



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Tourist Mediterranean holiday plans create stark contrast with migrants' plight



How many tourists heading for their summer holidays in the Mediterranean will spare a thought for another group of would-be travellers wanting to cross its sapphire seas?

While volcanoes, heat waves, war and economic uncertainty are deterring some tourists from escaping to the usual fashionable hot spots this year, millions of others have no choice but to flee.

Europe, the world's largest destination region, **had** 747 million international arrivals last year, according to UN Tourism. Meanwhile, around 1 in 120 people who tried to reach Europe across the Med died in 2024, the highest death rate since 2021, **says** the International Organisation for Migration.

Common sense would dictate that these parallel universes should intersect, given the labour shortages in Europe that are likely to worsen. But anti-migrant rhetoric remains a vote-winner in rich countries while northern Europeans decide where to spend their next vacation.

Tourism under threat

Earthquake activity and fears of a tsunami in Santorini earlier this year have left some tourists too "scared" to visit, **causing** a fall in arrivals for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic. Greek tourism officials expect losses of up to 15% this summer.

Other climate phenomena such as heat waves and wildfires are also exacting a toll, and the World Meteorological Organisation **warns** Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent.

Nordic countries and Ireland are hoping to capitalise on their temperate climates

This is prompting a tourist shift to cooler countries such as Norway, which has seen holiday bookings **rise** 50% year on year, and

other Nordic countries and Ireland are also hoping to capitalise on their temperate climates.

Geopolitical tensions are a particular constraint on tourism this year, including Israel's attacks on Iran that started last Friday. Airlines have cancelled or rerouted flights around the eastern Mediterranean, while western countries have updated their travel advisories not just for the Middle East, but also for tourist destinations such as Cyprus, Tunisia and even Morocco, which is more than 1,300 miles away from Israel.

Anti-tourist sentiment on the rise

But it is the cost of living that is perhaps having the most effect on tourist behaviour and on those who host them. Anti-tourist sentiment has been building up over the last three years amid groaning water, electricity and housing infrastructure in places including Barcelona, Athens, Lisbon, Venice, and Rome.

Tourists were greeted with water pistols as thousands of people **protested** against mass tourism in Spain and Italy on 15 June, following large demonstrations last summer.

"We don't want to hurt anyone" - Elena Boschi, an activist from Genoa

The latest protests were held after the Southern Europe Network Against Touristification brought activists from across southern Europe to Barcelona for a series of workshops in April. Further action is likely.

"We don't want to hurt anyone," Elena Boschi, an activist from Genoa, **told** the New York Times. "We just want them to be mindful of the impact that their presence is having on these places and the people who live in them."

Who is responsible for overtourism?

Traveller nights in short-term rentals advertised through platforms such as Airbnb rose by 57 million to reach 715 million last year, while hotels saw a surge of 73 million nights to 1.9 billion.

Airbnb has hit back, saying the hotel industry is responsible for overtourism. "We end up getting a lot of the blame, especially in city centres but the reality is overtourism is really driven by hotels," Theo Yedinsky, vice-president for public policy at Airbnb, **told** the Financial Times. "It is totally unfair. They are scapegoating Airbnb."

Barcelona has announced a full ban on Airbnb by 2028

Tui, Europe's biggest travel operator, **rejects** this. "The reason protesters hit the streets is because of issues with the cost of living and especially housing. Both are driven by the secondary home market and short-term leases," said Alexander Panczuk, group director of policy and reputation at Tui.

Potential tourists are also saving money amid global economic uncertainty, with Tui saying that sales were down 1% so far this year. But this fall is not enough yet for those regions that have experienced tourism surges in the last few years, and they still want action to help them cope.

So far, Barcelona has **announced** a full ban on Airbnb by 2028, and Spain has ordered the platform to remove nearly 66,000 listings, while Santorini, Venice and Bruges have introduced visitor caps and tourism taxes.

Migration tensions

Ahead of the European Commission's formal budget proposal on 16 July, discussions are underway on raising the EU's entry fee above a proposed €7 as part of efforts to pay back

pandemic-era debts. The €7 fee is not currently levied by member states, and it is lower than the US fee of \$21 and the UK's of £18 charged to non-EU travellers.



The Greek centre-right government has passed laws to legalise the status of about 30,000 unregistered labourers - Kyriakos Mitsotakis

Another factor that may restrain overtourism is a **shortage** of labour in countries such as Greece, where there were 80,000 vacancies in the food and hotel sector just before the summer season got underway.

The Greek centre-right government has passed laws to legalise the status of about 30,000 unregistered labourers and signed bilateral labour mobility agreements with countries including Egypt, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Georgia, India and Moldova. Perhaps most notable is a training scheme run by the Hellenic Hotel Association for asylum-seekers.

But the vow of Makis Voridis, who heads the Greek migration ministry, to expel "illegal migrants" is echoed by populists across Europe and the US.

Almost 32,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014 - 500 this year alone so far. The EU pays millions of euros to Libya, Tunisia and Turkey to reduce migration while activists continue to report serious human rights violations.

But many Europeans still need a holiday.