

# Vacationers travel, with belts tightened

Tourism improves this summer but visitors are steering clear of extra costs

C. DELGADO, **Barcelona**

"A few years ago there were hotels that employed extra staff just at coffee time. It was like rush hour. But that's not necessary now. Customers come to the restaurant if the food is included and then they leave. If you put on a party in the hotel, guests would have two or three drinks each — now they have one." This is how Joan Antoni Padró, vice-president of the association of hotels in Salou, Cambrils and La Pineda, sums up the tourism trends of the summer. He says that hotel occupancy in these coastal areas of Tarragona is over 90 percent. But while the rooms are as full as they were two years ago, travelers are running their vacation on half the budget.

The hotel owners in Costa Dorada are no exception. And it's the same situation across the rest of Spain. Although this season's figures are not yet out, the tourism sector agrees that positive predictions for a better year than 2009 are coming good. The International Tourism Organization believes that Spain will see more tourists arrive in 2010: 52.8 million instead of 52.2 million last year.

Restaurants, however, are still feeling the pinch. "Overnight stays in hotels have gone up and so have apartment rentals. But the restaurants are something else. We are still in negative figures and have been since April 2008. Now profits are not falling as fast, but they are still falling," explains José Luis Guerra, from the Spanish Hotel and Restaurant Federation (FEHR.)

Only the cruise ships are enjoying a boost. Barcelona received more than 400,000 cruise-ship passengers between January and June — a 20-percent improvement on last year. But sea aside, it has not been a good year for faint-



Sanlúcar de Barrameda beach (Cádiz), packed full of bathers on 7 August. / ALEJANDRO RUESGA

## Families go away for shorter breaks and plan longer stays during September

hearted restaurant owners or hoteliers. First, there has been the unusual weather (such as snowfall in March), then the Icelandic volcano's ash cloud, which brought Europe's airspace to a standstill for weeks. This summer there has also been the threat of a strike by air traffic controllers, which, despite never materializing, is feared to have dissuaded tourists. "Uncertainty is never good. People have less and less time for holidays and they want to spend less money. Rather than run the risk of losing the holi-

day or getting stuck, they'll opt for somewhere like Turkey or Croatia," says Guerra. These two countries have become the bogeymen of many in the hotel trade who fear they are encroaching on their market. "Their tourism is experiencing double digit growth every year. They say we have to find a better model than sun and sand packages," says a hotel owner from Lloret del Mar.

Exceltur — the business grouping for big players like Sol Meliá, and Iberia — collected the impressions of businesses before the end of this summer season. Some 52 percent expected to take more than last year, 25 percent thought they would stay the same and 22 percent thought they would lose money. But Exceltur predicts the sector will contract by 0.6 percent. Despite the optimism of the survey, the association concludes

that "we cannot celebrate a season that has been shorter and with very unhappy prices."

Some changes are here to stay. Families go away for shorter breaks and plan longer stays in September when prices dip. And last-minute bookings reign. Gone are the days when families booked summer holidays at Christmas. Marc Correa, human resources specialist at the San Ignacio Tourism School at Ramón Llull University, explains that online reservations — now 60 percent of all bookings — have contributed to last-minute plans, which impact on staffing. Now hotels "contract staff as the rooms fill up," he says. According to Labor Ministry data, the services sector employed a million people in July, but fewer than 44,000 were hired on permanent contracts.