'... losing some clients in summertime but gaining more in the other nine months of the year."

Albania is hoping to cash in on that, with a warm season that stretches into October. The country is currently experiencing a boom in tourism, with a 30 percent jump in arrivals expected this year.

In Croatia, where tourism accounts for 20 percent of the economy, experts are pushing the development of other options for the country's Adriatic coastline, which could benefit rural regions.

For Protourisme's Arino, climate change will force tourism to evolve.

"We must conceive our cities somewhat differently, our resorts, the range of activities on offer."

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