

# Recent diversification of international tourist flows to Spain

Article 03  
22/05/2024

<https://doi.org/10.53479/36594>

## Rationale

International tourism in Spain was highly buoyant in 2023, with record levels of tourist arrivals, hotel overnight stays and average spending per tourist. This article describes the recent characteristics of these tourist flows and the factors that could help explain them.

## Takeaways

- The increase in international tourist arrivals in 2023 and early 2024 relative to the 2016-2019 period was more marked during the autumn and winter months than during the summer months.
- In 2023 foreigner hotel overnight stays increased more sharply, compared with the pre-pandemic period, in the northern regions of Spain than in the islands and the south of mainland Spain.
- Foreign tourist source countries also appear to have diversified in 2023, with a notable increase in the number of tourists from the Americas and a slight decrease in the number of tourists from countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom.
- In 2023 as a whole international tourists appear to have chosen higher category hotels to a greater extent, thus boosting average spending per tourist.

## Keywords

International tourism, hotel overnight stays.

## JEL classification

Z30, Z32, F10, F60.

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## RECENT DIVERSIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL TOURIST FLOWS TO SPAIN

In 2023 Spain received more than 85 million international tourists – almost two million more than the all-time high recorded in 2019 – pushing up Spain’s share in global tourist arrivals to above pre-pandemic levels (see Chart 1.a). Moreover, against a background of rising prices in the sector, in which tourist consumption could be expected to be contained, total spending by foreign tourists reached record levels in real terms, driven by a robust increase in average daily spending, linked in part to the increase in travellers’ stays in higher category hotels (see Chart 1.b).<sup>1</sup> This article analyses some of the possible determinants of the vigour of international tourism in Spain in the most recent period.

In the years leading up to the pandemic, international tourism in Spain was characterised by a high seasonal and geographical (in terms of both origin and destination) concentration. Almost half of the international tourists who came to Spain did so in the summer months (see Chart 2.a). Four regions – the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, Catalonia and Andalusia – received around 80% of such tourists (see Chart 2.b). In addition, international tourism was predominantly from nearby countries, since the main source countries were European (namely, the United Kingdom, France and Germany) (see Chart 2.c).

In the most recent period, the high dynamism of international tourist arrivals in Spain points to a certain change in these patterns. First, the increase in arrivals was more pronounced during the autumn and winter months, which points to a certain seasonal diversification. For example, tourist arrivals were 10%, 16% and 25% higher, respectively, in October, November and December 2023 than in the same months of the period 2016-2019, while arrivals in the summer months were only 1% higher. The latest data suggest that they were also roughly 22% higher in 2024 Q1 than in the same months of the period 2016-2019 (see Chart 3.a).

Second, the number of foreigner hotel overnight stays<sup>2</sup> has grown more in the northern regions of Spain than in the islands and the south of mainland Spain, which accounted for the highest share of such stays in the past, resulting in a greater geographical diversification of tourist flows across the national territory. In particular, hotel overnight stays in the Cantabrian regions, Navarre and Rioja increased by more than 26% in 2023 relative to the pre-pandemic period, while in the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands and Andalusia they declined slightly (-0.5%, -0.1% and -0.2%, respectively) (see Chart 3.b).

Third, the countries of origin of international tourists arriving in Spain also appear to have diversified in 2023, with remarkable growth in the number of tourists from the Americas and, in

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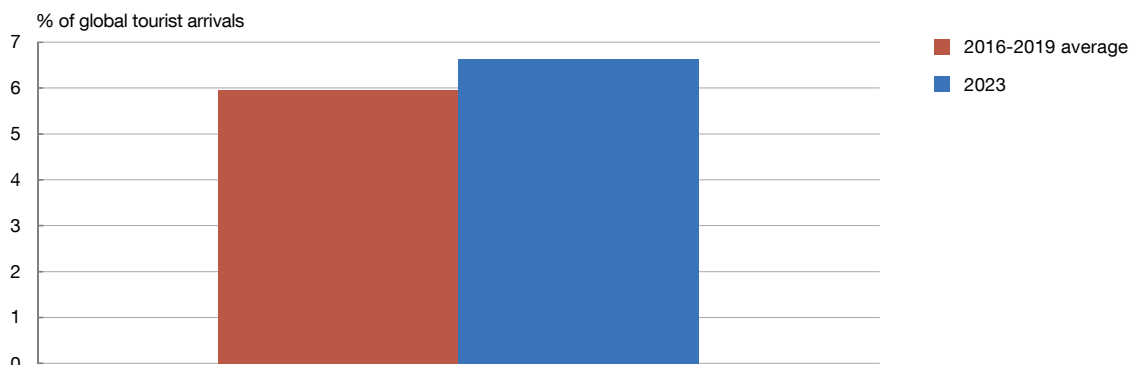
1 In 2024 Q1, daily average real spending appears to have continued increasing, by around 1% year-on-year and slightly more than 3% in relation to the same period in 2019.

2 According to the National Statistics Institute (INE), overnight stays in non-hotel accommodation (mainly tourist apartments and campsites) fell by just over 8% in 2023 relative to the 2016-2019 average, although they increased in the northern regions of Spain.

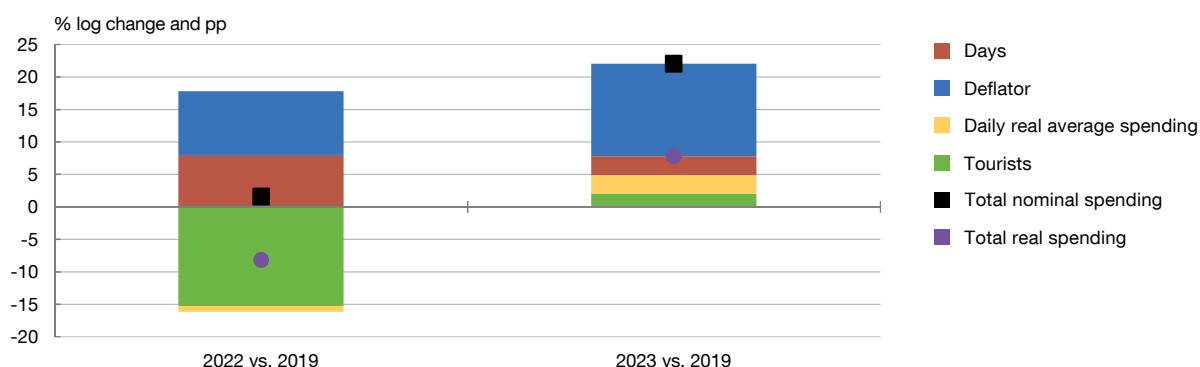
Chart 1

**Despite the profound impact of the health crisis on Spain's tourism sector, tourist arrivals in 2023 exceeded the record numbers of 2019, reaching just over 85 million**

1.a Recent changes in Spain's share in global tourist arrivals



1.b Logarithmic change in nominal tourist spending (not including transport or tourist package)



SOURCES: INE and Banco de España.

particular, from the United States,<sup>3</sup> which increased by more than 40% compared with the period 2016-2019 (see Chart 3.c). By contrast, arrivals from traditional source countries appear to have grown more moderately (5% in the case of France and 14% in the case of Italy) or even decreased (as in the case of Germany or the United Kingdom, which saw declines of around 5%). It should be noted that at end-2023 tourist numbers had still not returned to pre-pandemic levels in numerous countries, particularly Asian countries (such as Japan), historically characterised by higher average spending per tourist.

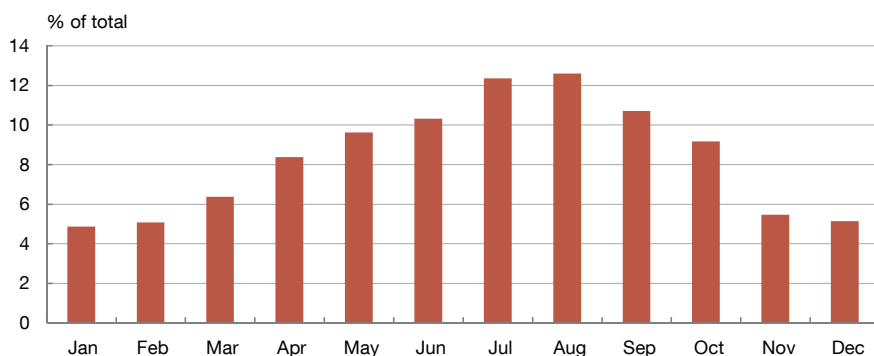
Lastly, as regards the dynamics described in the previous paragraph, of note is the substantial increase, compared with the pre-pandemic period, in the number of overnight stays in higher category (i.e. four and five-star) hotels. This is in line with the greater supply of bed places in establishments of this kind and appears to be linked to the increase in average expenditure per tourist (for more details, see García Esteban, Gómez Loscos and Martín Machuca, 2023). Thus,

<sup>3</sup> Average spending per tourist is typically higher for tourists from the United States. The rise in the number of tourists from the United States appears to have been driven, at least in part, by the depreciation of the euro against the dollar in this period.

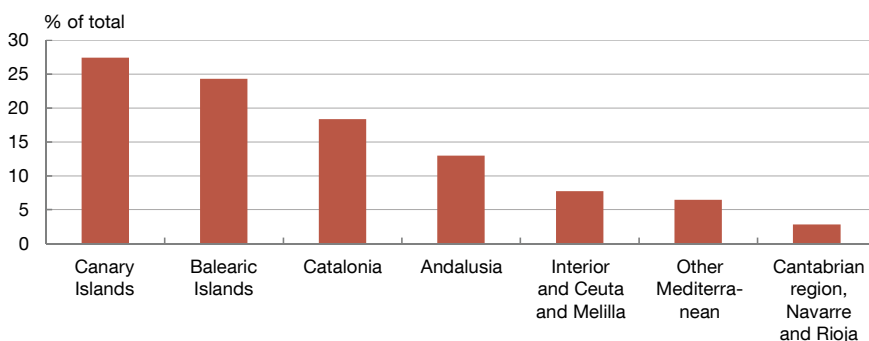
Chart 2

The tourism sector in Spain before the pandemic (2016-2019) was characterised by a high seasonal and geographical concentration

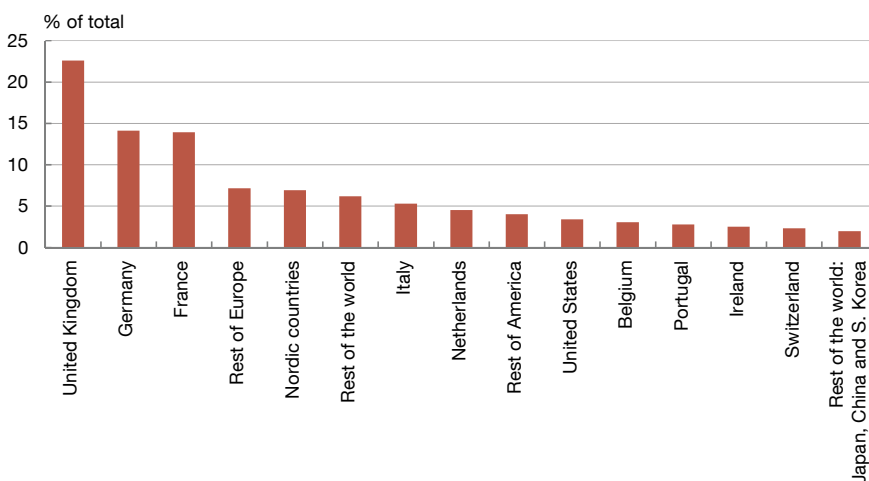
2.a Number of tourists per month (2016-2019 average)



2.b Foreigner hotel overnight stays by region (2016-2019 average) (a)



2.c Tourist arrivals by country of residence (2016-2019 average)



SOURCE: INE.

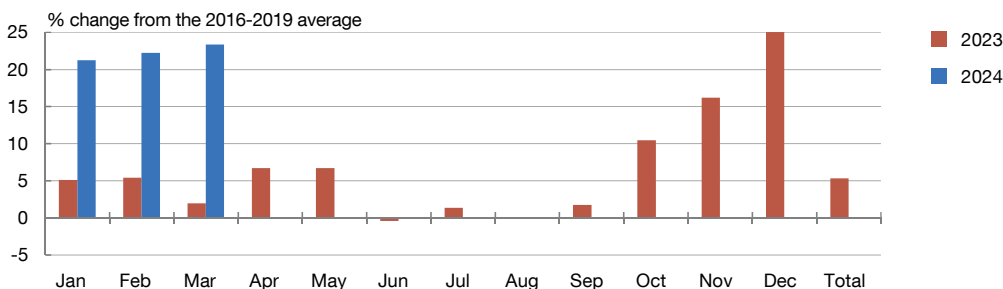
a "Cantabrian region" includes Asturias, Galicia, Cantabria and the Basque Country; "Other Mediterranean" includes Valencia and Murcia.



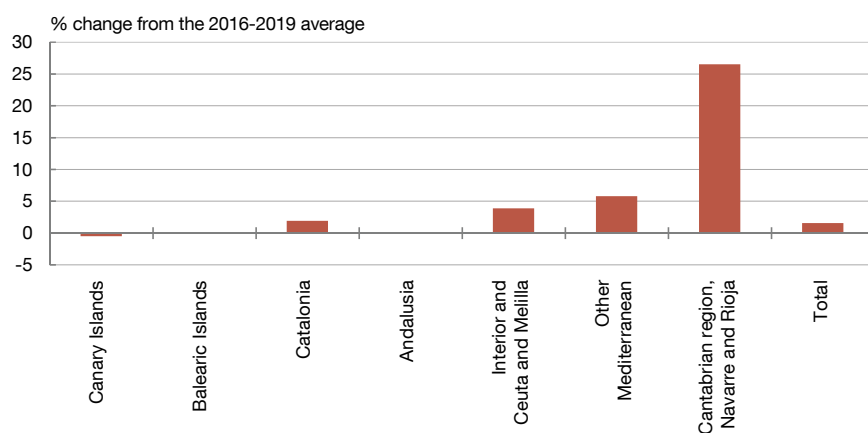
Chart 3

The increase in tourist arrivals in 2023 relative to the 2016-2019 average was sharper from October to November; foreigner hotel overnight stays grew more in Spain's northern regions

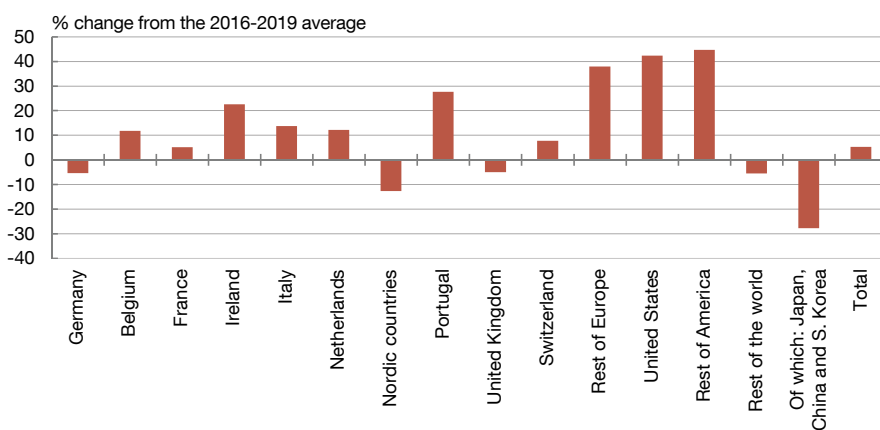
3.a Foreign tourist arrivals by month



3.b Foreigner hotel overnight stays by region in 2023 (a)



3.c Tourist arrivals by country of residence in 2023



SOURCE: INE.

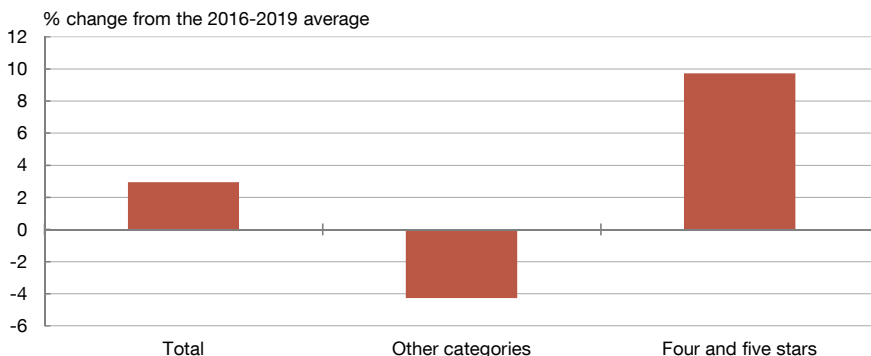
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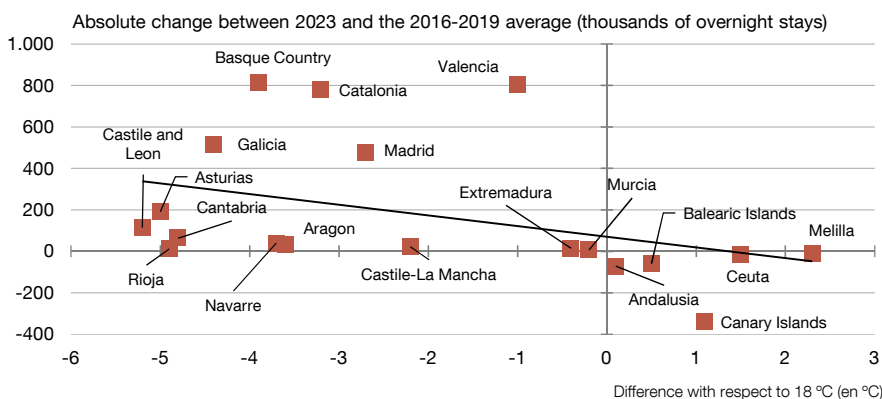
Chart 4

**Different supply and demand factors are leading to more balanced tourism dynamics in terms of seasons and geographical areas**

4.a Change in the number of estimated hotel bed places by category in 2023



4.b Relationship between temperature and foreigner hotel stays by region



SOURCES: INE and Agencia Estatal de Meteorología.



according to the Hotel Occupation Survey, the number of bed places has increased in the higher category establishments – to stand 10% above the 2016-2019 average – and has fallen in the other categories, which have not yet recovered their pre-pandemic levels (see Chart 4.a).

Several factors could explain these developments. First, while it is still early to draw definitive conclusions, climate change could be causing tourists to travel to destinations with more moderate temperatures in summer (see Chart 4.b).<sup>4</sup> This could reduce concentration in the most popular tourist areas during the summer months and increase occupancy in beach destinations during the autumn and winter months. In this vein, some studies have shown that changes in the geographical distribution of tourist expenditure in Spain during high season are associated with temperature increases above the historical daily average.<sup>5</sup> Second, Spain is considered a safe

4 For further details on the environmental dimension of tourism globally, see World Tourism Organisation (2024).

5 For more details, see Heymann (2024).

destination,<sup>6</sup> as indicated by the competitiveness index of the World Economic Forum.<sup>7</sup> In a setting of geopolitical instability and uncertainty marked by the Middle East conflict, this gives it a certain advantage over other Eastern Mediterranean competitors, such as Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

Looking ahead, it is uncertain whether the process of diversification and slight improvement in the quality of the tourist flows to Spain (as documented in this article) will continue. In principle, there is still room for improvement in two aspects. One is the recovery of business tourism, which in 2023 was nearly 3% below pre-pandemic levels, according to INE data, and which, in addition, has a less seasonal pattern than leisure and holiday tourism. The other is that a certain boost can also be expected from the recovery of the arrivals of tourists from countries where tourism outflows have not yet returned to their pre-pandemic figures, such as Japan, which is also characterised by a high average expenditure per tourist. The European economies' expected recovery from the impact of the energy crisis (for example, Germany returned to its pre-pandemic levels in early 2024) and the improvement of the real incomes of their population could be additional supporting factors in the short and medium term.<sup>9</sup>

In any event, a high level of uncertainty surrounds this outlook. From a conjunctural point of view, the intensity of tourism flows to Spain will continue to depend, to some extent, on the way geopolitical tensions evolve in some competing regions and on the strength of the global economic recovery. From a structural viewpoint, the tourism sector faces some major challenges that should not be underestimated. These include adaptation to the energy transition process and the adoption of new digital technologies. In this respect, it is important to emphasise that Spain is particularly exposed to the physical risks associated with climate change (see Banco de España, 2024); accordingly, the impact of global warming on tourism activity could have a more adverse impact than observed in recent years. Also notable is the challenge of achieving an effective use of Next Generation EU funds to steer investment projects towards improving transport infrastructures and regenerating the most congested tourist areas (for more details, see Hernández de Cos, 2024).

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6 See Banco de España (2017).

7 According to the Travel and Tourism Development Index 2021, Spain was the third country with the best travel and tourism development index in the world, after Japan and the United States. This index takes into account, among other aspects, the country's safety and health services.

8 According to the latest Exceltur report of April 2024, Spain is set to benefit in the coming months from the effects of the war in the Middle East on Egypt. While searches by international tourists bound for Egypt have declined considerably since the outbreak of the war, searches for travel to Spain have not changed substantially, according to data from Destination Insights with Google.

9 Also worth mentioning, as an additional factor, are the new labour dynamics which arose or became more pronounced after the pandemic, such as working from home, which may lead to longer average stays.

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## How to cite this document

Jiménez-García, Blanca and Coral García Esteban. (2024). "Recent diversification of international tourist flows to Spain". *Economic Bulletin - Banco de España*, 2024/Q2, 03. <https://doi.org/10.53479/36594>

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ISSN 1695-9086 (online edition)