

-Opinion Article-

HOTELS, TIMES ARE CHANGING

Barcelona, January 28, 2021 – By **Anwar Zibaoui**, General Coordinator at [**ASCAME**](https://ascame.org) –

The hotel industry has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic since the first quarter of 2020, following the cancellation of reservations and events and the restrictions imposed on travelling. Support is needed to keep the industry afloat, but the most important goal is to create a more resilient and sustainable hotel industry that is able to withstand major future crises.

The Mediterranean region has 20% of the hotel accommodation capacity worldwide. The 24 Mediterranean countries have 10.000 destinations, around 100.000 hotels and around a million restaurants.

However, before the pandemic, the sector was already facing continuous challenges: from senseless acts of terrorism, through fires, earthquakes, hurricanes or droughts, to other epidemics or economic crises. What happens in the world undoubtedly affects the hotel sector.

The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in the sector around the region, such as the oversupply of hotel capacity, bureaucracy, lack of flexibility and innovation and, notably, inadequate collaboration between all actors.

Once embargoes and quarantines are lifted and the consumer begins to feel safe enough to leave the couch and move beyond their city or country, there will be new demands in the industry because the renewed traveler will not be the same visitor as in 2019.

The traveler, who will have changed after the pandemic, will seek more personal and private experiences, moving away from mass destinations. This traveler will have developed higher expectations for hygiene and safety, and will even be likely to shift towards holidays' experiences that focus on quality. This shift can mainly benefit the mid-range and high-end travel market and make the budget hotel owner to revise the image and definition of its brand.

Without new management tools, the development, the delivery of products and experiences, as well as the innovation capacity of hotel companies will be hampered, which will impact their growth.

Action is needed to provide a framework that can be used by all involved and to help create a more resilient and sustainable industry.

The hotel industry of the future needs urgent support. In addition to providing crisis relief for companies in the sector, a cooperative business environment needs to be created for all stakeholders. In other words, promoting a new, more efficient operating model, maintaining safety and well-being standards, and boosting the adoption of the latest technologies, innovation and digitisation.

It is necessary to analyse, together with authorities, the taxes levied on the sector, the hotel security, labour mobility, sustainable development, worker training, the classification and standardisation to carry out their own certifications, and the promotion of the diet, food and the Mediterranean Brand.

The hotel sector must face the challenges and get involved in new measures and actions that guarantee its sustainability, efficiency and profitability.

The Mediterranean hotel industry lacks a formal body that can bring together all its voices and represent and coordinate its shared interests. It is necessary to establish a single body that acts as a forum for the sector to promote greater collaboration and unity, share resources, secure prices, renegotiate contracts, provide legal support in disputes and establish communication with governments. The ability to continue attracting tourists needs to be improved in order to consolidate the leadership position globally.

Hotel chains are introducing global auditing systems to certify that hotels are clean and safe. A dedicated health and safety manager ensures that cleaning and disinfection protocols are followed and that regular health checks are carried out on staff. But, with low incomes, many owners are not in a position to invest in technologies that improve health and safety standards in their hotels.

Reducing and deferring taxes, as well as offering financial support, will help hotels remain viable, but banks must also help their survival by temporarily removing financial burdens or providing flexible solutions to clients affected by the crisis.

It will take time for visitor numbers to return to pre-pandemic levels and the long-term impact this will have is unknown. Therefore, the careful development of a future tourism ecosystem that provides the right product to meet the demand of potential visitors is essential.

The path is clear: promote cooperation and coordination of a coherent, modern and efficient Mediterranean tourism market. A profitable sector that generates not only income but also jobs and also benefits the entire population. A sector prepared for climate change and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Without a comprehensive plan that consolidates its leadership, recovery and long-term sustainability are in jeopardy.