

Configuring the Northern Coast of Spain as a privileged tourist enclave: the cities of San Sebastián and Santander, 1902-1931

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Configuring the Northern Coast of Spain as a privileged tourist enclave: the cities of San Sebastián and Santander, 1902-1931

This paper is a contribution to the international history of tourism concentrating on Spain and more precisely on the specific tourist region of the northern coast, the *Cantabrian Cornice*. The central-eastern sector of the northern Spanish coast, which followed a pattern somewhat similar to other European locales, notably Brighton and Biarritz, became an elite tourist area and one of the earliest tourist destinations in the country in the first third of the twentieth century. Although there were earlier precedents dating to the mid-nineteenth century, it was during the early twentieth century that tourist development in the cities of San Sebastián and Santander coalesced, creating an enticing and coherent leisure region. The most privileged members of Spanish society, as well as foreigners from both Europe and America, were drawn to the area. The continual presence of King Alfonso XIII and the royal family, the support of local entrepreneurs and bourgeoisie, and the promotion of such sports as yachting, horse-racing, tennis, and golf encouraged this process. Specialisation in tourism also impacted significantly on the urban development of both cities.

Keywords: Spain; Cantabrian Cornice; elite tourism; leisure sports; history of tourism; twentieth century

Introduction

Until very recently, the small historiography of Spanish tourism at an international level focused almost exclusively on the discovery of the country by foreign visitors. This resulted in the creation of a succession of exotic images associated with particular territories and cities.¹ These images first appeared in the late eighteenth century and

¹ See, for example, the book by Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

were maintained until the mid-twentieth century, when mass tourism emerged.² This preference for exploring an external point of view and the focus on foreign tourism obscured the initial development of internal or domestic tourism experiences, involving privileged groups of Spanish citizens in their own country in a time before mass tourism. This fact is also reflected in the lack of attention to the historical correlations between the foreign tourist system and the elite domestic leisure system in those years.³

Thus, with only a few exceptions, such as San Sebastián during the First World War,⁴ no comprehensive studies explore continuity and change in the resources and regions used by tourism in the long term. Indeed, there are hardly any studies addressing interactions between foreign and domestic tourism in the period before the 1950s. Fortunately, Rafael Vallejo and Carlos Larrinaga (2018)⁵ began to address this deficiency in their study of the creation of the Spanish leisure system in the first forty years of the twentieth century, including its regional differences. Even more recently, Ana Moreno Garrido refers to the importance of the national elite in her recent book, *De forasteros y turistas* (2022).⁶

² Eugenia Afinoguénova and Eduardo Rodríguez Merchán. 'Picturesque violence: tourism, the film industry, and the heritagization of "bandoleros" in Spain, 1905-1936', *Journal of Tourism History* 6, 1 (2014): 38-56. DOI: 10.1080/1755182X.2014.954639

³ As pointed out by M. Barke and J. Towner, 'Exploring the History of Leisure and Tourism in Spain', in *Tourism in Spain: Critical Issues*, ed. Michael Barke, John Towner and Michael T. Newton (Wallingford, UK: CAB International, 1996), 3-34. For instance, cultural tourism was promoted by the Royal Commission on Tourism between 1911 and 1928, and particularly by Benigno de la Vega Inclán, in cities like Toledo and Seville, and specific places like El Greco's house and the Santa Cruz district. This cultural and artistic offer was aimed mainly at foreigners, in the tradition of romantic travellers. This has been studied in works like Ana Moreno, 'Turismo de élite y administración turística de la época (1911-1936)', *Estudios Turísticos* 163-164 (2005): 31-54; and Soledad Pérez, 'Vega Inclán y las Casas Museo: un concepto inédito de turismo cultural en la España de Alfonso XIII', *Cuadernos de Turismo* 42 (2018): 421-445.

⁴ One of the first scholars to study the phenomenon was Luis Lavour. 'Turismo de entreguerras 1919-1939', *Estudios Turísticos* 68 (1980): 13-130.

⁵ Rafael Vallejo and Carlos Larrinaga, *Los orígenes del turismo moderno en España. El nacimiento de un país turístico 1900-1939* (Madrid: Sílex, 2018).

⁶ Ana Moreno Garrido, *De forasteros y turistas. Una historia del turismo en España 1880-1936* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2022).

The present article seeks to further fill the gap. It examines the development of a specific area in the north of Spain, known as the ‘Cantabrian Cornice’, as an elite and mainly urban tourist destination in a particular historical period, coinciding with the reign of Alfonso XIII, between 1902 and 1931, the first third of the twentieth century. Some authors refer to this as the pre-Fordist stage of tourism, parallel to the advances in the Second Industrial Revolution,⁷ with decisive progress in services, transport, navigation, hotels, and the leisure industry. These were years in which tourism was practiced by a few individuals with great consumer capacity—what might be called ‘minority tourism’—although from the 1920s more layers of society began to take part in the phenomenon through a process of democratisation and imitation.⁸

In order to understand this process of growth, it is worth considering the ideas of several authors who approach the study of tourist practices in terms of a ‘programmed mythology’: a system of socially-shared beliefs.⁹ This concept is applicable not only to mass tourism, to which most authors apply it, but also to the previous period, when tourist activity was still an incipient, minority phenomenon that new groups gradually adhered to in their desire to emulate bourgeois practices as a way of achieving differentiation and distinction.¹⁰

⁷ Luis Garay and Gemma Cànoves, ‘Life cycles, stages and tourism history. The Catalonia (Spain) Experience’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38, 2 (2011): 651-671. DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2010.12.006

⁸ Marc Boyer, ‘El turismo en Europa, de la Edad Moderna al siglo XX’, *Historia Contemporánea* 25 (2002): 13-31.

⁹ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); Marie-Dominique Perrot, Gilbert Rist and Fabrizio Sabelli, *La mythologie programmée: l'économie des croyances dans la société moderne* (Paris: PUF, 1992); Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard, *Tourism Promotion and Power. Creating Images, Creating Identities* (Chichester: Wiley, 1998); Saskia Cousin and Bertrand Réau, *Sociologie du tourisme* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2009); Kadri Boualem and Maria Bondarenko, ‘L’expérience touristique: la complexité conceptuelle et le pragmatisme de la mise en scène’, in *Le tourisme comme expérience. Regards interdisciplinaires sur le vécu touristique*, ed. Jean-Michel Decroly (Montréal: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2015), 23-46.

¹⁰ In the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979). Bourdieu is a basic reference to the sociology of tourism. For this author, the promotion and the commercialisation of tourist practices are posed in terms of the construction of symbolic relationships that, in turn, serve to conceal the commercial and economics objectives.

In the present case-study, this phenomenon is appreciable in the urban environments of the provinces of Santander (now Cantabria), Biscay, and Guipúzcoa (in the Basque Country). In addition to creating the image of a brand through the sacralisation of particular leisure practices, an aspect that will not be covered in detail here as it requires a more specific study, the summer stays of the king and other members of the royal family contributed to attracting the most distinguished members of Spanish society as well as a small number of foreigners.¹¹ Already in the mid-nineteenth century, these coastal provinces had adopted the phenomenon of sea-bathing which, as is well known, originated in the eighteenth century in the United Kingdom and gradually spread along the Atlantic seaboard of Europe,¹² where this region of Spain is located.

At an international level, these beach resorts were so successful that some of them rivalled spas in popularity. Thus, in the early nineteenth century, Brighton became the most fashionable resort in England, replacing Bath.¹³ When the Prince Regent, the future George IV, built the Royal Pavilion, Brighton became the main summer holiday centre in England for much of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The presence of the royal family

¹¹ Brian Shelmerdine, 'The Experiences of British Holidaymakers and Expatriate Residents in Pre-Civil War Spain', *European History Quarterly* 32, 3 (2002): 367-390. DOI: 10.1177/0269142002032003061. In turn, Ana Moreno devotes a section of her book *De forasteros a turistas. Una historia del turismo en España 1880-1936* (2022): 139-142, titled 'El primer turista el Rey' to the role of the Spanish monarchy and royal visits in the promotion of different Spanish destinations. In this respect, the case of Asturias is different because, despite being located on the Cantabrian Coast, it was not a royal summer resort. Consequently, business initiatives, aspirations and achievements were not the same. For Asturias, see Juan Carlos de la Madrid, *Aquellos maravillosos baños: historia del turismo en Asturias, 1840-1940* (Oviedo: Fundación Caja Rural de Asturias, 2011).

¹² Alain Corbin, A, *The Lure of the Sea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) [1st. ed. *Le territoire du vide. L'Occident et le désir du rivage. 1750-1840* (Paris: Aubier, 1988)].

¹³ John Alfred Ralph Pimlott, *The Englishman's holiday* (Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1976, 1st. ed. 1947); James Walvin, *Leisure and Society* (London: Longman, 1978).

¹⁴ Sue Farrant, 'London by the Sea: Resort Development on the South Coast of England, 1880-1939', *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, 1 (1987): 137-162.; Sue Berry, *Georgian Brighton* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2005).

set the tone for these resorts and attracted the wealthier sectors of society¹⁵ and, in some cases, sports helped to set that tone.¹⁶ In addition, the railway was fundamental in the urban development of these coastal towns.¹⁷ In England, higher and even middle layers of society found in the coastal resorts places where they could shelter and escape from the big city. For example, Southend, Margate, Ramsgate, Broadstairs and other places on the coasts of Kent and Sussex played this role in the case of London.

On the other side of the English Channel, the Parisian elite chose the coast of Normandy for sea-bathing and this became a major tourist area during the Second Empire.¹⁸ With the expansion of the railway, more distant beach resorts gained importance, such as Biarritz, which became the epicentre of French summer holidays in the time of Napoleon III.¹⁹ However, the clearest evidence of the relationship between this form of transport and the appearance and development of a tourist centre is Arcachon, which the brothers Émile and Isaac Péreire promoted, benefitting from the proximity of Bordeaux.²⁰

¹⁵ Harold James Perkin, 'The "Social Tone" of Victorian Seaside Resorts in the North-West', *Northern History* 11 (1979): 180-194. DOI: 10.1179/nhi.1976.11.1.180

¹⁶ Alastair Durie and Mike J. Huggins, 'Sports, Social Tone and the Seaside Resorts of Great Britain, c.1850-1914', *The International Journal of the History for Sport* 15 (1998):173-187. DOI: 10.1080/09523369808714018

¹⁷ According to Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, 21-22.

¹⁸ Daniel Clary, *La façade littorale de Paris. Le tourisme sur la côte normande, étude géographique* (Paris: Ophrys, 1977); Gabriel Désert, *La vie quotidienne sur les plages normandes du Second Empire aux années folles* (Paris: Hachette, 1983).

¹⁹ Bertrand Blancheton and Jean-Jacques Marchi, 'Le développement du tourisme ferroviaire en France depuis 1870', *Histoire, Économie et Société* 30 (2011): 95-113. DOI: 10.3917/hes.113.0095; Bruno Delarue, *Les bains de mer sur les côtes françaises* (Yport: Terre en vue, 2013); Claude Bailhé and Paul Charpentier, *La Côte Atlantique de Biarritz à La Rochelle au temps des guides baigneurs* (Toulouse: Milan, 1983); Pierre Laborde, *Histoire du tourisme sur la Côte basque, 1830-1930* (Anglet: Atlantica, 2001); Alain Puyau, 'Le rôle de Biarritz dans le développement touristique et urbain de la Côte basque dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle', in *Les villes balnéaires d'Europe occidentale*, ed. Jean-Pierre Poussou, Yves Perret-Gentil and Alain Lottin (Paris: PUPS, 2008), 125-143.

²⁰ Christophe Bouneau, 'La contribution des chemins de fer au développement touristique d'Arcachon de 1841 au second conflit mondial', in *D'Arcachon à Andernos. Regards sur le Bassin, Actes du 49ème Congrès de la Fédération Historique du Sud-Ouest* (Bordeaux, F.H.S.O., 1997), 265-293; Alice Garner, *A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2015).

In Spain, cold-water sea-bathing became popular in the mid-nineteenth century.²¹ Queen Isabel II travelled to San Sebastián and Santander for that purpose. Northern Spain thus was added to a phenomenon that affected the whole Atlantic coast of Europe, in a fashion that spread from Great Britain across the Continent and even reached America. In Spain, at the fin de siècle and particularly during the reign of Alfonso XIII, the Basque Country and Santander emerged as the preferred area for elite tourism, at a time before mass holiday-making. As well as the constant presence of the royal family, this area attracted social elites (aristocrats, politicians, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, and so on). From the 1920s, it began to draw people from further down the social ladder, contributing to an increased number of visitors and to a growing demand for tourist facilities. Even so, during the 1920s and 30s, the Cantabrian Cornice maintained its status as an elite tourism mecca, while other destinations (Catalan Coast, Mallorca, and Malaga) acquired increasing importance as more regions and coastal resorts were popularised in Spain.²² The Mediterranean location of these other destinations should be underscored, as they were particularly linked to more popular

²¹ For the evolution in those practices, see John K. Walton and Jenny Smith, 'The First Century of Beach Tourism in Spain: San Sebastián and the Playas del Norte from the 1830s to the 1930s', in *Tourism in Spain. Critical Issues*, ed. Michael Barke, John Towner and Michael Thomas Newton (Oxon, UK: CAB International, 1995), 31-65; Carmen Gil de Arriba, 'La práctica social de los baños de mar. Establecimientos balnearios y actividades de ocio en Cantabria (1868-1936)', *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* 25 (1994): 79-97. In the nineteenth century, sea-bathing practices on the Cantabrian coast sometimes involved dividing up beaches depending on the sex of the bathers, by separating specific areas for men from places for women and children. The segmentation was never very strict however and disappeared at the turn of the century. In contrast, social discrimination in the access and use of beaches continued, albeit more subtly during the first third of the century, until the end of the monarchy. Thus, there were more urban beaches that were better equipped in their physical characteristics and with paid facilities which the more affluent used and more remote beaches with fewer and more economical services for groups of a lower social class. Sections of stony, less attractive beaches with difficulties for bathing were even used, where the municipal authorities set up huts that were free of charge for the poorer sectors of the population who could not afford to use the facilities with a charge. In this aspect, see also Carmen Gil de Arriba, 'Las playas y el fenómeno urbano', in *Playas urbanas. IV Curso Internacional de Relaciones Puerto-Ciudad*, ed. José Luis Estrada et al. (Santander: Autoridad Portuaria de Santander & Navalia, 2007), 33-48.

²² Richard J. Buswell, *Mallorca and Tourism* (Bristol: Channel View, 2011); Mercedes Tatjer, *Els banys de mar a Catalunya* (Barcelona: Albertí, 2012); Joan Carles Cirer-Costa, 'Spain's tourism models in the first third of the twentieth century', Munich Personal RePEc Archive 91824 (2019). <https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/91824/>

sports like swimming and new social practices, such as sun-bathing.²³ The origins of Spanish sun-and-beach tourism can be found in those Mediterranean resorts which attracted a more downscale clientele than was true on the Cantabrian Cornice.

The present article aims to analyse the part that the Crown and socioeconomic elites played in shaping this part of the northern Spanish coast into a tourist region through its urban centres, the construction of facilities and infrastructures that enabled it, and the role of the main agents who helped to build them.²⁴ Therefore, rather than study a region from the geographic, administrative or political points of view, the aim is to explore the role played by urban centres in a tourist region, as the Cantabrian Cornice was during those years.

The sources used for this purpose are largely qualitative. We concentrate mainly on the press: Spanish and foreign illustrated magazines and newspapers from the period of study. Since members of the royal family and economically-favoured social sectors played a decisive role in the type of tourism in the north of Spain, many magazines published detailed reports about the summer holidays of these groups. These publications did not only inform their readers, they also created a significant discourse. More specialised publications reported news about nautical sports, like the regattas, some of which were international and interested Spanish and foreign readers, or about the trips made by some distinguished tourists who owned their own cars. Similarly, the local, national, foreign, or specialised press did not only follow closely the activities of the king, his family and other important visitors, but the large newspapers in Madrid and other large cities in Spain sent one or more correspondents to Santander and San

²³ Jean-Didier Urbain, *Au soleil. Naissance de la Méditerranée estivale* (Paris: Payot, 2014).

²⁴ In this regard, it is worth recalling the considerations proposed in the review essay by J. Mark Souther, 'Landscapes of Leisure. Building an Urban History of Tourism', *Journal of Urban History* 30, 2 (2004): 257-265.

Sebastián to report on everything that happened in the summer capitals of Spain in those years, highlighting the aspects that they thought were of most interest, depending on the publication, and ultimately created an exclusive image of summer holidays on the Cantabrian Cornice at Spanish and international levels.

In the same way, we consulted reports, annuals, and the abundant tourist and travel guides published during those years, in Spanish and other languages.²⁵ These materials collectively provide interesting new data about the recreational activities practiced during the summer months and the transformation of the region into the first really modern tourism area in Spain.²⁶ At the same time, these qualitative sources of analysis confirm the existence of an important social discourse defining the northern coast as a place of refined and elite leisure throughout the period.

The concept of ‘tourist region’ and its application to the case of Spain

Tourism as a system implies the integration of different components: in this case, the tourists (travellers, day-trippers, holidaymakers, sea-bathers) and different public and private agents (businesses, associations, administrations). The latter form a more or less interconnected organisation with the aim of promoting tourist activities in a particular area and receiving groups of people who wish to participate in those activities,

²⁵ For example, in English the guidebook by Edgar Allison Peers, *Santander* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927); the same author would later write the foreword of the book by Trevor C. Smith, *San Sebastián and the Basque Country: a companion guide* (Liverpool: Institute of Hispanic Studies, 1935).

²⁶ Regarding the idea of modern tourism in Spain, see Rafael Vallejo, *Historia del turismo en España 1928-1962* (Madrid: Silex, 2021), 163-177; Carmelo Pellejero and José Joaquín García, *Historia económica del turismo en España (1820-2020)* (Madrid: Ediciones Pirámide, 2022). A study from that time that is worth mentioning in connection with this general process of modernization of the tourism industry in the first decades of the twentieth century is by the professor of the University of Pretoria A.J. Norval, *The Tourist Industry. A National and International Survey* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1936).

according to the subjective and diverse needs of leisure.²⁷ In any tourism system, an inter-relation of places, actors and practices converge in a specific socio-historic context and change and evolve over time.²⁸ Economic and non-economic interests, social values, legal regulations, images, discourses, and representations also form part of those inter-relations.²⁹

From the spatial perspective, the regional scale is appropriate for the study of a tourism system, as it does not restrict the analysis to a single place (a town, resort, or site) but takes into account other aspects, such as the relationships that tourists create between one place and another through their own mobility³⁰ or the interactions between different agents in more or less proximate locations. Therefore, this regional approach is able to stress the network of relationships that tourist practices establish between places, people, business, and institutions. Additionally, this concept of tourist region can be applied to areas with homogenous characteristics, with a functionality and image that identifies them, but without necessarily coinciding strictly with political-administrative boundaries, as will be seen in the present case-study.

²⁷ Rafael Vallejo, 'Turismo en España durante el primer tercio del siglo XX: la conformación de un sistema turístico', *Ayer* 114, 2 (2019): 175–211.

²⁸ Rémy Knafou, *Tourisme 2. Moments de lieux* (Paris: Belin - Équipe MIT Mobilités Itinéraires Tourisimes, Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot, 2005).

²⁹ According to one of the first authors to discuss the concept of tourism system, Jafar Jafari, *The Tourism System. A Theoretical Approach to the Study of Tourism* (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1985), 167-190, the tourism system is intended as a theoretical construct which explains not only the structure and function of tourism, but also the conditions, factors and processes involved. In turn, Kadek Wiweka and Komang Trisna Pratiwi Arcana, 'Rethinking the theory of tourism: what is tourism system in theoretical and empirical perspective', *Journal of Business on Hospitality and Tourism* 5, 2 (2019): 318- 336. DOI: 10.22334/jbhost.v5i2.176, consider that tourism as a system consists of two kinds of sub-system: internal and external. The internal sub-system is the interaction between the tourist demand and the tourism supply. While the external sub-system consists of such different aspects as trade factors, natural or climate conditions, socio-cultural characteristics, economic or finance factors, political factors and geographical factors.

³⁰ Jérôme Piriou, 'La dimension régionale du système touristique : une lecture réticulaire par les pratiques spatiales des touristes au sein de l'espace des Châteaux de la Loire', *Mondes du Tourisme Hors-série* (2016): 1-27. DOI: 10.4000/tourisme.1276

As a starting point, the development of the Spanish tourism system was not chronologically uniform in the country, especially in the first third of the twentieth century.³¹ The factors that influenced the early development of tourist areas in Spain included natural and cultural resources, long term changes in the reasons for tourist trips, changes in means of transport and infrastructures, variations in the countries providing the demand, renewal in the social make-up of the tourists, and the different public and private initiatives taken in each part of the country. As a consequence of these internal and external factors, tourism took different paths in one or other region in Spain from the late nineteenth century onwards.

In general, in the first decades of the twentieth century and even before, the northern provinces were more important to the incipient tourist development of the country, whereas the boom in sun and beach tourism from the 1950s onwards was more important on the Mediterranean coast and in the Balearic and Canary Islands.³²

Consequently, spatial differentiations are essential in an historical study of tourism and the area known as the Cantabrian Cornice should be analysed from the point of view of a tourist region (Figure 1): with two important urban centres, San Sebastián and Santander, and an array of secondary resorts, like Zarauz, Guetaria, Plencia, Algorta, Castro Urdiales, Laredo, Suances and Comillas, which also benefitted from the expansion of tourism in those years. Together with those places, Bilbao, although it does not enter in the same category of a tourist city, also played a major role

³¹ As noted by Rafael Vallejo, 'La formación de un sistema turístico nacional con diferentes desarrollos regionales entre 1900 y 1939', in *Los orígenes del turismo moderno en España*, ed. Vallejo & Larrinaga, 67-170. See too Rafael Vallejo, Elvira Lindoso and Margarita Vilar, 'Los antecedentes del turismo de masas en España, 1900-1936', *Revista de la Historia de la Economía y de la Empresa* 10 (2016): 182; Rafael Vallejo, Margarita Vilar and Elvira Lindoso, 'The tourism economy in Spain, 1900-1939: new sources, new methodologies and new results', *Journal of Tourism History* 10, 2 (2018): 105-129. DOI: 10.1080/1755182X.2018.1468495

³² Eric Zuelow establishes a framework for the contextualization of this process in his book *A History of Modern Tourism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 134-148.

in attracting Spanish elites, as it was the main economic centre in the north of Spain. Its location on the coast favoured this.

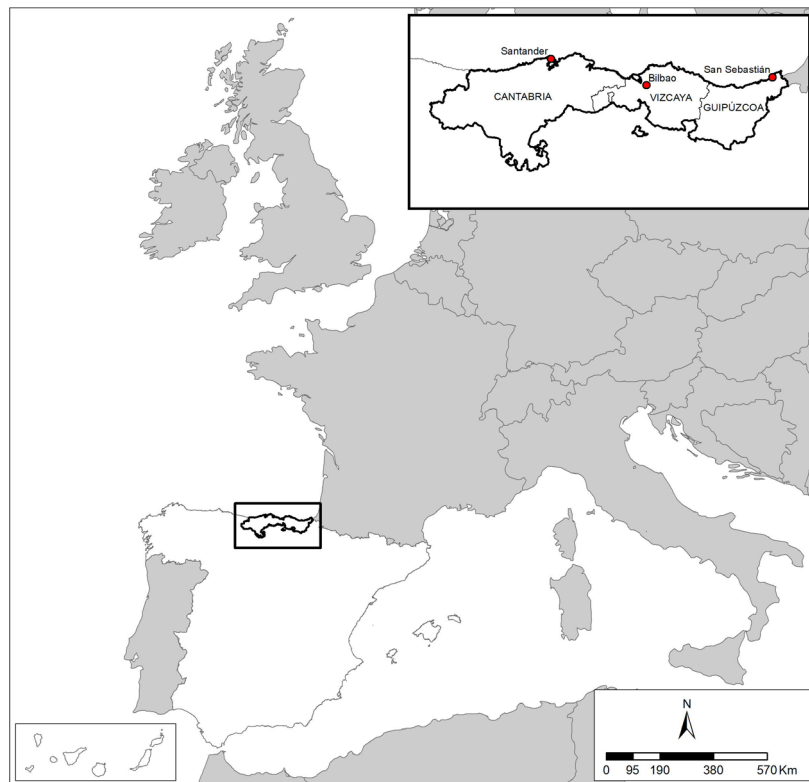


Figure 1. Map of Spain with the Cantabrian Coast and the provinces of Guipúzcoa, Biscay and Santander. Own elaboration based on ESRI cartography.

John K. Walton and Jenny Smith note this situation in their study of San Sebastián and the northern beaches,³³ but they do not conceive of the region as a whole in which it is possible to see a large number of common elements and synergies that made it the main tourist area in Spain at that time. Consequently, this study extends beyond the modern administrative demarcations, which are often followed in this type of study and that make sense when considering more recent times.³⁴ In our opinion, this approach, as well as being novel, allows a better analysis of the former tourist activity in

³³ Walton and Smith, 'The First Century of Beach Tourism in Spain: San Sebastián and the Playas del Norte from the 1830s to the 1930s'.

³⁴ Douglas Pearce, 'Tourism and the autonomous communities in Spain', *Annals of Touris Research* 24, 1 (1997): 177-197.

the north of Spain, linked as it was to the royal family, socioeconomic elites, inter-personal relationships, the consumption of different luxury goods and services and the very development of the two main tourist cities on this northern coast, Santander and San Sebastián.

As stated above, apart from a few exceptions,³⁵ the Cantabrian Cornice has not been analysed systematically as a tourist region from the historical and territorial point of view, even though activities related with summer holidays and tourist urbanisation took place at different places on this coast from the second half of the nineteenth century and therefore it was a pioneer on the Spanish and international levels. This early specialisation is mentioned in occasional studies of a few specific towns.³⁶ Thus, one of the originalities of the present study is that it underscores that this was one of the first tourist *regions* in Spain, long before the start of mass tourism in the 1960s; it helped to usher in the predominance of the Mediterranean coast and the islands as prime destinations.

Whereas the powerful industrialisation that occurred in several places in northern Spain during the early twentieth century was incompatible with the initial beach tourism in such towns as Portugalete and Santurce in Biscay and El Astillero on

³⁵ Carlos Larrinaga, 'A Century of seaside tourism and the planning of urban space in Spain, 1830-1936', *Storia del turismo. Annali* 5 (2004): 9-32; Carlos Larrinaga, 'A century of tourism in northern Spain, 1815-1914', in *Histories of Tourism*, ed. John K. Walton (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Press, 2005), 88-103.

³⁶ Carmen Gil de Arriba, 'La génesis de las actividades de ocio en Cantabria. Estudio del caso de Comillas', *Treballs de Geografia* 43 (1990): 111-118; José María Beascoechea, 'Veraneo y urbanización en la costa cantábrica durante el siglo XIX: las playas del Abra de Bilbao', *Historia Contemporánea* 25 (2002): 181-202; José María Beascoechea, 'De la estancia de baños al veraneo de clase media: el cambio de modelo urbano en Plentzia, Bizkaia', *Scripta Nova. Revista Electrónica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales* XXI-568 (2017): 1-47. DOI: 10.1344/sn2017.21.19238; Alet Valero, 'Saint-Sébastien: implantation tardive d'une balnéation de cour', in *Les villes balnéaires d'Europe occidentale*, ed. Perret-Gentil et al., 125-143; María Jesús Cava, 'Balnearios y baños de ola en Bizkaia', *Isas Memoria. Revista de Estudios Marítimos del País Vasco* 6 (2009): 369-380; Margarita Barral, 'Casas de baños y balnearios en el desarrollo del turismo en Galicia: el caso de Vigo y Mondariz', in *Claves del mundo contemporáneo. Actas del XI Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea*, ed. María Teresa Ortega and Miguel Angel del Arco (Granada: Comares, 2012), 1-8.

the Bay of Santander, during the first decades of the century the cities of San Sebastián and Santander strengthened their tourist functionality that had been marked out beforehand and was promoted by public and private initiatives from that time onwards. In short, thanks to such factors as the intense development of business activity in several sectors (commercial, financial, industrial, and shipping) and the early creation of rail and road infrastructures,³⁷ this northern part of the Iberian Peninsula found, during Alfonso XIII's reign, an especially favourable socioeconomic context for its consolidation as an elite tourist region, above all until the 1920s, when the first democratisation of tourism can be detected.³⁸

Similarly, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most resorts in the north of Spain resembled each other, early rivalry between them in attracting visitors—competition between San Sebastián and Santander was quite noticeable—led them to stress differences. Common features were downplayed such as collaboration between promoting agents and the continuous spatial mobility of the same elite from one resort to another.

The accessibility of the northern coast as a tourist region in the early twentieth century

A determining factor in the development of a place as a resort is its accessibility, both internal and external. As seen in other places in Europe, the growing use of the railways

³⁷ These circumstances meant that the provinces in the centre and east of the northern coast of Spain (Santander, Biscay and Guipúzcoa) were much better connected with Madrid than Galicia in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula and linked by a greater density of short-distance railways lines for internal communications, as can be seen, for example, in the *Mapa del Anuario de Ferrocarriles*, drawn by the railway official Enrique de la Torre (Madrid: Imp. del Indicador Oficial de los Caminos de Hierro, 1912). For the importance of roads, see Carmen Gil de Arriba, 'El papel de las carreteras en la configuración de los espacios turísticos españoles de mediados del siglo XX, desde el CNFE de 1926 al plan de modernización de 1950', in *La Península Ibérica no Mundo*, ed. José Alberto Rio Fernandez et al. (Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa, Centro de Estudos Geográficos), 705-715.

³⁸ John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

initially contributed to the development and accessibility of this northern tourist region.³⁹ Indeed, in the early twentieth century, the Northern Railway Company (*Compañía de Ferrocarriles del Norte*) offered special return tickets in summer; in order to travel from Madrid to the northern resorts, these tickets allowed the traveller to return from the same destination or from any other place on the Cantabrian Cornice chosen by the traveller.

In a similar way, in summer 1910, a special fast train service started from Madrid to San Sebastián, Santander and Gijón on particular dates in July and August. This special service was maintained at times of the greatest numbers of travellers. Thus, in summer 1930, a total of six special trains connected Madrid with Santander, Bilbao and San Sebastián, and also Barcelona and Valencia with the latter resort.

Together with railways, cars played an increasingly important role although they were initially restricted to a minority. Since the early twentieth century, summer trips to different Cantabrian resorts became more common for a wealthy Spanish and foreign clientele with their own form of transport, as they aimed to develop mutual relationships and to visit new fashionable places.⁴⁰ King Alfonso XIII himself, during his summer stays in San Sebastián and Santander, often travelled by car, either for reasons of government, or to make contact with groups of politicians and businessmen, as well as

³⁹ Rafael Barquín, 'El turismo y los primeros ferrocarriles españoles', *TsT: Transportes, Servicios y Telecomunicaciones* 24 (2013): 110-136.

⁴⁰ The *Real Automóvil Club de España* (RACE) was founded in 1903 with Alfonso XIII as its honorary president. There were also several provincial automobile clubs. One of them was the *Real Club Automovilista de Guipúzcoa*, which carried out frequent activities in summer near San Sebastián, such as the competitions in the field of Ondarreta and the races up Mt. Igueldo, with official rules and prizes that included the King's Cup and the Guipúzcoa Cup (*Gran Vida*, October 1st, 1910). In Santander, the *Real Club Automovilista Montañés* took an interest in the conservation and improvement of roads and also encouraged tourism by taking an active part in the summer festivals in Santander and organising excursions to different places in the province (*España automóvil y aeronáutica*, July 30th 1911). Similarly, the *Automóvil Club de Vizcaya* had 170 members in 1930, according to the *Anuario del comercio, industria, profesiones y tributación de País Vasco* in that year (Bilbao: Centro de Fomento y Turismo de Vizcaya). The Syndicate for the Development of Bilbao (*Sindicato de Fomento*) took part in its foundation in August 1910 and only three years later it had about 1,200 members (*Gran Vida*, December 1st, 1913).

for leisure or personal enjoyment.⁴¹ In general, this modern dynamism became increasingly usual among the still-minority social groups that enjoyed summer holidays, a phenomenon that is reflected in illustrated magazines and newspapers with their frequent notes in their society columns about those movements.⁴²

Following the creation of the National Circuit of Special Roads (*Circuito Nacional de Firmes Especiales* – CNFE) in 1926, the possibility of tourist travel and movements on the Cantabrian coast increased considerably. Of direct relevance here, Itinerary 3 in the North-West Section (later *Transversal* I-II), 230.8 kilometres long, connected San Sebastián with Bilbao and Santander. Route expansion was linked to the growth of upper-class automotive tourism, for whom cars were increasingly a must-have accessory.⁴³ Reflecting a worldwide trend, groups of bourgeoisie, aristocrats, entrepreneurs, politicians, and high-ranking public officials enjoyed excursions in their own vehicles around the usual tourist areas and neighbouring provinces.⁴⁴

Royal visits to the beaches in the North and summer nautical events

At other European resorts, Brighton or Biarritz, for example, royal visits contributed

⁴¹ Félix J. Luengo and Ander Delgado, 'Antes patria que rey. Los viajes de Alfonso XII por el País Vasco y Navarra', in *Alfonso XIII visita España. Monarquía y Nación*, ed. Margarita Barral Martínez (Granada: Comares, 2016), 75-100.

⁴² Some of those illustrated magazines and newspapers were *La Correspondencia de España* (1860-1925), *Blanco y Negro* (1891-), *Nuevo Mundo* (1895-1933), *ABC* (1903-), *La Actualidad* (1906-1911), *Mundo Gráfico* (1911-1938), *El Mundo Naval Ilustrado* (1897-1901) later replaced by *Vida Marítima* (1902-1934), *Arte y Sport* (1903-1903), *Heraldo Deportivo* (1915-1935), *Revista Cántabra* (1908-1911), *La Voz de Guipúzcoa* (1885-1936), *Anuario de ferrocarriles españoles* (1893-1927), *Anuario-guía de las playas y balnearios de España* (1924), *Biarritz* (Paris, 1927). Three magazines were specifically dedicated to automobile activities: *España automóvil* (1907-1911) with which the Real Automóvil Club de España, the Real Aero Club and the Club Alpino Español collaborated and which later changed its name to *España automóvil y aeronáutica* (1911-1928); in addition *Madrid automóvil* was launched in the mid-1920s (1925-1935).

⁴³ Miguel Artola, *El fin de la clase ociosa. De Romanones al estraperlo, 1900-1950* (Madrid: Alianza, 2015).

⁴⁴ Carmen Gil de Arriba, "'Geografías turísticas': moda y modos de viajar en la España de la primera mitad del siglo XX', *Ayer* 114 (2019): 147-174.

considerably to the consolidation of them as tourist destinations.⁴⁵ In the present case, the Spanish royal family had visited beaches on the northern coast since the 1830s, helping to establish their early reputation as high-status. For example, a brother of King Fernando VII, Infante Francisco de Paula Antonio, bathed in the sea on the beach of La Concha in San Sebastián in 1830 and 1833.⁴⁶ Queen Isabel II also visited La Concha in 1845, 1865, and 1868.

In Santander, after Isabel of Borbón stayed there in 1861, the next year the Provincial Deputation and Santander Town Hall, hoping to capitalise on the city's growing popularity among sea bathers, gave her a large plot of land so that she could build a summer palace. After the 1868 Revolution, however, the same institutions that had donated the property declared the donation null and void and took back ownership of the land, which was later divided and sold off to various proprietors keen to develop that part of the city for summer tourism.

In July 1872, Amadeo I visited Santander. The new king was in the city from July 24th to August 3rd and stayed in one of the holiday homes owned by Juan Pombo, an important businessman in El Sardinero, the centre for sea-bathing. The king also visited San Sebastián and Biscay during the summer in the same year. Later, in summer 1876, King Alfonso XII travelled to Santander to meet up with his mother and sisters, and also stayed at the property of the now Marquis of Casa-Pombo in El Sardinero. All these successive stays attracted numerous visitors to the city and made its beaches well known in all Spain. The work carried out to improve these coastal places attests to the interest of the mercantile bourgeoisie in fostering the development of the city, and

⁴⁵ Boyer, 'El turismo en Europa, de la Edad Moderna al siglo XX.'

⁴⁶ Municipal Archive of San Sebastián, E-1, 2035, 2.

particularly El Sardinero, as a select summer resort, with the support of direct contacts with the successive monarchs and their socio-political milieu.

In the case of San Sebastián, it was Maria Christina of Habsburg-Lorraine who contributed to its consolidation as a summer resort. In 1887 after the death of her husband, Alfonso XII, the queen regent made it her custom to spend her summer vacations in San Sebastián. Except for the critical year of 1898, when Spain lost its last overseas colonies, this practice continued uninterrupted until 1931. In fact, Maria Christina had the Miramar Palace built to accommodate her long holidays.

In contrast, for Santander, the most important person was Maria Christina's son, Alfonso XIII, as he assiduously stayed there for eighteen summers without a break (1913-1930). These circumstances earned Santander such names as the 'Spanish Biarritz' and the 'smart summer residence', a qualification that until then had been reserved almost exclusively for San Sebastián due to the stays of the queen mother.

Even so, Alfonso XIII first visited Santander in the company of this mother, on the yacht Giralda. In August 1900, they both sailed from San Sebastián to make a voyage around the northern coast which would be for pleasure and, at the same time, as instruction for the young king who still had not come of age. The following year, the royal family again sailed from San Sebastián to Bilbao in the same yacht, escorted by other boats.

Apart from official visits, the young Alfonso XIII began to come to Santander to take part in the yacht regattas held in the bay by the city yacht club, formed in 1870. This sporting interest which started in 1906 in Santander, where Alfonso XIII again took part in the 1907 regatta, also led him to return to San Sebastián and Bilbao, where each summer nautical activities had been held frequently since the start of the century, associated with elite and refined leisure practices.

In fact, the regattas held in any of the three northern cities in July, August, and September attracted numerous yachtsmen. These circumstances did not go unnoticed by members of the local financial elite, sons and grandsons of businessmen, bankers, industrialists, and ship owners and agents, many of whom were founder members of the nautical clubs in Santander, Bilbao, and San Sebastián as well as creators of the Federation of Cantabrian Clubs (FCC), of which Alfonso XIII was honorary president. These entrepreneurs soon saw the possibility of increasing their direct contacts with the king, the royal family, and other members of Spanish and foreign high society, and thus consolidated the three northern coastal provinces as tourist destinations and select places to rest and to establish useful political and commercial relationships.

In this way, the Cantabrian Cornice became a place of privileged social relations, in which leisure, business and politics went hand in hand. In the 1910s and 20s, large investments were made in tourist facilities and infrastructures in the different coastal towns in the region: in hotels, luxury shops, entertainment and sporting activities. Around leisure and vacations, a tourist industry developed to satisfy the needs of visitors.⁴⁷ In this respect, the facet of the king as a businessman with an investment portfolio covering very different sectors, including those connected with tourism, entertainment and property, should not be forgotten.⁴⁸ These trips were a good opportunity to rub shoulders with the most important financial elite in the northern cities, at the same time as they were used politically to make contact with the provincial monarchic leaders.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For San Sebastián, see Montserrat Gárate and Javier Martín Rudi, *Cien años de la vida económica de San Sebastián (1887-1987)* (San Sebastián: Instituto Dr. Camino de Historia Donostiarra, 1995). For Santander, Andrés Hoyo Aparicio, 'Economía, empresas y empresarios en el Santander de 1900', in *Santander hace un siglo*, ed. Manuel Suárez Cortina (Santander: Universidad de Cantabria, 2000), 30-63.

⁴⁸ Guillermo Gortázar, *Alfonso XIII, hombre de negocios* (Madrid: Alianza, 1986).

⁴⁹ Luengo and Delgado, 'Antes patria que rey. Los viajes de Alfonso XII por el País Vasco y Navarra', 80.

As explained above, in these first decades of the twentieth century, tourism was aimed at an elite minority but certain activities contributed to a gradual increase in the number of tourists, foreign and domestic. Nautical sports were of great importance for the tourist development of the Cantabrian Cornice. Both national and international competitions were held in area waters which were particularly suited to such events. In May 1901, the three nautical clubs in the north (Santander Regattas Club, San Sebastián Nautical Club, and the Sporting Club of Bilbao) met in the latter city to establish the Cantabrian Cup for the regattas in the following summer.⁵⁰ The competition was held in San Sebastián and was widely reported in the national and foreign press. In successive years, the Cantabrian Federation (FCC) organised regattas in Santander, San Sebastián, and Bilbao.⁵¹

International yachting regattas were held in each of these cities. For example, the queen regent established the Queen's Cup in San Sebastián in 1896. Such events were a significant form of tourist publicity and they often attracted cruise ships and liners to host cities. It is not surprising that in a place like San Sebastián the Festival Syndicate played a major role in organising these events, especially as they were regarded as the third most important regattas in Europe, only behind the English Cowes Regatta and the German Kiel Week.⁵² In this way, the eastern part of the northern Spanish coast occupied a pre-eminent place in the international sailing scene.

Similarly, in 1905, the Sporting Club of Bilbao held the first King's Cup.⁵³ Then, in 1907, when the FCC unified regatta regulations according to the rules of the International Yacht Racing Union, the first yachting races were organised with routes

⁵⁰ *El Mundo Naval Ilustrado*, May 30th, 1901.

⁵¹ *Arte y Sport*, October 10th, 1903.

⁵² Municipal Archive of San Sebastián, Sec.B, Neg. 7, Ser. II, Lib. 256, Expte. 2.

⁵³ *Nuevo Mundo*, August 17th, 1905.

from Santander to Santoña and from Castro to Guecho. King Alfonso XIII took part in 1908.⁵⁴ The following year, which was marked by the military campaign in Morocco, the king decided not to take part in the Bilbao regatta, but in contrast he participated in the race from San Sebastián to Guetaria. His yacht, *Hispania*, won the event.⁵⁵

In order to increase their international importance, in 1907, the FCC held the Hispano-American Regatta in San Sebastián. It received funding from the city, and the yacht *Dios Salve a la Reina*, owned by the king, took part. Several American yachts from New York also competed, together with boats from San Sebastián, Bilbao, and Santander.⁵⁶

In those first years of the century, the president of the FCC was Victoriano López Dóriga, a ship-owner from Santander⁵⁷ who also operated the San Martín Shipyard in Santander and whose business activity was linked to the Euskalduna Shipyards in Biscay. More members of the high Basque bourgeoisie were both ship-owners and yachtsmen, such as the brothers Benigno and Víctor Chávarri, Enrique González Careaga, Santiago Martínez de las Rivas, Ramón de la Sota, Luis Aznar, Tomás Urquijo, and Julio Arteche.

The good times were not immune to context. Against the backdrop of World War I and the subsequent disaster of Annual (Morocco, July 1921), elite leisure and high-priced regattas did not sit easily with public opinion. There was little taste for extensive publicity about privileged capitalists hobnobbing with royalty. Nevertheless, once the war ended, when the regattas restarted with new brilliance in the early 1920s, new groups of the elite bourgeoisie, businessmen, and wealthy liberal professionals

⁵⁴ *Vida Marítima*, April 30th, 1908.

⁵⁵ Luengo and Delgado, 'Antes patria que rey. Los viajes de Alfonso XII por el País Vasco y Navarra', 81.

⁵⁶ *Vida Marítima*, September 20th, 1907.

⁵⁷ *Revista Cántabra*, May 14th, 1908.

began to take part. After its inception in 1928, the National Tourism Board (NTB) (*Patronato Nacional de Turismo* – PNT) lent financial support to the organisation of the international Cantabrian Regattas, in which the clubs of Santander, San Sebastián, and Bilbao took part in collaboration. All these nautical events attracted a large number of foreign boats and crews and, together with the cruise-ships that berthed at some of the Cantabrian ports, they lent a very attractive and lively appearance to the seafronts of those cities, as shown by photographs and paintings of that time (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A tourist ship arrives at the quay in Santander. Postcard, *ca.* 1928.

Source: Photograph by Lucien Roisin. Centro de Documentación de la Imagen de Santander (CDIS)

In the second half of the 1920s, international races were held. Large yachts participated in events such as the 1929 Plymouth-Santander race and the New York-Santander race, also called the Atlantic Crossing, which was established in 1928 with royal sponsorship. One year before, in 1927, the Royal Maritime Club of Santander was founded, after breaking away from the nineteenth-century Royal Regattas Club, as a new association responsible for organising international sporting events that promised

to attract foreign visitors. Also in 1927, the shipping company Trasatlántica, chaired by Juan Antonio Güell, third Marquis of Comillas, began a special paquebot service to connect Pasajes, Bilbao, and Santander with Southampton.⁵⁸

Social relations through sport and consolidation as elite resorts

Other elite sports contributed to the consolidation of northern Spain as a high-end tourist region. The interest of Alfonso XIII and other members of the royal family encouraged these activities, in coincidence with the tastes of the local elite and those who visited the region every summer. Thus, a veritable ‘sporting society’ formed among the privileged few.⁵⁹

Horse-racing and polo were two of the more popular activities (Figure 3). The first horse-races in San Sebastián were held in 1907.⁶⁰ Some years later, on July 2nd 1916, Lasarte Racecourse was inaugurated on municipal land in the proximity of San Sebastián. The aim was to benefit from the circumstances of the First World War, when Spain as a neutral country attracted privileged groups of idle rentiers who were awaiting the end of the war. The royal family presided over the opening, which was of great significance as horseraces were not being held in the rest of Europe because of the war.⁶¹ As a result, owners of large stables of thoroughbreds gathered in San Sebastián.⁶²

⁵⁸ *El Imparcial*, September 2nd, 1927.

⁵⁹ As studied by Xavier Pujadas and Carles Santacana, ‘La sociabilidad deportiva en España (1850-1975)’, in *Cultura, ocio, identidades: espacios y formas de la sociabilidad en la España de los siglos XIX y XX*, ed. Jean-Louis Guereña (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2018), 241-266.

⁶⁰ On pages 105-107 of the book by Javier M. Sada, *125 agostos en la Historia de San Sebastián* (San Sebastián: Txertoa, 2007).

⁶¹ Javier M. Sada, *San Sebastián en la Primera Guerra Mundial* (San Sebastián: Txertoa, 2014), 96.

⁶² John K. Walton, ‘Leisure towns in wartime: the impact of the First World War in Blackpool and San Sebastián’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 4 (1996): 603-618; *La Voz de Guipúzcoa*, July 17th, 1916.



Figure 3. Horse race in San Sebastián, ca. 1921.

Source: Photograph by Ricardo Martín. Kutxa Photo Library.

Some of the most important prizes in the racing season at Lasarte were the San Sebastián Gran Prix and the King's Gold Cup. In this way, during the war years, the greatest attraction of San Sebastián for international high society, apart from the Casino, was abundant sporting activity,⁶³ which necessarily involved the king, a prototypical sportsman.

One year later than in San Sebastián, in September 1917, Bellavista Racecourse opened in Santander. The Duke of Santo Mauro, Mariano Fernández de Henestrosa, acting on a request from the king, who wished to have a racecourse in Santander similar to the one in San Sebastián, was its principle supporter. In this case neither the Santander bourgeoisie nor the city corporation, the owner of the land used by the racecourse, maintained the funding needed for an activity that never proved to be profitable and only functioned until 1921.

⁶³ As pointed out by Walton, 'Leisure towns in wartime: the impact of the First World War in Blackpool and San Sebastián', 610.

Another favourite sport of the royal family and the elite groups who spent their summers in northern Spain was tennis, an English fashion like the other sports that have been mentioned, which in this case was especially of interest to Queen Victoria Eugenie and for which Santander Lawn Tennis Club, founded in 1906, was established on the isthmus of La Magdalena, near the future summer palace. Proximity to a royal residence meant that it was frequented by monarchs and that it was an especially attractive setting for social and sporting events (Figure 4). Lawn tennis tournaments had also been held in San Sebastián since the early part of the century, organised by San Sebastián Recreation Club. Queens Victoria Eugenie and Maria Christina attended these tournaments. In 1919, the facilities of what was then called the Royal Tennis Club were located next to the beach of Ondarreta, at the foot of Mount Igueldo, an equally privileged setting in terms of scenery and views.



Figure 4. Alfonso XIII in the Royal Lawn Tennis Club in Santander.

Source: Photographer unknown. Centro de Documentación de la Imagen de Santander (CDIS)

Enthusiasts also established golf, another sport with a British origin, on the Cantabrian Cornice in the 1920s. Courses were modelled on English and French examples.⁶⁴ In 1915, Lasarte Golf-Course had a clubhouse that was frequented by the summering high society. Zarauz Golf Links opened in 1916 in an area of dunes next to the beach.⁶⁵ As might be imagined, Bilbao also had a golf course in Neguri.⁶⁶

In the province of Santander, Alfonso XIII himself inaugurated the Royal Oyambre Club near the dunes in Comillas in August 1924. In this case, Juan Antonio Güell y López, later chairman of the National Tourism Board (NTB) between late 1928 and mid-1930, was the primary person behind development of the links. A devoted fan of golf, he also had his organisation subsidise the building of another course in Pedreña, which opened in 1929. This project brought together high society to satisfy the wishes of Queen Victoria Eugenie.⁶⁷

The press often reported about the elite sporting events that took place during the royal summers in northern Spain. Newspaper stories sometimes included photographs, which helped to create an image of Spain focused on select and refined resorts. This image of elite destinations had staying power, both at home and abroad. The opportunity to meet important people and to make vital contacts in private clubs with elegant backdrops was valuable indeed. Although less likely to gain media exposure, such meetings had important repercussions in terms of business deals, architectural undertakings, and urban development projects.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Gerardo Rebanal, 'Aspiraciones al golf en Biarritz y San Sebastián, 1900-1936', *Historia Contemporánea* 53 (2016): 521-552.

⁶⁵ *Heraldo Deportivo*, August 25th, 1916.

⁶⁶ *Mundo Gráfico*, October 24th, 1928; *La Época*, August 27th, 1929.

⁶⁷ Boletín oficial de la provincia de Santander, November 17th, 1930.

⁶⁸ Luis Sazatornil Ruiz, 'Los orígenes del veraneo en España: playas urbanas, ciudades balneario y arquitectura elegante', in *Playas urbanas. IV Curso Internacional de Relaciones Puerto-Ciudad*, ed. José Luis Estrada et al. (Santander: Autoridad Portuaria de Santander & Navalia, 2007), 49-73.

Tourist splendour and urban development

In the early twentieth century, the main beach areas of the Cantabrian Cornice became fully integrated into urban life. Of all these, La Concha in San Sebastián and El Sardinero in Santander were the most important.⁶⁹ In summer, from June to September, their scenic value combined with that of the urban seafront, acquiring a new social and economic importance that rivalled the use of ports and industrial alternatives, as demonstrated by the large public works projects and new town planning schemes.

The enduring summer stays and visits of both royal family and social elites in Santander and the coastal provinces of the Basque Country fostered the development of specific places of leisure that were strategically located. This tourist specialisation is reflected in the urban planning of some particular areas, as well as a series of joint actions that reveal the control and supremacy of the social groups with political and economic power at both local and national scales.

In this regard, it is important to link the Cantabrian Cornice tourist brand with its urban structures, coastal façades, and spatial distributions. As the sociologist Michel de Certeau demonstrates, social practices, which are diverse and variable depending on the social groups and historical periods in which they develop, create affective links and individual and collective memories related to places, types of towns, buildings, streets, promenades, squares, and gardens. These concepts are applicable to the historical study of tourist places, as noted by Frédéric Vidal.⁷⁰ The appearance and proliferation of the tourism phenomenon in cities, like San Sebastián and Santander, and other secondary

⁶⁹ José María Beascoechea, in his article 'Veraneo y urbanización en la costa cantábrica durante el siglo XIX: las playas del Abra de Bilbao', 186, counted as many as 25 sea-bathing locales in different places in the Cantabrian Cornice between Guipúzcoa and Santander by the last third of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire*. (Paris, Gallimard, 1990). Certeau's ideas are analysed in an article by Frédéric Vidal, 'Faire la ville et pratiquer des lieux. L'histoire du tourisme sur les pas de Michel de Certeau', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines*, 2, 23 (2010): 99-115.

resorts on the Cantabrian Cornice, are also a context with which to express the conception of cities held by the social groups who carried out the urbanisation process. In this way, during the reign of Alfonso XIII, tourism and its promotion on the Cantabrian coast were an economic, political, and cultural challenge that ultimately catalysed in a series of schemes related to the idea of modernisation, one of which was urban development.

In the case of San Sebastián, the influence of tourist activity is seen in the design of the expansion of the city, inspired by the Cerdà Plan for the Extension of Barcelona.⁷¹ As a result, the supporters of a port and industrial development had to give way to the pressure of those who wanted a city basically devoted to services (including tourism).⁷² Based on that decision, which was controversial, urban planning was oriented mainly towards leisure. Along the whole length of the beach of La Concha a promenade was designed at the edge of the sands. This promenade ended by connecting two emblematic buildings, the Gran Casino and the Miramar Palace.

As no resort is imaginable without a casino, developers began proposing initiatives for such an establishment in San Sebastián beginning in the late nineteenth century, although none of them was on the scale of those in the main French resorts. In 1877, the town corporation promoted the foundation of a new casino, encouraged by the creation of a company that would build it, in exchange for the concession of land. On October 8th 1881, they formed the ‘Casino of San Sebastián’ company and work began

⁷¹ Antònia Casellas, ‘Barcelona’s Urban Landscape. The Historical Making of a Tourist Product’, *Journal of Urban History* 35, 6 (2009): 815-832.

⁷² For this discussion between development either for industry and the port or for tourism, see Carlos Larrinaga, ‘Ciudad, economía e infraestructura urbana: San Sebastián a mediados del siglo XIX’, *Boletín de Estudios Históricos sobre San Sebastián* 32 (1998): 787-808; Ángel Martín, *Los orígenes del ensanche de Cortázar de San Sebastián* (Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2004); Gaspar Fernández, ‘San Sebastián: un modelo de construcción de la ciudad burguesa en España’, *Ería* 88 (2012): 101-128; Luis Sazatornil, ‘Santander, ciudad burguesa y los ensanches’, in *Arte en Cantabria. Itinerarios*, ed. Luis Sazatornil and Julio Polo (Santander: Universidad de Cantabria, 2001), 233-240.

in 1883. The Madrid architects Adolfo Morales de los Ríos and Luis Aladrén designed the building with inspiration from Charles Garnier's Paris Opera. It opened its doors on July 1st 1887.⁷³ The establishment immediately became the centre of activities for a select Spanish and foreign clientele who gathered to enjoy gambling, the theatre, and society balls.

In turn, the queen regent María Christina, a regular summer visitor from 1887, built her own palace opposite the bay of La Concha. Miramar Palace, surrounded by a park. The queen mother made it her principal summer residence beginning in 1893. Its construction had important planning implications for the city, as it underlined the architect José Goicoa's idea of including the bay as an essential element of the urban landscape of San Sebastián. By that time, two hotels stood at the start of the promenade: the Kursaal, opened in 1868 and renamed the London Hotel in 1881; and the Continental, opened in 1884 and managed by Georges Marquet, a Belgian businessman who specialised in administrating European and Spanish luxury tourist establishments, such as the Hotel Palace and the Ritz in Madrid, soon followed by the Hotel Paris, also in the capital (1920), and the Alfonso XIII Hotel in Seville. They formed the most important chain of luxury hotels in Spain and belonged to Les Grands Hôtels Européens, with establishments in Paris, Lyon, Nice, Brussels, and the Ardennes.⁷⁴

The sea promenade, soon the heart of most summer vacations in the city, underwent a series of design improvements. In 1912, the Royal Bathing Hut was inaugurated along with a new spa, La Perla del Océano. At the same time, designers

⁷³ María del Carmen Rodríguez Sorondo, *Arquitectura pública en la ciudad de San Sebastián (1813-1922)* (San Sebastián: Sociedad Guipuzcoana de Ediciones y Publicaciones, 1985).

⁷⁴ Ana Moreno Garrido, 'Madrid, 1912. El reto del turismo', *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 37 (2015): 23-44.

planned a kind of cantilever that overhung the beach and was flanked by two obelisks.

The characteristic cityscape of San Sebastián was taking shape (Figure 5).

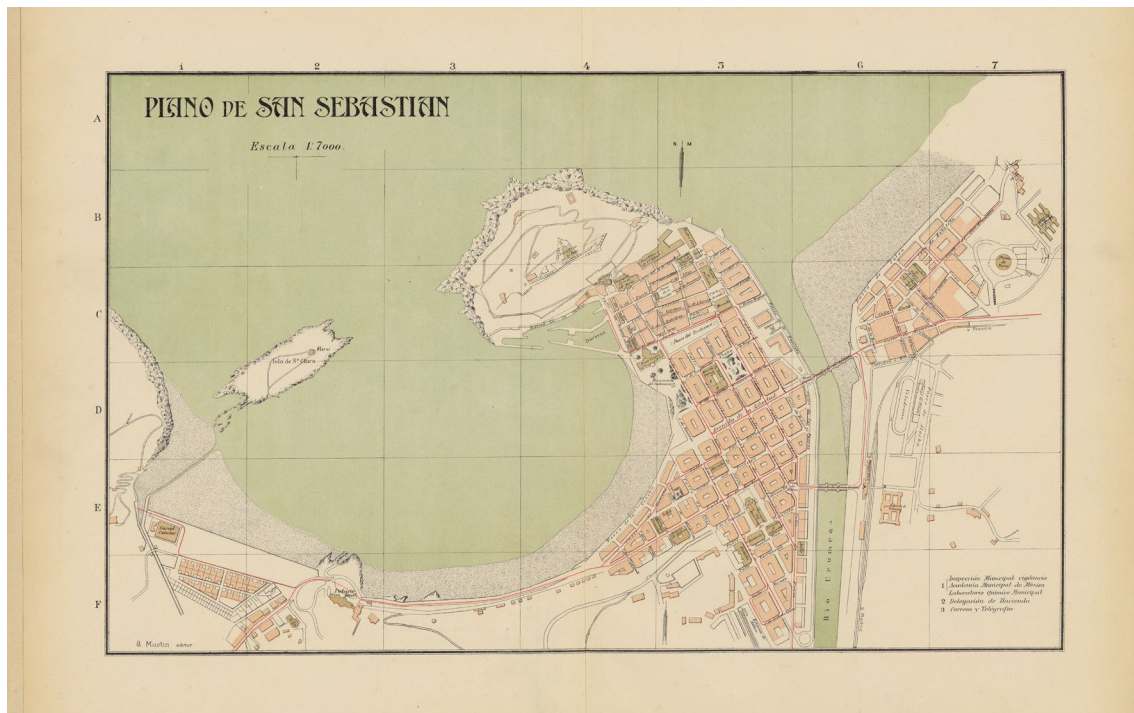


Figure 5. Plan of San Sebastián (1918)

Source: *Regional Atlas of Spain*. San Sebastián (Guipúzcoa). Alberto Martín, Benito Chías y Carbó, Casimiro Dalmau and Ceferino Rocafort. Original at 1:7,000. Library of the National Geographic Institute. CC BY 4.0 ign.es 92-89 (V03-0104-MAPA_ED2).

Together with this urbanism-tourism axis by the bay of La Concha, other actions emphasised the tourist aspect of the city even further. Following models drawn from parts of Europe, like Deauville, Ostend, Brighton, Weymouth, and Hastings, local entrepreneurs appreciated the possibilities that tourists and their consumer habits offered to diversify their businesses. They therefore began to invest in tourist infrastructure and facilities. A good example is the foundation of the ‘Fomento de San Sebastián’ company in 1902. This was created with the sponsorship of the Town Corporation to encourage tourism and holidays in the city.⁷⁵ The first objective was to develop a

⁷⁵ San Sebastián Mercantile Registry, Sheet nº 431.

bullring and to build a theatre and a hotel. After several years of financial difficulties, the company finally concentrated on the construction of the Victoria Eugenia Theatre and María Cristina Hotel, whose architect, Charles Mewès, previously designed the Hotel Ritz in Paris. These two buildings, located next to each other, created an enticing urban tourist landscape on the left bank of the River Urumea. Between 1915 and 1919, another emblematic promenade was built at the mouth of the river: the Castle or Prince of Asturias promenade, facing the sea. The press did not hesitate to compare it with the Promenade des Anglais in Nice.⁷⁶ Once completed, San Sebastián had created a long urban promenade that followed practically its whole coastline, and which became a visual and scenic attraction.

In Santander, the coastal district of El Sardinero was consolidated as a tourist area with three new buildings: the Magdalena Palace, the Royal Hotel and the Gran Casino, the main architectonic symbols that represented the aim of creating elegant and refined places of leisure.⁷⁷ The ‘El Sardinero’ company was founded in 1901 as a business initiative in which the Pombo family played an active part,⁷⁸ with the objective of exploiting the concession of the beach of the same name. The plans included a sea-bathing establishment, a steam tram connecting the city-centre with the sands, a café-casino and four hotels, including the Gran Hotel. This was a large-scale project that aimed to benefit from the beach by creating a new district devoted to tourism. It was also evidently a long-term project as a duration of 99 years was set at the time the company was founded with an initial capital of two million pesetas. It was thus a project

⁷⁶ *La Voz de Guipúzcoa*, ‘El paseo del Castillo. El segundo trozo’, July 26th, 1917.

⁷⁷ Ramón Rodríguez Llera, *Arquitectura regionalista y lo pintoresco en Santander* (Santander: Pronillo, 1989).

⁷⁸ Santander Mercantile Registry, Sheet nº 346.

for wide-ranging tourism investment and a similar initiative to the one that the Péreire brothers carried out in the French town of Arcachon some years earlier.⁷⁹

In 1911, Santander City Corporation invited tenders for the design of a plan to expand the city towards the east and the north-east, an area that included El Sardinero.⁸⁰ The plan was approved by the Ministry of Public Works in March 1916 although the appeals of some landowners meant that definitive approval of the north-east expansion did not take place until June 1925.

Independent of the legal proceedings, which eventually would strengthen the bourgeois residential function of El Sardinero in the style of a garden city, the development of this beachside district continued at a constant pace with the construction of detached houses that were used as holiday homes (Figure 6).⁸¹

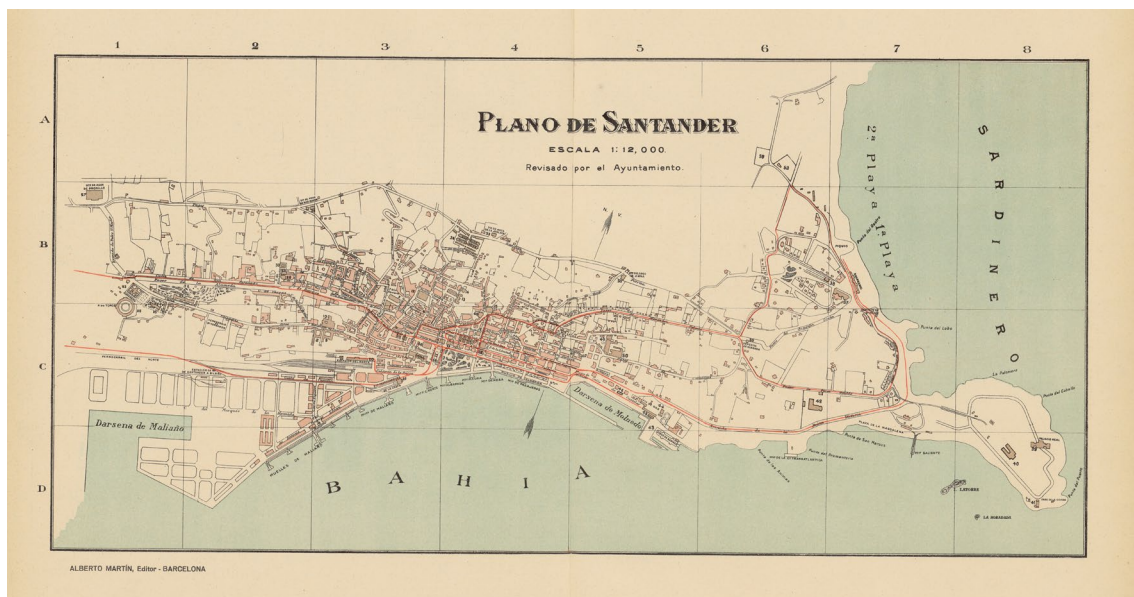


Figure 6. Plan of Santander (1918)

⁷⁹ Bouneau, 'La contribution des chemins de fer au développement touristique d'Arcachon de 1841 au second conflit mondial', 267.

⁸⁰ *Gaceta de Madrid*, August 14th, 1911.

⁸¹ Luis Sazatornil Ruiz, 'A orillas del Cantábrico: arquitectura y veraneos regios', *Reales Sitios: Revista del Patrimonio Nacional* 136 (1998): 12-23.

Source: *Regional Atlas of Spain*. Santander. Alberto Martín, Benito Chías y Carbó, Casimiro Dalmau and Ceferino Rocafort. Original at 1:12.000. Library of the National Geographic Institute. CC BY 4.0 ign.es 92-89(V03-0056-MAPA_ED2)

In April 1908, at a town council meeting, members of the Santander bourgeoisie expressed a desire to construct a summer palace on the peninsula of La Magdalena, at the entrance to the Bay of Santander and adjacent to El Sardinero. The aim was to present the king with all the surrounding land, amounting to nearly 25 hectares.⁸² Donating this area to the royal family reduced the surface available for public recreation in the proximity of El Sardinero. Instead, it increased the possibilities of producing land for privileged social groups in the whole urban area. In this regard, the presence of the royal family in Santander, summer after summer, turned out to be excellent marketing for the city. The Magdalena Palace was built in an English style between 1908 and 1912. Its use as a summer residence from summer 1913 onwards set off the spectacular development of El Sardinero and the city as a place of leisure. Both prominent national and international figures were keen to holiday in the area.

Following inauguration of the Magdalena Palace, the Royal Hotel was conceived as a grand establishment to accommodate the distinguished summer visitors who did not own a residence in the city or surrounding areas. A limited company with shareholders was formed in 1916 in order to build this new luxury hotel with 125 rooms.⁸³ Its construction on a hill overlooking the bay and El Sardinero took a little over a year and the hotel opened in time for the 1917 season. The Santander Royal

⁸² *La Correspondencia de España*, April 5th, 1908, on the front page.

⁸³ Santander Mercantile Registry, Sheet nº 658. In early 1917, the capital in shares of the 'Hotel Real' company was 1,750,000 pesetas, cf. *El Financiero Hispanoamericano*, January 17th, 1917.

Hotel was then added to the short list of luxury establishments that existed in Spain at that time.

The Gran Casino was built opposite the beach in El Sardinero in 1916, financed by the aforesaid 'El Sardinero' company. From 1917, the Casino was managed by the same group that also took charge of the Royal Hotel and the Bellavista Racecourse. Georges Marquet, who was also active in San Sebastián, as mentioned above, was chairman of this company.

Other hotel and building projects emerged in El Sardinero during the same years. This boom was reflected in other parts of the city that underwent a general restructuring, with new areas of expansion. In sum, Santander acquired an air of urban modernity, oriented towards the sea and focused on providing recreation for tourists and holidaymakers. Accordingly, in the identifying imaginary of the Cantabrian Coast, the social landscape and the urban one, were closely related. Social life, seeing people and being seen, was very important in a geographical setting of sea, beaches, and tourist amenities. Elite tourism and its protagonists were in themselves a part of the spectacle that attracted more tourists.

Conclusions

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, different members of the Spanish royal family frequented resorts in the Cantabrian Cornice. The royal presence attracted a select minority of very wealthy Spanish and foreign visitors whose money enabled them to participate in some of the first leisure practices that developed in Spain. At first these visits related to the environmental qualities and therapeutic benefits attributed to sea water. Things started to change by the turn of the century. Pleasure and recreation began to prevail over health and hygiene. As was true in other western countries, the desire for sea water and summer holidays gained strength.

The Cantabrian Cornice benefitted from the new fashion and developers soon recast it as a tourist region, complete with all of the necessary infrastructure and capitalising on perfect climate and natural beauty. The region was especially privileged by the presence each summer of King Alfonso XIII, the royal family, and members of an economic and political elite. The fact that a hotelier of the importance of Georges Marquet decided to do business in San Sebastián and Santander is clear proof of the importance of the two cities, not only in Spain but also internationally.

The present article shows how, across administrative and provincial boundaries, in the area of Guipúzcoa, Biscay, and Cantabria, as well as the two cities of San Sebastián and Santander, a tourist region was shaped with common characteristics and mutual influences between one place and another. However, the configuration of this area as a tourist region took place in a particular historical and geographic context that should not be overlooked. During the first third of the twentieth century, while the Cantabrian Cornice remained an elite tourist region, the first tourism system for the whole population was developed in Spain, although at different rates in each region and area.⁸⁴ This article examines one of those regional developments, but it was clearly not the only tourism development in Spain during those years, even if it was one of the most important from the social point of view.

Unlike other destinations that developed (Catalan Coast and Mallorca, for example), the Cantabrian Cornice was clearly represented by an elite tourism that was very limited in other parts of Spain. These circumstances led to a very specific type of sociability based on high-status gatherings and exclusive sports. These activities established fashionable behaviours, spawned opinions about the sort of destinations that

⁸⁴ Vallejo, 'Turismo en España durante el primer tercio del siglo XX: la conformación de un sistema turístico', 175–211.

were desirable, and helped to establish tourist practices and travel decisions that took root across the whole of Spain. These developments are evident in the physical and social construction of this part of northern Spain. They are visible in the many notable buildings that were added to the landscape: casinos, luxury hotels, mansions, private villas, leafy gardens, promenades. They are also obvious in the leisure infrastructure that developers added for golf, tennis, motor sports, horse-racing, and regattas. In all these material elements of elite leisure, local bourgeoisie found advantages for business and profit, with a pragmatic attitude in the decision-making process that is evident throughout this period.⁸⁵

The desire by elites to gather collectively influenced the form of the Cantabrian Cornice as an elite tourism region at Spanish and international scales. The three provinces of Guipúzcoa, Biscay, and Santander were conceived as a distinct whole by those groups: a tourist region for their exclusive pleasure. Indeed, the elite used those leisure areas to develop their inter-personal relationships, do business, and mix with members of the royal family.

The general changes in Spain that in April 1931 led to the end of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Second Republic also implied for the Cantabrian Cornice a necessary transformation in its image and its characteristics as a tourist destination. The goal of the agents involved and particularly of the local bourgeoisie, who had been able to adapt to the various political circumstances since the mid-nineteenth century, was to ensure the continuation of leisure activity and even to increase the flow of visitors and income by adapting to new models and expanding the types of visitor anxious to vacation in the area. With Alfonso XIII in exile, tourism in northern Spain was no longer an

⁸⁵ This pragmatism of the local bourgeoisie and entrepreneurs has been described in such works as those by Eugenio Torres Villanueva, *Ramón de la Sota 1857-1936* (Madrid: LID, 1998) and Hoyo Aparicio 'Economía, empresas y empresarios en el Santander de 1900', 54-55.

aristocratic and minority matter. The new context required a change and businesses related to tourism soon adapted.

Yet the physical and symbolic perception of the Cantabrian Cornice as a refined tourism region persisted even as the Spanish tourist system evolved and diversified, eventually yielding to the mass tourism of the period after the 1950s. Nonetheless, the period studied here left unmistakeable and unique material traces in this northern region: in architecture, town planning, and landscape. In accordance with Butler's model of the life-cycles of tourist destinations,⁸⁶ at the end of the monarchic era, a new cycle of rejuvenation had begun in order to attract a more diversified clientele in which the middle classes formed a larger percentage. New adaptations never fully marginalised the past and they certainly do not erase the foundation of the region's peculiarity within the Spanish tourist system.

⁸⁶ Richard W. Butler, 'The concept of tourism area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources', *Canadian Geographer* 24, 1 (1980): 5-12. DOI:10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x.