

Trapped in budget travel

Lloret de Mar, a “drunken tourism” destination, seeks facelift after disturbances

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A young woman in dangerously high heels wanders around the center of Lloret de Mar handing out flyers for a nightclub. “It’s the only fashionable place in town,” she tells tourists. “There’s a lot of security, Spanish music and they don’t let drunk people in.”

Lloret, a town of 40,000 inhabitants, has 25 discos, 27 music bars, seven nightclubs, 261 watering holes and 31,222 hotel beds. Last year, more than a million people visited the town, which recorded over five million overnight stays. According to the National Statistics Institute, 3,200 people were employed in the hotel sector in Lloret last summer. These are positive figures in times of economic woe.

The other side of the coin is the pitched battles between police and young revellers, which last week erupted throughout Lloret. On Monday last week, around 400 people ran amok in the town. Last Thursday trouble flared again, resulting in a running battle between the police and young tourists. Several officers were injured in a hail of bottles and property in the town center fared little better. In 2004, the former regional interior minister, Montserrat Tura, termed Lloret a destination for “drunken tourism.”

The current mayor of the town, Romà Codina, said the incidents had brought about a “time for reflection.” Lloret must change its model: discos should close earlier and tourists should not assume Lloret is lawless.

“The task in hand involves businesses and the public administrations sitting down to talk,” says Rafael Gallego, president of the Spanish Association of Travel Agencies. “Obsolete zones need to be regenerated and Lloret should be reinvented as a different kind of destination.”

Ricardo Santomà, a tourism expert from the TSI Tourism School, says that Miami Beach and Acapulco reconverted from low-cost destinations “by involv-



Police and tourists in Lloret de Mar’s La Rivera area during the night of August 11-12. / PERE DURAN

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ing the public and private sectors.” Tenerife, he adds, is striving to cast itself as an ecological destination, not just sun, sand and sangria.

“There is an excess of accommodation and an excess of tourists who do not contribute to social and economic profit,” says José Luis Zoreda, executive vice president of Exceltur, which groups together the sector’s biggest brands. Zoreda advocates a tourism policy that does not compromise the image of a destination.

“The logical thing would be to reduce the offers and invest, but the global situation isn’t geared toward this,” says Bruno Hallé, a consultant at Magma Turismo.

Demand is king and if there is a tour operator who wants a low price, there will be a hotel willing to provide it.”

It is a divisive issue among hoteliers. Tourism is big business in Spain, accounting for 10 percent of GDP and 11 percent of employment, according to Industry Ministry figures. “There is no consensus in the sector, although we have tried,” says Antonio Casals, manager of the Helios hotel in the center of Lloret. The Helios does not offer all-inclusive deals and refuses groups of young people. Casals, though, admits the travel operators fill some of his 400 beds. “I hope someone finds a solution, but it’s going to be very difficult.”

Sector experts believe a short- to medium-term solution is to raise prices. “I have to decide if I want income from price or from quantity,” says Santomà. But hotels fear the empty bed. “There is a risk that many people will

lose their jobs,” says Casals.

“Lloret plays a role in its environment. If it didn’t exist we would have to invent it,” says Martí Sabrià, manager of the Union of Hotel and Tourism Businesses of the Costa Brava. In Sabrià’s estimation, the altercations in Lloret are caused by the bars and clubs all closing at the same time, and can be countered by putting more police on the street or moving the nightspots out of the town center. The Fecasarm employers’ association, which oversees nightlife in Catalonia, refuses to consider the latter proposal.

It’s 5am in Lloret. Groups of youngsters lurch drunkenly about the streets. Bruno, a 17-year-old German, shouts: “I’ve had the night of my life! Lloret is the best party town in Europe. The people are good-looking, it’s a great place to get laid... the only bad thing is the police.”

Lloret’s rebranding is not going to happen overnight.