

## Rave capital faces tourism crisis

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IN IBIZA

SURVEYING their empty terraces, the grim faces of the British bar-owners in Ibiza say it all. It is the height of the season in Europe's clubbing capital, but aside from the searing Mediterranean heat, it could be April.

Hotels - two of them in the club hotspot of San Antonio - are closing. Visitor numbers are dramatically down and every barman has free tickets to offer his diminishing number of customers as some of Europe's best-known clubs frantically try to stoke up the business.

The clubbers who came here in their hedonistic droves for sex, drugs and dancing are being blamed for scaring away families and older tourists. Ironically, many of the ravers themselves are now deserting Ibiza for more exotic locations thanks to readily available low-cost long-haul flights.

Each fresh set of figures brings more depressing news for tourism operators on 'the white island', and as the politicians argue about who is to blame, a special commission has been set up to examine what is now termed a crisis.

To make matters worse, there is evidence that visitor numbers are increasing on neighbouring islands.

In the first four months of this year, international visitors to the Balearics increased by 3.6%, but visitors to Ibiza dropped by 1.7%. It was an ominous start to the year and since then things have become worse. The British account for 40% of Ibiza's tourists, but in the first six months of the year the number of UK visitors dropped by 13%, and hotel operators point out it is the young clubbers who are most notable by their absence.

But it is not just the British who are giving Ibiza a wide berth these days.

A promotional campaign by the Balearics Conseil in Germany has produced great results for Majorca, with German visitors up by 7% this year.

But in Ibiza the number of German tourists has collapsed from 400,000 at this time last year to only 240,000, and again the largest drop is among the young.

The slump so far has cost the island an estimated €20m and its tourism-driven economy is registering a growth of only 0.4% compared with 2.7% for Majorca.

Alan Burdon, originally from the north of England, has run his own bar near Ibiza town for six years and has "never seen it so quiet".

He said: "It is a tragedy - this is such a beautiful island. There are a number of different factors. But the clubs have become too expensive.

"They are charging up to €50 to get in and then every long drink costs €8 to €10. The clubbers are just not coming in the same numbers, and those who do cannot afford to go to the clubs and the pubs. Ibiza is not a cheap place to come.

"There is a lot of Ibiza-bashing. There is a drug culture here. Clubbers can pay €5 for an ecstasy tablet, compared with more expensive drinks, but the same is equally true of the UK, which has a massive drug culture."

In January this year, the BBC broadcast Drugland, a documentary exposing drug trafficking on the island and specifically in San Antonio.

Among the revelations were the fact that Ibiza's understaffed customs had not made a single arrest for drug smuggling in two years.

Specially installed CCTV cameras to curb the more or less open sale of drugs in San Antonio were defective and the dealers knew their locations. The timing of the programme could not have been worse, and it would appear that thousands of British families decided to look elsewhere for their package holidays.



As the clubbers move on to pastures new, Ibiza must restore its image, argues the Socialist opposition which claims the Conservatives have bungled the island's promotion. Burdon, alone in his bar and thinking of closing before midnight, has plenty of time on his hands to agree. He said: "I don't think the Conseil has promoted the place properly. They have just spent a fortune in Italy but that is a low-spend market. We need some money to be spent in the UK."

Last week the Balearic government's tourism minister, Joan Flaquer, flew to the island only to be greeted by striking airport workers.

In a bid to quell the mounting fears of hotel operators, he announced a doubling of Ibiza's promotional budget to €1.8m and the launch of a new joint private and public promotional campaign.

Flaquer also pointed out that more than €15m are being spent on the island's infrastructure, with new tourist cycle tracks and nautical stations.

And he announced that a new plan for the 'restructuring' of the tourism industry in San Antonio would be unveiled to the public in autumn.

It is likely that Ibiza will have to undergo a painful period of repositioning to lessen its reliance on clubbers and improve its image.

Many parts of the island remain upmarket destinations of striking beauty.

With property prices up 15% this year, there are signs that the wealthy are regaining a paradise that was almost lost to the clubbers.

Denis, a quietly spoken American sound engineer and musician, was one of the original hippies to arrive on the island back in the 1970s. He is laid back about the Ibiza's prospects.

"The party might be over for the big clubs. The numbers are well down. But nothing lasts forever and it was a hell of a party while it lasted."