

# The architectural hangover after an entire nation got drunk on cement

Over-development of Spain's beaches has seen them lose their appeal for tourists

RAFAEL MÉNDEZ  
Madrid

Three years ago, Juan Antonio Ramírez, a real estate agent in Huelva, would regularly have lines of people outside his agency eager to buy a beachfront apartment. With the onset of the economic crisis, the lines have gone and Ramírez no longer sells three properties a week. But the effects of that home-buying and construction frenzy are still visible along Huelva's once-pristine coastline.

In the six years between 2000 and 2006, urban development within the first two kilometers of the southern Atlantic province's coast increased by 48.1 percent. It was not, however, the worst offender, according to satellite images of the Spanish coast taken by the European Environment Agency. That title goes to Valencia, where urban sprawl increased by 53.1 percent. In just six years, concrete was blighting one out of every 10 previously untouched kilometers of Valencia's coastline. In the neighboring province of Alicante and in the Andalusian province of Málaga, home to the Costa del Sol, more than half of the first two kilometers of coast are under concrete. In Barcelona, just 32 percent of the coastline remains undeveloped. Across Spain, coastal urban sprawl has increased by 22 percent in just six years.

"Society got drunk on cement," says Juan Manuel Barragán, who teaches coastal management at the University of Cádiz. "In a few years when we look back and see what we have done to the coast, we will real-



Coastal areas such as Xilxes (above), in the Valencia region, are drowning in a sea of cement. / CARLES FRANCESC

"When we look at what we have done to the coast, we will see it was madness"

ize that it was madness. A few people have made a lot of money at the expense of our common heritage."

Barragán argues that because of the overdevelopment, the coast has lost much of its value as an income generator for Spain, whose beaches have traditionally been the main at-

traction for eight out of 10 tourists.

"The coast has lost value. Tourists don't come in search of cement — they have that in Düsseldorf. They want well-kept beaches and there are fewer of those left," he says.

However, when tourists started to leave the urban sprawl of the Mediterranean behind and went in search of pristine beaches on Spain's Atlantic coast, the developers followed close behind. Many of them were willing to break the law for a quick sale.

"There are 50,000 illegal properties in 17 coastal municipi-

palities in the province of Cádiz. That doesn't happen anywhere else in Europe," Barragán notes.

Even Spain's northern Atlantic coast, with its chillier waters, did not escape the building boom. The "Mediterraneanization of the Atlantic" had begun, says Pilar Marcos, a Greenpeace spokeswoman.

The economic crisis has paralyzed many projects along Spain's Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, though they remain on developer's books. Conservationists fear that once the current economic crisis abates, the bulldozers will be back.