



Interview ▶ The director of Andorra Tourism reviews the current affairs linked to the sector at

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Betim Budzaku, in his office of Andorra Turisme, in Encamp.



Betim Budzaku

Director General of Andorra Tourism

«We are aware that Andorra cannot receive more than the 8.2 million visitors we have now»

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In the middle of the winter season, the general director of Andorra Tourism, Betim Budzaku, addresses in this interview the current affairs linked to his daily activity and above all points out the challenges of the future.

–How are you at the new location?

–We get along very well, even though arriving in a new place is like moving, it's the most stressful thing there is. We had been in the same place for eight years and now we are in a building that is a privilege, as it is emblematic and renovated. We or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to be here, for all that it means to the outside world, a point of reference for architecture in Andorra and above all the history that the building carries. We have been there for four months, we are adapting and we are happy.

–Is it also good for work?

–You adapt. A lot of people used to walk to work, but nothing compared to working in London or New York, where you might need more than an hour to get to work. It's not the same, but it's a much better place than what we had, for everything it means, and in that sense the adaptation is simple, since we now spend all our professional lives here. From eight in the morning until we leave, we have a space for lunch without the need to go outside and a car park, which also helps a lot. There are pros and cons, but we adapt. If we take stock, we are satisfied.

– Does the fact that the place is emblematic help sell Andorra to the world?

–We have a lot of contact with the outside world, for example international media buying agencies. We also talk to National Geographic and others like that, and when we have meetings here they are surprised,

they don't expect it. People come from a city and realize that here you go out the window and see a cow, we are in direct contact with nature. It may not help close a commercial deal, but it is an image issue, which helps. Everything we do we do for an international image, so you look good with a building like this.

– You have been in office for 12 years. What do you have left to do and how many years do you see yourself there?

–Before coming here, I spent 11 years in Port Aventura. When I arrived in Andorra, I made a commitment for two years, because there was the objective of taking a market pace to compete in external communication. And I've had almost 12. We're a very dynamic company that doesn't always do the same thing, so it gives you the possibility to look for that point of creativity, and that's the balance of the pressure

you can have, because we're a public company with a global competition. Tourism means more than 50% of GDP, everyone has the right to an opinion and in marketing everyone knows about it. You may

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«The concept of visiting a destination and not spending the night there is not natural, and that is why we have generated 4 million overnight stays»

or may not like a campaign, concert or show. If it weren't for a company that has such an ability to create activity and a very good and powerful team like the one we have, it probably wouldn't have been there for so long.

– Would you like to continue many more years?

–As long as there is a challenge and things we can do with great creativity, I will continue.

–What is the challenge now?

–In principle, my position is one of trust, with a political link, and now there will be a change of government, so both parties must agree to continue. Now the challenges are different compared to the time we started in 2012, when Andorra had other priorities and needs, with one of the worst economic crises in the modern world. As things stand, we started losing customers from 2004, with a change in model

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due to the disappearance of the tour operation and the birth of low-cost companies. The years 2010, 2011 and 2012 were among the worst years, because there was no alternative with the economic crisis. And now, we are more than aware that Andorra cannot receive more than the 8.2 visitors we have now, because the infrastructure capacity does not allow us to go beyond these figures, since we are only 80,000 inhabitants and the roads are limited. We have to find the balance of maintaining a solid tourist destination and putting the Andorra brand on another level in the perception of people outside.

-If in terms of numbers we cannot grow any more, what is the goal?

- There are three of them. Those who come in the winter must have a higher purchasing power, but this does not depend only on us, but on the offer. If the offer is more expensive and better, the purchasing power of the visitors will automatically be higher. This, firstly, because we are not at 80 or 90% employment. In addition, there are still 5 million people who do not spend the night in Andorra, they come in the morning and leave in the afternoon. The concept of visiting a tourist destination and not spending the night there is unnatural. The figures since 2013 for overnight stays have risen from 6 to 10 million, so we have generated 4 million overnight stays with the same number of visitors. We must increase purchasing power, because a balance must be made with the middle class.

- You say that the middle class no longer exists.

- The problem we have now around the world is that we pay more to have the same thing, and this is one of the effects of the pandemic. And it can't be, everything that is paid more must have more quality. If we have the ability to improve the offer we have, we will automatically have the ability to attract this type of tourist.

-What would you say to a hotel that tells you that in November, for example, it has low occupancy?

- I didn't say that we don't want people, we want people who sleep in the country, which is the big diffe-

rence, since there are 5 million who still don't sleep there.

-How do we get them to stay asleep?

-Improving the offer. The more things you can do in Andorra, the longer you will stay there. If before you only bought basic products, now you have more purchasing options, in the commercial part, which is more complicated. But if you do a Cirque du Soleil at 10 at night, for example, it forces you to stay asleep.

- Diversifying the offer has already been done. It goes beyond snow tourism, shopping and nature, doesn't it?

- It's the reality. If we have increased overnight stays by 4 million and keep the same number of visitors, this means that more and more people are coming and staying to sleep. It's a process, you can't make a radical change. It is said that tourism in Andorra is massive, and this is not true. Venice, for example, is like a theme park, you pay an entrance fee. Amsterdam, Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, New York or Dubai, with hotels up to seven stars, I spent two hours at the airport crossing the border, which was collapsed. Andorra does not have exclusive massification. There are 8,000 million people in the world, with more capacity to travel, and there are countries that do it better than the rest, and one of these countries is us. It is not a sin to have too many tourists, we must be tourist friendly.

- But the country is limited, in the end it is three valleys of the Pyrenees.

-Exactly, but you have 47,000 beds and occupancy in May is 40%, so you have the possibility to grow.

-Could it happen that one day they charge to enter Andorra like Venice?

- This is very tendentious. It could happen, but the problem is that there are some Andorran families with family businesses that depend on people coming and going. It's very easy to say we only want people who spend a lot of money, but there are 190 hotels and 47,000 beds.

- Will the casino help?

-The casino and the airport help in a very small segment. The casino helps to go out and be able to say you have everything, but it won't solve your problem, it's just a relevant added value. It helps to differentiate the offer and give added value to leisure,



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«The US, Asia, the countries of the former Soviet Union and the Middle East are the priorities of the international market»

because if something is missing it is night time.

-It has decreased. Are you worried?

- Yes, we worry about everything, but there are so many worries...

-If there is a night offer, it's a calling effect, isn't it?

-Everything has a link. The casino will help with night time entertainment, as there will be shows and gastronomy.

- Does the airport only solve one segment? The lighting has just been inaugurated.

-A tourist destination must have all possible means of communication. Any plane that lands at La Seu d'Urgell can carry a maximum of 75 people, because the runway does not

allow more. This does not solve your problem.

- Now they want to have segregated transport to La Seu, the Pas variant and the train has been ruled out. How do you see it?

-There must be consistency with the projects. If the recently approved budget has a volume similar to the cost of the train, how will we finance it? It is a matter of consistency that those in charge must have. There was talk of building an airport inside Andorra, an absurd idea, because 90% of the country is nature, the differentiating point in terms of sustainability. And that during the pandemic helped us, because people came and could breathe. This differentiating point does not marry with an airport, because, in addition, that means you have to have an airline. First is the company and then the airport, not the other way around. All have their center. We must be consistent and reasonable with what we are trying to achieve. There are only about 80,000 people who can travel here, it's like a neighborhood in Madrid. When an idea is launched it must be able to be realized. Obviously I'm interested in having a train station and an airport, but we have to be realistic.

-This year, with the issue of temporary workers, has there been a certain collapse?

-We have come from two very complex pandemic years and the vision has been given that there is work for everyone here, a destination that you know is fashionable and that everyone should go there. This is controllable. If we have the capacity to be able to guarantee that a person can work for seven or eight months and have the possibility to continue, automatically the rotation will not exist, since they will have the option of working all year. As for the lack of housing, these are global problems, but here they are more noticeable because there are fewer of us. Everywhere there are difficulties with too high rents.

-But it's also a model problem: are big towers built for the rich and little housing for workers?

-There is no magic and short-term solution, even though it's not up to me, I've had enough with my work. Yes, it is true that there are models like Canada's to ensure that nationals

can have a home. The 2008 crisis was for banks and housing, so we already have experience.

-Has the single pass been positive?

-A lot, especially in the definition of a unique brand with Grandvalira and Andorra. It helps a lot because it simplifies the offer. Now we need to generate impacts.

-With the need to save energy, the ski slopes, with the artificial snow, are not complying. Is this sustainable?

-They have four months of business and must invoice 60 or 70 million euros to be profitable. As a society, we had never found such aggressive energy saving targets. I'm sure they will spend less in January than in December, because there is more natural snow. To be fair, better to make an assessment at the end of the season. If you waste energy, it's bad, because if I can survive in 20 degrees, I don't have to be in 23, but the business depends on skiing and without snow you can't ski. More than 50% of GDP is tourism.

-Perhaps it is necessary to change the model?

-Of course we have to change models, models change. Skiing is the basis of the business in winter, but 10 or 15 years ago we didn't use the museums, culture and nature part, and now we do.

-How is it possible that it took so long to sell nature in Andorra?

- I don't know, they are trends, fashions.

-Will local tourism always be the most important?

-No, by a long shot. France and Spain have a large number of visitors in the nationals. We don't have that internal strength, so we have to consider these two countries as nationals. However, we generate 20% of visitors from outside these two countries, which is like 40% of the total, because they stay more nights. We have to be receptive to Spanish and French tourism, but the target is central Europe, as we have lost a lot of overnight stays from Russians. We will do 20 or 30% more in the British market this year compared to 2019. Priorities are international markets from other continents, such as the United States, Asia, countries of the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. ≡

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(+376) 353 424 / (+376) 379 769

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