



# Spain TALKS

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The Conduit Club, London

## EVENT REPORT

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The aim of **Spain Talks** was to address the evolving challenges in tourism for leading Spanish tourism destinations, explore disruptive business models in the economy, and discuss how tourism must transform today to meet the demands of tomorrow.

The livestreamed dual language conference, moderated by Richard Hammond, Publishing Director of Green Traveller Media, included speakers from across Spain and the UK's travel and tourism industries with panel sessions on how sustainable tourism can benefit both locals and visitors, and on innovative disruptive business models.

### **Welcome from Manuel Butler, UK Director of the Spanish Tourist Office in London**

Manuel officially opened the event, saying that **tourism must evolve to meet the challenges of a changing world**. He said: "We are at a crossroads, an era of profound transformation. **The disruptive challenge we now face now as industry is social sustainability**."

"Modern tourism, which has flourished for over 60 years, stands as one of the most remarkable social achievements since the Second World War. It is a legacy that we must preserve. A success story born from the collaboration between British tour operators and Spanish hoteliers and destinations, which has thrived. But today, tourism has reached adulthood."



**"From now on, tourism must be responsible, or it simply will not endure."**

Manuel Butler, UK Director of the Spanish Tourist Office in London

Manuel said that Spain and the UK, country leaders in modern tourism with a "special relationship," are once again joining forces, this time to forge the path toward responsible tourism. He said: "This is not merely an economic duty; it is a moral obligation to safeguard one of the most significant social advances of the past century. Yet tourism is a human right, recognized by the United Nations. It is time to refocus on people."

Manuel made clear in response to recent headlines about anti-tourism demonstrations and concerns around overtourism, that the Spanish Tourist Office (STO) is committed to "defending tourism for all, without distinctions." He drew attention to two significant campaigns that the STO launched in 2023: *Stay Longer, Discover More*, encouraging longer stays to better balance the needs of visitors and residents alike, and *Spain for All*, a bold initiative championing accessible travel, which has brought together experts from both the British and Spanish travel industries to identify the challenges and opportunities for making travel more inclusive. As part of this effort, the STO has established "the first cross-country advisory board of its kind". The campaign launched a series of initiatives focused on fostering dialogue, sharing key insights, and creating a roadmap to improve social and accessibility standards. He said the goal "is to enable even more visitors to fully experience Spain's rich culture, history, and natural beauty".

Manuel ended his introduction providing a summary of the overall aims of Spain Talks, saying that it had been curated around three essential pillars:

- New ways of thinking to readdress the critical social challenges of tourism – not just for Spain, but globally.
- New business models that are already succeeding – showing us that we must not only think outside the box but beyond it.
- A deeper reflection on travel and capacities – sometimes we need to pause, think, and recalibrate.

**Foreword by Miguel Sanz,  
Director General of Turespaña**

Miguel congratulated the Spanish Tourist Office UK on the successful model of Spain Talks, which he said originated in London, thanks to Manuel and his team, and is now celebrated in nine countries across Europe “where Spanish destinations, Spanish businesses, tourism businesses, hoteliers, airlines and local travel trade journalists, the media and activists come together to discuss matters on sustainable travel”.



Miguel pointed out that **Spain is the second most visited country in the world, and with that leadership comes responsibility**, which he said is why it is holding an event such as Spain Talks: “We take the responsibility to help everyone, to listen to everyone and transform our industry into a more sustainable industry”.

He said that over the last 40–50 years, tourism has been a great tool for economic development in Spain but only **in** about a third of the country, notably in the Balearics, Canary Islands, Andalucia, Catalonia and the Mediterranean Coast but that **the rest of Spain needs this really important industry as a strategic economic tool for economic and social development**.

Miguel pointed out the work that Benidorm has done on sustainability and that it is now “one of the world class destinations regarding sustainability”. It has one of the lowest water consumptions per visitor, and most of the territory is protected.

He said that Spain has earmarked €3.4 billion out of European funds for recovery and transformation for tourism, and almost €2 billion has been earmarked for sustainability, which he said is being distributed to all four corners of the country “**upgrading Spain as a tourist destination**”.

Miguel then outlined some of the changes that will reshape Spain’s tourism sector, with innovations in areas like food waste, CO2 reduction, and sustainable hospitality through implementation of legislation and regulation.

Spain Talks was sponsored by **Palma de Mallorca** and the **Principality of Asturias**.

Representatives from both gave short presentations: **Jaime Martínez**, Mayor of Palma de Mallorca, illustrated the city’s commitment to developing practical, forward-looking methods to ensure a balanced and sustainable tourism model, resulting in the integration of visitors and residents. The city is preparing for its designation as one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2031 through significant cultural investment while **Tatiana González Salas**, Head of the Asturias Tourism Board, highlighted that the destination welcomes tourism and gave an overview of how they are forming a sustainable tourism model that promotes the niche offering of the lesser-visited destination and its fantastic natural offerings and rich culture.

**Panel 1: *Fostering Harmonious Tourism***

Moderator:

Richard Hammond, Publishing Director, Green Traveller Media

Panellists:

Mateu Hernández, Director General of the Barcelona Tourism Board

Pedro Homar, Managing Director of the Palma Tourism Board

Matt Callaghan, COO of easyJet holidays

Ian Corbett, Head of Sustainability at TUI



In summary, this panel discussed how destinations and brands are fostering harmonious tourism, ensuring sustainable benefits for both locals and visitors.

Pedro Homar said there are three key elements to how sustainable tourism is managed in Palma. First is that public-private cooperation is key (his organisation is 50% public, 50% private), and that “no decision is made without taking into consideration the private sector”. Second is that their focus is on residents and that their priority is no longer on co-marketing with tour operators to generate demand but that fostering harmonious tourism starts with prioritising residents in all strategic decisions. And third, he said they want to open up the discussion about tourism limits. At its core, he said **Palma's strategy aims to make the city not only a better place to visit, but a better place to live**, setting limits on accommodation and cruise arrivals and shifting focus to high-value, longer-stay visitors.

Mateu Hernández reiterated those points and highlighted the city's long-term efforts to manage tourism sustainably, including strict limits on hotels and tourist flats in the centre, limiting cruise terminals, limiting the number of people in a group to 20 in the city centre, enhancing visitor experience in the destination for a balanced tourism model with a locals-first approach. He said that Barcelona has 154,000 tourist beds and that this figure is stabilised, and that in 2024 there were 15 million visitors, 0.2% less than the previous year.

Matt Callaghan underlined the importance of residents by pointing out that all holiday destinations are also homes, creating a model that wins for customers, shareholders, and destinations whilst supporting local people. With sustainability now a core expectation from consumers, companies need to be committed to responsible decision-making, offering guilt-free travel options with regulated sustainable accommodations that directly benefit the communities that host them.

Ian Corbett underscored the importance of respecting destinations' rights to shape the type and volume of tourism they welcome and create dialogue with residents to reinforce the sustainable tourism model.

Mateu Hernández said that the key question that needs to be addressed in Barcelona is: **Can tourism save us from tourism?** He said that cities like Barcelona, and capital cities such as Paris, London and Berlin, all have the same challenges of housing, congestion and sustainability that need to be solved. But he said that tourism can have a direct influence on attracting investment in the city - he gave examples of AstraZeneca, which has just invested millions of Euros opening a hub of about 1,500 engineers in the city, and BYD Auto Chinese car producer, which is opening a new factory in the city.

**“Can tourism save us from tourism?”**

Mateu Hernández, Director General of the Barcelona Tourism Board

Mateu said this investment is partly due to the attractiveness of labour and tradition, but also due to airline connections, which are a direct result of tourism, in particular cruise tourism; Mateu said that half a million US citizens visit Barcelona on a cruise and that justifies 14 direct airline connections from the US (he said that no other post-industrial city has that number of connections), so tourism has really transformed the city.

Mateu then explained that they do an annual survey each year asking residents whether they think tourism is beneficial for the city. In 2014, 96% said yes while last year it dropped to 71% and this year it was 59%. “That’s a drama” he said. So as a result, they have changed their position to **encouraging quality over quantity**. Their new slogan is “This is Barcelona” encouraging visitors to “come for the culture and stay for the rest”. He said they have also invested about €400 million in the Meetings an Incentive Market (MICE) over the following 5 years, specifically on congresses and conventions.

Pedro agreed that Palma faces similar challenges to Barcelona, although with slightly smaller visitor numbers – he said that annually it has around 7 to 8 million tourists on top of a population of 485,000, and that they position themselves as “**an urban city break destination appealing to a cosmopolitan, upscale, premium type of client**” and they are putting limits in place to ensure this. For instance, he said that 95% of the beds in the city of Palma are in four- or five-star hotels, and that they hardly have any two- or three-star hotels, and that there is a cap of 12,000 beds. There is also a cap on the number of cruise ships that can dock each day to three, even though they have capacity for up to 6 a day.

On the subject of anti-tourism, Mateu said it was sad that places like Barcelona and Palma have been singled out for not dealing with tourism very well, when in fact an enormous amount has been done, such as being recognised as a biosphere reserve since 2011, that more than 1000 companies in Barcelona have attained a sustainability label, and that a third of income for the municipality comes from the direct taxation of hotels.

Pablo agreed, adding that they are working on a scheme to raise ~~the~~ awareness among residents about what tourism brings to their infrastructure. He said they are running a **year-long campaign**, starting in November, **providing free activities to residents to visit a range of experiences**, including museums and public spaces.

Two questions were asked from the audience, one regarding the provision of illegal apartments and the other about whether there are concerns that in seeking quality over quantity, destinations may become exclusive. Mateu addressed the first question by saying that illegal apartments are a huge problem in Barcelona and that a lot is being done to address the situation. Matt followed up by saying that this problem isn’t confined to Spain and is being felt all over Europe, and that it’s having a huge consequence on the housing market, preventing first time buyers getting their foot on the ladder and buying their first property. He pointed out that easyjet holidays only work with licensed, regulated hotels “who pay their taxes, local authorities know who they are and what they are doing, and, importantly, create jobs for local people.

**“So it’s about... how we can provide more sustainable practices through mainstream operators to try and encourage more and more customers to holiday in a way that does provide a win for the local destination.”**

Matt Callaghan, COO of easyJet holidays



In response to the second question on exclusivity, Ian said that he thinks seasonality is part of this issue and that whilst it's not a new topic, it is something that TUI have been working on recently, "supporting destinations more broadly than we have in the past because whilst we can't always operate our own flights, we can then use our brand and our platform in order to try and grow demand in those shoulder seasons." He also referred to the launch of their Mediterranean series of marathons that started in Mallorca, and they've now added Rhodes and Cyprus, where they are trying to find new and more creative ways to, to grow demand outside of the peak season. "So I think it's about well-planned, well-regulated, controlled tourism. I don't think it's about exclusion. That's certainly not what we are into as a mainstream operator".

**Keynote speaker: Angel Pérez Agenjo, Founder and Managing Partner Trascendent**  
*Impact as a business opportunity in Travel and Tourism*

Angel highlighted the growing significance of measuring and managing tourism beyond the usual tangibles to look particularly at the **outcome, effect and impact of business activities on society and on the planet**. He said he thinks that the tourism industry has the basic platform on sustainability to become a **key differentiator** to other sectors, proving all the benefits that it can bring to society and to the economy.



He praised Barcelona for the work it has done to gain feedback from tourists and residents, but he asked whether it was possible to go further than that. Angel stressed the need for **timely reporting** with feedback that supports destinations in positioning themselves effectively and highlighted **the increasing demand in Europe to quantify and map how tourism operators affect destinations**.

He said that there are three areas to consider:

- i. Consider the impact on a specific place, building an impact map based on an organisation's contribution to the most strategic social and environmental challenges;
- ii. Look at whether the impacts can be measured. Angel gave several examples of organisations that are already measuring and certifying the impact they generate on some of their activities – a tour operator, a tech company, an airline and a hotel group. He said that in the future we'll start to hear more about '**P&L Net of Impact**' – looking at the monetary value of generated impacts to see if a businesses' P & L (profit and loss) looks better or worse as "another lever" to enrich and improve the way businesses are managed;
- iii. Producing a heat map of impacts to help businesses make decisions and 'walk the talk' showing that sustainability is relevant and important.

Finally, Angel said that AI can help businesses look at their impact, outcome and the effect of the activities that it does. And that regardless of geopolitical challenges or changes on regulation in Europe, this is something that you can do to reinforce your remit your license to operate properly, and you can demonstrate that you "**lead it, manage it, communicate it, and prove that you are truly committed with sustainability and beyond**".

## Panel 2: Disruptive Innovation and New Business Models

Moderator:

Richard Hammond, Publishing Director, Green Traveller Media

Panellists:

José Guillermo Díaz Montañés, Founder&CEO Artiem Hotels

Tricia Handley-Hughes, UK & Ireland Managing Director, Inteletravel

Daniel Pearce, CEO TTG Media

José María Moncada Durruti, CEO founder La Bolsa Social and Vicepresident of SpainNAB



In summary, this panel session discussed some of the new ways travel and tourism organisations are doing business in a changing world.

Tricia Handley-Hughes, UK & Ireland Managing Director of InteleTravel, said that she thought that the word ‘disruption’ had negative connotations, so she preferred to use the word ‘change’. She explained how important it is for change makers to change perception and to understand the relevant regulations for operating, particularly in new markets. Her advice would be to keep your focus on delivering for your suppliers because they will become your ambassadors.

**“Keep your focus on delivering for your suppliers because they will become your ambassadors”.**

Tricia Handley-Hughes, UK & Ireland Managing Director of InteleTravel

Tricia said that when a business reaches a certain size, **development is all about technology and innovation** striving all the time to look at how you can differentiate and make the journey easier. She also discussed shifting perceptions around sustainable tourism models by providing regulated education and training — empowering travel advisors to become **ambassadors for sustainable travel** and utilising AI to improve models. She said that they have been introducing AI particularly where it can replace human errors as well as for communication. She said that she thinks there’s a fear that AI replaces humans, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that **“because you need humans to make the AI work”**, but it’s very much an admin tool that you should be embracing to grow your business.

José Guillermo Díaz Montañés showcased how **technological innovation has enhanced the value of tourism in Spain** and suggested that **simplifying bureaucracy is key to enabling stakeholders to innovate more easily**. He said that there are technology hubs particularly in Madrid, Barcelona, Mallorca and Valencia, and that private tech platforms — such as CENTUR — are bringing together different players in the value chain using investment funds and venture capital to support tourism innovation. He also referenced that there is a change in financial organisations and how they invest in tourism.

Daniel Pearce explained that TTG Media has adopted a clear strategic approach with a model that prioritises ‘smarter better fairer travel’ that benefits the environment and the people in destinations, highlighting that sustainable practices can make for a successful commercial model. He explained the three pillars in detail: **“Smarter: to raise the knowledge of the industry; Better by raising standards and showcasing best practice, such as through our awards programmes; and most importantly we promote a Fairer travel industry, an industry that’s fairer to the environment and fairer to the people that work within it”**. He said this has not only been a strong differentiator

but has also led to it attaining B Corps, which he says, **“enshrines that we prioritise the planet and prioritise people, alongside our own profit”**.

Daniel said that sometimes TTG Media gets mistaken for being “somehow a not-for-profit business because all we care about now is sustainability and diversity, equity, inclusion in our values”. But he says that he always counters this by saying it’s the opposite, that “it’s good for business, it’s good for profit, and, and that makes you a stronger, more resilient business, because it attracts more customers”. He said it also “really fires us up as a team”.

Daniel referred to a book *Start with Why* by Simon Sinek, which TTG used internally to ask questions about their business, and he said the answers they came up with then still permeate its business operations today.

José María Moncada Durruti said that their mission is **“to support businesses and moreover, innovative businesses that have a clear goal of having a positive impact in society and on the environment”**. He said that in Spain they share many of the challenges faced in the UK in terms of “aging population, climate change, unsustainable production and consumption, the lack of a circular economy, and the lack of integration of vulnerable groups” and so they are trying to support entrepreneurs that have solutions for these issues for the public sector.

But he pointed out that Spain does have a very specific challenge known as ‘empty Spain’ where large rural areas are having to confront de-population because the economies in those areas are based on the primary sector, such as agriculture and cattle, which is no longer a very competitive sector due to lack of innovation, technology and infrastructure – not only roads but also internet connection, and as a consequence public services, such as health and education don’t have the kind of quality necessary so young people are leaving these areas. But he said that “what entrepreneurs do is see challenges as opportunities, and what they have seen is that by bringing economic value to these communities we can attract people to these areas and **break the vicious circle of depopulation** of ‘Empty Spain’”.

**“What entrepreneurs do, is see challenges as opportunities”**

José María Moncada Durruti, CEO founder La Bolsa Social and Vicepresident of SpainNAB

José also shared the story of the investment they provided for a company that provides AI phone services the elderly to check on their needs, which he said really worked wonders during the floods in Valencia when they could reach out to many elderly people affected by the floods and find out what they needed.

Finally, José Guillermo Díaz Montanés announced three things Artiem Hotels is putting in place to adapt to **the changing nature of tourism**: It is leading a culture of sustainability through networking and communication; sharing resources without necessarily competing with each other; promoting entrepreneurship so that tourism can adapt to changing needs and become more competitive; and incorporating AI to personalise experience and anticipate situations as well as to propose value experiences in hotels, including training staff to work with AI, which he said will require a rapid and significant adaptation effort from everyone.



**Keynote speaker: Chantal Khoueiry, Chief Culture Officer, The Bicester Collection**

Chantal Khoueiry of The Bicester Collection addressed the issue of **How the private sector can deliver impact** and **How a retail destination can create social impact**. She shared their concept of ‘**unreasonable hospitality**’, sharing the mission of making the lives of others better, specifically women and children, across their product through education. She said that core to what they do is their ‘Do-Good’ initiative, a philanthropic programme, which seeks to “to unlock the future of women and children, both locally and globally”. She explained that they do this through three pillars:

**charity partnership; advocacy and innovation.**

**Fireside Chat: Consolidation and Overcapacity**

A frank discussion on the challenges of getting the balance right between value, supply and demand in a highly price-sensitive market between Noel Josephides, CEO & founder of Sunvil Travel (pictured right) and Ian Taylor, Chief Editor of Travel Weekly.

Ian and Noel discussed how the tourism models centred around rapid growth need to be reevaluated and destination management methods need to be established before it is too late and that it is up to the destinations to set tourism limits.



Noel said that “**The problem with the growth in our industry is that there is no middle way in our industry.** It's always about the big numbers” but he was very supportive of the approach Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca are taking. He said “What they've done is the end product of what every destination should be doing, because ultimately the onus is on the destination itself to look after itself... **you very rarely hear a destination say, well, we had so many thousand this year, and we're going to have exactly the same number next year. It's very wise.**” Noel cited the fall out when operators left Spain in the 1980s when the market became saturated and that lessons had to be learnt from that experience.

**“Ultimately the onus is on the destination itself to look after itself”**

Noel Josephides, CEO & founder of Sunvil Travel

Noel praised the way that Spain responded by promoting the country’s heritage. He said: “They've led the way, and it's turned out very well, and they're still doing it.” But he gave a warning to other destinations, particularly in the Mediterranean, faced with a similar situation:

**“It's extremely important that other destinations should look at what's happening because you have to catch this [unchecked growth] before it gets terminal.”**

Noel Josephides, CEO & founder of Sunvil Travel

Ian then quizzed Noel on the role of tour operators and the effect that the liberalisation of the air network, that paved the way for the ‘no frills’ airlines, has had on the control of tourism. Noel said that before this, when everything was charter based, it was far easier to control the growth in tourism, but he said that the ‘no frills’ airlines, as well as online travel agents such as booking.com and Airbnb, are much harder to control and he expressed his concern that it’s getting out of control, especially, he said, when you consider that Boeing and Airbus are telling us that by 2050 the number of travellers will double. He said he thought **“This whole situation is very worrying because private enterprises want to grow, and you are not going to stop airlines growing – as long as they’re given the go ahead, as long as they’ve got room to do so, they will continue doing so.”**

Noel said that he thinks the only way to deal with overtourism is for destinations to moderate numbers of visitors, but that’s very difficult, and he added that he doesn’t believe initiatives such as Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) will be able to do that, nor emissions controls, he said: “They’re just tinkering at the edges of the problem.” Noel also warned that extending the seasons or redirecting tourism flows is not easy as he said that you need the infrastructure to be able to handle increased visitors either out of season or in non-hotspots, he said: “if you want to lengthen the season, you need a lot of investment. You have to make sure that the infrastructure is there and that the infrastructure is open.”

Noel said he thought that taxation is one way of limiting growth, so long as the taxes raised are hypothecated “to what’s happening in the destination from the point of view of tourism.” He added **“Don’t forget that about 50% of the people in the UK don’t fly at all. And of the 50% that do fly, 2% account for 40% of the emissions. So really, they should be able to pay.”**

Finally, Ian asked Noel whether he was pessimistic or optimistic about the future to which Noel replied: “There never has been so much action from the trade, so much awareness of what’s happening out there regards to tourism” and he concluded by saying: **“Hopefully, with all the experience we’ve had and where we are at the moment, that we will continue to use the expression that tourism is a force for good.”**

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### Event Photos

A selection of the event’s photo can be found here:

<https://socialnewsroom.spain.info/spain-talks-2025-image-gallery>

