

CRUISE TOURISM IN BARCELONA: FROM MARGINALITY TO INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today Barcelona is the leading European cruise port and is ranked as the fifth destination of this kind worldwide. The prospects are for this product to sustain or even step up its growth throughout 2011. However, this considerable development is relatively recent, even though cruise ships have been arriving in the city for many years. This article analyses the success of cruise tourism in the city of Barcelona in the past three decades. The academic literature on cruise tourism is still quite scant, especially literature on Barcelona, even though cruise tourism is one of the most important tourism phenomena in this destination in recent years. In this literature, one can note the almost complete predominance of references on the Caribbean, the traditional destination of the U.S. cruise market. However, it is important to note the scarcity of studies on the Mediterranean, which can partly be explained by the fact that its growth is fairly recent and its importance in relation to other destinations is still incipient. Within this dynamic, as the leading home port in the region, Barcelona is a clear example of the explosion of cruise tourism in the past two decades.

II. A SUMMARY OF THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CRUISE TOURISM

Due to the recent take-off in Barcelona cruise tourism, along with other kinds of tourist products, it tends to be regarded as a novel tourism product, which is partly wrong. In fact, just like other post-fordism products, cruise tourism is one of the kinds of products that perfectly captures the transformation of tourism based on the revival of phenomena that are reborn after a decades-long crisis which takes place after an early age of splendour, precisely at the time when tourism emerged as a modern free-time activity. Its success was based on reproducing a recurring phenomenon in tourism: copying the elitist activities linked to

free-time and tourism. After this early inaugural stage, a new era got underway after the end of World War I, when the transatlantic shipping crisis triggered by the drop in immigrant traffic required many companies to transform their ships of the line into cruise ships. This and the previous period can largely be considered a first *golden age* of cruise tourism, even though between the World Wars it was still reserved for a highly restricted demand with a high purchasing power. Finally, the outbreak of World War II interrupted and transformed its development, since most of the ships were requisitioned to transport troops or logistical services, and the majority were sunk or heavily damaged during the conflict. Furthermore, the immediate post-war period was not a favourable context, with incipient aviation and scarce means to promote a tourism activity both from the perspective of the supply and given the impetus of the demand. The situation changed notably after the 1960s, especially because of the development of commercial aviation. From that moment on, the companies were forced to seek new markets to survive. While the difficulty lay in adapting the ships of the line to become free-time products with a full range of services for tourists, the response was quick and focused on offering much lower prices, thus facilitating access to a broad swath of the population. Later, the growth in the ships facilitated the transformation of the product, and the cruise ships started to offer the traditional mass tourism formula of «all-inclusive». Additionally, the companies had to be better prepared in other areas as well, such as passenger and crew safety.

Nowadays, even though cruise tourism can be viewed as a kind of resort in constant motion, its substantial impact on the main destinations where the ships stop has also been demonstrated. The Caribbean destination remains as the top one, especially during the winter, when it receives much of the demand from North America, which is still far and away that largest market in the entire world, even though these days its growth is quite slow. From the perspective of the demand, with the definitive spread of this kind of tourism, and even the *overcrowding* at certain destinations, the average growth in the past few decades has been spectacular. The main market in this demand is still North America and Europe is the next most important market, although it only distantly trails the first one. Nonetheless, cruise tourism is still experiencing a rising demand and is still regarded as having vast potential, since there are markets which have barely been tapped. Cruise tourism can also be readily linked to the new trends in the demand, since the experience of an interesting, varied trip can be offered in a short period of time. Many destinations have begun to concertedly focus on it in recent years, including Barcelona, which is also one of the largest tourist marketplaces in Europe. The city's development as a cruise ship destination has taken many years, but its position among the leading destinations is relatively recent.

III. CRUISE TOURISM IN PRE-OLYMPIC BARCELONA

Barcelona's spectacular take-off as a cruise tourism destination is relatively recent, but its history stretches back many years. There is information on the creation of the first shipping companies operating in the port of Barcelona as far back as the early 19th century, although journeys for reasons other than leisure predominated during this entire century, and they were practically always in relation to emigrants' journeys from Spain mainly to the colonies and independent countries in Latin America. Towards the end of the 19th century, the efforts

of Barcelona's *Junta de Obras del Puerto* (Board of Port Construction) would give rise to the first infrastructures and shipping companies. These companies usually covered regular lines, and their passengers most included emigrants, although they also carried the first travellers to cross the sea in first class for leisure purpose. Unlike other countries, this situation did not change excessively in the early decades of the 20th century, since the number of travellers who embarked and disembarked in the Spanish ports purely for tourism was still quite small, and the outbreak of the Civil War and the later post-war years perpetuated the lack of sea-based leisure travellers passing through Barcelona.

The arrival of democracy and political changes also brought changes that affected cruise tourism. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, new companies appeared in Spain devoted to the business of cruise tourism, such as the tour operator *Unión Lloyd* or the *Central de Cruceros* Company, which emerged from the maritime departments of different travel agencies (*Meliá*, *Marsans* and *Wagons Lit*) and the tour operator *Latitud 4*. Still, in the 1980s Barcelona still welcomed few cruise tourists, as it was not a particularly well known destination internationally and had less projection among the elite tourists who still predominated in this kind of tourism in Europe in the 1980s. However, everything was about to change after Barcelona hosted the 25th Olympic Games in July 1992.

IV. 1992, THE PIVOTAL YEAR IN CRUISE TOURISM IN BARCELONA

Today there can be no doubt that the 1992 Olympics were a pivotal point in the development of the different kinds of tourism in Barcelona, and cruise tourism was no exception. The choice of Barcelona to host the 25th Olympics led the Town Hall to embark upon a new process of reflection, in which it sought to usher in a profound transformation of the city, where tourism was one of the cornerstones of its future development. With this purpose in mind, the first meetings between the Town Hall, represented by the *Municipal Tourism Board* and the *Tourism Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Barcelona* got underway in 1987. Thus began a partnership that would result in the Strategic Plan, which carefully examined the city's potential to be a major international tourist destination in the future, taking advantage of the impetus of the Olympics. With the definition of the plan the subsequent creation of *Turisme de Barcelona*, there was a shift from a stage in which Barcelona was promoted generically to a new one in which the goals were specific and specialised promotion through the identification of different market segments, including the cruise tourism market. Cruise tourism is unquestionably included in this wide range of new products and successful new markets in the city. In fact, from the very start, the Strategic Plan mentioned above perceived this kind of tourism as crucially important and thus created a specific plan aimed at promoting Barcelona as the leading cruise destination in the Mediterranean. The efforts got underway considering the cruise ships' accommodation capacity as a support for the city's hotels as lodging during the Olympics. This was a risky venture which somewhat put the management of the large cruise ships in port facilities to the test. In the end, the experience was successful despite the risks, and during the Olympics eleven ships offered the city their services, becoming the second largest concentration of accommodations after the Olympic Village. The result demonstrated the port managers' organisational capacity and revealed Barcelona's potential to promote cruise

tourism. Likewise, equally important as the public-private strategy in terms of encouraging tourism was the series of urban planning actions carried out in parallel to the preparations for the Olympics, especially through the remodelling of *Port Vell* (Old Port) and the birth of *Autoritat Portuària de Barcelona* (Port Authority of Barcelona), ushering in an institution whose role has been crucial in grasping the development of the port infrastructures, and especially important in terms of the possibility of accommodating the rising demand from tourists. In this sense, starting in 1992 all the factors mentioned converged to give rise to the success of cruise tourism as we know it today: first, the role of *Turisme de Barcelona* in the projection of the city as an interesting urban destination internationally, welcoming a rising number of tourists, and secondly the role of the *Autoritat Portuària* in adapting the port of Barcelona and its relationship with shipping organisations. They have both been key in being able to accommodate the development of the new wave of tourists, namely cruise passengers, which have joined other segments in the demand whose growth has been spectacular in the past few decades.

V. THE ADVENT OF NEW MARKETS AND INFRASTRUCTURES FOR CRUISE TOURISM IN BARCELONA

The success of tourism in post-Olympic Barcelona is an example of how the city has managed to make its brand profitable and project it thanks to this event. In the 1990s, with the brief exception of the years of crisis just after the Olympics, the influx of tourists into the city rose considerably. Between 1991 and 2005, the number of tourists that stayed in the city overnight practically tripled, rising from a little over 1.7 million to more than 5 million according to the Barcelona Town Hall. Different factors worked in favour of this upswing, such as the design of the supply, which rose more than 30%, the major changes associated with the transformation in the demand, with the impact of the information and communication technologies (ICT) and the use of its location value expanded by the surge in low-cost airlines. Barcelona also has the advantage of being located in the centre of traditional sun-and-beach tourism peppered along the coastline of Catalonia. After decades of relative abandonment, the city's natural heritage (especially its beaches), as well as its cultural heritage, were revitalised and made attractive for an international public that rediscovered its appeal after years of lethargy. Barcelona is not only located close to the large European markets (made closer by the proliferation of low-cost airlines), it is also located in the Mediterranean basin, with everything this entails in terms of the possibility of becoming a hub for travel to numerous destinations with spectacular natural and cultural resources that are just one night's journey away. This means that it offers a host of possibilities as a destination that interplays sea and land like few can. Bearing these factors in mind, and in the wake of the success of the Olympic experience, the managers of the *Autoritat Portuària de Barcelona* understood the city's potentiality to witness a rise in cruise tourism by promoting traffic in passengers which would in theory not entail a huge rise in investments in infrastructures yet that would bring notable profits. With this intention, the municipal administration and the *Autoritat Portuària* drafted a Special Plan with the goal of redesigning *Port Vell* so it could be the site of new terminals for regular lines and cruise ships. In any event, the upswing in cruise tourism in these years was due largely to the successful convergence

of efforts between the *Autoritat Portuària* and *Turisme de Barcelona*. While the *Autoritat Portuària* focused on dealing with the shipping companies and crews as clients, *Turisme de Barcelona* took charge of developing tourist promotion and communication. Thus, *Turisme de Barcelona* took care of the city's image, promoted the arrival of tourists and focused its promotion abroad on international travel agencies, especially American ones, while the *Autoritat Portuària* was charged with promoting cruise tourism at specialised international trade fairs. Other key factors have also fostered this growth in cruise tourism, notably the availability of optimal, safe embarkation facilities, infrastructures related to free time, and particularly easy connections (inter-modal relationship) with other means of transport. Indeed, the fact that Barcelona's El Prat airport is easy to reach from the port zone, at less than half an hour away, is very appealing to cruise tourists who choose Barcelona as their city of embarkation. Other factors also come into play in this kind of decision, such as the markets themselves, competitive pricing and the brokering companies' ability to organise the sales network. However, none of this would be enough without the appeal of the city itself as an international destination. The development of facilities and the promotion of Barcelona as a destination has had its translation into a spectacular growth in demand, which fortunately coincided in time with two elements that directly impacted in this: the development of the Mediterranean as a cruise destination and the growth in the European market.

VI. BARCELONA, ONE OF THE LEADING CRUISE SHIP DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONALLY

Today, it is unquestionable that cruise tourism is one of the kinds of tourism and markets with the steepest growth in the world. Its characteristics make it a good example of new tourism, at least in terms of many of the product's features from the supply perspective and are in this context that Barcelona has become a leading cruise tourism destination internationally. The key to Barcelona's success can be explained by the intelligent promotion of the destination, which got underway in the time of the Olympics, along with efficient cooperation among the different authorities, the investments needed in port infrastructures, the safety of the destination (especially compared to the eastern Mediterranean) and the development of new products related to a good segmentation of the demand. Barcelona is precisely one of the best-located ports of Europe, given its proximity to many other tourism ports in the western Mediterranean. Thanks to these factors, most of the ships still trust the Port of Barcelona, and in the forthcoming years they are expected to keep stopping there and using the city as their home port. In relation to the demand and its repercussions, too, the city's main attractions for cruise tourists (with a high percentage of repeaters) are art, architecture, history, retail, food, good public transport and the safety of the city (optimal if compared to other destinations in the region). It is important to note that cruise tourism has not had a negative effect on the hotels in the city, especially because Barcelona is a home port and what this means is an opportunity for hotels, since many tourists stay here a few days before or after their cruise. Regarding the impact of this type of tourism in the city this is high and also most of its profits affect the city itself, which seems to demonstrate the symbiosis between its dynamics and the tourist sector development. Regarding the future prospects, everything seems to point to the fact that the Port of Barcelona has the major potential to grow in the forthcoming years since there is still a very broad target market, especially

in Europe, which today only accounts for one-fourth of the worldwide volume cruise tourists. Even bearing in mind the differences internationally (owing to location, markets, etc.), the future of cruise tourism in Barcelona entails promoting different elements; these future elements include, from the supply side, the need for greater flexibility, the situation of oligopoly into which the sector may fall, a focus on increasingly large ships, an effort at innovation and improvements in services, the growing regulation of the different destinations and issues related to security. It is also clear that the factors related to sustainability and responsibilities will be crucial in understanding the evolution of the business. Regarding the demand, socio-demographic changes (the ageing of the population, changing family units, segmentation of vacation, etc.), and the process of globalisation, climate change and the use of the information and communication technologies will also play a key role. As an international destination, Barcelona must keep abreast of these changes in order to deal with the risks and make the most of the advantages that will appear in these new scenarios.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have demonstrated the current importance of cruise tourism for Barcelona and how it shifted from a marginal situation in the period prior to the 1992 Olympics to its position of international leadership today. The study has also shown the importance of the local agents in driving the development of this kind of tourism. The preparations for the Olympics were fundamental in adapting the port infrastructures to tourist traffic, while equally or even more important was the role of the *Turisme de Barcelona* consortium in projecting the city as a tourist destination in general and a cruise tourism destination in particular. The steadfast involvement of these agents was further benefited by a set of factors in both the supply and demand that have fostered the spectacular growth in cruise tourism in the past two decades. Barcelona is now one of the leading cruise tourism destinations internationally, which is coupled with its well-known appeal for other kinds of tourism as well. However, to keep this position, the heads of tourist promotion, the port authorities and the companies operating in the city have to be aware of the new risks and opportunities arising from today's social and economic context. These include factors are linked to safety, the constant need for logistics to be updated, the need for greater specialisation in cruise tourism which responds to the growing segmentation of the demand, and finally a greater concern among the demand for considerations related to sustainability and social responsibility.