

## Via@ Tourism Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors: [Viatourismreview.com](http://Viatourismreview.com)




### To cite this article:



MEMBRADO, J.C., HUETE, R., MANTECÓN, A., 2016, Urban Sprawl and Northern European Residential Tourism in the Spanish Mediterranean Coast, *Via@*, 2016-2(10), <https://viatourismreview.com/es/2017/09/art2-2/>

### To link to this article:

<https://viatourismreview.com/es/2017/09/art2-2/>

### Languages:

 Article in English

  This article can be downloaded in Catalan and Spanish (original language)

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Online publication: December 2016 @[Viatourismreview.com](http://Viatourismreview.com)

## Urban Sprawl and Northern European Residential Tourism in the Spanish Mediterranean Coast

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### **Abstract**

*Residential tourism from Northern European countries has influenced the process of urban development in the Spanish Mediterranean coast. We explain the recent urban growth in Spain (or “Spanish house bubble”) and then show the main characteristics of the influx of citizens from other European countries richer than Spain, especially into the Spanish Mediterranean coast and specifically into the Costa Blanca region. Finally we demonstrate the relationship between the development of residential tourism and the growth of urban sprawl in the Spanish Mediterranean coast and we analyze some of its consequences for the region..*

**Keywords:** *Planning, House bubble, Urban sprawl, Spanish Mediterranean coast, Residential tourism*

### **Introduction**

This paper will examine the massive residential tourism from Northern Europeans into the Mediterranean Spanish coast and will explore and discuss the effects of such residential mobility on the huge expansion of urban sprawl in that part of Spain. This mobility of (mainly) Northern European elderly people into Mediterranean Spain has been one of the most significant flows of international retirement migration in the entire world during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Despite some scholars have made considerable analytical efforts in order to explain what does residential tourism mean (see Huete & Mantecón, 2012), the boundaries between long-stay tourism in private homes and residential migration searching leisure experiences still remain unclear. The residential tourism concept has provoked intense debate among scholars and contains contradictions (beginning with the very term –residential tourism- which is itself an oxymoron) that have served both to

clarify and to conceal the nature of different social dynamics. That is why in this paper we have decided not to interpret the residential tourism as a specific type of tourism but as a set of processes that lead to very different changes. In these processes unequivocally tourist behaviors intermingle in complex ways with conducts linked to real estate business and migration processes. Therefore, in this paper we use interchangeably and almost equivalently both concepts of residential migration and residential tourism.

This paper discusses as well the economic benefits and the environmental drawbacks of sprawling development patterns in Mediterranean Spain in recent years –a development favored by the Spanish government, promoted by public authorities and large construction companies, with foreign capital involved, and mostly driven by Northern European long-stay tourists and retired migrants. Among the 5 million citizens that migrated into Spain between 2000 and 2010, around 20% did so from higher GDP *per capita* European countries than Spain's. Most of these latter migrated into Spain as residential tourists with the expectation of achieving a better lifestyle through residential mobility. We can find the roots of Spain's residential tourism in the mass tourism boom initiated in the 1960's. The remarkable growth in both wealth and life expectancy that took place in Northern Europe from the 1960's on resulted in a swell in the numbers of Northern European elderly who could afford to holiday abroad, preferably in the Mediterranean region, after the end of their working lives (Russell, Warnes & Williams, 1998). From the 1990's on many of the usual tourists in sunny Spain –especially senior citizens– decided to take up permanent or part-time residence in the Mediterranean region (Casado, 2006; Gustafson, 2009; Huete, 2009; King, Warnes & Williams, 2000; Mazón, Huete & Mantecón, 2009; O'Reilly, 2000, 2007; Rodríguez, Casado & Huber, 2005; Williams, King, Warnes & Patterson, 2000; Nielsen, 2016).

In the Spanish Mediterranean coastal areas where senior residential tourists and migrants have settled, almost all the land-use planning that has been done in the last decades has aimed to serve real estate and tourist interests (Huete & Mantecón, 2011; Vera & Ivars 2003). This was particularly so during the global economic expansion of the late 20th century and the early 21st century, when elderly migrants (over 55) arrived in Spain *en masse* in order to stay: their numbers went from 60,000 in 1991 to almost 450,000 in 2012. This flow was triggered, as regards Spain, by a combination of causes such as low-cost airlines, relatively low housing prices and cost of living, and global technological improvement.

If we analyze the use of artificial land during the last twenty years in Spain, we can see that urban land uses experienced a strong rise in this period, chiefly due to the Spanish housing bubble (1997-2007) (Burriel, 2008, 2009; Gaja, 2008; Romero, 2010); and also that among urban land uses, it was urban sprawl that grew the most in those years. Local developers contributed to the expansion of sprawling development patterns in the Spanish Mediterranean area by constructing thousands of single-family homes that were largely bought by Northern European tourists and migrants. It must be pointed out that urban sprawl –a kind of development pattern studied by Brody (2013), Gillham (2002), Hogan & Ojima (2008), Richardson & Chang Hee (2004), Sarzynski, Galsterb & Stack (2014) or Zeng, Sui & Li (2005)– had been scarcely present in Spain, or in the whole Southern Europe region, before the economic expansion of the late 20th century and the early 21st century (Muñoz, 2003; Pumain, 2004; Roca, Burns & Carreras, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to establish the correlation between the growth of urban sprawl and the increasing of Northern European residential tourism into the Spanish Mediterranean coast. This paper is organized as follows. First, we focus on recent urban development and the main reasons behind what has been called the “Spanish housing bubble” (1997-2007), where urban sprawl has consumed more acres than any other type of urban development. Second, we discuss the characteristics of the Northern European migration in the Mediterranean Spanish Coast, and the role of developers and local authorities in the fact that this territory is Europe’s most popular place for residential tourists to live in. Third, we analyze the contribution of residential tourism to urban sprawl by observing how the coastal Mediterranean tourist regions are the ones who host most of residential tourists and, at the same time, they are the ones where urban sprawl is more widespread (in acres per capita), especially in Costa Blanca (the tourist name for the province of Alicante). Fourth, we explore the recent urban dynamics of Costa Blanca. As a conclusion, we analyze the consequences of the urban sprawling in the Spanish Mediterranean coast, with all the short-term benefits for local economies and all the long-term drawbacks for the territory.

## Data and Methods

In this study we have analyzed data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, Instituto Nacional de Estadística). In order to distinguish residential migrants living in Spain from those who do not belong to this category, we have taken into account their age and country of origin. Thus we consider individuals aged 55 years or older, as it is known that many retirees associated with residential tourism have opted for early retirement or have spouses that have not reached retirement age yet (Huete, 2009; Koch-Schulte, 2008). As for the country of origin, immigrants coming from countries with a higher GDP *per capita* than Spain’s can be regarded as residential tourists, while those coming from countries with a lower GDP *per capita* than Spain’s can be seen as labor migrants. Of course, we assume that in fact both labor migrants and residential tourists may be found in any group (either by age or country), but all studies agree that the number of cases deviating from the aforementioned distribution is not significant (Huete, Mantecón & Estévez, 2013; Rodríguez, Casado & Huber, 2005).

We have taken data from two GIS projects to study the urban sprawl in the Spanish Mediterranean area. The first is CORINE Land Cover (CLC), started in 1985 as an initiative of the European Commission with the aim of gathering environmental data about the European Union and incorporated in the European Environment Agency (EEA) since 1994. The EEA is the institution responsible for providing information on Europe’s environmental and territorial policies –to achieve this aim it uses CLC. Its first version dates from 1990, and it was updated in 2000 and 2006. It was expected to be updated again in 2012 (CLC2012 is currently under construction). The CLC nomenclature consists of 44 land uses, 11 of which are labelled artificial uses. Among these 11 artificial uses can be found the so-called *Discontinuous urban fabric*, which is defined as a use comprising residential areas around the edge of urban district centers, and certain urban districts in rural areas –this is, therefore, the CLC’s land use which best describes the sprawling development pattern, and we have employed it to draw our maps of urban sprawl evolution in Spain. A second GIS

project on land use evolution that we have taken into account is SIOSE (Spain's Land Cover Information System), a project promoted in 2005 by the Spanish Geographic National Institute (IGN, 2006; Membrado, 2011a) and updated in 2009 and 2011. SIOSE's nomenclature is formed by simple and composed land uses. One of the composed land uses is *mixed urban*, which in turn is divided into *casco* (old city), *ensanche* (new city), and *discontinuo* (urban sprawl). In order to distinguish urban sprawl areas from compact cities, we have taken the class *discontinuo* as sprawling development and the sum of the classes *casco* and *ensanche* as compact development.

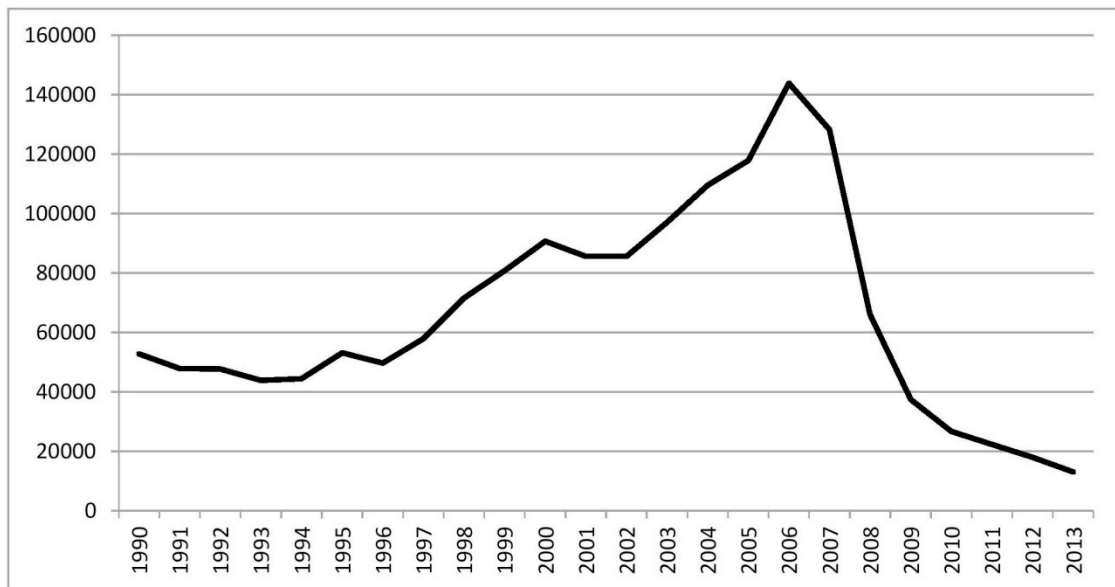
The map design program used to create the maps in this paper has been ArcGIS by ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute). In order to create our maps of Spain we have used provincial-level data, which are more disaggregated than those at a regional level, and less disaggregated, but easier to read, than those at a municipal level. To create our maps of Costa Blanca we have used as a reference the *comarca* level, which is smaller area than a province but bigger than a municipality (and rather similar to a county).

## Background

### *The Spanish Housing Bubble*

Between 1997 and 2007, economic growth in Spain was mainly based on the construction sector, a fact which was particularly striking all along the Mediterranean coast. This housing boom can be explained by two main factors. The first is that Spain, as a member of the Euro zone since its creation in 1999, enjoyed the benefits of being part of a currency regarded as strong and safe (Romero, 2010: 24). It was thus easy for Spanish banks and companies to get credit from abroad. The second is the approval in 1998 of a new Land Law which established that any non-protected piece of land could be built on. The conjunction of both factors led to considerable investment of private capital (both Spanish and foreign) in the housing sector, offering quick, substantial returns. Town councils began to promote urban expansion so as to use it as a source of revenue (via taxes). The lack of a proper regulatory framework allowed non-public developers to build as much as they wanted. Neither national nor regional authorities were able, or willing, to control this development promoted by municipalities and private interests, or to attenuate its impact on environmental sustainability (Burriel, 2008).

This development process was reinforced by cheap credit, thanks to the low interest rates that banks charged on loans to buy a house. This, in turn, led to more people buying houses as opposed to renting them. Thanks to the construction fever, unemployment in Spain went from 21% in 1997 to 8% in 2006. The rising employment increased many families' disposable income, and also attracted many immigrants, whose number went from 1% of the whole population living in Spain in 1995 to 12.2% in 2010. This increase of the immigrant population also implied that even more people now wanted to buy a house in Spain.



**Figure 1. Spain: land (thousands of sq. m) built on (1990-2013).**

Source: INE (2014)

Because of land speculation, the average housing price multiplied by three between 1997 and 2007. That led to a growing housing bubble that eventually burst in the 2007 global financial crisis. The credit lines were cut, causing the collapse of the construction-dependent economy (Hernández, Morales & Saurí, 2014: 77). Since then, housing price has fallen in Spain by a third and housing construction has descended to levels of the early 1960's.

#### *Expansion of urban sprawl. Characteristics of this development pattern*

Urban sprawl is a pattern of low-density settlement which has been the prevailing urban development pattern in Spain for the last 20 years. According to CLC data, in the period 1987-2006 urban or other developed land uses increased significantly all over Spain, especially in the Mediterranean Spanish Coast (just the coastal Mediterranean provinces), where 134,280 new hectares were developed. Among these developed land uses, it was urban sprawl that grew the most (46,406 new hectares). If we take into account only a 10-km-deep coastal strip, developed land uses increased by 83,496 hectares, and urban sprawl alone grew by 35,653 (+68%). According to CLC, in 2006 4.2% of land along a 10-km-deep coastal strip in Mediterranean Spain was occupied by urban sprawl, a percentage that reached 40% in some resort towns.

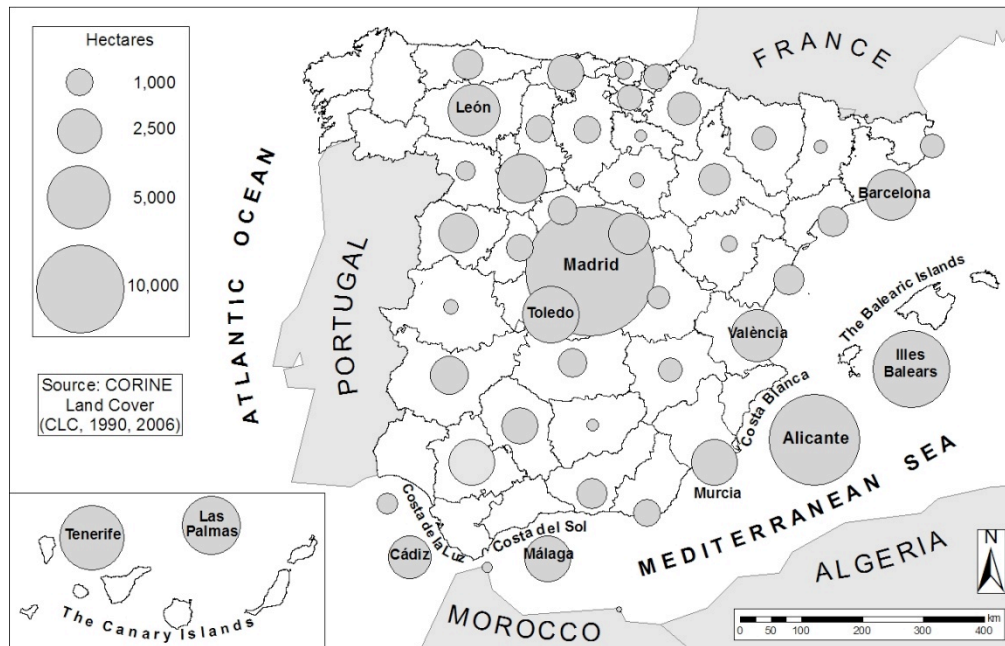


Figure 2. Spain: urban sprawl growth by provinces (1987- 2006)

Source: CLC.

This kind of development –urban sprawl– was developed first in the United States particularly after the Second World War, when large suburban residential areas were created there. The spread of urban sprawl to Europe began first in the northern countries (by the 1960’s), then it reached France (where suburbanization multiplied fivefold between 1969 and 1999) (Pumain, 2004: 137), and finally it affected Spain, Italy and other southern countries. Before the remarkable recent urban sprawl development, the Mediterranean coastal regions had traditionally been a paradigm of high-density cities, urban complexity and social diversity (Muñoz, 2003: 381; Roca *et al.*, 2004).

Although there is not a universally accepted definition of urban sprawl, there are several common characteristics that can help us describe it, according to Brody (2013). First, the most frequently noted feature of sprawl is that low-density, single family dwellings consume large amounts of previously natural or farm land. Second, the development of homogeneous sprawl neighborhoods lacking a mixture of land uses (residential, commercial, amenities...) forces residents to rely on automobiles even for short distances. During the 2000’s, car use grew faster in Europe than in the United States, a fact which can be linked to the growth, despite some European pro-compact city policies, of urban sprawl in the old continent. Nowadays “there is more convergence than divergence between the United States and Western Europe” as regards suburbanization (Richardson & Chang Hee, 2004: 7). Third, sprawl housing grows outward from more compact urban cores. Approximately 80 percent of the land for new housing in the United States during 1994-1997 can be found outside compact cities (Heimlich & Anderson, 2001); according to CLC, during 1987-2006 73% of land for new housing in Spain was for sprawl outside urban cores. Fourth, development is dispersed, which favors the development of land situated further out in the countryside. This leapfrogging growth creates a chaotic development pattern

consuming large amounts of natural and farm lands. Fifth, sprawl residences are often placed along the roads extending outward from urban cores, creating a *ribbon* development that increases traffic jams. And sixth, urban sprawl often encroaches on natural and agricultural lands and thus tends to blur the division between urban and rural areas.

Those who support urban sprawl believe that living in a suburban area increases contact with nature and reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. Furthermore, they argue that suburban houses are cheaper than those closer to the city center and that, when asked, most people prefer to live away from the compact city (Gillham, 2002: 72). Opponents of urban sprawl regard it as undesirable since it devours a huge amount of valuable land resources (including farmland and wetlands) and devastates landscapes. Moreover, it consumes unsustainable amounts of energy and water. Its dependence on the use of private vehicles causes not only air pollution but also traffic congestion, obesity and stress for drivers. Besides, it destroys community life and segregates people according to their status (*Ibid.*).

Among the causes which attract people from compact cities into suburban areas we can name the cost of housing: those who want to buy a large house can find less expensive options in suburban areas. Choosing to live in a sprawling residential area, however, is not only linked to the cost of housing but also to some new values (environmental awareness, global communication technology) as well as to the expansion of globalized patterns of production and consumption (Hogan & Ojima, 2008: 205).

### **Residential tourism in the Spanish Mediterranean Coast**

Thanks to the temporary wealth created by the Spanish housing bubble, Spain attracted over 5 million immigrants during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They mainly come from Eastern Europe, Southern America and Northern Africa (figure 3).



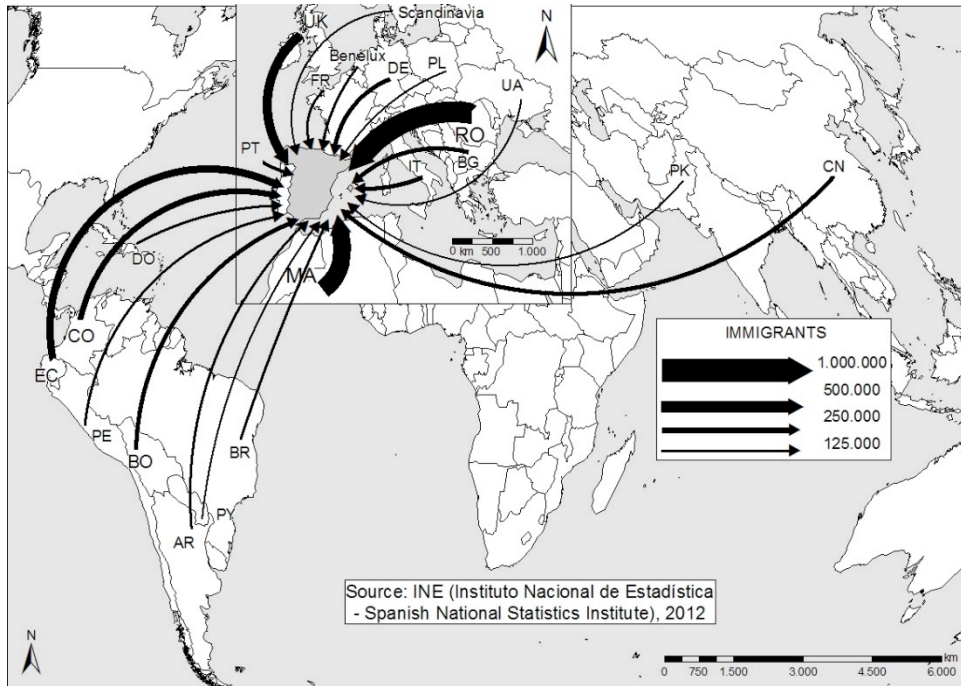


Figure 3. Spain: main countries of origin of registered immigrants (2012)

Source: INE (2014)

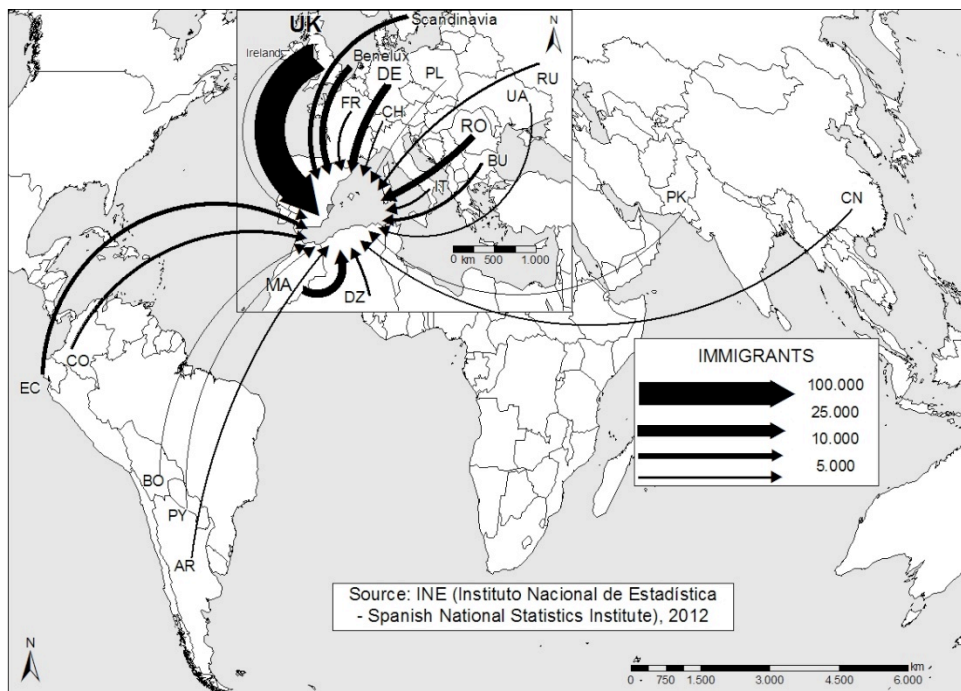


Figure 4. Costa Blanca: main countries of origin of registered immigrants (2012)

Source: INE (2014)

Via@ 2016-2 (10)

Nevertheless there is a noteworthy minority of immigrants (around 20%) whose origin are countries richer (with a higher GDP per capita) than Spain. Typically these come from the United Kingdom, Germany, the Benelux or Scandinavia. For the most part, they decided to settle all along the Mediterranean coast, in search not only of sunny, dry weather, but also of a different lifestyle. Residential tourists and residential migrants in the Spanish Mediterranean coast are people who live all the year or most of the year in there, most of them owning a property (Huete, 2009).

Residential tourism should refer only to those migrants whose daily life in Spain is linked to leisure experiences –typically, the retirees. Indeed, retirees are the most clearly identified group of residential tourists. As far as Spain’s senior migrants are concerned, it must be noted that almost half of the expatriates coming from countries with a higher GDP per capita than Spain’s are aged 55 and over, and that 95% of these senior migrants have settled in the Spanish coastal regions under Mediterranean climate<sup>1</sup>. So these residential tourists choose to live in the Mediterranean Spain for various reasons, among them the housing cost, the cost of living, the climate and the sea, but also what they regard as the *Mediterranean lifestyle* –a lifestyle that implies a better quality of life, and a healthier life, thanks to its slower pace and its outdoor activities. It is also important to take into account the role of the Spanish and foreign real estate developers, and of the Spanish political authorities, in supporting mass tourism and attracting the attention of potential buyers abroad to the Spanish coastal areas. Real estate promoters are also responsible for the concentration of expatriates of the same nationality in certain areas: to achieve optimization of resources and costs, they tried to sell each development in just one country, thus creating colonies of people from the same country. These settlements by nationality were particularly sought by the elderly, who found it safer to move abroad if they could live among people from their own country (Huete & Mantecón, 2012).

As we said above, residential tourists are mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean Spanish Coast. Costa Blanca is the area with the highest percentage of this kind of migrants on the total immigrant population: one third of all immigrants living in Costa Blanca are people over 55 and linked to residential tourism processes. If we observe the origin of immigrants (of all kinds) living in Costa Blanca (figure 4), and compare it with the origin of immigrants living in the whole of Spain (figure 3), we notice significant differences. Whereas in Costa Blanca the biggest group of expatriates come from the UK, in Spain as a whole they come mostly from Romania, Morocco and South America. Costa del Sol is the area with the second-highest percentage of residential tourists (25%) and the Canary Islands the third (20%). In areas placed far away from the Mediterranean coast, such as Madrid, the percentage of migrants (over 55) from countries with a GSP per capita higher than Spain equals 1% on the total immigrant population.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mediterranean climate is dry and hot in the summer, and more or less rainy and warm in the winter. Only 5% of senior migrants have decided to live outside this area, either in central Spain (where the climate is continental Mediterranean) or in northern Spain (where the climate is oceanic).

*Europe's most popular place for residential tourists to live in*

The Spanish Mediterranean coast is, by far, the Mediterranean region with the highest number of residential tourists. The number of registered inhabitants coming from European countries richer than Spain to this country in 2012 was around 1,125,000 (INE, 2014). If we compare this number with the amount of residential tourists living in other Mediterranean-climate European countries, we can see that Italy (150,000), Portugal (60,000) and Greece (50,000) lag far behind Spain<sup>2</sup>.

As regards retired residential tourists, 87,000 of them lived in Spain January 1<sup>st</sup> 1996, whereas in the same date of 2012 their numbers were close to 450,000 (figure 5). Despite the economic crisis (which started in 2007), this number did not cease to grow until January 1<sup>st</sup> 2012. During 2012 the amount of people linked to residential tourism processes living in Spain fell for the first time ever since official records began to list immigration data –it did so by 7,000. This 2012 drop was moderate compared to the one that took place in the following year: on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, according to provisional INE data, the numbers had dropped by 91,300 all along 2013. This sharp decline was caused by three causes at least. First, the European economic crisis, which led to many residential migrants moving back home. Second, the fact that some of them decided to unregister from the Spanish Census in order to avoid paying the rising taxes levied by the Spanish Treasury. Third, the fact that until 2014 the numbers of registered retired residential tourists had been artificially inflated by municipalities –which wanted to benefit from better government funding, since having more inhabitants meant receiving more funding–, in combination with the fact that in 2014 –precisely in order to enable the government to save on the funding of municipalities– the Spanish National Statistics Institute decided to purge the statistical registers.

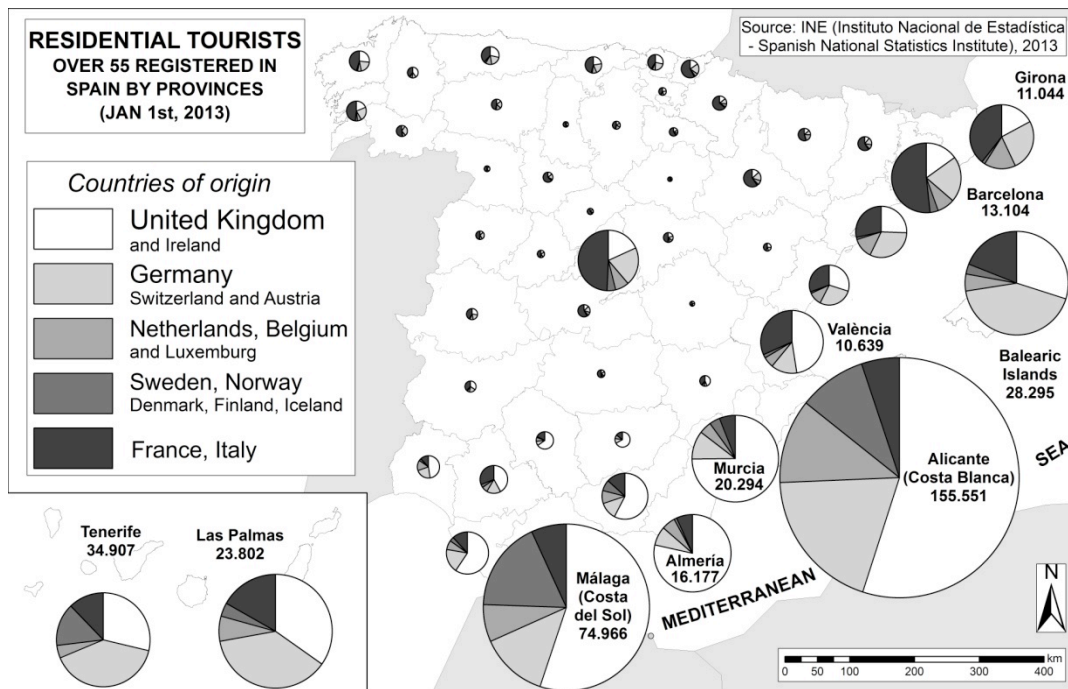
In figure 5 we can see the geographic distribution of residential tourists 55 and over. 95 of them live in Mediterranean Spain<sup>3</sup>. The areas where they prefer to settle are Costa Blanca (35,5% of all retired residential tourists in Spain live there), Costa del Sol (17,1%), the Canary Islands (13,5%), the Catalan Coast (7,1%), the Balearic Islands (6,6%), Mediterranean Andalusia without Costa del Sol (5%), Murcia (4,6%), and the Valencian coast (3,4%) (figure 5).

As far as the nationality of residential tourists is concerned, in figure 5 we have distinguished five provenances according to the immigrants' languages: Britons, plus a small Irish colony; Germans, including the small colony of Austrians and the sizable Swiss colony, most of which consists of German speakers; people from the Benelux (Dutchmen, Belgians and Luxembourgers), who for the most part speak Dutch; Scandinavians (including Finns), the Swedish and Norwegian colonies being considerable among them; and speakers of Romance languages (Frenchmen and Italians).

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<sup>2</sup> According to ISTAT (2013), in 2010 150,000 immigrants from European countries richer than Italy lived in this country. According to SEF (2013), around 60,000 European residential tourists had settled in Portugal in 2011. As for Greece, according to EL.STAT (2013), around 50,000 residential tourists had settled there in 2001 (we could not find more recent data).

<sup>3</sup> 80% in the Mediterranean coast proper, 13.7% in the Canary Islands, and 1.5% in Atlantic Andalusia. The remaining 5.3% live in central, western or northern Spain.



**Figure 5. Spain: registered residential tourists over 55 by nationality and by province in 2012**

Source: INE (2014).

Residential tourists over 55 from France and Italy (60,742; 14% of all residential tourists over that age in Spain) constitute a majority in the entire Catalan coast, due to the geographical proximity of their countries of origin to Catalonia. As for Scandinavians (36,726; 8.4% of all residential tourists over 55 living in Spain), they are concentrated in tourist resorts such as Costa Blanca and Costa del Sol<sup>4</sup>. People from the Benelux (37,844; 8.6% of all residential tourists over 55 living in Spain) are also predominantly concentrated in Costa Blanca, and, in a lesser way, in Costa del Sol<sup>5</sup>. German speakers (95,426; 21.8% of all residential tourists over 55 living in Spain), prefer Costa Blanca as well, but there are also big colonies of them in the Canary and the Balearic islands –in both archipelagos German speakers constitute the biggest colony of retired residential tourists<sup>6</sup>. Almost half of the residential tourists living in Spain (47.3%) come from United Kingdom and Ireland (207,274); these people have a preference for Costa Blanca and, in a lesser way, for Costa del

<sup>4</sup> 39% of all Scandinavians who are migrants over 55 and live in Spain do so in Costa Blanca and 36% in Costa del Sol.

<sup>5</sup> 47% of all the people from the Benelux who are migrants over 55 living in Spain do so in Costa Blanca and 14% in Costa del Sol.

<sup>6</sup> 32% of all German speakers who are migrants over 55 residing in Spain have chosen Costa Blanca, 21% the Canary Islands, and 13% the Balearic Islands.

Sol<sup>7</sup>; they constitute the biggest colony in the entire Southern and Eastern Spanish coast, excluding Catalonia and the islands (Figure 5).

## **The Contribution of residential tourists to Urban Sprawl**

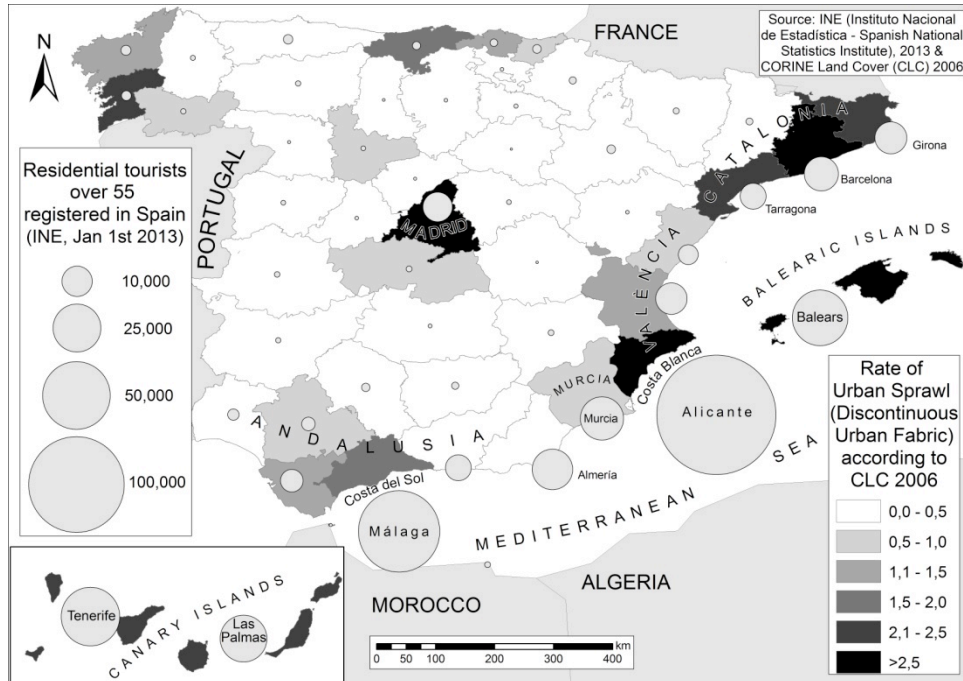
When they lived in their countries of origin, most residential tourists now residing in Spain did so in single-family houses, i.e. under a model of urban development that could be characterized as urban sprawl. Apart from the new lifestyle and the 3,000 sun hours per year, residential tourists were attracted to the Spanish Mediterranean area because of the price of single-family houses there. The cost of such a home was relatively low in the Spanish Mediterranean region, even after the price rise during the Spanish housing bubble (before 2008, buying a house in ‘sunny Spain’ –although expensive– was generally considered a good investment).

Thus, with the approval of local authorities, real estate developers built thousands of single-family houses. With this development came those drawbacks that are usually connected to urban sprawl: landscape and environmental damage, traffic congestion, flood risk or water scarcity. Unlike the part of Europe which lies north of latitude 45°, in the Mediterranean basin rainfall is low and there is a chronic shortage of water, a fact which is exacerbated by urban sprawl expansion. According to Vera (2006: 166), water consumption in tourist urban sprawl areas such as Torrevieja (in Southern Costa Blanca) doubles the water consumption corresponding to tourist compact cities such as Benidorm (in Northern Costa Blanca).

There is a connection in Spain between the number of residential tourists in a given territory and the amount of hectares of urban sprawl that can be found there. According to CLC 2006, Madrid and Barcelona are the provinces where the highest percentage of urban sprawl can be found (6.6% and 4.45% respectively of those provinces’ territory corresponds to this kind of land use, figure 6). In both cases this is due to the high population numbers (6.5 million people live in Madrid, and 5.5 in Barcelona) and to the outstanding GDP of both areas, which entails that a sizable number of people living there have enough purchasing power to be able to afford a single-family house. People living in urban sprawl around Madrid and Barcelona are mainly Spaniards. During the Spanish housing bubble many of them abandoned their former home in the compact city for a new house in a suburban area. As we have explained, they expect to experience there a new lifestyle, linked to modern phenomena such as environmental awareness, new communication technologies and global patterns of consumption.

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<sup>7</sup> 35.5% of all English-speaking migrants over 55 in Spain can be found in Costa Blanca and 17% in Costa del Sol.



**Figure 6. Spain: urban sprawl and residential tourists by provinces**

Source: CLC and INE (2014)

After Madrid and Barcelona, the greatest amount of urban sprawl can be found mainly in tourist coastal provinces. In Alicante/Costa Blanca, which, as we have seen, has more residential tourists than any other province in Spain, urban sprawl constitutes 4.16% of the land. That is 245 km<sup>2</sup> in total, compared with 348 in Barcelona and 527 in Madrid. However, if we divide the number of km<sup>2</sup> by the province's population, Alicante has 1 km<sup>2</sup> of urban sprawl per 7,881 inhabitants, while Madrid has 1 per 12,307, and Barcelona, 1 per 15,895. According to SIOSE data (2009), some areas in this province contain an extremely high percentage of urban sprawl: in the coastal district of Vega Baja, urban sprawl took up 8% of the land (and in its main town, Torrevieja, no less than 21%), and in the coastal district of Marina Alta urban sprawl exceeded 10% of the total surface (in towns such as Dénia and Xàbia this number rose to 25%; in Calp, to a stunning 40%) (Membrado, 2011b: 425-426).

Even though, as we can see in figure 6, there are some other areas –such as the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands and Costa del Sol– containing a huge number of residential tourists along with a noteworthy development of urban sprawl, we will focus on Costa Blanca, in order to establish the correlation between urban sprawl and residential tourism. In figures 7 and 8 we can see the distribution, per census sections, of residential tourists (according to INE 2011 data) and urban sprawl development (according to SIOSE 2011 data referring to some Costa Blanca areas particularly affected by urban sprawl). We can observe that the more urban sprawl we find, the bigger the number of residential tourists will be. Conversely, the areas where the compact city is predominant are the ones where the fewest residential tourists can be found.

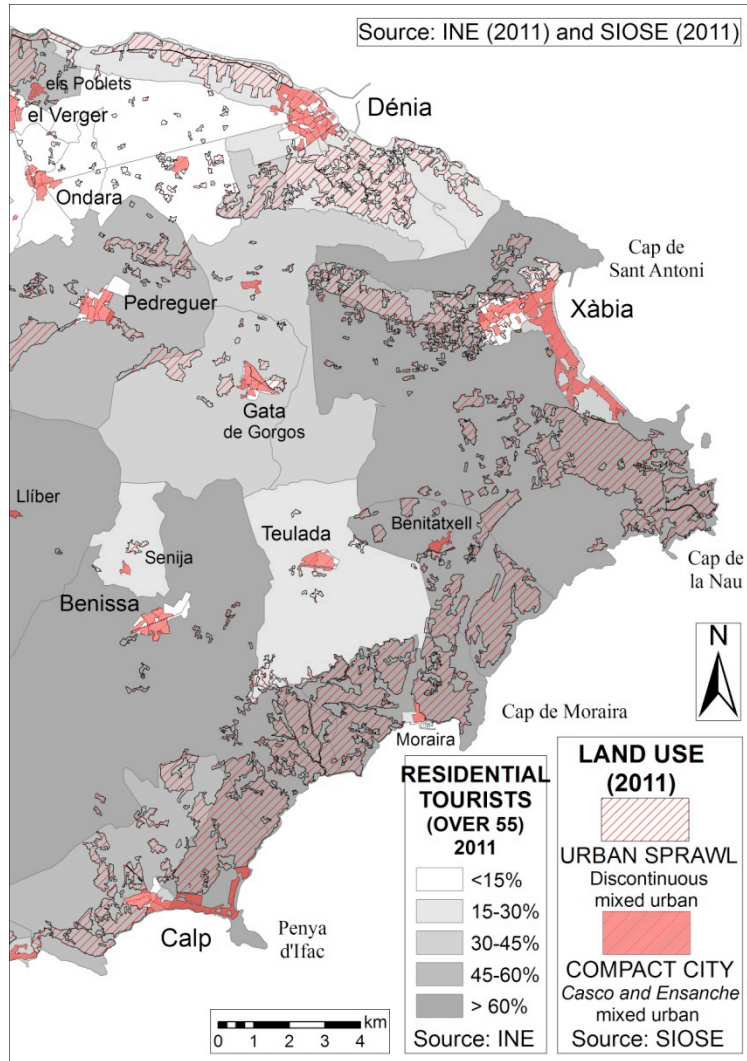
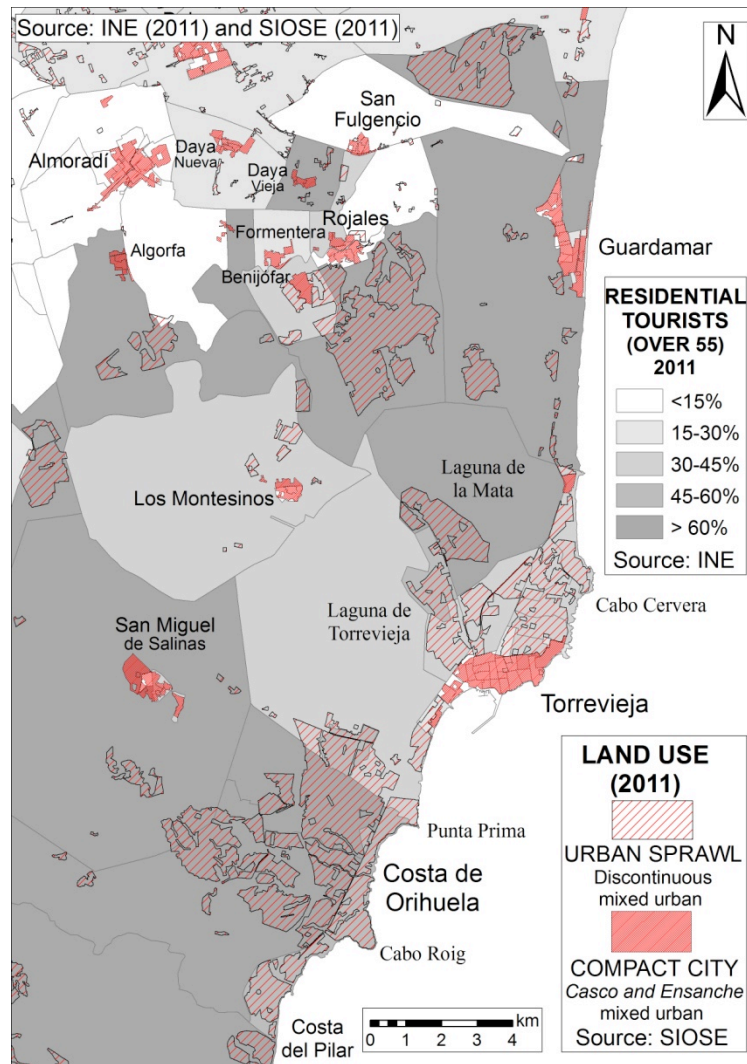


Figure 7. La Marina (Northern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl (2011) and residential tourists (2011)

Source: SIOSE 2011 and INE 2011



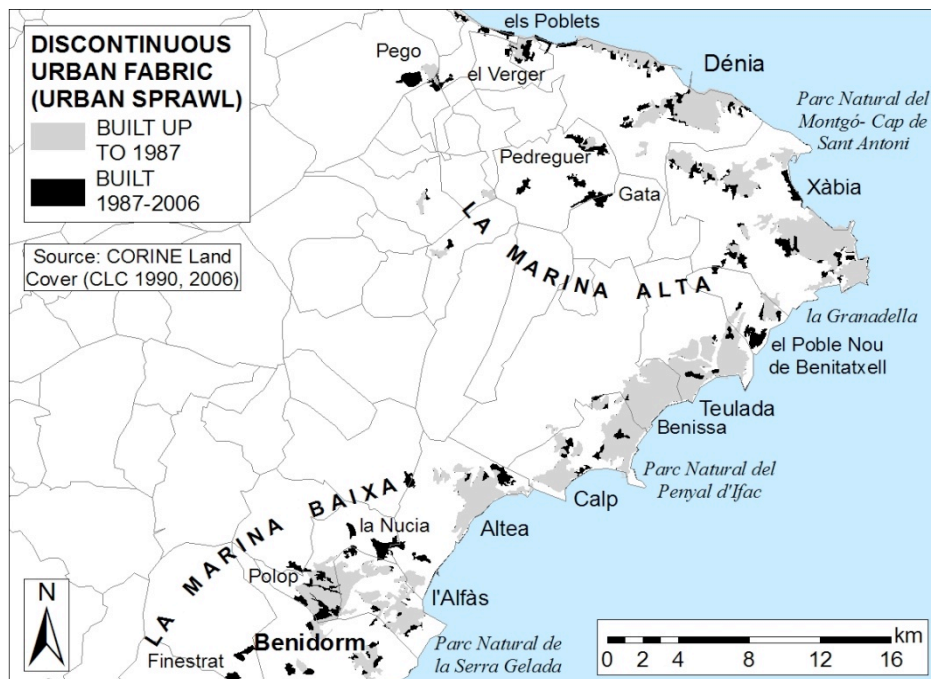
**Figure 8. Vega Baja (Southern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl (2011) and residential tourists (2011)**

Source: SIOSE 2011 and INE 2011

*Costa Blanca: a paradigm for urban sprawl and residential tourism in Southern Europe*

The Mediterranean Spanish coast has become the area in Southern Europe where urban sprawl has grown the most and the fastest, thanks to the solvent demand by residential tourists for single-family houses, according to the sprawling development patterns. Costa Blanca, a relatively small territory in coastal South Eastern Spain, contained more residential tourists in January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 (254,000) than the sum of those in Italy (150,000) and Portugal (68,000). To get an idea of the importance of urban sprawl and of residential tourism in Costa Blanca, it must be said that its five coastal districts, which constitute just 0.68% of the entire Spanish territory, contain 7.7% of the Spanish urban sprawl surface, and no less than one third of all the retired residential tourists living in Spain.



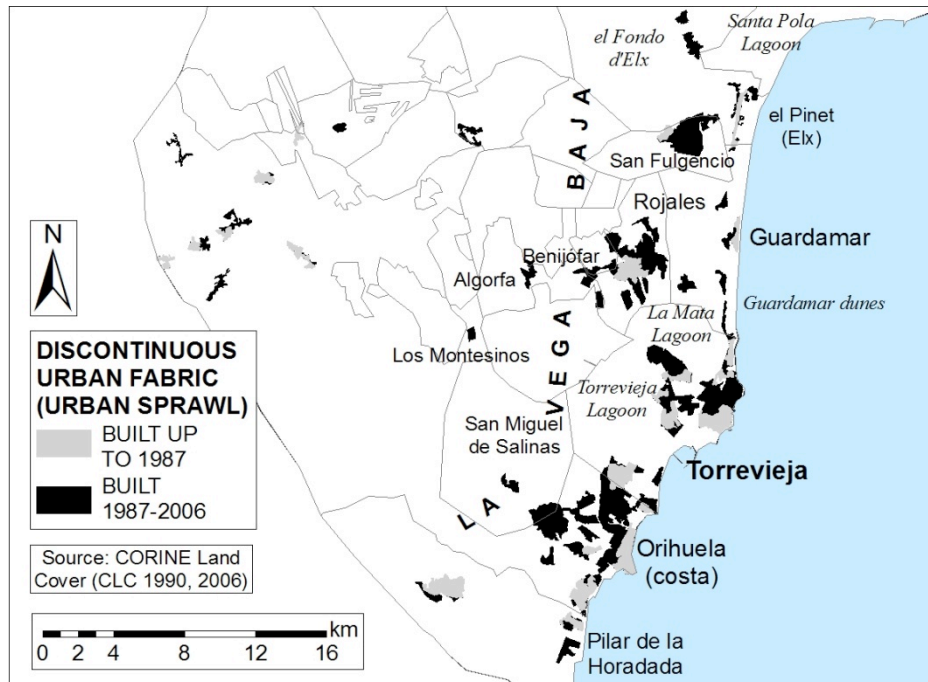


**Figure 9. La Marina (Northern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl diachronic map (1987-2006)**

Source: CLC

The biggest urban sprawl development connected to residential tourists in Costa Blanca can be found in their northernmost (La Marina, figure 7) and southernmost (La Vega Baja, figure 8) districts. Both areas benefit from its proximity to Alicante airport, which is very well connected (more than 40 daily flights) with the British Isles and also has regular connections with Scandinavia, the Benelux, Germany and Russia. In fact, many British residents in Costa Blanca usually travel to the UK for medical, work, family or other reasons.

In figure 9 we can see how during the Spanish real estate bubble there was a remarkable expansion of urban sprawl in La Marina. It went from 8,000 hectares in 1987 to 11.500 in 2006. Urban sprawl development was particularly significant in the pre-coastal area (3-7 km to the sea), because the coastal areas (0-3 km to the sea) were already densely developed before 1987. Thus the pre-coastal fringe acted as a spatial outlet for new growth. The same interior-coast development phenomenon has been observed in equivalent areas in North Carolina and Florida, and described by Crawford, Bradley & Marcucci (2013: 236) and by Kambly & Moreland (2009:11).



**Figure 10. La Vega Baja (Southern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl diachronic map (1987-2006)**

Source: CLC.

In figure 10 we observe recent urban sprawl development in Vega Baja –a less expensive area than la Marina (Northern Coast Blanca)– where thousands of Northern European retirees –with not very high incomes– have settled during the last 15 years (Hernández, Morales & Saurí, 2014: 77). As a consequence, a vast increase of urban sprawl took place there between 1987 (1,600 ha) and 2006 (6,300). Single-family houses were developed both by the seashore and, especially, in pre-coastal areas. The distance to the sea is compensated by other amenities, such as golf courses (Villar, 2012: 18). Thus, interior-coast urban sprawl areas in Vega Baja are typically distributed around golf courses. In fact, 7 out of the 14 golf courses existing in Costa Blanca are located in pre-coastal Vega Baja. And in 2012, pre-coastal Vega Baja contained the three Spanish municipalities with the highest percentage of foreigners: San Fulgencio (78% of its 12,522 inhabitants were foreigners), Rojales (77% of its 22,006 inhabitants) and Algorfa (72% of 4,755). Residential tourists constitute more than half the population there. English is spoken there more than any other language, including Spanish.

The large urban sprawl developments in Costa Blanca were driven by the high demand by residential tourists (especially the British), favoured by town councils, and promoted by large construction companies and banks. Some developers, bankers and politicians got rich overnight through land speculation and unlimited urban growth. Many of their companies and banks have eventually gone bankrupt due to mismanagement. Many savings banks bought so much land, intending to build on it, that when the housing bubble burst, they had to be intervened or nationalized. But before the crisis started, much land had already been constructed on. That implied

not only environmental and landscape drawbacks, but also the overcrowding of tourist areas.



**Figure 11. Rojales (La Vega Baja, Costa Blanca): densely packed urban sprawl. Thousands of houses are densely scattered over sq. km of urban land devoid of gardens, public transportation and other public services.**

Foto: Antoni Martínez Bernat

As for the economic effects of residential tourism to Costa Blanca, we can list some advantageous and some disadvantageous effects. Among the former, residential tourists increase the demand for local services (real estate, trade/consumption, personal, health and elderly care services), thus attracting new labor, which will increase the number of consumers even more (Huete & Mantecón, 2012: 163; Walters, 2002: 51). This process, according to Moss (2006), infuses the host region with a new economic, institutional and physical infrastructure capacity. The economic benefits of the immigrants' influx can be observed in the population increase of the places where they settle. E.g., Torrevieja (30% of residential tourists) has grown fourfold in just twenty years (its population went from 25,000 in 1991 to over 100,000 in 2011); Rojales (75% of residential tourists) tripled its population in the same period (it went from 5,000 to 20,000). The population of San Fulgencio (80% of residential tourists) multiplied by 7.5: from 1,600 in 1991 to 12,000 in 2011). Another benefit, cited by Walters (2002: 52), is that retirees have incomes based largely on pensions, which are independent of local economy, and recession-proof. However, Britons' incomes (Britons being more than a half of all retired residential tourists living in Costa Blanca) have been hit by the devaluation of the pound. Thus

Britons can no longer afford to live as expensively as they did before –as a matter of fact, many of them simply cannot afford to live in Costa Blanca any more<sup>8</sup>.



**Figure 12. Benitatxell (La Marina Alta, Costa Blanca): aggression to the environment. Overcrowding of houses hanging from a cliff, which disfigures the landscape**

Foto: Antoni Martínez Bernat

Negative impacts of residential tourism include, according to Williams & Gill (2004: 2) “unanticipated growth-related stress on the capacity of local social and health delivery systems, environmental resources, cultural and recreational facilities, retailing services and housing”. According to Walters (2002: 52) “rapid immigration carries the danger of local overpopulation –traffic congestion, overdevelopment, and so on. Migration may put unbearable strains on the local physical infrastructure (water, power, sanitation) and on the natural environment”. This fragment by Walters refers to retirement migration to Florida, Arizona, California and other Sun Belt US states, but it also accurately describes the current situation in Spain. Overdevelopment has been so huge there that some urban sprawl areas have become *densely packed sprawl*

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<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, thousands of British retirees are *trapped* in Mediterranean Spain. Most of them bought their houses between 1999 and 2008, when £1 equalled €1.5. Then a €200,000 house cost £133,000 and a £1,000 pension equalled €1,500. British retirees could afford expensive houses in Spain and live with relatively low pensions. But since 2008, the pound's depreciation against the euro has sliced about 30% off the UK pensioners' income. Many do not earn enough money (a £1,000 pension now equals about €1,150) to live in Spain and pay a mortgage, and need to return to the UK. However, some of these people are trapped because they sold their houses in Britain, bought one in the Mediterranean Spain, and now they cannot sell it, not even at a much lower price than what they paid for it (Huete, Mantecón & Estévez, 2013: 334).

areas, a paradoxical category<sup>9</sup>, with all the drawbacks listed by Walters. No less paradoxical is the fact that residential tourists, who moved south in order to increase their quality of life, have to see it eroded as their destinations become overdeveloped and overpopulated with new residential tourists (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009: 621). As a matter of fact, some of the first residential tourists who moved south several decades ago to settle in a rural, isolated location were later deprived of their particular haven of tranquility when local authorities and developers permitted to build on those rural lands. Some of these residential pioneers reported to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights what they regarded as an instance of urban abuse, political corruption and landscape destruction (Janoschka, 2011: 232).

Another drawback is that, even though retired migrants tend to be in good health when they move to their new home, as they age they become increasingly disabled. The long-term cost of sustaining an ageing population may be larger than estimated (Walters, 2002: 52). In the Spanish case, an aged population resulting from the arrival of senior migrants (and senior tourists) causes expenses that local authorities find it difficult to pay (Huete & Mantecón, 2012: 163), even more in the middle of an economic crisis like the current one.

Now as regards the social consequences of residential tourism to Costa Blanca, the huge development of this area, driven as we have seen by residential tourists who wanted to live in neighborhoods built in the urban sprawl spatial pattern, has created huge suburban areas isolated from compact cities and local people (figure 11). Most of these suburban neighborhoods have little or no public transportation, a fact which restricts the mobility of many of their residents, who tend to stay inside the suburb, with few entertainment options<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, isolation and the distance to basic services –such as health facilities or police stations– increase the perception of insecurity in these suburban areas.

Finally, regarding environmental impact, the consequences of this rapid, unlimited development have been devastating. The damage to the landscape and the environment, especially next to the sea, is irreparable (figures 12 & 13). The Land Law passed by the Spanish government in 1998, which established that any non-protected piece of land could be built on has had a heavy impact on some areas of the Mediterranean Spanish Coast. In Costa Blanca there are some coastal protected areas: Montgó-Cap de Sant Antoni, Penya d'Ifac (figure 13), Serra Gelada or the lagoons of Santa Pola, la Mata, and Torrevieja (figures 11 and 13). Thus it might seem that there is no shortage in this area of places where nature can be enjoyed. The

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<sup>9</sup> This is the expression used by *The Washington Post* (Harden, 2005) to describe the urbanized areas of Los Angeles, the origin and paradigm of urban sprawl around the world. According to this article, Los Angeles is denser than some major cities in the East that seemingly are more compact, such as New York or Washington. This process is similar to what happens in Mediterranean Spain. According to 2009 SIOSE data, population density (per developed square kilometre) in urban-sprawl-archetypal Torrevieja is 4,634, whereas in compact-city-archetypal Benidorm it is 5,011, just a bit higher.

<sup>10</sup> Schildt (2010) has studied this type of isolated retired migrant who lives alone, gets a low pension, has no relatives or friends in his/her home country, and does not take part in any Spanish social network. Huete & Mantecón (2012: 164) refer to the gradual increase in the number of European elderly migrants that experience such isolation associated with the proliferation of residents with mental health problems (anxiety/depression), and the increase in alcohol intake and tobacco use.

problem is that all those parks are partially or completely surrounded by overcrowded urban areas. There is no transition at all between the natural parks and the urbanized surfaces (e.g. figure 13). Due to its climate, landscape, culture and atmosphere, the Mediterranean coast is a place coveted by real estate developers. Governments –at a local, regional or national level– that should have protected this area against any profit-driven building excess, instead chose to allow –either by action or by omission– developers to go on building to the point where a considerable part of a unique Mediterranean landscape has been irreversibly disfigured or lost. This is a serious drawback when competing in a market as dynamic and open as tourism, which increasingly regards the quality of the territory as part of the quality of the product.



**Figure 13. Intensive land use in Calp (Marina Alta, Costa Blanca). In the forefront we can see the protected Peña d'Ifac natural park. Then we see compact urban land and a marina. Third, we can see the protected salt marshes. Fourth, there is a huge area of urban sprawl. As we can observe, there is no transition zone between the protected land and the built-on land.**

Foto: Antoni Martínez Bernat

## Conclusions

The Spanish Mediterranean region has seen an uncontrolled urban sprawl development during the last two decades. This growth was significantly driven by the solvent demand by residential sun-seeker tourists, mostly retired from Northern Europe, who wanted –and were able to afford– a house that would allow them to

live in the relaxing Mediterranean atmosphere. Retired residential tourists registered in Spain increased by 7.5 times between 1991 and 2012. A vast majority of them (95%) chose the Spanish coastal regions under Mediterranean climate to spend their retirement years.

This massive influx of residential tourism created a considerable short-term wealth in Spain. First, it generated revenues for (local, regional, national) governments via taxes. Second, it benefited the private real estate developers, and also the local people who provided services for the newcomers. Nonetheless, the lack of a suitable urban planning that would have made it possible to control the developers' excesses led to the construction of overcrowded suburban areas. Thus, many of those long-stay tourists and leisure-oriented migrants who had moved south expecting to improve their quality of life –among other things, by living surrounded by nature and tranquility– eventually saw themselves (partly) frustrated as their new neighborhoods became too developed. Another consequence of this overcrowding has been the irreversible damage caused to the environment and the landscape through the loss of fields, mountains, and forests.

The economic progress that urban sprawl development generated in the short term can have unpredictable economic consequences in the long term. Some suburban areas have become overcrowded, and many drawbacks derive from this process of densification in the Spanish Mediterranean coast. First, those areas have the same disadvantages as any other suburban area: high consumption of water, energy and land *per capita*; absolute dependence on private vehicles; and destruction of the landscape and the environment. Second, they also have the problems of compact areas (traffic congestion, dense urban land) without any of their advantages (public transportation, public facilities, green areas, shops close to home...). In addition, the increasingly indebted towns can hardly provide basic services, such as cleaning or policing, to these suburban areas.

Given the growing shortcomings of the overcrowded Mediterranean Spain, along with the effects of the economic crisis, the retired residential tourists now living there may not have replacement within a few years. Since at least 1991 (the first year for which we have statistical records) until 2012 the number of residential tourists never ceased to grow in Spain. However, INE data from January 1st, 2013, show that throughout 2012, despite a huge drop in housing prices, the amount of registered residential migrants in Spain slightly decreased, by 7,000 people. But this is nothing if compared with the sharp decline during 2013: in Jan 1st 2014, according to INE data, the numbers dropped by 90,000 (although we must keep in mind that this decrease coincided with a statistical purge by the Spanish National Statistics, which magnified the reduction). If local politicians want to prevent this decline to continue, they should begin to work in a more rational and sustainable way. For instance, outskirts suburbs should be better connected to the central urban areas through public transportation, pedestrian walks and bike paths. In addition, suburbs should be provided with green areas and public utilities. These measures would improve the territorial and social cohesion among the local people, who should stop regarding residential tourists as mere consumers of services, and the new residents, who would thus be more motivated to overcome the barriers of language and culture.

Despite the strong attraction that Mediterranean Spain still exerts over hundreds of thousands of Northern Europeans, urban development excesses, the lack of services, the perception of insecurity or the irreparable environmental damage may prove too heavy a mortgage on the future of the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

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