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Leisure Parks and Destination Redevelopment: the case of PortAventura, Catalonia*

ABSTRACT

The ability of medium-sized and large leisure parks to generate external economies, create a new image for specific places and catalyse the location of economic activities are examined in the context of PortAventura, Catalonia. PortAventura theme park, established in Salou in 1995 as a result of a regional and local public destination rejuvenation policy started during the 1980s. It is currently the largest theme park in Spain and the second largest in Europe. Having reached the 4 million visitors-a-year threshold in 2007, since the late 1990s it has gone from being a classic leisure park to becoming a whole entertainment complex. Research outcomes presented in this article discuss the extent to which Salou and its surrounding area, the central Costa Daurada, the mass tourism destination where the park is sited, is enjoying renewed expansion and is transforming the consolidated tourism business into new recreational, cultural and entertainment opportunities.

KEY WORDS

Mass tourism destinations, theme parks, policy implementation, life cycle, PortAventura

Since opening in 1995, PortAventura has played a key role in Salou and the whole of Catalonia's central Costa Daurada in the reorganisation of the destination's urban structure

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and the rejuvenation of tourism development. Salou's transformation was a planned option. The location and development of the PortAventura theme park took place with the collaboration of both the city and the region's public agents. Both considered PortAventura as the ideal promoter of a new image for the destination linking the beach, the main attraction of coastal, sunny Catalonia, with a certain idea of family entertainment.

PortAventura is, in fact, the key attraction of coastal Catalonia. The location of the park was planned in the 1980s and its development enjoyed the benefits of the law as regards the concession of the land and possibilities of expansion. So, the park has been seen by the local administration as a productive activity with great potential to favour the development of a new concept of tourist destination. In fact, while PortAventura was becoming established, in the mid 1990s, the hotels and private agents in Salou and the whole of central Costa Daurada had to face up to the new reality. In that sense, PortAventura is, therefore, one of the theme parks around the world that has not been seen just as a recreational business –the fundamental nature of leisure and theme parks from their promoters' point of view- but also as an instrument of the urban and tourist policy of the destination. So, its impact has not only had the effect of boosting local economic development but, also fundamentally, of assisting the territorial reorganisation of the town and the creation of a new tourism positioning for the destination.

The main intention of this paper is to explain the attempt to remodel a conventional coastal Mediterranean beach holiday destination through a themed attraction and to explore some of the effects that this strategy has had on the long-existing holiday resort of Salou. The paper is organised into four sections. The first is a theoretical discussion as to the role of theme parks both in regional planning and tourism development. The second explains the main dimensions of central Costa Daurada, the region where Salou and PortAventura are located, and the

tourist area life cycle of Salou. The third details the policy that has allowed the development and the expansion of the PortAventura theme park, and the fourth explores two of the main effects of the development of the theme park on tourism activities: the improvement to accommodation and the change in tourism demand. As a result, the destination is undergoing a process of rejuvenation. Finally, the conclusion is presented alongside some open questions for future research.

The role of theme parks in regional planning and tourism development

In the 1990s, traditional tourism to Spanish Mediterranean resorts in the sun was facing a rapidly changing and fragmenting market. Trends seemed to indicate that the Mediterranean mass tourist destinations, beset with the legacy of weak planning and over-development, may need to virtually re-invent themselves in order to survive. Since then, several strategies have been implemented at national, regional and local levels in an attempt to consolidate conventional mass market tourism in Spain by changing some of its features (Aguiló et al, 2004, Curtis, 1997, Knowles and Curtis, 1999). Some destinations like Calvià in the Balearic Islands activated sustainability schemes to change their image as overdeveloped, highly substitutable places (Dodds, 2007). Others, like Benidorm, tried to renew the mass market of the resort by adapting the existing supply to new holiday segments (Camisón and Montfort, 1998). Finally, there was the approach adopted by Salou: that of developing a multilevel policy approach to create a new recreational and leisure facility as the current PortAventura theme park.

Eyssartel and Rochette (1992, 37-38) propose a definition of theme park that is useful in this context. They suggest that theme parks are “urban spaces with a commercial vocation” where

the resources of architecture, art and technology (especially communications technology) are at the service of a coherent “cultural creation” (in its broad sense). Parks are in fact the result of precise formulas of planning and design of space whose aim is to propose a certain way of consuming leisure time. Thus, parks represent a specific type of urbanism of illusion and of emotion that lies at the crossroads of the tourist industries, culture industries and country planning.

As a result, as explained by Davis (1997), public authorities, from local to state government, tend to perceive leisure and theme parks as machinery for economic development. She states that theme parks are conducive to new investment, create jobs and generate revenue in local and regional economies in addition to what they turn over. This may be particularly effective when theme parks are conceived and related with complementary activities – tourist, recreational or other – with which they may have synergies (Cartier, 1998). This is the case, for instance, of Busch Gardens Europe in Virginia or Futuroscope in France among medium-sized parks. Both parks have been considered instruments for regional and tourist development because they boost commercial and industrial activities, housing and indeed educational and research facilities in the area where they are located. So, on these occasions, parks have acted as catalysts of the local economy and they can even play, such as in the case of Disneyland Paris, a major role as key elements for territorial planning (Handschuh, 1998).

In fact, the theme park industry has evolved quickly in recent years. This explained by several factors. It is the result of changes to consumers’ motivations, perceptions and expectations of the growing importance of the concept of value-for-money in the consumer decision-making process. It is also related to the emergence of new systems of communication, promotion and

commercialisation and to the changes in the role played by new technology. Moreover, there have been contributory developments via new systems to operations management and human resources, the importance of service quality-related matters, improvements to information and decision-making and the awareness in respect of issues related to environmental impact and social justice in destinations. Now, the most important transformation is related to the evolution of the business model, from the attractions operation to the development of veritable leisure complexes concentrating recreational, commercial, tourist, and, in some cases residential activities.

Jones, Robinett and Zito (1998) consider the process of generating other businesses in the areas around medium-sized and large parks. Following their work, authors such as Scheer (2000) have theorized the relationships that are established between the elements of what he calls a “leisure and business complex”, that is to say, the leisure park and its corporate surroundings. There are two premises that explain this: the progressive integration of the leisure complex into the host region and the growing interconnection between each one of the elements of the complex. The ability of these leisure complexes to generate external economies, to create a particular image and to catalyse the location of economic activities also allows theme parks to be considered from their potential to contribute to tourism development and redevelopment.

In fact, considering this context of changes, it can be hypothesized that theme park developments can allow mature tourist destinations to respond competitively to the many challenges that they are facing. The argument is that because attractions act as key components in the system of tourism (Benckerdorff, 2006) they arouse interest and may provide high visitor satisfaction. Nevertheless, studies have shown that there are different

types of theme parks according to their relationships with tourism development (Anton Clavé, 2007). It seems that most theme parks have a limited capacity to generate tourist flows because they are generally conceived and operated as recreational facilities for metropolitan areas. This is the case of most of the Six Flags parks in the United States. There are, of course, other parks that have brought about the creation of tourist flows in their surrounding areas, such as Parc Astérix in France or Everland in Korea. However, neither of these has itself created a new tourist destination like Walt Disney World has in Orlando. In fact, Walt Disney World is, without a doubt, the characteristic example of a theme park that has generated a tourist destination to the extent of becoming the actual symbolic referent of the place. There are, finally, theme parks located at popular tourist destinations. This is the case of medium-sized parks such as the one that is the subject of this analysis, PortAventura, or the Dreamworld, Seaworld and Movieworld group of parks on the Golden Coast of Australia. All of them have become instruments for the diversification of consolidated tourist destinations and, therefore, an element of a strategy to attract new segments of the market to the destination.

From this perspective, theme park development may be viewed by public administrations as a tool for executing strategies of destination redevelopment, productive diversification, spatial re-equilibrium and even the valorisation of parts of the territory. Indeed, theme parks may be seen within the model of the life cycle of destinations initially presented by Butler (1980). This is a universal model that plots the hypothetical evolutionary development of destinations over time (Cooper, 1992). Despite the many adjustments that can be made to the model (see Butler 2006a and 2006b), the fact is that within the development process of a tourist destination, decline is inevitable unless corrective measures are defined before the destination reaches the stagnation phase. According to the model, following the period of stagnation, the

destination area will either decline or, alternatively, if steps are taken to renew interest in the area –as it can be through a theme park- the destination may regenerate in terms of accommodation redevelopment and the attraction of new segments of demand.

According to Agarwal (2002) there are two main strategies that can drive this process of rejuvenation of coastal tourist destinations: (1) specific product reorganization strategies including investment and technical change, centralization and product specialization, and (2) product transformation strategies including service quality enhancement, environmental quality enhancement, repositioning, diversification, collaboration and adaptation. Public policies and the local ability to respond to the global challenges are key factors in this context of redevelopment (see Agarwal, 2005). In fact, in a tourist market such as the Mediterranean coast, which focuses on the seaside holiday format, developing a theme park means product reorganization and destination transformation and evokes both types of strategies. As a consequence, the integration of a theme park into a territorial and productive strategy means that despite being a private initiative, its development may be in close collaboration with public policies implemented by tourist authorities (Jacquin, 1993).

The life cycle of the tourist area and theme park development

Salou and central Costa Daurada are located on the south Catalan coast, 100 km from Barcelona. The municipality of Salou is the main destination within the area. Originally, it was a tiny fishing village with occasional small, middle-class villas in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, along with the development of tourism in Spain, that it turned out to be a so-called “sun and sand” destination. It enjoys a mild climate with mean temperatures of about 10°C in the winter and 25°C to 30°C in the summer. Adjacent to Salou are the resorts of La Pineda (municipality of Vila-seca) and Cambrils (see

Figure 1). The three municipalities belong to the central Costa Daurada tourism destination. As shown in Table 1, the supply of hotels, campsites and registered tourist apartments in the whole area is abundant (about 85,000 places) and in 2007 generated some 12.5 million overnight stays. Second homes are estimated at 49,967 units in the whole central Costa Daurada destination. The mean annual hotel occupancy rate in 2007 was 78%.

Figure 1. Location of PortAventura in central Costa Daurada

Salou and the whole of central Costa Daurada are located within an urban area with more than 350,000 permanent inhabitants; the urban area of Tarragona. For central Costa Daurada, the last census recorded a population of 62,223, although the actual number of inhabitants may reach more than 100,000. Despite the importance of tourism along the 22.4 km coastal strip (including 14.1 km of beaches), the tourist area is adjacent to a well-developed petrochemical industrial estate. Many of the most important industrial chemical companies in the world (Repsol, BASF, Dow, Bayer, and Shell, among others) are located here. The area is connected to the French border and other Spanish Mediterranean provinces by the AP-7 motorway and with the most dynamic north-western inland Spanish regions and Madrid by the AP-2 motorway. The two motorways are the most important routes for the arrival of international and domestic tourist flows. Charter and low cost flights also arrive at Reus airport, in the urban area of Tarragona, and at the airport in Barcelona. It is essential to note the proximity of Barcelona, which means that more than 4.2 million Catalan people live within less than 90 minutes' drive from the area.

Table 1. Tourism statistics for central Costa Daurada (Salou, Cambrils and Vila-seca)

Although the precursors of tourism in Salou date back to the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s that the destination became included in the brochures of international package operators. Throughout this phase, development was dependent upon local small land owners. In accordance with the destination's mass tourism orientation during the 1960s and the 1970s, initial luxury urban developments planned in the 1950s and early 1960s were abandoned in favour of medium level accommodation and poorly planned apartment lots. The urbanization process and the development of small housing estates continued during the 1970s until the onset of the general economic crisis that began in Spain in the 1970s. In fact, during this period, apartments became the favoured form of construction because they satisfied the new self-catering holiday market and could be supplied by small to medium-sized private building firms.

This development of hotels and estates in beach locations meant that by the late 1970s most of the sea front in Salou and central Costa Daurada was already developed. Small estates, many of which were used for second homes, replaced agricultural land use and occupied ancient marsh areas. The pattern of tourism space in this area was, therefore, an intricate mosaic of expanded villages and towns, lower density residential estates, apartment block developments. Studies clearly reveal, in consequence, that during the 1980s, the area's tourist industry lost demand and economic viability (Anton Clavé, 1997a). One of the reasons was the loss to other, younger destinations, of appeal and competitiveness, and the new trends in demand and motivations that emerged in the late 1980s. The rapid development of new tourist interests and the progressive loss of the exceptionality of traditional tourist destinations were having important consequences on

the competitive position of Salou as a coastal Spanish Mediterranean mass tourism destination. Moreover, in this context, in 1989 Salou suffered a "typhoid scare". This event meant that many of the main international tour operators who worked directly with Salou stopped working altogether. The English market was lost and both the hotel and commercial sectors suffered greatly.

As Figure 2 shows, Salou started its decline during the 1980s. Destinations in central Costa Daurada became increasingly outdated and less unique than competing destinations. The public sector was aware of the need to seek new markets and to adjust the recreational product in the area to new trends in tourist demand. Several actions and strategies were implemented in order to rejuvenate the tourist product. At the local level, several strategic urban restructuring actions existed that had started in the mid 1980s. These initial actions were characterised by urban rearrangement and improved public infrastructure and, in addition, during the first phase between 1983 and 1989, by the municipality purchasing land to promote key actions like new generation hotel resorts and recreational facilities such as the currently existing Aquopolis waterpark. These planning development strategies were intended to rejuvenate the tourist product in the area. In this context, the most important, was the plan for the development of PortAventura at the end of the 1980s.

Figure 2. Growth in hotel accommodation in Salou (1959-2005)

Since the beginning of the 1990s, restructuring actions have continued to improve the destination, and during the 1990s, local policies implemented by all three municipalities that configure the whole of central Costa Daurada transformed the developed and natural aesthetics and landscape of resorts, especially through the urban and architectural reshaping of the seafront. Since then, central Costa Daurada has been trying to combine its classic “sea and sand” product with other alternatives and indeed with sustainable management practices.

Simultaneously, the private sector in Central Costa Daurada invested to improve the quality of hotels during the 1990s. There was also a growth in new accommodation provision such as the aparthotel -a partial self-catering establishment-; some obsolete hotels were closed and indeed one which was built on the beach was demolished by the municipality. This process of closing or improving old facilities caused a decrease in the number of available beds. After this period of adjustment, the development of new recreational, hotel and sporting facilities, including 3 hotels that opened in 2002 and the planning of a complete resort, again boosted the growth of the destination. As can be seen in Figure 2, since then the rejuvenation of Salou as a tourism destination has mainly been led by the strategy of the theme park. Its success suggests that, as a medium created for meeting people’s pleasure needs and expectations, PortAventura can serve the mass tourism market efficiently and can be used as a tool for the rejuvenation of a tourism destination.

Public policy and the development of the theme park

The siting of a theme park in Catalonia had been of political interest since the middle of the 1980s. The expectation that Disney created in Catalonia when they were considering it as a potential location for a theme park precipitated a favourable atmosphere for park development. These expectations were given shape by specific legislation of the Catalan Parliament. In fact, PortAventura arose from the political will, on the level of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia and locally, to respond to the need to transform the dominant model of tourism and leisure in central Costa Daurada. This political will translated into the establishment of a novel legal framework for Spain and Europe which gives an incentive to and regulates the development of theme parks.

More precisely, PortAventura is part of a larger project –classified as Tourist Recreational Centre by Law 2/1989 enacted by the Catalan Parliament– which covers a total surface area of 833 ha with plans to include hotels, residential, shopping and sports areas. With almost 2.7 million visitors during the first year of operation and more than 4 million in 2007, the PortAventura theme park has become a key component of the current central Costa Daurada tourist scene. The park was designed as a round-the-world trip visiting exotic places. PortAventura organises this theme through a carefully planned selection of four places (Mexico, Polynesia, China and the Far West) from a port of departure themed as a small Mediterranean fishing port.

It is worth noting that Law 2/1989 defined not only the characteristics of the theme park, but also the concept of Tourist Recreational Centre. According to the Law, a Tourist Recreational Centre has to consist of "extensive areas of land where recreational, cultural and leisure theme park activities and sporting, shopping, hotel industry and residential complementary uses are to be found side by side with their corresponding services". The

Law also prescribed the maximum land area devoted to the hotel industry and residential uses (30%), the maximum building density for residential uses ($0.06 \text{ m}^2/\text{m}^2$) and the minimum land area devoted to sporting uses and open spaces (30%). So, the theme park was conceived and is in fact currently part of a larger project that includes several components.

As shown in Table 2, PortAventura is enjoying a phase of expansion. Since 1998 new attractions have been developed, opening times have been extended, and since 2002, four 500-room hotels have been started, as well as a water park and, in 2006, a Beach Club located on the sea front. These investments meant a change in concept from exploiting a recreational facility to managing a whole productive chain of tourist entertainment (travel, accommodation and a variety of leisure pursuits) that as of 2008 includes 3 golf courses with 45 holes and a Convention Centre. Future plans include an orientation towards penetration into the markets residing in the immediate surrounding area of Tarragona and Barcelona.

Table 2. Phases of the development of the PortAventura Tourist Recreational Centre

Exploring the effects of the PortAventura theme park on the tourist destination

PortAventura has seen significant investment by public and private bodies. In fact, the local administration has greatly improved the provision of public services and the local infrastructure in order to benefit the quality and attractiveness of the destination. This includes the construction of two water treatment plants to serve the central Costa Daurada tourist area and to irrigate the grounds and plants of the theme park. This is important in a region such as Tarragona in which water is a scarce resource.

Change in the accommodation supply is a key indicator of processes of destination restructuring (see Clegg and Essex, 2000). Table 3 shows the evolution of the supply of hotels between 1994 and 2005 in central Costa Daurada. Compared with other well-established Catalan coastal destinations such as Lloret de Mar on the Costa Brava, the evolution of central Costa Daurada was 60 per cent higher during the same period. As a result, the area is now the second largest tourism destination of Catalonia, as regards number of tourism beds, after the city of Barcelona. Of greater importance is the fact that most of the growth has been in the higher category hotels. In fact, as shown in Table 4, the highest percentage change between 2001 and 2006 is among the 4 stars hotels. An important reason that helps explain the renewed interest in investment in the area is related to the lengthening of the season and revitalisation during the off-peak season. In fact, until the siting of the park, Salou had been a highly seasonal, traditional summer destination. Since PortAventura, Salou and the whole of central Costa Daurada has witnessed the lengthening of the season, from as early as Easter to late November.

Table 3. Evolution of the supply of hotel beds in central Costa Daurada, 1994-2005

Table 4. Growth of hotel beds by category in central Costa Daurada, 2001-2006

Exploratory analysis by Anton Clavé and Orellana (2003), using data from a sample of 3,100 visitors, shows that there is a fundamental difference between the tourists in central Costa Daurada that visit the park and those that do not. Those that do not visit the park

have a profile close to the traditional tourism in a conventional mass seaside resort. They are a homogeneous group that can be described as the people who would continue to go to central Costa Daurada whether the park was there or not because they are motivated only by sun and sea. By contrast, those that visit the park constitute a more heterogeneous group. In fact, the motivations of this group of respondents seem to be more complex. They go to the park but they also evaluate very highly the appeal of the beach. Moreover, they combine these two basic motivations with others such as culture or nature, which they can only satisfy by visiting the areas immediately adjacent to Salou, or even in Barcelona. The profile of theme park visitors does not correspond to the profile of the conventional tourist to the area. Family tourist segments are, in this sense, the main new customers to the area.

This has occurred together with changes in the international demand for the PortAventura park (Anton Clavé, 2007). The number of visits to the park made by French citizens increased from 81,000 in 1997 to over 383,000 in 2005 (a 472% increase) and the number of British from 146,000 in 1997 to around 600,000 in 2005 (a 411% increase). Following the physical changes, concentrated promotion to specific international markets is the most plausible explanation for this growth. Equally significantly, communications campaigns run by PortAventura have looked towards the final consumer - rather than those organising packaged holidays - in selected target markets.

Conclusion

The recent changes in tourism development and, specifically, the establishment of the PortAventura theme park in Salou can be used as an example to highlight how some policies are changing the face of conventional coastal tourism activity and, in particular,

how conventional, mature tourist resorts are adapting to new demand trends. Data suggest that the park has played a role in the restructuring of the destination and functions (1) as an engine to override the stagnation phase of the destination, (2) as a tool to attract new market segments, and (3) acts as a stimulus for other private agents to respond to the new demand and to change the type of accommodation facilities in the area. The process also suggests some interesting critical factors when redeveloping coastal mass tourism destinations: the enhancement of the recreational quality of the destination; the differentiation of the image of the place as an identification strategy and the exploration of new urban models for the creation of new places of consumption (see Faulkner, 2002).

It is also worthy of note that this process of rejuvenation could be characterized not only by the role of the PortAventura theme park but also by the existence of some key conditions that have enabled the destination to proceed with its transformation. These can be summarized as follows: (1) the existence of a strategic plan for the destination that leads the implementation of a regeneration policy in an atmosphere of political and entrepreneurial consensus at the local and regional level; (2) the effective changing of the real image of the destination designing new sights, boosting the development of new, higher quality accommodation and leisure facilities and promoting new marketing strategies including the use of new baseline concepts and communication channels.

Further research may enhance the lessons to be learned from the role of the park in the area. First, theoretically, the evolution of Salou and the central Costa Daurada area as a mass tourist destination might highlight additional novelties to the research into the tourism area life cycle (Butler, 2006a, 2006b). Second, insofar as the restructuring thesis

might be tested, new research might examine how the global capital of large entertainment companies operates in traditional investment areas and how national, regional and local politics can shape these global investments (Teo and Li, 2003). Third, other hypothetical, positive restructuring effects should be measured more in depth, such as (1) the hypothetical growth of the income generated in the local destination related to the changing demographic profiles of visitors, (2) the extent of the growing use of new distribution channels to reach the destination and its relationship with the development of the theme park in the area, (3) the changing image of Salou in the European markets and (4) the development of new recreational facilities and visitor services in the destination and in the adjacent areas (cultural tourism in Tarragona, wine tourism in rural areas, active tourism in the nearby mountain areas, environmentally sensitive tourism in natural parks). Fourth, it will be necessary to test what other kinds of repercussions PortAventura, which has embarked on its medium-term goal of becoming a complete tourist destination by itself, will have on the growth of new urban districts in the area and on the tourism dynamics of the destination (Foglesong, 1991).

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Table 1. Tourism statistics for central Costa Daurada (Salou, Cambrils and Vila-seca)

GENERAL DATA		
Surface area		71.4 sq km
Coastal length		22.4 km
Beach length		14.1 km
Population (census)	2005	62,223 inhabitants
Population (actual)	2003	97.709 inhabitants (estimated)
SUPPLY OF TOURISM		
Hotel beds	2007	44,818 beds
Camping places	2007	16,810 places
Apartment beds	2007	24,788 beds
Second homes units	2001	49,967 units
TOURIST DEMAND (excluding second homes)		
Arrivals	2007	2.8 Million
% of international tourists	2007	55 %
Nights	2007	12.5 Million
Annual mean occupancy rates	2007	
Hotels	2007	78%
Camping sites	2007	45%
Apartments	2007	55%
Number of nights per trip	2007	
Hotels	2007	4.1
Camping sites	2007	4.3
Apartments	2007	5.3

Source: Costa Daurada Tourism Observatory

Table 2. Phases of the development of the PortAventura Tourist Recreational Centre

	Until 1997	1998-01	2002-07	2008-09
Parks	-1 theme park	-3 new major attractions -1 major show	-1 water park -2 new major shows -1 major attraction	-water park phase II
Hotels			-3 (1,500 rooms)	-1 (500 rooms)
Leisure/Business			-Beach Club	-3 Golf courses (45 holes) -1 Convention Centre

Source: PortAventura data

Table 3. Evolution of the supply of hotel beds in central Costa Daurada, 1994-2005

	1994	2005	% of change
Salou	18,055	29,258	62.0 %
Cambrils	3,548	5,592	57.6 %
Vila-seca	2,377	4,490	88.9 %
TOTAL	23,980	39,340	64.1%

Source: Costa Daurada Tourism Observatory

Table 4. Growth of hotel beds by category in central Costa Daurada, 2001-2006

	% change
4 stars	198.8 %
3 stars	2.6 %
2 stars	-21.6 %
1 star	-26.1 %
TOTAL	31.9 %

Source: Costa Daurada Tourism Observatory

Figure 1. Location of PortAventura in central Costa Daurada

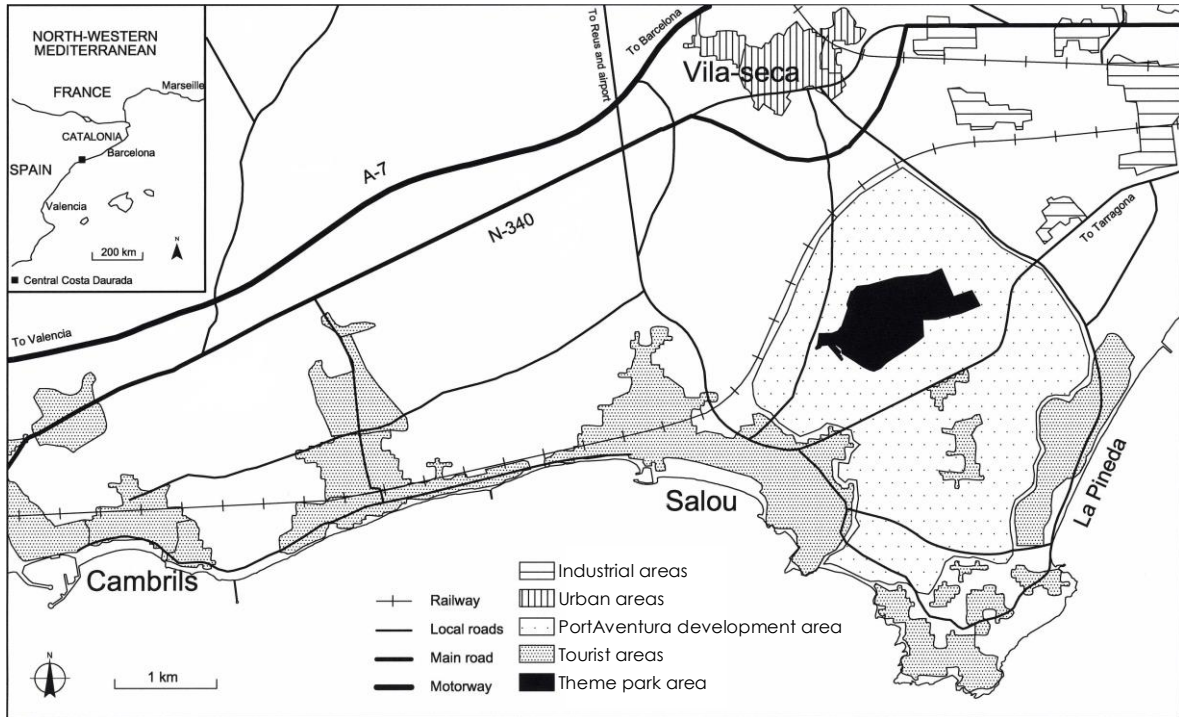
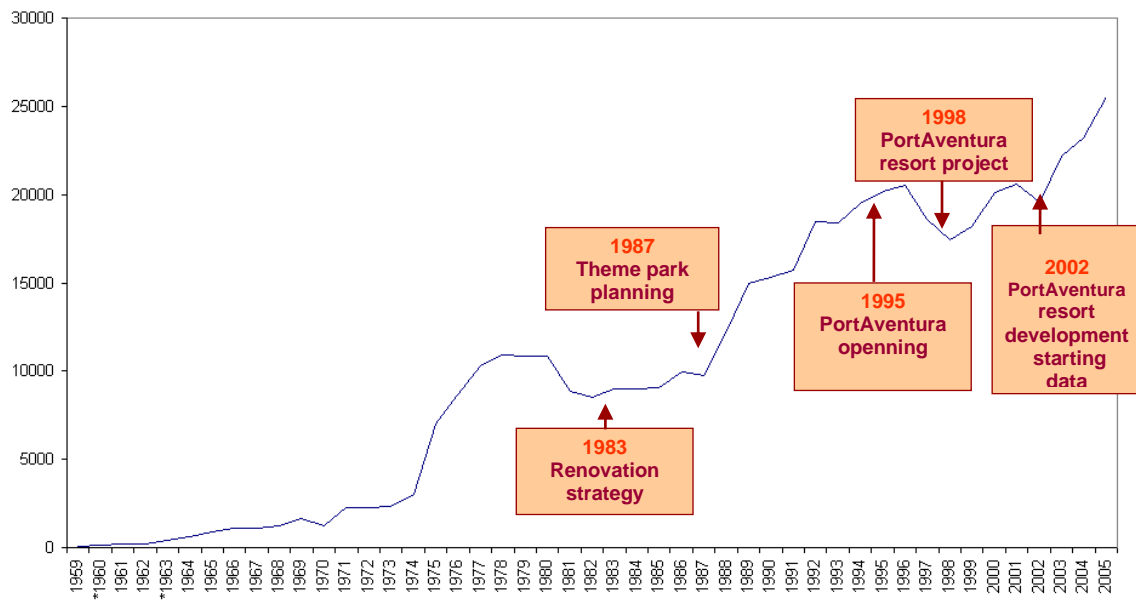


Figure 2. Growth in hotel accommodation in Salou (1959-2005)



Source: based on Beas, 2009