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Spain's hoteliers fear hard Brexit, hope for a deal

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If the United Kingdom leaves the European Union without a negotiated settlement to avoid a "hard" Brexit, the Spanish hotel sector fears it will take a big hit.



Joan Molas, president of CEHAT, speaks about Brexit as the company's biggest unknown. (Photo: Benjamin Jones; Photo Illustration: Rachel Daub)

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MADRID—Spanish hoteliers are worried that the number of guests from the United Kingdom, the sector's biggest source market, will suffer a major decline if London and Brussels fail to agree on a negotiated exit for the United Kingdom from the European Union.

"If there is a hard Brexit and all that entails, such as visas being required for British visitors or (there being) a big drop in the value of the British pound, we could see a 15% fall in the number of visitors compared with last year," said Joan Molas, president, Confederation of Spanish Hotels & Tourist Accommodation (CEHAT).

At a press conference on the state of the Spanish hotel industry, Molas said that the estimate came from a survey of British tour operators and travel agencies carried out for CEHAT (https://cehat.com/frontend/cehat/base.php).

"According to the poll, a hard Brexit could reduce the numbers of British visitors by around 3 million, taking into account that 18 million Britons visited Spain last year," he added.

Molas said the biggest problem is that no one knows what will happen regarding Brexit and its possible effect on the tourism sector.

"We've tried to gain some insight on this from the Spanish Foreign Ministry, the Spanish Tourism Board, our embassy in London and others, but no one has a clue," Molas said.

Optimistic notes

Molas noted in the first two months of this year the number of British visitors rose by 3% compared to the same period in 2018, which, he said, showed that Britons are still interested in coming to Spain, at least for the moment.

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In a telephone interview, CEHAT Secretary General Ramón Estalella also struck an optimistic tone. While a no-deal Brexit would mean Spanish hoteliers losing a large chunk of their most important market, he is confident there will be a negotiated agreement in the end, he said.

"This week, the British Parliament voted to seek an extension beyond the current April 12 leave date, and this shows that the British want to leave the EU with some kind of deal," Estalella said.

"Hotel owners I have spoken to in the destinations most popular with British visitors are not worried, nor are tour operators or the tourists themselves from the evidence I've seen," he said. "Everyone believes that some form of an agreement will be struck."

Diversification

British tourism to Spain is diversifying beyond the sea-and-sun sector, Estalella added, with increasing numbers of Britons coming to ski in the Pyrenees Mountains, go on bird-watching excursions or take part in other activities far from the traditional coastal and island resorts.

"Spain is still an attractive destination for the British, and we expect that to continue," he said.

Apart from Brexit, other issues causing concern among Spanish hoteliers are the weakening in the economies of major European source markets such as Germany and France and the continuing recovery of regional tourism rivals Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Greece.

"As these other Mediterranean resort destinations attract more visitors going into the summer, a worry for us is that airline capacity will be diverted to those countries so there will be fewer flights available to Spain," Molas said.

"On the bright side, we're expecting a rise in visitor numbers this year from North America of 11% and a 20% surge from Russia. China and Latin America should also do well," he added.

Molas said that according to a survey of CEHAT's 15,000 members, occupancy rates for the upcoming Holy Week holidays were buoyant and the sector should enjoy general stability in the months ahead.

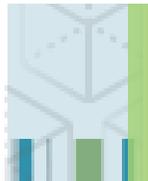
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