Dealing with Recovery from the Covid-19 Measures on Cities, Towns and Villages in the Autonomous Region of Andalucia
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Working together and Being Flexible

In the early 19th century, the author, Washington Irving, wrote a story in which the protagonist ‘Rip Van Winkle’, fell asleep for twenty years. When he awoke, it was to a totally different economic and technological reality. Measures introduced to combat Covid-19 have caused comparable changes to society, the economy, and the use of technology in less than one year. Politicians and businesses are slow to realise the ‘new normal’ and are failing to develop strategies to deal with them. It can be assumed that it will be pro-active businesses that bring about any sort of recovery, with or without government assistance.

In ‘Personal Observations of the Economic Consequences of the Covid-19 Measures on Cities, Towns and Villages in Andalucia’ I looked at how the Covid-19 measures during and after lockdown, had affected the Andalucian economy from personal observations. That report is the basis for an action plan for businesses based on one of the conclusions; that the main consequence of the Covid-19, and the consequent contraction of the economy, was caused by the massive reduction in visitors to the area. This plan therefore looks at ways to rejuvenate the tourism sector and the businesses that operate within that sector.

This report is divided into businesses within the three economic zones described in ‘Personal Observations’, the coastal zone, the inland zone and the mountain zone. As concluded in ‘Personal Observations’, the mountain villages and towns should be the first to recover, followed by the inland cities, towns and villages and finally, the cities, towns and villages in the coastal areas.

As a reminder, this table shows the relative values of each zone:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of area of region</th>
<th>% of population</th>
<th>% of regional income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coastal zone</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inland zone</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain zone</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Mountain Zone

The mountain zone is characterised by small towns and villages, often remote and sometimes with poor road access. The economy depends on small scale mixed agriculture and animal husbandry and, in some areas, the monoculture of olives. As identified in ‘Personal Observations’, many of these towns and villages have made efforts to capitalise on existing resources to produce branded olive oil, wine, cheeses, pork products and so on. Some, particularly those adjacent to or within the National and Natural Parks, started to promote rural tourism.

In many cases, enterprising individuals opened guest houses, boutique hotels and rural hotels to cater for what was, prior to Covid-19, an increasing number of visitors more interested in adventurous activities than sitting on a beach. In many such towns and villages, historical features from prehistoric settlements to castles have been opened to the public, widening the appeal of that location to people interested in the past. Many towns and villages have also developed museums and interpretation centres, some created in very recent years, to provide those interested with educational resources.

Allied to those initiatives, individuals have created businesses that facilitate the enjoyment of activities in the mountain zone: walking tours, cycling tours, and a range of extreme sports.

The Covid-19 lockdown effectively stopped all those businesses and initiatives since the lockdown prevented people travelling to any of the business locations.

Restrictions on air travel since the lockdown was lifted means that few visitors from outside Spain will appear in the foreseeable future. The reasons for this pessimism are: the destination for the bulk of air travellers were the resorts in the coastal areas, and, for reasons explained in ‘Personal Observations’, the coastal areas will be the last to recover.

Airlines are not going to put flights on for the small minority of people that want to go walking in the mountains or BASE jumping at Torcal whether those visitors can afford the flights or not.

It follows that any business in the mountains of Andalucia must concentrate on promoting itself first within Andalucia, secondly within Spain and only finally to the outside world. All businesses must accept that their customer base will be reduced both geographically and numerically for some time to come.

Looking at how hotel chains, pre-Covid-19, promoted themselves, it was all about the virtues of the hotel and little about the area in which that hotel was located. Fair enough - the hotel wanted people to stay within the precincts of the hotel, not wander off to spend their holiday cash elsewhere and they were appealing to people who wanted to laze beside a pool or soak up the sun on the beach.

For the small rural businesses offering accommodation, this is actually an opportunity; if they can reach the people that would be interested in the area and are able to travel to that area, then they will score over their larger hotel chain who, it has been reported, are closing 80% of their hotels.

Turning the marketing message on its head, promoting the area first and targeting that message at those who may...
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be interested in the activities and products available in the area and only then saying, ‘We are here to facilitate your plans’, those plans being: to purchase product or engage in an activity or be accommodated, could be an effective strategy.

Even during these depressing times there are opportunities for new, barely established, and well established businesses in the mountain zones that have found themselves stymied and also for the creation of brand-new businesses. Take a step back and ask yourself, ‘How effectively were the products and resources of my village or town, and its surroundings, promoted (by all agencies) prior to lockdown?’. The answer is generally, ‘Not very well’. In fact, local businesses have probably been more effective in extolling the virtues of their own area than the local council or tourist office.

For some time, for reasons explained in ‘Personal Observations’, local authorities are going to have even less money to spend on awareness campaigns and promotions, despite promised injections of cash from the EU.

One of the outcomes of the economic decline will be less money to spend on luxuries, including holidays. However, many people are still going to want holidays, particularly those people who are also interested in cultural or activity-based vacations, and there are always people who can afford whatever they want. Those people will want to indulge in everything from extreme sports to less strenuous activities and cultural pursuits. In short people will be looking for holiday content that adds value to the vacation. The prevalence of home-working, especially since lockdown was introduced, is producing a population that will seek active holidays as a total contrast to their sedentary working lives. Due to generally reduced financial circumstances, visitors will be looking for shorter breaks.

The Inland Zone

The Inland Zone is characterised by four cities, Seville, Córdoba, Granada and Jaén, larger towns and villages and large areas of cultivation with a production base in rural and urban economies with foundations in agriculture. The inland zone consists of the fertile lowlands of the Guadalquivir valley and the lower valleys that run between the mountain chains such as the valleys of the Guadiana, the Guadiaro, the Guadalhorce and the Almanzora. The agricultural base has led to the development of a foodstuffs industry closely allied to the production of olive oil, sugars, and grape and wine products. As explained in ‘Personal Observations’, this will be the second area to regenerate, largely because the massive markets for their products, in the coastal areas, have reduced and will take time to recover.

That is not to say that large areas within the inland zone do not have an attraction for visitors. As with the mountain zone, there are many activities to be found for those that want them. Via Verdes have been opened for cyclists and walkers, olive oil factories and sherry bodegas have opened their doors to visitors and there is even more to attract those interested in culture and history than can be found in the mountains.

As in the mountain zone, entrepreneurs have created businesses to accommodate visitors and facilitate their enjoyment of the cultural and physical activities in the area. Due to the more benign character of the landscape, many outdoor pursuits are less strenuous than those available in the mountains, and easier to access.

As explained in ‘Personal Observations’, promotion of tourism outside of the inland regional capitals of Granada, Córdoba and Seville is a novel initiative that barely had an impact prior to Covid-19. Jaén city is a relative newcomer to the tourist’s itinerary.

The problems facing businesses working in the tourism sector within the inland zone are identical to those for businesses in the mountain zone. Similarly, the opportunities for rejuvenation are the same. The basic difference between the two zones is that it will take somewhat longer for that rejuvenation to be effective unless the virtues of the individual towns and villages are broadcast to a receptive audience within Andalucia, the surrounding regions, Spain and the rest of the world, in that order and with that priority. A programme of awareness campaigns is more essential in this zone than any other.

The Coastal Zone

The coastal zone is characterised by major urban centres, including four of the provincial capitals, Huelva, Cádiz, Málaga and Almería and coastal towns, some purpose built to cater for visitors such as Puerto Banus, whilst others, such as Nerja, are greatly expanded fishing villages. As detailed in ‘Personal Observations’, the zone occupies 6% of the territory of Andalucia, has nearly 50% of the population and generates 70% of the regional income. All the urban centres depend on the annual influx of visitors that, in 2019, were worth 12.9 billion Euros, 8% of the region’s gross domestic product. In addition to tourism, the coastal zone also has commercial ports at Huelva, Cádiz, Algeciras, Málaga, Motril, Almería and Garrucha and a string of fishing ports along both the Atlantic and Mediterranean seaboard.

The area has a long history of tourism – Algeciras was promoted in the UK as a tropical paradise holiday destination in the late 19th century, for those that could afford to travel. The successful promotion of the coastal zone as a tourist and retiree destination over the last 60 years has created a zone almost totally dependent on one market, in effect a one customer business, not an ideal situation.

For reasons pointed out in ‘Personal Observations’, recovery to pre-Covid levels of economic activity will take some time, probably a number of years. Assuming that the traditional virtues of the Costas; sun, sea, sand and sangria, are...
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pretty well ingrained in the public consciousness and that promotion of those virtues is not going to regenerate the huge numbers of visitors experienced pre-Covid, then another solution has to be found for those tourism related businesses that survive the winter. An alternative is the promotion of individual businesses extolling the unique selling point of that business and its value to residents and/or visitors.

The Visit-Andalucia.com Business Plan for Recovery
We at Visit-Andalucia.com are under no illusions that recovery is going to be hard work, for us and for every business in the tourism sector. Nor do we pretend to have all the solutions. What we are prepared to do is work with individual businesses and use our resources to best effect to promote those businesses. Simultaneously we will be working to widen our audience, both visitors to our website and our social media network, so that business promotions reach more people who want to take advantage of the products or services offered by that business. We are particularly aiming at a younger audience in the 18 – 35 year old range whilst maintaining our well established 35 – 65 range.

We have already introduced a ‘holiday’ for advertisers with a three month, no obligation trial run. We are also looking at providing a monthly, low cost scheme to spread the load.

Our message to all businesses in Andalucia is that we all have to work together and be flexible. For that reason, the outline plans that follow integrate our business plan with the needs of businesses in the various zones.

Our Plan for the Mountain Zone
We have analysed the resources within the mountain zones and the type of person who would enjoy those resources. We have also looked at the marketing of those resources prior to Covid-19 and realised that much more can be done with the present technologies available to us. To state we were surprised at the number and diversity of resources is an understatement. For instance: the mountainous areas provide the landscape for a range of extreme sports. We have expanded our extreme sports section to include those sports and the specific areas within Andalucia where those sports are available. We have identified businesses involved in those sports, providing instruction, providing the equipment, organising groups to participate and so on. Our extreme sports articles then provide an ideal platform to promote those businesses.

We have found access to the audience interested in those activities and developed a method of effectively reaching them via our articles and newsletters.

The good news is that, whilst there are relatively few potential customers for businesses within this economic sphere (compared to the thousands that used to flock to the coastal areas), there are also few such businesses. Similarly, there are relatively few businesses providing accommodation so, with effective marketing, all the businesses alluded to here should be able to profit.

We have also looked at the unique products produced in the mountain areas, refer to ‘Personal Observations’. There is an opportunity for new businesses to look at selling those products on line, taking advantage of the huge increase in Internet shopping that started during lockdown and continued afterwards.

To facilitate online shops in Andalucia, Visit-Andalucia.com has created a ‘shop window’ to promote online shops in the region. The more shops there are in that window, the higher the search engine ratings for all the shops in the window.

Our Plan for the Inland Zone
The analysis of the inland zone that we have conducted shows that there are more establishments per square kilometre providing accommodation, including hotel chains and franchises. As a result the competition is higher than in the mountain areas. However, we already know that some of the larger hotels will be closing, some will not re-open. The limited marketing, prior to Covid-19, concentrated on the culture of the towns in those areas, primarily but not solely, history. Architecture and religious structures of all the denominations represented in Andalucia were also promoted. The inland provincial capitals, Seville, Córdoba, Granada and Jaén, benefited from the majority of that marketing, with Jaén being late to the party. Businesses working in the tourism sector include more tour guides and tour operators than in the mountain zones. Activity facilitators tend to provide for less extreme activities, walking, cycling and so on.

Visit-Andalucia.com already has a good selection of articles about the cities, towns and villages of inland Andalucia, their culture and history. To facilitate the requirement for ‘added value’ holidays in the future, we have organised articles into itineraries, travel guides and history series to excite the imagination of the ‘new normal visitor’ to Andalucia.

We have to accept that, for the foreseeable future, visitors to any city or town will primarily be from within Andalucia itself and to a lesser degree, from within Spain, see ‘Personal Observations’. Our targeted marketing reflects those priorities and results in numbers of visitors to the website as follows: Spain – 33.66%, UK – 25.78%, USA – 20.69 %, EU – 7%, ROW – 12.97%. Within Spain, 62.5% of visitors are from within Andalucia, 9.5% from Madrid, 28% from the rest of Spain.

Since what we do already is working, Visit-Andalucia.com will continue to add to its fund of articles based on locations and activities within Andalucia and disseminating them to a targeted audience.
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Our Plan for the Coastal Zone
Businesses working in the tourism sector, in the coastal areas, predominately fall into those that provide accommodation and those that provide food and drink. As pointed out in ‘Personal Observations’, the sector is overcrowded. Too few resident customers to service the existing businesses and no sign of the mass of visitors needed to sustain them. 80% of hotels in the coastal areas have announced they will close. Many restaurants and bars have already closed. Many are planning to close for winter and many of those will not open next spring. The severe lack of people has resulted in a knock on effect with retail outlets closing and businesses within the tourism service sector, such as holiday rental agents, hotel laundry services, transport suppliers, food suppliers and many others, with a severe cut in turnover.

Often included in the ‘tourism sector’ category are those businesses that provide attractions such as Selwo Aventura in Estepona, the Butterfly House in Benalmadena, Isla Magica in Seville, the Crocodile Park in Torremolinos etc. of which there are a plethora in the coastal zone. I would also include here the cultural attractions, museums and galleries and interpretation centres, many of which are found in the coastal provincial capitals, Huelva, Cádiz, Málaga and Almería. Not to be forgotten are the businesses that facilitate activities from golf to dolphin watching and a host of water sports. In the coastal zone, Huelva and Almeria are latecomers to the tourism market so are less dependent on it and are most likely to recover to pre-Covid economic levels before the coastal regions in other provinces.

The plan for coastal areas has to be in two parts. How to survive the winter and how to capture enough of the reduced market next year to once again show profit.

In a perverse way, the closure of some businesses benefits those that remain. Residents provide a fairly stable, though much reduced, market so each surviving business should attract proportionally more of that market. Those businesses that ‘prosper’ will be those that offer their customers something different and strive for excellence in what they provide. Boutik hotels are a good example. Some restaurants are promoting ‘curry nights’ and specials to attract new customers. Some bars are promoting entertainment with the same aim. All good ideas.

Visit-Andalucia.com has provided businesses with the facilities to promote their unique selling point (USP). In addition, we are committed to spreading those USPs. We are expanding our marketing activities so that every business will benefit from being inserted into our promotions within Andalucia.

At the same time, those USPs are being promoted to those outside Andalucia to raise awareness amongst the reduced numbers of visitors who will arrive next year.

Conclusions and predictions
Over the next few years it is going to be a hard slog to regain that which has been lost. Provinces that, until spring 2020, were the powerhouse of Andalucia in terms of the value of economic activity, Málaga and Cádiz, have the longest road to travel and it will be the mountain zones that regenerate first within those provinces, followed by their inland and finally and belatedly, their coastal areas. The pre-Covid ‘poor cousins’ Huelva, Almería and Jaén, are in a good position to recover before Cádiz and Málaga since they were less dependent on the tourism cash cow, again the recovery will be from top to bottom (Jaén and Córdoba do not have coastlines). Córdoba and Granada will be somewhere in the middle of the field with the tourist dependent provincial capitals last to recover within the last two mentioned provinces.

In all areas, businesses are going to have to consider their marketing however painful that may be in terms of expenditure and time. Targeted marketing will be important because it provides more ‘bang per buck’.

Although ‘Personal Observations’ and this paper ‘Dealing with Recovery’, look mainly at the tourist industry in Andalucia, all other businesses will be affected by similar problems and constraints. Visit-Andalucia.com provides a platform for all businesses in Andalucia.

Twenty four years ago, when we first arrived on the Costa del Sol, there was a somewhat cynical expression, ‘The only way to make a fortune on the Costa del Sol is to bring three fortunes with you’. I cannot help feeling that the sentiment behind that expression holds true today.

Based on personal observations and the research carried out, here is my prediction for recovery; which zones will be first to recover and which last.

| 1 | Almería mountain, Córdoba mountain |
| 2 | Almería inland, Málaga mountain, Cádiz mountain, Seville mountain, Granada mountain |
| 3 | Córdoba inland, Cádiz inland, Málaga inland, Jaén mountain, Huelva mountain |
| 4 | Seville inland, Granada inland, Jaén inland, Huelva inland |
| 5 | Almería coast, Huelva coast, Granada coast |
| 6 | Cádiz coast |
| 7 | Málaga coast |
Visit-Andalucia.com is convinced that by working together, we will recover.

References


Promoting Andalucia within Andalucia & around the World to residents and visitors

visit-andalucia.com