



Spain **TALKS**

Caring for the Future

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REPORT



Official Opening and Presentation of the Spanish Tourism Market

On Thursday, September 25, 2025, Isabel Martín Benítez, Director of the Spanish Tourism Office in Toronto, inaugurated the event “Spain Talks. Caring for the Future”, thanking the audience for their attendance and introducing this first Canadian edition of the format promoted by Turespaña.

During her remarks, she explained that Spain Talks is part of a series of international meetings focused on sustainability, where challenges, data, and best practices contributing to a more responsible tourism model are addressed through dialogue. She underscored that Spain is a leading tourism destination and is already developing strategies and actions in this field; however, she stressed the importance of understanding challenges and impacts from multiple perspectives in order to continue moving forward.

The Director highlighted that this international forum contributes to strengthening Spain’s commitment as a global leader in sustainable tourism, while also creating a favorable space for the exchange of ideas and collaboration among experts and key stakeholders from both the Canadian and Spanish markets.



The program for the day included two panel discussions, two presentations, and an awards ceremony. The Director emphasized three key elements of the meeting: balance, accessibility, and constructive debate, with the aim of providing a collective vision of the future, sharing the sector’s current challenges, and proposing innovative solutions. She also introduced the context of the Spanish tourism sector with relevant data, such as the sector’s 13.1% contribution to GDP, the 13.5% employment share, and tourist spending reaching €126.143 billion.

Isabel Martín expressed special gratitude to the Spanish destinations Comunitat Valenciana and Lanzarote for their commitment and collaboration, as well as to the participating experts and the Canadian travel professionals, agents, and journalists who attended the event drawn by their interest in Spain.

She then introduced the Ambassador of Spain to Canada, Alfredo Martínez Serrano, who emphasized the importance of strong relations between both countries. The Ambassador

highlighted the values of Canadian society, linking them to the reasons why Spain is an attractive destination for this market, including sustainability as a key factor in his address.



The Ambassador stressed that only through exchange, reflection, and shared knowledge is it possible to improve, thus reinforcing the central purpose of the event. He noted that Spain's evolution in the Canadian market has been significant, consolidating its position as one of the preferred destinations for Canadian travelers.

This positioning is supported by three key factors:

- Connectivity, which has improved significantly in recent years.
- The open and mindful mindset of Canadian society, which strengthens the connection with Spain.
- Spain's growing recognition as a destination, thanks to a well-structured tourism ecosystem characterized by hospitality, safety, and high-quality services.

The Ambassador presented Spain as a country of diverse cultural, natural, and climatic landscapes, highlighting its solid infrastructure, including high-speed rail networks and modern airports. He added that Spain's tourism model continues to evolve to address new challenges, supported by the necessary capacity and determination to do so sustainably. A Turespaña video on sustainability was played.

Destination Presentation: Comunitat Valenciana



Juan Antonio Muñoz, Director of Promotion at the Valencian Tourism Agency, presented the region as a sustainable tourism destination. He highlighted the characteristics that have positioned the Region of Valencia as one of the most attractive destinations in the Mediterranean, while emphasizing how sustainability plays a fundamental role in the region's strategy and destination management.

Drawing on his expertise in public management and tourism, he provided the audience with a broad view of the Region of Valencia and its “Mediterranean Attitude”, an approach that has left its mark on the way the region addresses current challenges, with tourism accounting for 16% of its revenue.

Throughout his presentation, Muñoz praised the region's cultural heritage, gastronomy, and pleasant climate, which allow visitors to enjoy the destination year-round, including in winter. Beyond its well-known coastal offering, he underscored the value of promoting inland areas and other natural resources as pillars of sustainable and balanced development.

He also noted the growing presence and interest of the Canadian market, along with the increasing number of direct international connections — the most recent example being the new route between Montreal and Valencia. This progress also facilitates travel within Spain through the country's extensive transportation network.

The Region of Valencia leads responsible tourism initiatives, with a clear example being the designation of the City of Valencia as European Green Capital 2024, reaffirming its commitment to sustainability and quality of life.

Panel 1: How to Maintain Balance Between Local Residents and Tourists



As an introduction to the session, Isabel Martín stressed the need to work on strategies and actions that ensure positive coexistence between tourists and local residents, emphasizing respect for local communities. She highlighted the work of Turespaña, and particularly the Toronto Office, in raising awareness among the outbound market, promoting less crowded destinations, and fostering year-round tourism. An example of this effort is the upcoming celebration of the International Conference of the Association of Canadian Travel Agencies and Advisors (ACTA) in León this year.

This topic, central to sustainability debates and affecting many destinations today, was addressed directly in this panel moderated by Marina Jimenez, a well-known Canadian journalist who has traveled to and written about Spain on multiple occasions.

Moderator: Marina Jimenez, International Journalist

Marina opened the panel “How to Achieve Balance Between Local Residents and Tourists” by briefly introducing the speakers:

- Dr. Rachel Dodds, Professor at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Toronto Metropolitan University, and recognized expert in sustainable tourism
- Dr. Fergus Maclaren, B.A., M.E.Des., Past President, ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee
- Juan Antonio Muñoz, Director of Promotion, Valencian Tourism Agency

During the discussion, the moderator posed questions about the sector's challenges in moving toward a more balanced and sustainable tourism model, analyzing impacts and possible solutions from different perspectives.

Key Conclusions:

Tourism Taxes

Dr. Rachel Dodds noted that before COVID-19, most destinations applied some type of tourist tax, a practice interrupted by the decline in international tourism. In 2025, the number of international tourists reached record levels and the tourism industry has grown more than any other since 2019 — a paradigm many thought would never occur. In this context, she stated that tourism taxes can be a useful measure but must be transparent and clearly geared toward destination regeneration to be effective.

Dr. Fergus Maclaren added that travelers are already paying various types of fees (airports, hotels, travel agencies, restaurants, services, rising prices), but these should be directed toward conserving the area, restoring heritage, or improving infrastructure — and the revenue generated should lead to tangible improvements.

Meanwhile, Juan Antonio Muñoz explained the different competencies and government levels involved in tourism. He commented that tourism taxes are an option but should be carefully evaluated, and they do not necessarily guarantee a reduction in tourist numbers.

Measuring When Tourism Benefits Local Communities

Dr. Dodds emphasized that current metrics tend to focus on visitor numbers, but value creation must also be measured. She highlighted the growing complexity of certification processes required for destinations, involving numerous indicators that are often not understood or valued by tourists or travel agents.

Maclaren noted that the tourism value chain in destinations like Spain or the Caribbean is enormous, making impact measurement challenging. He also highlighted positive impacts such as infrastructure improvements and expanded cultural offerings, referencing events like the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) or the upcoming FIFA World Cup, while noting challenges such as housing access.

From the destination's standpoint, Muñoz stressed the importance of having data and analyzing it for management purposes. The benefits of tourism vary even within the same region, depending on the area's development stage. He used Benidorm as an example of a consolidated destination requiring different strategies from emerging ones.

The Role of Media and Travel Agencies

Maclaren noted that media diversity poses challenges for sustainability. Destination storytelling must be evaluated carefully — for example, whether a new air connection like Montreal–Valencia promotes sustainable travel or contributes to overtourism. Choosing segments that can travel off-season is also essential.

Dodds highlighted the responsibility of agents in encouraging clients to explore alternative experiences while managing expectations realistically, particularly regarding seasonality and crowd levels.

Muñoz reiterated the importance of seasonality reduction and redistributing visitor flows. Media and agents can identify which traveler profiles are suited for off-season periods and inspire them to enjoy destinations such as the Region of Valencia in October or November.

Raising Tourist Awareness to Foster Sustainable Behavior

Dodds stated that limiting choices can exponentially encourage sustainable behavior among tourists, who become more aware and understand that sustainable options can enhance their experience. Maclaren added that more options often make decision-making harder.

Beyond changing traveler mindsets, Maclaren stressed the need to deepen sustainability practices, going beyond superficial measures like reusing towels. Muñoz illustrated this with examples of water management in Valencia and good practices implemented in Benidorm to address drought and water abundance challenges.

Conclusion

Speakers agreed that sustainability includes three interconnected pillars: social, environmental, and economic. Maclaren added a fourth element: the culture of sustainability, expressed through authentic experiences, local gastronomy, and traditions, all reflecting the active commitment of local communities. He emphasized the importance of individual responsibility and consistency in behavior, regardless of being a traveler or resident.

A Q&A session followed the panel discussion.

Destination Presentation: Lanzarote



Paula Muñoz, Marketing Director of Turismo Lanzarote, presented Lanzarote as a sustainable tourism destination. She highlighted the island's unique characteristics as part of the Canary archipelago, as well as the central role of sustainability in its strategy and destination management.

Although there are no direct flights from Canada, she explained the various combinations through mainland Spanish cities, positioning Lanzarote as an exceptional final stop. She also emphasized the island's strong potential for the Canadian market, particularly due to its privileged climate — often described as “eternal spring” — which allows for year-round visits.

Muñoz provided a detailed overview of sustainable management in Lanzarote, where 41.5% of the territory is protected and tourism accounts for 70% of GDP.

Drawing on her experience, she explained the evolution of tourism policies and regulations aimed at preserving the island's cultural and natural identity. She highlighted the collaboration between public and private stakeholders, especially in social and economic reinvestment. She referenced the significant impact of The Ironman competition, an event where best practices are consistently applied.

From the perspective of the tourism office, destination promotion is grounded in active listening to both local residents and visitors, illustrated by the campaign “Discover, Respect and Enjoy”, promoting responsible and respectful tourism. She emphasized the private sector's commitment as well, with tourism businesses — through the Lanzarote Tourism Federation — working collectively toward sustainable goals.

PANEL 2: Designing Tourism That Includes Everyone



Isabel Martín introduced the accessibility panel, highlighting Spain's position as an accessible destination and acknowledging the significant progress made in this field. She also emphasized the need to increase both national and international visibility of these efforts, especially in tourism promotion. She reminded attendees that “we cannot claim that everyone is welcome if the destination is not prepared or barriers still exist. It is essential to ensure a truly accessible offering.”

Moderator: Marina Jimenez, International Journalist

Marina Jimenez opened the panel “Designing Tourism that Includes Everyone” by introducing the experts:

- Miguel Carrasco Hernández, Director of Tourism, Impulsa Igualdad / Tur4All (Spain) and COO at TUR4all Travel

- Susana Pérez, President of the Island Association of Hotels and Tourist Apartments of Lanzarote (ASOLAN) and of the Lanzarote Tourism Federation
- Maayan Ziv, CEO & Founder of AccessNow, Activist and Tech Entrepreneur

Following the previous format, Jimenez posed questions on accessibility as a core component of sustainable tourism, encouraging discussion of best practices and possible solutions.

Key Conclusions:

Understanding the True Meaning of Accessibility

Maayan Ziv began by stressing the importance of understanding the true meaning of accessibility, noting that her experience has shown the need to clarify the concept before discussing infrastructure, promotion, or marketing. Accessibility, she explained, is a means to empower people in different life situations to feel included and should be centered on inspiring and co-creating with people with disabilities. “Accessibility is a broad topic that can reach a wide diversity of people,” she said.

Improving Services for Accessible Tourism

Responding to a question about improving customer service, including travel agents, Ziv emphasized that accessibility begins with education and empathy, learning to ask questions and understand travelers’ needs without fear or prejudice. She also highlighted the disconnect between the simplicity of asking what someone needs and the hesitation to do so due to fear of offending or acknowledging that a service may not be accessible.

Panelists discussed data showing that the accessible market is much larger than often assumed. Accessibility is not just about wheelchair users: it includes older adults, families with strollers, travelers with temporary injuries, and companions supporting people with disabilities.

Miguel Carrasco highlighted the importance of awareness-raising within the tourism sector, capacity-building, and the role of effective communication as the first link in the value chain. He warned that accessibility information on many destination or provider websites is limited, superficial, or absent, which significantly affects decision-making.

At this point in the discussion, good practices were introduced as essential for improving accessibility in tourism.

Ziv explained how her research, experience, and preparation for travel — combined with ongoing frustrations over lack of information — led her to create AccessNow, a collaborative platform for sharing verified and reliable accessibility information. Its goal is to reduce frustration and help people make informed decisions, empowering them to travel where they want. AccessNow currently works directly with DMOs and local governments.

Carrasco explained how Impulsa Igualdad has been working for more than three decades on inclusion and accessible tourism through training, consultancy, and awareness-raising, advocating for the enjoyment and rights of people with disabilities. He highlighted examples of collaboration with Spanish destinations, including those participating in the event, and the adaptation of strategic plans based on local needs—reflecting Spain’s strong commitment to accessibility.

He also noted the creation of the Tur4all platform, an open resource for sharing accessibility information based on universal methodology and criteria. The platform receives 200,000 visits annually from people planning trips to Spain. Two years ago, Tur4all expanded with a socially sustainable tour operator and DMC in Spain, reinvesting in people with disabilities and offering a unique product in the market.

From the perspective of an island destination, Susana Pérez highlighted Lanzarote's progress toward accessible and inclusive tourism, driven by social awareness and targeted regulations. She underscored the importance of industry collaboration to achieve long-term improvements in infrastructure and services, as well as the role of business associations working together toward shared objectives. Pérez cited Lanzarote's Accessibility and Inclusion Strategy 2024–2030, which includes improvements in infrastructure, beaches, transportation, and accommodations — representing another step forward in addressing diverse accessibility criteria.

Regarding Spain's positioning, Carrasco noted that the country ranks among the three most accessible destinations in the world. From a North American standpoint, Ziv cited Barcelona as an international model for accessibility. The panel also highlighted accessible itineraries and progress in collaborating destinations like the Region of Valencia and Lanzarote, reflecting Spain's commitment to accessible tourism.

However, they emphasized the need to increase general awareness of the achievements made in accessibility.

The Role of Media: Opportunities and Challenges

Technology and media are powerful and essential tools for disseminating knowledge and resources, as well as for promoting destinations and services that prioritize accessibility.

One challenge highlighted was the tendency of some media or storytellers to romanticize disability, reinforcing stereotypes. Ziv stressed the importance of avoiding “inspirational” narratives using images of people with disabilities, as this does not reflect their reality or represent them adequately. Media should instead aim to empower people, telling stories in the same manner as for any other audience. They should also work with creators with disabilities, journalists with disabilities, and inclusive marketing firms to ensure authentic representation.

Technology's Impact on Accessible Tourism

Carrasco stated that technology is a key driver of accessible tourism, offering practical solutions for more inclusive models. He referenced an AI-powered assistant that helps plan itineraries in Spain tailored to travelers' needs, increasing confidence during trip planning.

A question from the audience raised global concerns regarding accessibility in air travel and airlines. While improvements are underway, significant progress remains necessary. Travel agencies can contribute through proactive planning and by preparing for potential complications, with value stemming from how they manage challenges, the information they provide, and their coordination with service providers.

This highlights the importance of protocols, awareness-raising, and accessibility training within airlines, tourism organizations, and airport infrastructure to ensure improvements in what remains a pervasive challenge.

Conclusion

Panelists agreed that there is vast creative potential for implementing accessibility measures, provided there is proper planning and adequate resources. They emphasized the importance of education and awareness, as well as real and representative inclusion of people with disabilities.

Training and specialized consultancy were highlighted as essential tools for developing realistic and effective accessibility plans, while collaboration among stakeholders was noted as vital across the value chain. The speakers expressed appreciation for the Spain Talks platform as a constructive space for sharing knowledge on accessibility and the sector's challenges.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The first edition of Spain Talks in Canada proved to be highly enriching and dynamic, fostering a space for dialogue that delved into key issues and challenges in the tourism sector, while strengthening Spain's positioning as a sustainable destination in the Canadian market.

During the event, awards were presented in recognition of contributions to responsible tourism development. The recipients were selected by a jury composed of Isabel Martín Benítez, Marco Pozzonbon (Vice President of ACTA), and Carolyn Ray (Canadian President of the Society of American Travel Writers – SATW):

- Canadian Geographic Magazine (Media Award), received by John Hovland
- Jennifer Bain (Ambassador Award), received by Robin Robinson
- Kensington Tours (Experience Award), received by Silvia Cilia
- Germain Hotels (Business Award), received by Jean-Philip Dupre



The day concluded with a cocktail inspired by Spanish gastronomy, serving as a meeting point and networking space for attendees and speakers to exchange impressions and experiences.