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Sun, sea & crises: can the Mediterranean reinvent tourism?

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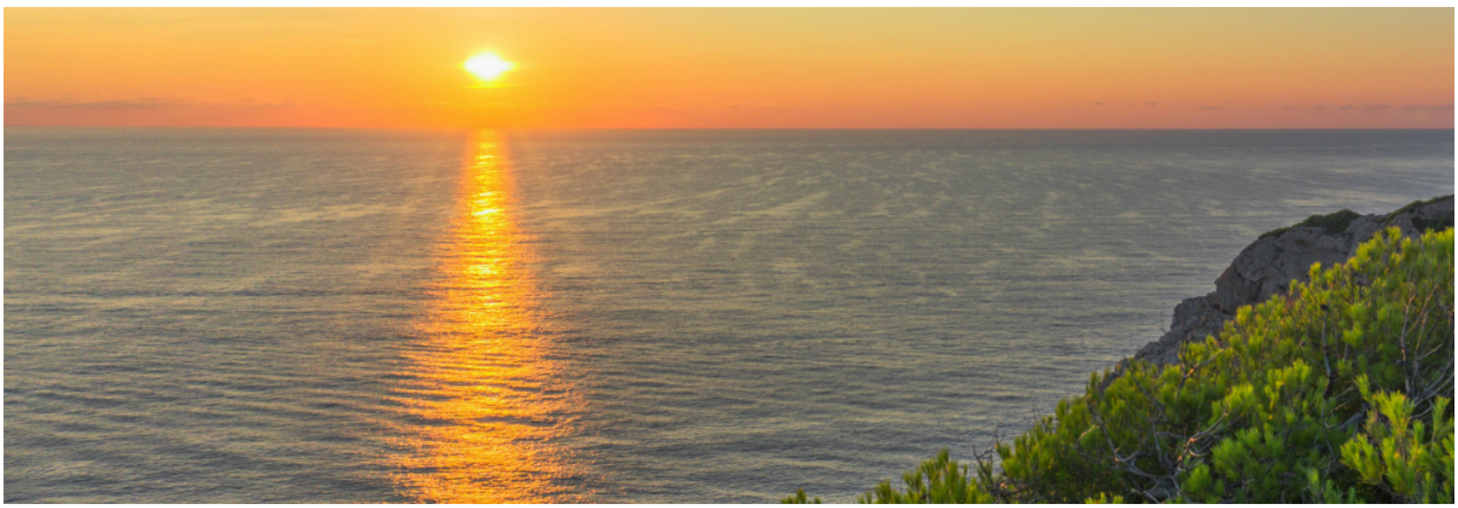

The Mediterranean is at a turning point. For decades, tourism has been the region's economic engine, yet its very success is now testing the region's limits. Overcrowding is driving up housing costs, straining fragile ecosystems, and stretching local infrastructure to its limit, especially during peak seasons. These pressures are triggering a wave of policy responses, but fragmented action will not be enough. What is needed is a bold, coordinated shift, one that embraces shared responsibilities, long-term planning and stronger regional cooperation.

As the world's top tourist destination, the Mediterranean receives around 30% of global arrivals–nearly 360 million international tourists annually, with projections surpassing 500 million visitors by 2030[1]. Tourism contributes about US$420 billion to the region's economy each year, accounting for 4.8% of GDP and supporting 11.5% of its workforce.[2] Coastal tourism dominates, especially in France, Spain, Italy, and Greece, where it makes up over 70% of the sector's value.[3]

While this growth boosts Mediterranean economies, it also fuels pressing environmental and socio-economic challenges. Fragile ecosystems are threatened by aggressive coastal development, resource overuse, and biodiversity loss. At the same time, tourism inflates housing prices and drives precarious employment and social exclusion, while overtourism and seasonal pressures intensify local resentment and destabilize traditional economic sectors.[4] Compounding these issues, the Mediterranean is warming 20% faster than the global average, making coordinated strategies for sustainable blue tourism essential. Such strategies must protect ecological integrity, promote social equity, and ensure the long-term economic resilience of the region's diverse coastal and marine landscapes.

In response to mounting pressures, Mediterranean governments and local authorities are experimenting with a wide range of policy tools to manage tourism's impact. While actions are often locally driven, common patterns begin to emerge.

With cruise tourism (IDDRI, 2024) contributing disproportionately to congestion and emissions, several destinations are taking bold steps. In Barcelona, the number of cruise ship dockings at the central port has been reduced, and Greece introduced a €20 cruise levy on passengers visiting popular islands such as Mykonos and Santorini during peak season. Venice has banned large cruise ships from its historic canals and charges day-trippers an entry fee. Marseille is also cracking down, taxing cruise passengers and restricting access to sensitive areas like the Calanques National Park,[5] whereas in the Balearic Islands, Ibiza has restricted simultaneous cruise ship dockings.

To protect vulnerable coastal areas, several destinations are placing physical or temporal limits on visitor access. Sardinia's Tuerredda Beach now operates a digital booking system that caps entries at 1,100 visitors per day during high season, while residents of Binibeca Vell in Menorca[6] have asked tourists to limit daytime visits to preserve local tranquillity. Elsewhere, Italy's Spiaggia Rosa[7] enforces fines of up to €3,500 for damaging its pink sands, while Capri has proposed a 40-buoy barrier to protect its coast from anchoring boats.[8]

Economic instruments are gaining traction to better align tourism with environmental and infrastructure costs. Greece's Climate Resilience Tax, introduced in 2024, applies higher rates during the high season and to luxury accommodations. In Tunisia, a revised tourist tax now charges guests between 4 and 12 Tunisian dinars per night, depending on the hotel category.[9] These fiscal tools aim to both disincentivize high-impact tourism and generate funds for local resilience.

Moreover, to combat urban crowding and resident fatigue, cities are experimenting with demarketing and other regulations. Marseille has launched visitor dispersal campaigns and banned outdoor key safes for short-term rentals, authorizing agents to dismantle non-compliant units. In Portofino, taking selfies in busy zones is now banned, with fines of up to €275. Greece's 2024 Coastal Development Law also introduces stricter rules on beach management while reaffirming the right to public access.

These initiatives reflect a growing sense of urgency among policymakers in the face of escalating environmental challenges and social demands, which intensify with each tourist season. However, they often reveal a case-by-case, crisis-driven approach that lacks cohesive, long-term vision for the future of tourism in the Mediterranean basin. Crucially, while the measures taken may have the potential to address local issues, they will have little meaningful impact at the regional level. For instance, banning the largest cruise ships from entering certain ports will neither improve ecosystem health nor enhance the lives of coastal communities if those same ships are allowed to dock in nearby cities. Without coordination at the regional level, the problems will merely be shifted elsewhere.

What is needed is a truly unified approach–one that facilitate collaboration on key issues such as harmonizing regulations on cruise ship size, managing overtourism, setting common fuel and emissions standards, sharing data on tourist flows across destinations and fostering public-private partnership to align economic development with environmental stewardship. To this end, multi-stakeholder collaboration platforms could play a crucial role by enabling cross-regional exchange of experience, aligning policy frameworks, and coordinating instruments across different governance levels. This would foster regionally coherent solutions and help mitigate the spillover effects of measures taken in one Mediterranean destination on others. The timing for such collaboration has never been more critical. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Barcelona Convention,[10] a cornerstone of Mediterranean environmental cooperation, and in a few days, Nice will host the third United Nations Ocean Conference. These events represent major opportunities to shape a new future for tourism in the region–moving beyond the pitfalls of fragmented national policies to build a truly coordinated regional strategy that safeguards both ecosystems and communities.

1

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2

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