New tourism patterns

# What factors have contributed to the reduced seasonality of tourist spending in Spain?

Tourism in Spain is undergoing an increasingly marked reduction of its seasonality. Although the summer months continue to account for a large part of annual tourist flows, arrivals outside the high season are growing more rapidly. Some of the main drivers of this trend include travellers from Europe and, most notably, the increasing seasonal diversification of urban coastal destinations. Regarding domestic tourism, the analysis based on internal CaixaBank data confirms that, between 2019 and 2024, middle-aged visitors and those with middle and high income levels have played a leading role in this phenomenon. Greater job flexibility and the possibility to take advantage of more competitive prices in the off-season could be determining factors. This change of pattern opens up new opportunities to balance tourism activity throughout the year and promote a more sustainable form of growth.

Spain's tourism industry has enjoyed significant growth in recent decades. During the trailing 12 months to November 2024, 93.7 million international visitors arrived in our country, doubling the figure of 1999 when Spain received some 47 million tourists. However, this growth has not been evenly distributed: international arrivals have increased much more sharply in the low season than in the high season. Whereas in July and August 2024 there were 63.5% more tourist arrivals than in the same months of 1999, in the rest of the year the increase exceeded 115%, almost double that of the summer months.

The trend towards reduced seasonality is steadily consolidating: in 1999, the months of July and August accounted for 28.5% of international arrivals, but in 2024 (the cumulative 12 months to November) this figure fell to 23.2%. What explains this trend? To shed some light, this article combines public data and internal CaixaBank records to identify which destinations and tourist profiles are driving the change.

International tourist arrivals each month
(% of the total tourists in each year)

Legend: — 1999 — 2009 — 2019 — 2024*
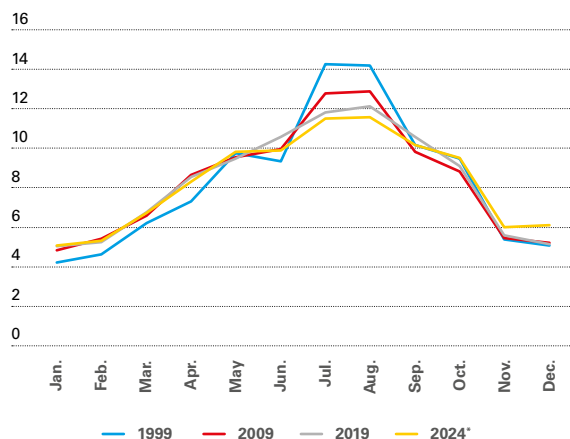
Proportion of international tourist arrivals in July and August each year
(% of the total tourists in each year)
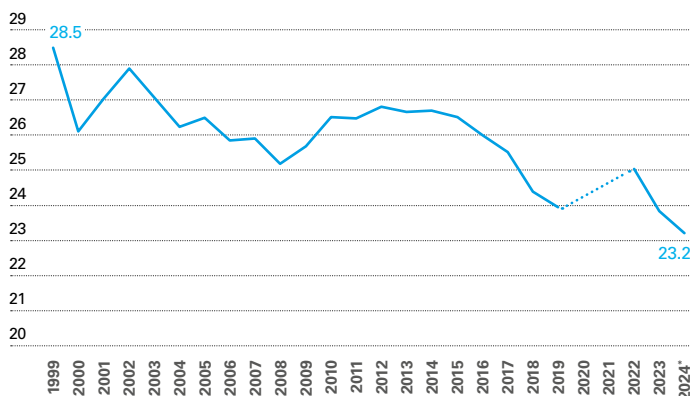
Notes: (*)The data for 2024 correspond to the cumulative total for the trailing 12 months to November. In the right-hand chart, the data for 2020-2021 are omitted because the seasonal pattern was greatly affected by the pandemic.
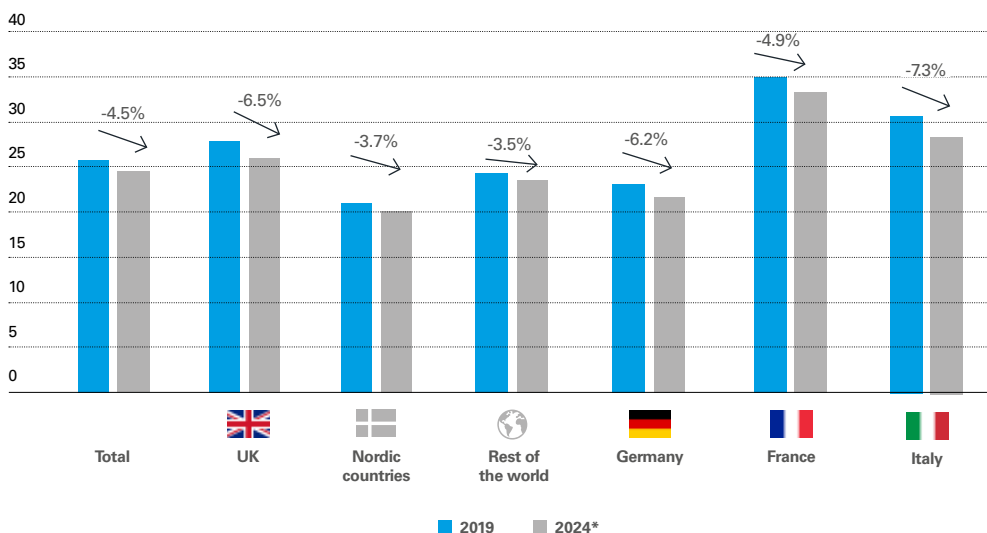**Source:** CaixaBank Research, based on data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE).

The reduced seasonality of international tourism is primarily driven by European tourism

Data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) reveal that the European market has been the main driving force behind the reduction in the seasonality of international tourism in Spain. Between 2019 and 2024, the share of annual international tourism spending recorded during the two months with the highest spending (July and August) decreased by 4.5% in aggregate terms, with particularly marked declines in spending by tourists from Italy (–7.3%), the United Kingdom (–6.5%) and Germany (–6.2%). In the case of the «Rest of the world» category, in contrast, the share of spending in those peak months decreased by only 3.5%, confirming the decisive role of European tourism in balancing demand throughout the year.

Proportion of international tourist spending in July and August
(% of the total expenditure in each year)

Legend: ■ 2019 ■ 2024*

Note: (*)The data for 2024 correspond to the cumulative total for the trailing 12 months to November.
Source: CaixaBank Research, based on data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE).

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Coastal urban destinations are leading the reduction in seasonality

Besides the data from the INE, we have also analysed internal data, duly aggregated and anonymised,[9] on payments recorded on CaixaBank POS terminals with foreign cards (international tourist expenditure) and with Spanish cards outside their usual expenditure zone (domestic tourist expenditure). The granular nature of these data allows us to investigate the factors and trends affecting tourism seasonality in greater detail. The following two maps represent the proportion of international and domestic tourist spending that is concentrated in the two months of the year with the highest tourist spending at the provincial level for the year 2024 (cumulative 12 months to November).

Seasonality of tourist expenditure by province

International tourist expenditure

Domestic tourist expenditure
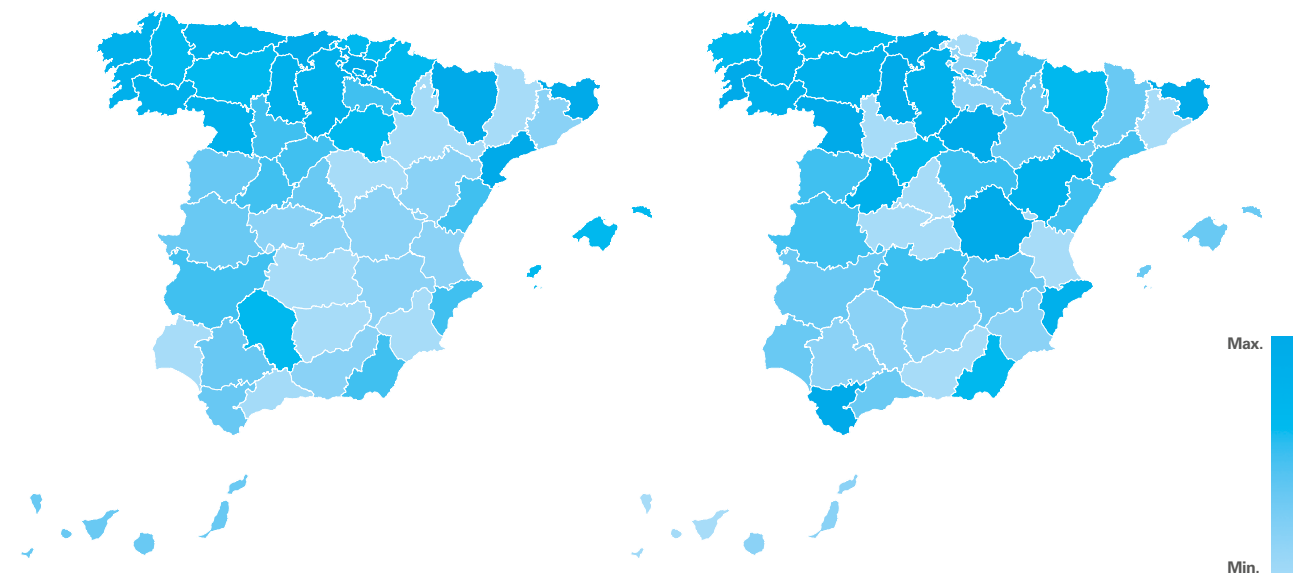
Notes: The map represents the proportion of spending in the two months with the most spending relative to the total. Darker colours indicate greater seasonality.
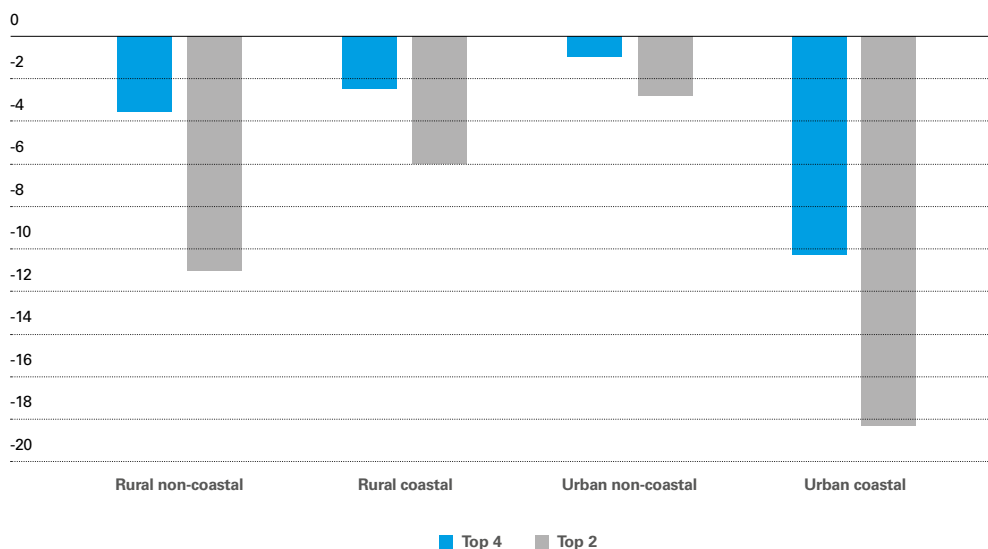**Source:** CaixaBank Research, based on payments data from CaixaBank POS terminals.

This geographical analysis reveals significant contrasts between the Atlantic and Mediterranean coastal areas, and between the more rural and urban areas. On the map of international tourism, lighter tones (indicative of lower seasonal concentration) are observed in the large cities and on the Mediterranean coast, while on the Atlantic coast darker colours predominate, reflecting greater seasonality. The domestic tourism map follows a similar pattern, albeit with a slightly greater degree of seasonality: the differences between the urban and coastal provinces are intensified, and rural tourism, in both inland and coastal areas, shows a clear seasonal pattern. There is also a clear north-south divide, suggesting that climate factors and the tourism supply affect each territory differently.

In the following chart, which illustrates the variation in the proportion of spending in the peak months (the top 4 and top 2, respectively) between 2019 and 2024, we can see that urban coastal destinations are the ones that have made the most progress in reducing their seasonality. The share of spending in the top 4 months with the highest consumption has fallen by 10.3%, while that of the top 2 months has reduced by as much as 18.3%. These results contrast with the smaller reduction observed in non-coastal urban destinations (–1.0% in the top 4 months and –2.8% in the top 2) and in rural areas (e.g. in coastal rural tourism, the reduction is of 2.5% in the top 4 months and of 6.0% in the top 2). Together, these statistics highlight that the combination of urban attractions with sun, sea and sand is causing urban and coastal municipalities to be the main drivers of reduced seasonality in Spain.

International tourist expenditure: change in seasonality by type of destination

Change in the proportion of expenditure in the peak months between 2019 and 2024 (%)

Note: Top 2 and Top 4 indicate the two and four months with the highest spending, respectively.
Source: CaixaBank Research, based on payments data from CaixaBank POS terminals.

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Domestic tourism: middle age groups and individuals with middle and upper income levels are the driving forces behind the reduction in seasonality

CaixaBank's internal data, aggregated and anonymised, allow us to breakdown domestic tourist spending according to customers' age. The analysis between 2019 and 2024 shows that the segments of the population aged between 30 to 64 years are the main architects of the reduced seasonality in the peak months. The group aged 16 to 29 has barely reduced their proportion of spending in the top four months in terms of activity (–0.2%) and in the two months with the highest expenditure (–0.1%), while the groups aged 30 to 49 years show much more significant declines (–4.1% and –9.7%, respectively). The segment aged 50 to 64 years, meanwhile, shows reductions of 3.8% in the spending occurring in the top 4 months and of 7.7% in spending in the top 2. In the case of those over 65 years of age, the decrease is more contained in the four months with the highest spending (–1.0%), although it is as much as –6.9% in the two months of highest spending.

Greater job flexibility following the pandemic seems to be a determining factor in explaining these results. With the increase in opportunities for teleworking and with fewer restrictions on the dates in which holidays can be taken, the age groups that are more active in the labour market can now take advantage of more competitive prices, less crowding and, in general, a more comfortable tourism experience. Low birth rates also reduce travellers' dependence on school calendars and could thus facilitate travel in less traditional periods.

With internal data, we can also segment the variation in the seasonality of domestic tourism between 2019 and 2024 according to individuals' income levels. Following the methodology used on the Real-Time Economics portal, we divide households between those on low-
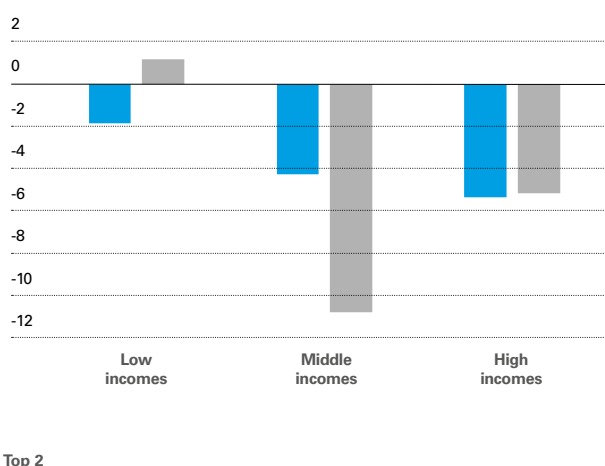
Seasonality of domestic tourist expenditure

By age group
Change in the proportion of expenditure in the peak months between 2019 and 2024 (%)
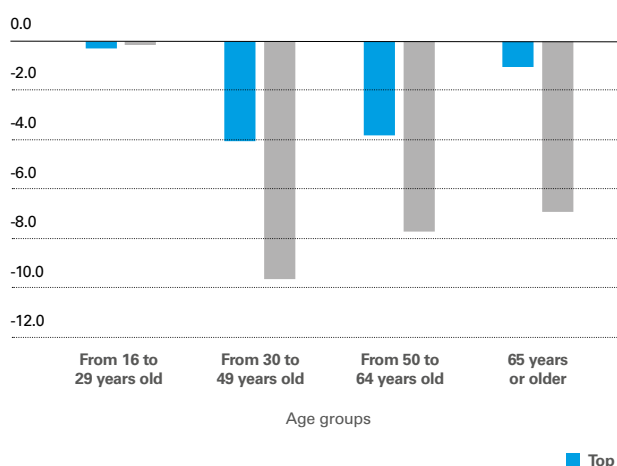
By income level
Change in the proportion of expenditure in the peak months between 2019 and 2024 (%)

Notes: Top 2 and Top 4 indicate the two and four months with the highest spending, respectively.
Source: CaixaBank Research, based on payments data from CaixaBank POS terminals.

incomes (less than 1,000 euros net per month), middle-incomes (between 1,000 and 2,000 euros net) and high-incomes (more than 2,000 euros net per month).

We observe that individuals in the middle and high income groups show a greater tendency to reduce the seasonality of their tourist spending, as shown by the decreases in the proportion of spending in the peak months (top 4 and top 2) between 2019 and 2024. Whereas low-income individuals have barely changed their spending patterns in the peak months (–1.9% in the top 4 and a slight increase of +1.2% in the top 2), the middle-income groups registered declines in the proportion of tourist spending in the four and two months with the highest expenditure of 4.3% and 10.8%, respectively. Similarly, the high-income segment shows notable reductions of 5.3% in the top 4 months and of 5.2% in the top 2, indicating increased flexibility when it comes to choosing travel dates.

One of the main potential explanations for this trend is the increased financial capacity of middle and high-income groups to adjust their holidays to less crowded seasons, either to avoid crowds or to benefit from more competitive prices. In addition, the greater autonomy offered by skilled positions could afford people greater flexibility to plan trips in non-traditional periods.

The recent data confirm that the reduction in the seasonality of tourism in Spain is an ever-growing reality. Several dynamics are converging to facilitate this phenomenon: the increasing influx of European tourists with fewer travel restrictions, the flexibility of work and the search for destinations that combine urban attractions with the traditional appeal of sun, sea and sand. In addition, the age groups between 30 and 64 years and the middle and upper income segments are the ones contributing the most to this structural change. In a context marked by growing international demand and the need for sustainability, this reduction in seasonality opens windows of opportunity for Spain's tourism sector, as reduced seasonality facilitates a more balanced use of infrastructure and human capital throughout the year. The consolidation of this pattern could, in the long term, bolster the competitiveness of tourism in Spain and facilitate a more sustainable form of growth.