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Spain's La Manga del Mar Menor (Murcia), a Space Transformed by Tourist Activity—Analysis from the Geography of Perception

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Abstract: Tourist activity has a powerful capacity to transform landscapes, often modifying natural or semi-natural spaces in favour of increasingly dense urban structures. This change is particularly evident in Mediterranean coastal areas, and specifically in Spain's La Manga del Mar Menor in the Region of Murcia, whose environment and landscape have been altered from the 1960s onwards. During this time, intense urbanisation based on the sun and beach tourism model has been developed, which represents a bad example of urban land-use planning. Speculation and the lack of a sustainable tourist model in those years have created a 22-km linear city along a coastal strip, currently characterised by a densified tourist area. This situation is due to the lack of urban planning and a series of other problems, such as the lack of basic services and facilities, saturation in access to them and environmental pollution. In this spatial context, the geography of perception's methodology will serve as an analytical tool in aspects related to the lived space and the interaction of residents and tourists. This is combined with a DAFO/SWOT-CAME analysis and the use of photographs and cartographies as key research instruments. The aim of this work is to analyse the intense urbanisation that has taken place in this coastal area and to show the need to carry out urban development actions within the framework of a possible new plan aimed at halting environmental deterioration, organising land use, creating more spaces for public services and protecting, to a greater extent, beaches and other natural and cultural resources. A commitment to sustainable tourism should ensure better urban conditions to meet both visitor and local demands.

Keywords: urbanism; urban planning; tourism; environmental sustainability; geography of perception



Citation: Morales Yago, F.J.; Jurado Almonte, J.M.; Cuesta Aguilar, M.J. Spain's La Manga del Mar Menor (Murcia), a Space Transformed by Tourist Activity—Analysis from the Geography of Perception.

Sustainability **2024**, *16*, 10437. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su162310437>

Academic Editor: Olaf Kühne

Received: 13 October 2024

Revised: 18 November 2024

Accepted: 22 November 2024

Published: 28 November 2024



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1. Introduction

The research problem is that currently, La Manga del Mar Menor is a crowded tourist area due to a lack of urban planning, with consequences such as scarce basic services, saturation in access to them and environmental pollution. The methodological contribution used is the geography of perception [1], which assesses how its inhabitants see and feel the territory [2]. The interview technique used allows a diagnosis to be made and territorial proposals to be put forward that help reconcile the problematic urban and tourism issues [3].

This study aims to show the intense urbanisation that has taken place in the coastal area of Spain's La Manga del Mar Menor, where there has been a radical transformation of an area of outstanding natural beauty into an urbanistic ally overcrowded tourist centre, with notable territorial planning problems. Simultaneously, the loss of natural heritage has accelerated as a consequence of the implementation of a low-quality mass tourism model, based on the sun and beach binomial, as in so many other towns in the Spanish Mediterranean. As a result of this historical development, La Manga is the main tourist area in the Region of Murcia and is key to the area's future employment and economic dynamism.

1.1. The Geographic Space

La Manga del Mar Menor is located between the municipalities of Cartagena, which has a total population of 221,364 people (2024) and a municipal area of 558 km², and San Javier has 35,241 inhabitants and 74.2 km². Both belong to Spain's Autonomous Community of the Region of Murcia.

This territory has a Mediterranean climate with an average annual temperature of 18.3°, which means a very short and mild winter and 3591 h of sunshine per year, equivalent to more than 320 sunny days. At the same time, it has an exceptionally long sandy coastline of almost 22 km and a width of between 100 and 1200 metres. This sand spit separates the so-called 'Mar Mayor' (or open sea, the Mediterranean), from Mar Menor, which comprises a hypersaline lagoon area of 135 km². It has a perimeter of 73 km of coastline, which makes it a significant wetland or coastal lagoon. Its average depth is 3 to 4 m, with a maximum of 6 (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Location of La Manga del Mar Menor (Murcia). Source: [4].

The two bodies of water are connected by several canals known as gullies, of which Marchamalo and Estacio are man-made. Further north is the Veneziola or Encañizadas canal (Figure 2). These waterways allow communication and water transfer from the Mediterranean to Mar Menor, since the latter suffers to a greater extent from evaporation. Additionally, it is much more saline, and in recent years, its depth has decreased, essentially due to sedimentation from the agricultural areas of the continental zone. Further, it suffers from high nitrate input from intensive farming around the coastal lagoon, contributing to a serious process of eutrophication, as well as damaging the Campo de Cartagena aquifer [5].



Figure 2. Location of the channels between Mar Menor and the Mediterranean Sea. Source: [6].

The urban development model developed over the last six decades has been very intense, speculative and without joint planning by the two competent municipalities, resulting in a major transformation of the original landscape of coastal dunes and sandbanks. In fact, this coastal strip has become a linear city where the various residential developments follow, one after the other, in a continuous and anarchic manner. In the summer months, it becomes very busy. The initial project's proposed load capacity was for no more than 70,000 people, but, during the summer months, the current resident population exceeds 300,000, which generates major problems in the management of public facilities and environmental quality [7]. It is worth noting that the registered or stable year-round population in La Manga, between the two municipalities that administer it, is below 6000 inhabitants.

Until the 1960s, La Manga del Mar Menor was practically untouched by human intervention and almost uninhabited, and its few activities focused on small-scale fishing and salt extraction [8]. The absence of transport, lack of water and non-existence of urban infrastructure prevented tourist interest at that time. The neighbouring areas dedicated to mining in the Sierra de La Unión-Cartagena and dry farming—with low yields—were the main activities in the area around La Manga [9]. But this situation broke down in that decade due to the appearance of both urban and agricultural development and accelerated in the following decade because of the arrival of surface water from the Tagus-Segura Transfer [10].

The idea of urbanising this area came from businessman Tomás Maestre Aznar, who began a process of land acquisition until he had acquired all the available space. Then, in 1961, the services of two Catalan town planners were requested: Antonio Bonet Castellana and Josep Puig Torné [11]. Both proposed the creation along the entire strip of land of a series of large nuclei with residential towers, of about 20 floors, and wide spaces between each, to offer rationality, integration and low building density. In total, it was calculated that 12 compact nuclei would be created with, as said, a maximum occupancy of 70,000 people [12].

This project encompassed a large coastal area and within a year or so obtained urban planning approval from the competent authorities of the then Ministry of Housing, which was highly active following implementation of the 1959 Stabilisation Plan and the international opening up of Spain. In fact, by the late 1950s, a tourist and territorial planning system was clearly defined. This plan was finally approved in the 1960s by the well-known Law of Centres and Areas of National Tourist Interest (CyZITN) [13], which included La Manga del Mar Menor [14]. In 1963, urbanisation work began and by 1965 the first hotels and developments of detached and semi-detached houses were inaugurated. The pace of construction was accelerated to achieve rapid profitability, and subsequently uncontrolled and uncoordinated urban growth was tolerated between the town councils of San Javier and Cartagena, which had not been reflected in the initial proposal, as can be seen in the first developments (Figure 3).

Thus, La Manga del Mar Menor has a high rate of housing density, although this depends on the different sectors or stretches. The space occupied between kms 0 and 4 (corresponding to the municipal area of Cartagena) is the most densely populated with 120 housing developments (51% of a total of 252 in La Manga), and in the remainder (kms 5–19), there are 123 housing developments (49%). However, these first four kilometres are the coastline's widest. Thus, 29% of the surface area of La Manga is in the municipality of Cartagena, and the rest, 71%, in the municipality of San Javier.



Figure 3. Images of early construction in La Manga in the 1960s. Source: [15].

1.2. Studies and Literature Related to the Geography of Perception

Geographical science is a discipline based on the analysis and assessment of the problems related to human beings' distribution and territorial organisation, as well as their acceptance or rejection [16] on the basis of housing satisfaction, environmental quality or safety conditions and provision of services. It is also concerned with studying the subjective way in which we see geographical space and how this vision influences our personal and social behaviour [16]. This perceptual approach argues that spatial use is conditioned not only by economic and social variables, but also by factors stemming from people's internal valuation and vision. The methodological use of perception and behavioural geography is epistemologically increasingly interested in the mental images [17] derived from the routes used in travel and the places frequented, which are finally synthesised in the feelings of identification or rejection with the territory [18].

In this context of geographical thinking, the influence of the Chicago School's approach to urbanism appeared. Some of its authors [19,20] contended that the geography of perception is a discipline that accepts dialectical reasoning and the role of social mediators. From Lynch (1960) [19] emerged an important critique of positivist approaches, considering that the quantitative view of spatial reality is subject to excessively rigid forms

of interpretation, valid for the treatment of experimental sciences, but insufficient for the objectives of geographic science [21,22].

Wolpert (1964) [23] argued that human behaviour is an individual rather than a collective fact, giving rise to a current of thought dedicated to social problems and issues related to territorial planning, where priority is given to the analysis of issues related to the lived space [24]. This theoretical approach was based on accepting that human beings accumulate a series of images in their minds [25], which can lead to the creation of individual and collective ‘mental’ maps [26]. This led to a new ‘cartography’ that captures the interaction between the real world and human behaviour with meaningful results, linking the geography of perception with territorial analysis and local development [27].

Boira [25] built on this by proposing a forward-looking approach to the geography of perception, as another instrument in urban planning and spatial planning. This line was followed by other authors [28,29], who highlighted technicians’ lack of attention in city design to citizen’s views, and stressed the lack of reflection and analysis about subjective space, both in its didactic aspect (knowing and teaching the city), and in urban and territorial planning. Thus, the usefulness of the geography of perception was also extended to rural analyses [30,31].

Other studies have positively valued the geography of perception as a tool that allows us to understand the subjective image of space [32]. It is even viewed as essential for objectively comprehending the characteristics of citizen behaviour [33]. In our research, following De Castro [27,34,35], we propose working instruments such as the construction of mental and cognitive maps, emphasising that the geography of perception is an explanatory science that reveals certain behavioural mechanisms useful in territorial planning and management. In the construction of maps, we work on the aspect of displacement, eliminating the risk of getting lost in urban diversity and habitual environments. Cognitive or mental mapping, surveys or interviews and text analysis, as a means of understanding the object of spatial perceptions, are widely used methods in the geography of perception [36,37]. All are employed in this research on La Manga del Mar Menor. The aim is to seek an image of this space as perceived and drawn by its inhabitants, whose territory has changed so much in urban terms in recent decades (Figure 4).



Figure 4. La Manga in the early 1960s and today. Source: [38].

2. Methodology

The methodology used employs the three approaches or perspectives on the perception of space identified by Zárate and Rubio [24]: the visual approach, characterised by

observation and description; the evaluative and preferential approach, in which the subject analyses and evaluates; and a third approach, centred on the feelings that a space awakens in individuals, known as the sense of place. All these condition people's behaviour (action–decision).

Lynch (1960) [19] noted that the mental image of the urban landscape comprises at least five structural elements: landmarks, nodes, paths or roads, edges or boundaries, and districts or neighbourhoods. Landmarks are elements of the urban landscape that most of its inhabitants use as points of reference and guidance: a church tower, a town hall, a monument. Nodes are strategic points in the city, traffic junctions or 'transport breaks', such as squares, harbours, airports, railway or bus stations, which often concentrate activities and contain symbolic and representative values of the city or neighbourhood. Paths are the routes or tracks followed by any ordinary, transient or potential individual as s/he wanders through the city, streets, canals or around railways. Edges are the elements that separate morphologically or socially differentiated spaces, such as material boundaries (railway lines, walls, rivers, waterfronts), distinct land uses, or perceived boundaries, such as residential areas with certain social characteristics or 'areas of fear'. Finally, neighbourhoods are urban areas that citizens perceive as well-differentiated spaces from others for administrative reasons or by the characteristics of their morphology, functional significance and population composition.

This classification of elements was simplified by Hudson and Pocock (1978) [39], who reduced it to three types: point features (or elements), linear features and areas. This links with the vector model used today by Geographic Information Systems (GISs) in territorial analysis. Both positions can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Structural aspects of the urban image.

	Elements		Lineal		Areas
Landmarks	Ecclesiastical, historical, civic, educational, social, commercial, business, transport, buildings	Footpaths	Streets, rivers, viaducts, bridges, movements	Neighbourhoods	Districts and open spaces
Nodes	Crossroads and bus and train stations	Borders	Cycle lanes and rail networks		

Source: [39].

The visual aspect was obtained from analysis of the mental maps drawn by the inhabitants of La Manga del Mar Menor, whether regular residents or holidaymakers [40]. These respondents were asked to draw a series of town maps, highlighting as many visible elements as they could remember, and which could serve as an orientation reference for any individual visiting this area for the first time. From these mental maps, we extracted the structuring elements of the landscape according to Lynch, and which other authors have applied to various cities such as Segovia [41], Bordeaux [42] and Murcia [43].

Other sources of information were the urban registry and various data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INE) and the Statistical Yearbook of the Region of Murcia, produced by the Ministry of Finance. The general urban development plans of the municipalities of Cartagena and San Javier with their urban development regulations for La Manga [44] were also considered.

For cartographic elaboration, the application designed by the Consejería de Urbanismo y Obras Públicas de la Región de Murcia, known as CARTOMUR, as well as the geographic information system ArcGIS Online, were used.

Surface and aerial photography was another resource used to assess the landscape's evolution. Photographs taken from the 1960s to the present day were included. These constitute an important graphic testimony of the great changes generated in the landscape in terms of its urban transformation.

Individual interviews (N = 14; see Appendix A) were carried out with experts who know the territory in depth (Table 2). Additionally, the study drew upon responses to a face-to-face questionnaire carried out with 87 individuals. The presence of local people (23%) stands out compared to tourists or travellers (67%), with an estimated reliability of the results between 0 and 1 of over 85%. Triangulation of the resulting data enabled us to carry out SWOT assessment and the subsequent proposal for improvement through SWOT-CAME analysis.

Table 2. Selected sample of interviews.

Collective	N° Interviews	Code
Technicians from the city councils of Cartagena and S. Javier	2	TA1-TA2
Hotel and accommodation managers	3	RA1-RA3
Members of the ecological collective	2	CE1-CE2
Neighbours of the ‘Dos Mares’ collective	2	TAQ1
Tourism technicians from Cartagena and San Javier	1	AD1
Local historian	1	H1
Urban landscape specialists	3	PU1-PU2
Total	14	

Source: [45].

3. Results

The results obtained provide data for the first section, which is dedicated to the creation of mental maps of visually perceived space. The second section highlights the preferential spaces [46], which refer to the appreciative dimension of the image, with a view to behaviour and decision-making [47]. We next focus on explanations of the emotional feelings that this urban space awakens in people. Finally, in a fourth section, we illustrate the results of a SWOT-CAME analysis and suggest proposals for improvement. The last two sections provide results on the important loss of natural and cultural heritage, ending with repercussions of the construction process and occupation of space in La Manga del Mar Menor.

3.1. Mental Maps as a Visual Representation of Perceived Space

The theoretical approach of the geography of perception and behaviour is based on the consideration that human beings accumulate a series of images in their minds that can be measured and quantified. These images help to create each individual’s mental map and help us to interpret it.

These mental maps highlight the main elements to be considered, such as paths, edges, nodes, landmarks and the most well-known neighbourhoods, and identify the most outstanding elements. Figure 5 shows a mental map drawn by a resident of La Manga del Mar Menor.

The continuity of developments and other spaces that form part of citizens’ collective memory can be observed in the urban area (Figure 5). Edges can be seen, such as the two seas that delimit the space of La Manga, and the main road that crosses the entire nucleus (Gran Vía). Additionally, landmarks such as the Estacio suspension bridge, the Marchamalo canal, the Cabo de Palos lighthouse and the Torre Navarra building can be identified. The most important nodes are the Plaza Bohemia, the Souk and Tomás Maestre port, where the Gran Vía meets other less significant avenues. Table 3 shows the structural elements of this space identified by the surveys.



Figure 5. Mental map of La Manga del Mar Menor. Individual vision. Source: [48].

Landmarks are elements of the urban landscape used as points of reference and guidance. In this sense, in La Manga del Mar Menor, we highlight several unique buildings, such as the lighthouses of Cabo de Palos and El Estacio and the bridges over canals such as the Estacio suspension bridge (km 11) and 'De la risa' (km 19). In terms of the natural environment, the Marchamalo salt marsh is an outstanding landmark. In the built environment, there are no outstanding monuments or houses, only buildings constructed in the 1960s and 70s that stand out and are known for their great height, such as the Galúa Hotel, the Navarra Tower (Plaza Bohemia) and the Casino (Lagomar Hotel) (Figure 6).

The nodes, or meeting points in inhabitants' lives, are identified with the larger squares or open spaces. In this area, only two places of close confluence stand out: Bohemia Square (km 3) and the Souk (km 4), where a series of shops, restaurants and leisure facilities are located (Figure 7).

The footpaths or transit routes are reflected in the surveys. We highlight the Gran Vía or main street, which is the backbone of the entire distribution of road traffic and the mobility of people by various means, such as bicycle or skateboard and, of course, on foot. The urban expansion of La Manga over almost 22 km has given rise to buildings generally located between the sea and this avenue, a pattern that is duplicated in both directions until km 11 (Las Brisas), and then becomes a road with only one lane in each direction, with significant traffic congestion and parking problems (Figure 8).

Table 3. List of the most important elements in La Manga del Mar Menor.

Landmarks	Nodes
Cabo de Palos lighthouse	Tomás Maestre port
Estacio lighthouse	Dos Mares sports port
Estacio suspension bridge	El Zoco
“La risa” bridge	Bus station
Molinos de sal	Plaza Bohemia
Torre Navarra	Las Sirenas health centre
Los Castillos residential development	Costa Cálida health centre
Iglesia Santa María del Mar	Eurovosa
Salinas de Marchamalo	El Galán
Veneziola Golf	El Zoco petrol station
Casino building (Lagomar)	Peque Park, La Manga
Hotel Galúa	
Collados Beach	
Poseidón building	
Hotel Entremares	
Hotel Cavanna	
Pathways	Borders
	Mediterranean sea
	Mar Menor
	Las Encañizadas (at the end of La Manga)
	San Pedro harbour
	Harbourside walk
	Monte Blanco
	Ciervo island
	Punta del Pedruchillo
	Tomás Maestre canal port
La Manga’s Gran Vía	
Access to Cala del Pino	
Veneziola canals	

Source: [49].

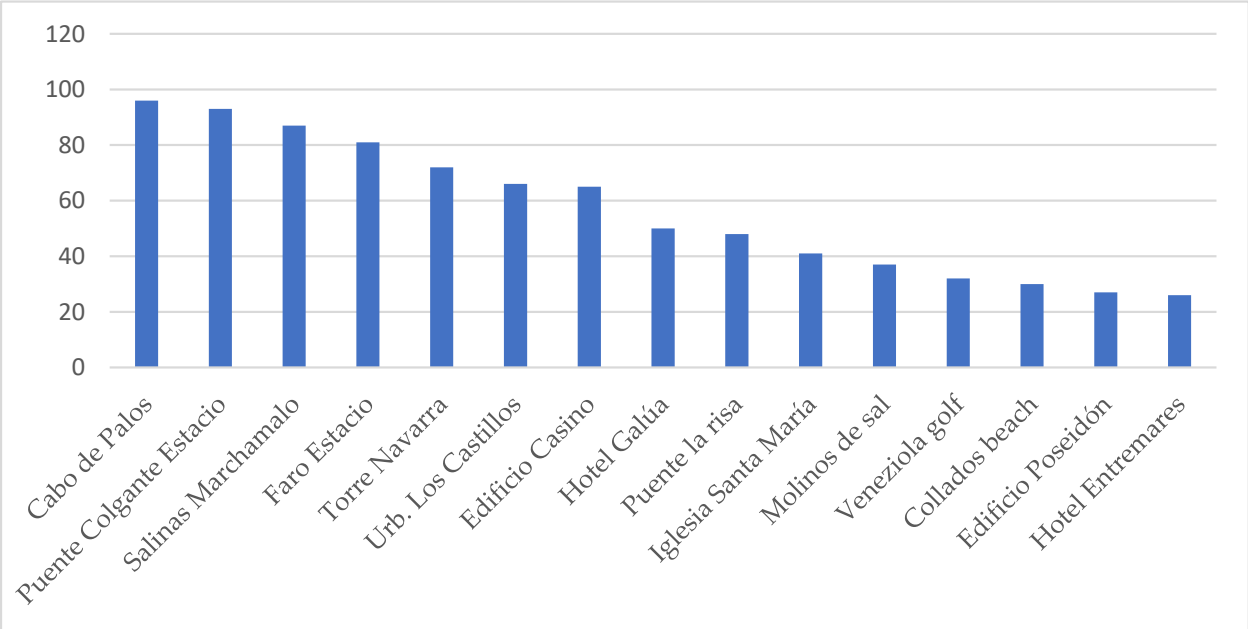


Figure 6. Outstanding landmarks in La Manga del Mar Menor (2024). Source: [49].

As an edge or boundary present in the collective memory that separates morphologically or socially differentiated spaces, we highlight the psychological barrier of both seas, including the canals (gullies) built to communicate the two bodies of water and several promenades.



Figure 7. Highlighted nodes in La Manga del Mar Menor (2024). Source: [45].



Figure 8. Partial view of La Manga's Gran Vía. Source: [50].

Finally, the concept of 'neighbourhood' proposed by Lynch (1960) [19] would be more associated with 'urbanisations', the morphology being defined by a clear perception of its limits; however, an identification with the place where one lives or works is detected, especially when there is a natural physical barrier, such as the coastline, or an artificial

one, such as a canal. The respondents clearly identified the urbanisations of Eurovosa and Castillos del Mar, as well as the natural exit of La Manga by road access to Cabo de Palos or the Port of Tomás Maestre for its excellent nautical facilities. These locations offer good quality leisure facilities and urban beaches, and very busy areas with many rental properties and tourist hotels.

3.2. Spaces of Preference

To illustrate preferred spaces, the study area was divided into sections, which, in turn, were subdivided into outstanding residential developments. In this case, respondents were not asked to draw a ‘map of knowledge’, but rather asked to list the residential developments or estates, indicating in order of preference, from highest to lowest, preferred spaces for living.

From the total number of residential developments selected for each survey we took the top 10 ranked by each, giving a maximum score of 10 to the preferred estate at the top of the list, 9 to the next, and so on. From the scores obtained from these top 10, after summation, the results were plotted on a topological preferential map. This map shows the existence of great coincidences in inhabitants’ estimation of many estates, but there are also important differences in perception depending, above all, on the places of residence, distance, personal experience, familiarity with the environment, the socio-familial context and the stereotypes generated by the different residential developments [51].

The results of this survey reflected very clearly the most deeply rooted preferences for living and elements of the landscape. Of the 87 interviews, 84 respondents gave a score for each preferred space. Each participant rated them from 1 (least) to 10 (most), according to the preferred place where s/he would like to live, from which we obtained total scores. The city, evaluated from a geography of perception perspective, was divided into more well-known neighbourhoods with their own identity, totalling 25 significant spaces. Obviously, there are more, but for the purposes of this case study we show those indicated and the score achieved in order of preference for living in them (Table 4).

Table 4. Order of preference of 25 of La Manga’s best-known estates.

Estates	Accumulated Scores from the Interviews
Eurovosa	637
Castillos del Mar	550
Puerto Tomás Maestre	472
Cabo de Palos	468
Plaza Bohemia	453
Zoco	444
Las Sirenas	381
Casino	367
Dos Mares/El Pino	345
Galán	317
El Pedrucho	312
El Estacio	271
Veneziola	256
El Pedruchillo	242
Ibicencos	196
Cabo Romano	181
Monte Blanco	95
Las Brisas	78
Ancora	75
La Mirage	73
El Vivero	71
Optimist	64
Euromanga	53
Las Amoladeras	47
Las Antillas	42

Source: [49].

The assessments made and mapped in a topological map of situation [52] represent the real and scaled image (Figure 9) offered by the different areas of the city, and the different preferences according to the scores obtained. The preponderance of three outstanding places can be clearly observed: Eurovosa, Castillos de Mar and Cabo de Palos.

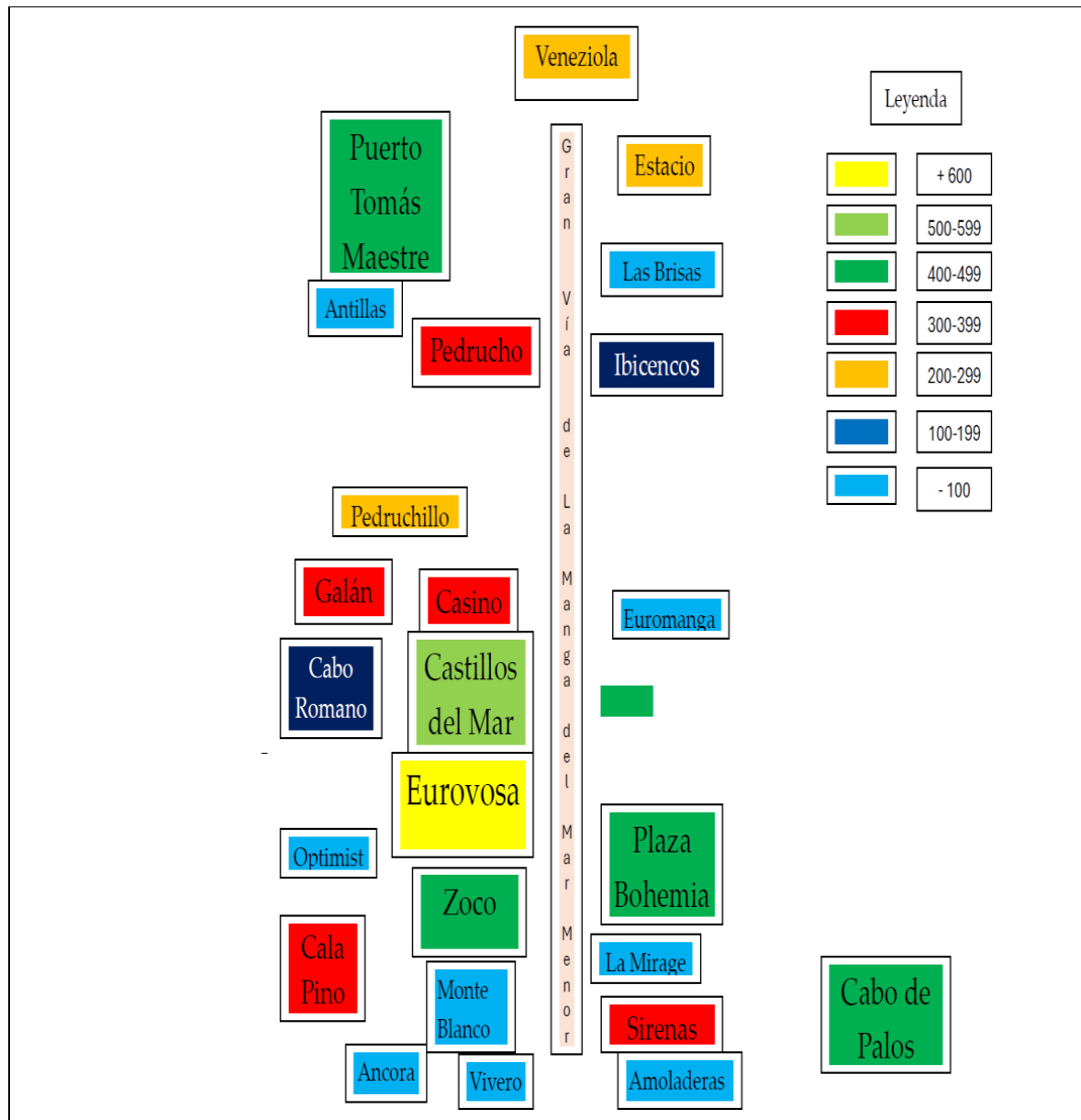


Figure 9. Topological map of living preferences in La Manga's spaces or neighbourhoods. Source: [49].

The results obtained allow us to develop at least four key ideas to better understand the preferential configuration: firstly, we highlight the most valued activities when a person finishes their vacation; secondly, the most outstanding places that they would show to a new visitor; the third idea reflects use of urban space; finally, the aspects derived from transport mobility and its spatial consequences. These results would be in line with Butler's so-called tourism life cycle [53,54], which identifies six stages in the tourist development of a territory. La Manga, in this context, would be placed in the final or sixth stage, at a delicate point between the possibilities of a necessary rejuvenation or entry into a decadent space, which would be difficult to reconvert into a successful tourist destination.

3.2.1. Most Valued Activities When Leaving La Manga

In general, both inhabitants and tourists find La Manga an attractive place and are satisfied, despite the significant problems caused by tourist overcrowding. Thus, we identified 71% of citizens who liked living in La Manga very much, compared to 14% who did not like it at all due to increasing tourism. At the same time, 78% of the respondents were highly satisfied with spending their holidays there (Figure 10).

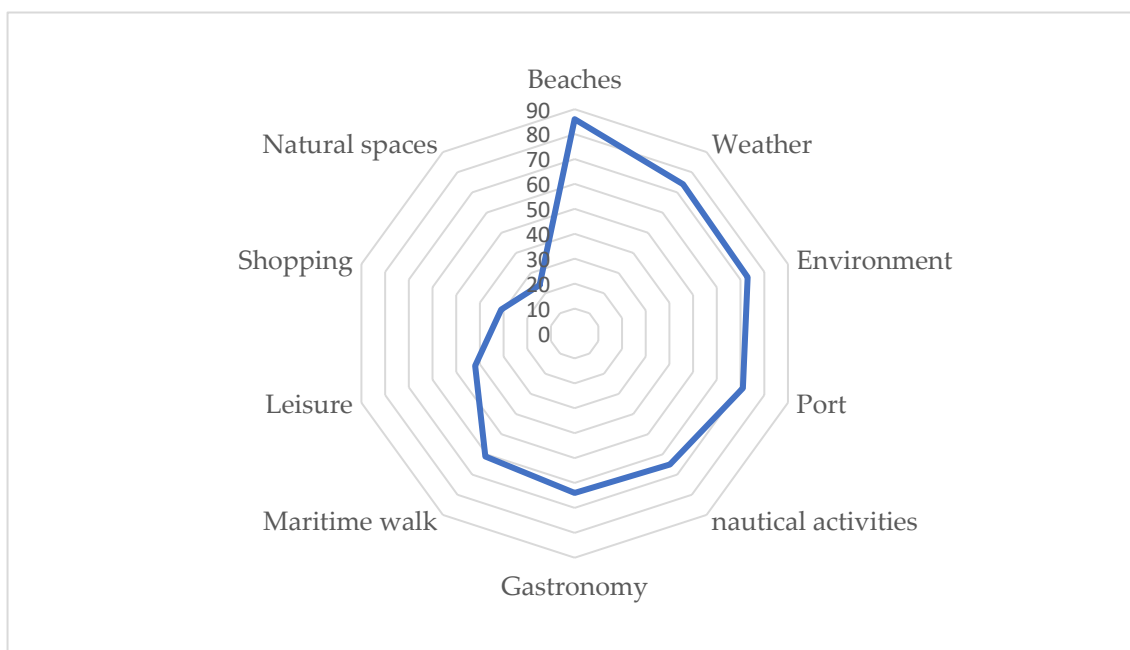


Figure 10. Most significant elements recalled after leaving La Manga. Source: [49].

Undoubtedly, La Manga has become the main tourist centre of the Region of Murcia, with a clear influence on other Mar Menor municipalities, such as Cartagena, San Javier, San Pedro del Pinatar, Los Alcázares, Torre Pacheco and Fuente Álamo. As for the origin of visitors and tourists, there is a significant flow of people from Madrid and other countries such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, France and Germany.

Tomás Maestre's climate, beaches and port is one of visitors' preferred locations and what many miss most after returning to their places of origin. Additionally, nearby places with significant heritage and history, such as Cartagena, La Union, Murcia, Lorca and Caravaca de la Cruz, are also very attractive. Gastronomy is another element highlighted by those surveyed. The presence of natural spaces and heritage related to the sea stand out, although with lower scores in the interviews and surveys. On the other hand, La Manga is seen as less interesting for congresses, although hotels such as Galúa, Entremares and Casino (Lagomar) have facilities for these types of meetings. La Manga's image corresponds more to a dynamic space linked to sea sports. There is a lack of cultural offer related to museums and temporary exhibitions, although there are two open-air cinemas that operate in summer. The commercial spaces are scarce, due to the proximity of other localities.

3.2.2. Outstanding Places in La Manga to Show Visitors

A total of 45% of those surveyed had an outstanding preference for 'sun and beach', highlighting beaches such as Las Sirenas, Cala del Pino and/or Pedrucho as essential visits. They are proud of these places and the possibilities they offer from a recreational, leisure and sport activities point of view. Interviewees identify La Manga del Mar Menor as offering outstanding places to visit on its many kilometres of beach, both in inland waters and the open sea (Figures 11 and 12). It is also important to note that Cartagena and

Murcia are less than 60 min away and represent alternative locations that offer more varied tourist resources.

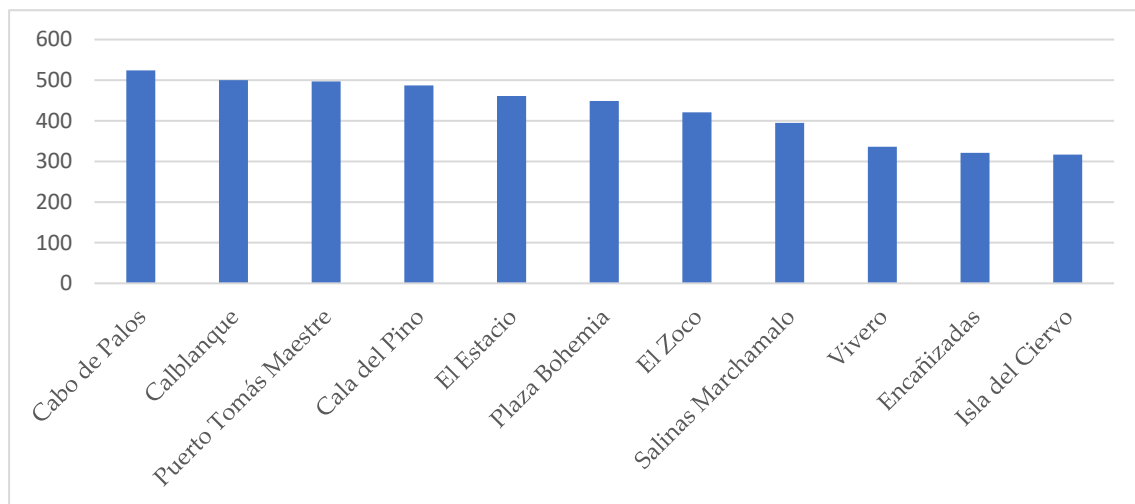


Figure 11. The 11 most preferred places to show visitors in La Manga. Source: [49].



Figure 12. Most highlighted places in La Manga: Cabo de Palos and Calblanque. Source: [50].

3.2.3. Use of Urban Space in La Manga

Most of La Manga is urbanised, with buildings and roads that almost fill the space. There are a number of buildings that rise to 25 floors, along with semi-detached and detached houses. Its irregular street layout adapts to the coastal contour, with coves and protrusions.

Territorial interventions have resulted in a halting of the degradation process in clogged spaces and improvements in the habitability of the facades, roofs and common elements of the dwellings. Electricity, telephone, water and sewage services have been modernized. However, social facilities are scarce, and the regeneration of public spaces is slow.

In this urban area, the results of the questionnaire indicate that visits to the beaches, followed by leisure, gastronomy and shopping, are considered to be the most important activities (Figure 13).

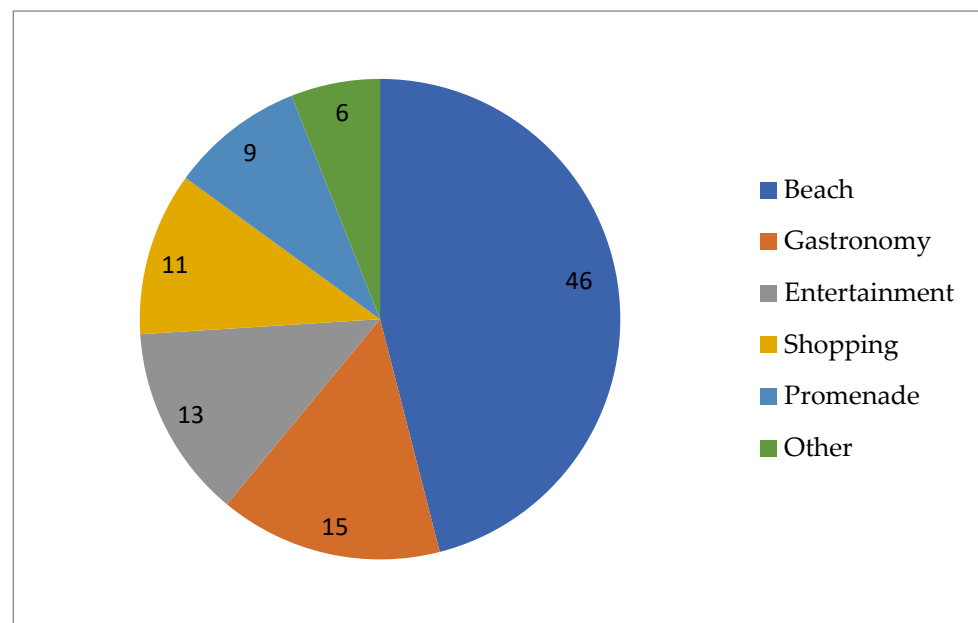


Figure 13. Degree of use of La Manga's urban space (in %). Source: [49].

3.2.4. Mobility and Means of Transport

The means of transport preferred by respondents are, in order of preference, the car, walking, motorcycles and electric scooters (Figure 14). In terms of public transport, buses are the main means of travel, given that the only alternative is taxis.

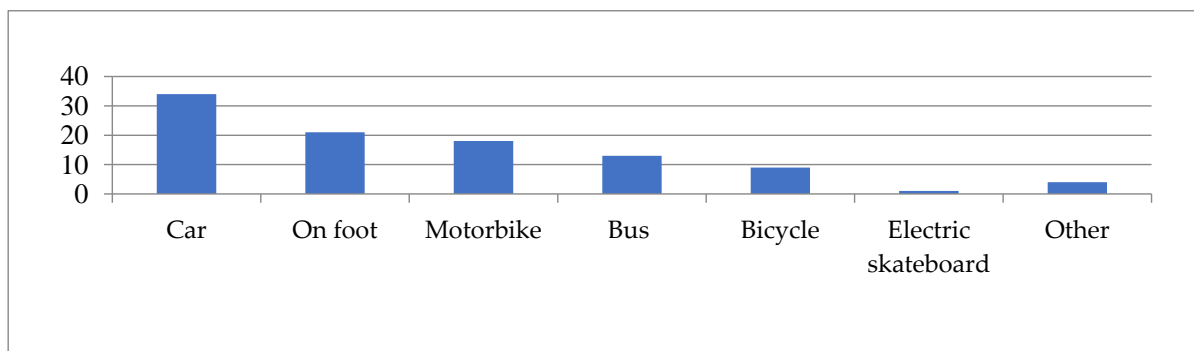


Figure 14. Preferences in transport use. Source: [49].

The use of bicycles comes next. Despite being an ecological and cheap means of transport, it has yet to be promoted, perhaps due to the scarcity of bicycle lanes. The absence of a public bicycle rental service in La Manga is significant. The section entitled "other means" reflects a small part of mobility, especially through Mar Menor, relating to small boats and jet skis.

In the surveys, only the bus station in Las Sirenas and the bus stop in El Pedrucho stand out as small transport nodes. Undoubtedly, La Manga is a space dependent on land transport systems; essentially private vehicles and buses. Mobility problems are accentuated during the summer season due to the high concentration of vehicles and the lack of capacity of the central node located in the central street or Gran Vía [55].

3.3. Emotional Feelings Towards the Place

Among citizens, a positive sense of union and identification with the space in which they live can be generated or, on the contrary, rejected. Tuan (2007) [16] systematised how neighbours express these feelings in relation to the place, defining them as topophilia or

sympathy; topolatry or reverential and mythical; topophobia or aversion, rejection and fear; and toponegligence or disinterest, when the place is not appreciated. In this line and in relation to tourist activity, in those areas where the load capacity of tourism has overwhelmed the life of local inhabitants with a high influx in certain areas or neighbourhoods, as has been the well-known case of Barcelona in recent years, we speak of tourismphobia [56]. These feelings are related to subjectivity and emotional relationships between the individual and the usual place of residence, which affects the behaviour of citizens and their sense of place [57].

In the case of La Manga, following Tuan [16], the places of topophilia include the Plaza Bohemia, the Zoco and Tomás Maestre port, all next to the Gran Vía. These locations constitute some of the most relevant spatial elements.

Secondly, the spaces with a more reverential sense (topolatry) are, firstly, the Cabo de Palos Lighthouse and the end of La Manga, both for their emblematic value as singular elements of the landscape and the entity of their space.

The least accepted correspond to densified places such as Monte Blanco, which contrasts with the necessary spatial remodelling to recover these areas of increasing degradation, where respondents show a feeling of topophobia and rejection.

The neighbourhoods that arouse indifference or disinterest in the population (toponegligence) are those least travelled, scarcely known and, generally, with a lack of common facilities (e.g., green areas, sports activities and cultural spaces) and with low-quality construction. Preference for living in them is limited, although some are gradually recovering, such as the estates located in the old Casino, Eurovosa and Castillos del Mar, as areas of tourist interest [58].

Material elements, such as the squares and roads along the promenade or the Gran Vía, are most highly valued (Table 5 and Figure 15), while immaterial elements, such as leisure, climate, gastronomy and shopping, stand out in terms of lifestyle and ‘understanding the place’. In fact, the climate is one of the main elements mentioned, an aspect that is more environmental than strictly urban.

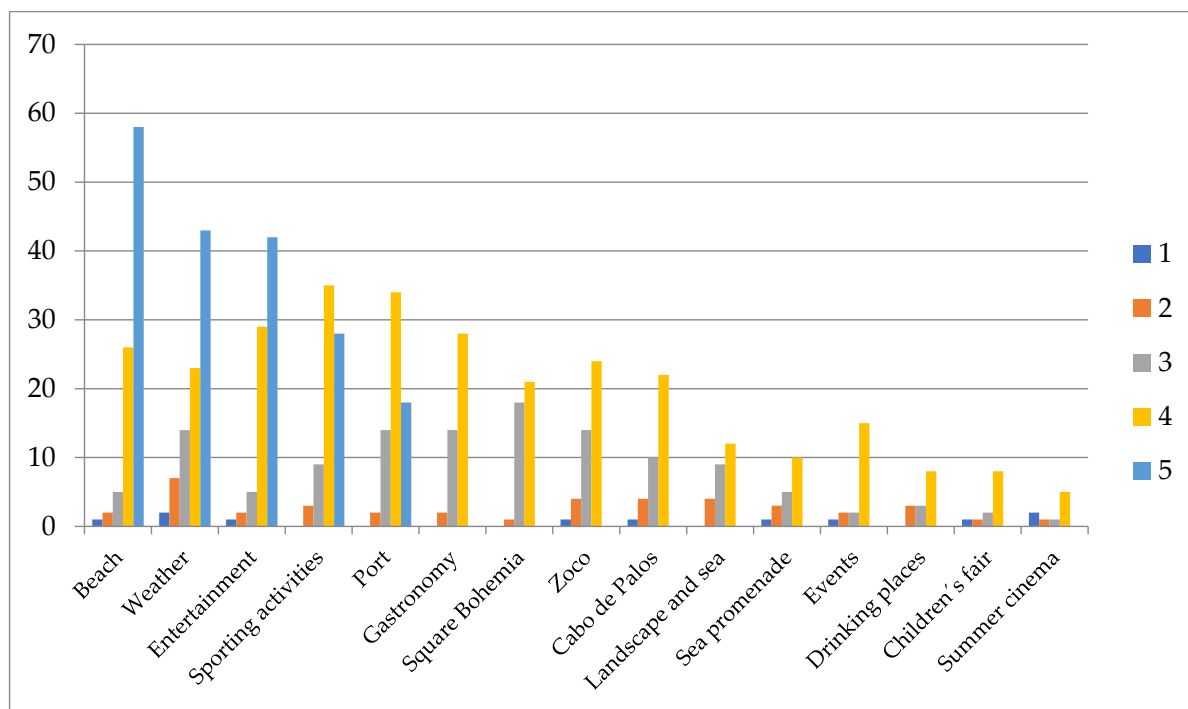


Figure 15. Valuation of places (from 1 to 5) and feelings of preference (in % of those interviewed) Source: [49].

Table 5. Evaluation of the preferred places and feelings of La Manga’s inhabitants. 1 (very low), 2 (low), 3 (medium), 4 (high) and 5 (very high).

Value	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Weighted Average
Beaches	1	2	5	26	58	92	18.4
Weather	2	7	14	23	43	89	17.8
Entertainment	1	2	5	29	42	79	15.8
Sporting activities	-	3	9	35	28	75	15.0
Port	-	2	14	34	18	68	13.6
Gastronomy	-	2	14	28	20	64	12.8
Plaza Bohemia	-	1	18	21	18	58	11.6
Zoco	1	4	14	24	11	54	10.8
Visita Cabo Palos	1	4	10	22	12	49	9.8
Landscape and sea		4	9	12	13	38	7.6
Sea promenade	1	3	5	10	12	31	6.2
Events	1	2	2	15	8	28	5.6
Drinking places	-	3	3	8	11	25	5.0
Children’s fair	1	1	2	8	7	19	3.8
Summer cinema	2	1	1	5	3	12	2.4

Source: [49].

The weighted average rating of the different elements was calculated by multiplying the number obtained for each by the total number of ratings, to obtain a ranking. The result has confirmed the great weight that the beaches, climate and general leisure have in the collective imagination of La Manga’s inhabitants.

3.4. SWOT and CAME Analysis

A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) helped us diagnose the territory under study. The combination of strengths and opportunities gives rise to potentialities, which indicate the most promising lines of action for the local and sustainable development of this area. At the same time, the interaction between weaknesses and threats highlights the risks and challenges in the short and medium term. The following is a summary of the most important elements of the internal analysis for the case of La Manga del Menor, as a result of the interviews and surveys (Table 6).

Table 6. Most significant strengths and weaknesses in La Manga del Mar Menor.

Weaknesses	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High urban densification - Tourist overcrowding in July and August - Bad odours in certain places - Internal mobility problems in the urban area - Lack of green spaces - High rental prices - Lack of cultural facilities - Insufficient hotel supply 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High-quality beaches - Very favourable climate - Consolidated tourist destination - Variety of landscapes - Quality gastronomy - Possibility of choosing between two seas - Very attractive seabed - Institutional support and promotion

Table 6. Cont.

Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of water - Rising prices - Environmental deterioration - New competitors in the international market - Competition from nearby areas - Generational change in some professions - Increase in the price of energy supplies - Land speculation - Lack of professionalism in the hotel and catering industry - Increased costs and environmental impacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in maritime sports tourism - Impact of new technologies on tourism quality - Promotion of training - Improving the quality of hotels and gastronomic offer - Next-generation European funds - Subsidies from public bodies - Opening of Murcia international airport - Prestige of La Manga area - Increase in international arrivals - Link to the Dos Mares consortium

Source: [59].

In terms of strengths and weaknesses, we could translate the above qualitative analysis into quantifiable data. Bearing in mind that the weaknesses might be counterbalanced by the strengths from a percentage perspective and based on the answers collected in the interviews, we have obtained the following data (Figure 16), which indicate that high densification and touristification are the leading weaknesses, reflected in the *overtourism* model [60–62], while the high quality of beaches and the good climate are the most important strengths.

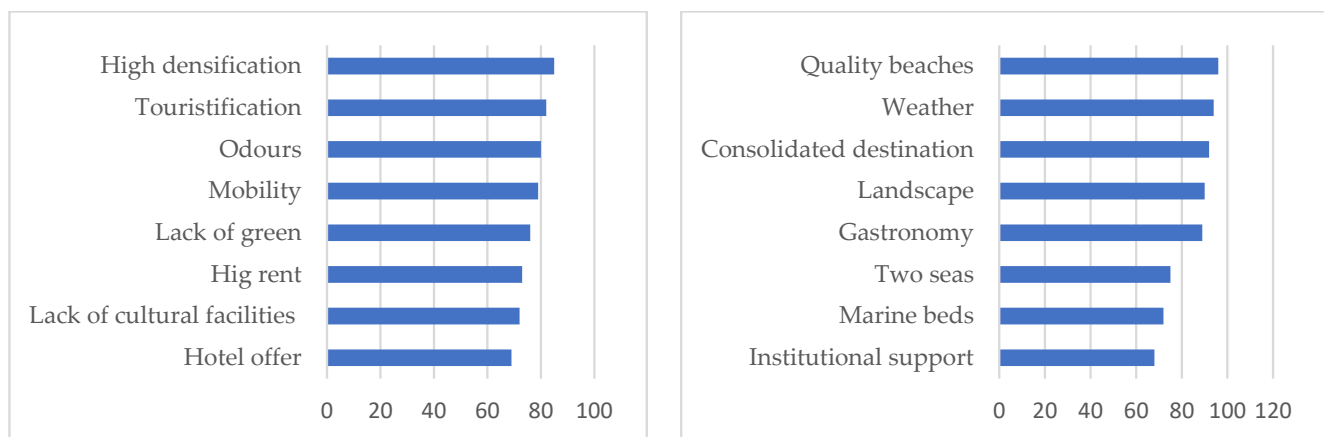


Figure 16. Percentage (%) in relation to weaknesses and strengths in La Manga del Mar Menor. Source: [59].

Data analysis raises hope if the relevant authorities can address the existing risks; in fact, the data suggest there are more opportunities than threats (Figure 17). Among the most indicated threats are water shortages and persistent price rises, while the key opportunities would include the emergence of sport tourism and the application of new technologies in the organisation of tourism.

The results from the interviews and their subsequent tabulation, as well as verification of the field work, led to the following CAME (Correct, Confront, Maintain and Exploit) analysis (Table 7). With a sample of 14 interviews, and a maximum score for each participant of 10, the maximum is 140 rating points.

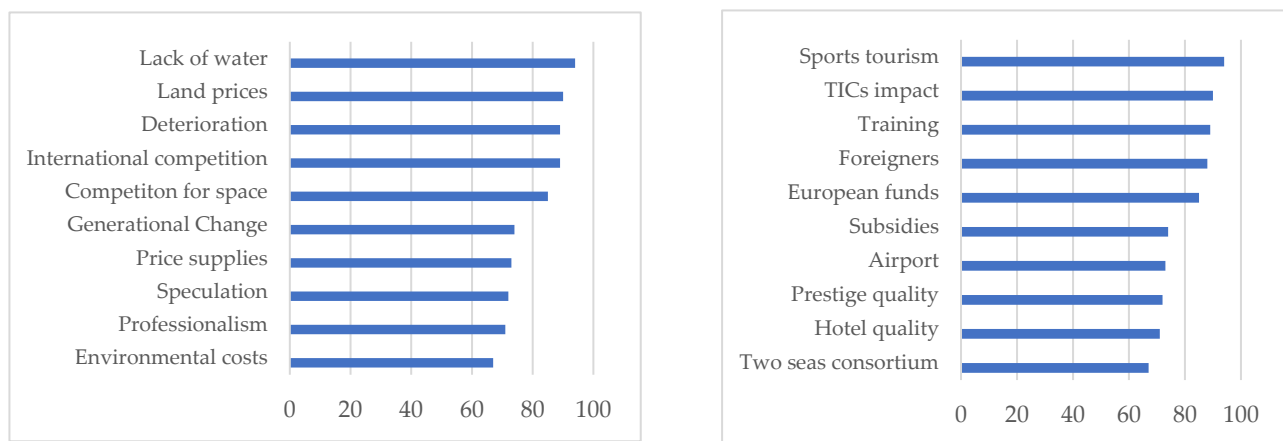


Figure 17. Percentage (%) in relation to threats and opportunities in La Manga del Mar Menor. Source: [59].

Table 7. CAME analysis.

Identification of Weaknesses to Address (DECO)	Score (Max 140)	Identification of Strengths to Enhance (FOPO)	Score (Max 140)
1. Little awareness of natural heritage	119	1. Good climate all year round	113
2. Little private initiative to conserve	103	2. Natural patrimony	109
3. Lack of public funding	93	3. Archaeological initiatives	107
4. Avoid seasonality	88	4. Defence platform	86
5. Lack of protection ordinance	75	5. Sensitive geographical environment	64
6. Improve professional training	71	6. Varied gastronomy	58
7. Be more competitive	64	7. Enjoying landscapes	42
Identification of threats to prepare for (AMPRE)		Identification of opportunities to take advantage of (OPAP)	
1. Advancing environmental deterioration	111	1. European Funds	117
2. Lack of effective legislation	105	2. Sports tourism	115
3. Harmful current agriculture	90	3. New PGMO	106
4. High land prices	81	4. Outdoor activities	90
5. Overexploitation of aquifers	65	5. Creation of tourist routes	62
6. Speculative investments	63	6. Educational awareness	53

Source: [45].

3.5. Loss of Natural Heritage and Cultural Landscape

Loss of goods and resources because of their degradation or disappearance constitutes an impoverishment of natural and cultural heritage. In the case of La Manga, this reality has grown in recent decades due to poor tourism planning, land speculation, insensitivity to nature and landscape, and the lack of water conservation [5].

In relation to natural heritage, we highlight the loss of extension of the original beaches cut by promenades, which delimit the residential developments. Also noteworthy is the disappearance of fossil dunes and the alteration of an ecosystem that has led to the extinction of native species, such as the fan palm and the loss of posidonia colonies [62].

Regarding the cultural heritage inherited prior to the arrival of tourism, we highlight the presence of a cistern in El Estacio and several nineteenth century salt mills that, despite

having a degree of protection, are abandoned in the area of Veneziola (Km. 17 and 18) and in a state of ruin (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Disappearance of fossil dunes in the Ensenada del Esparto and Veneziola in La Manga del Mar Menor, and abandonment of old salt mills. Source: [50].

3.6. Building and Occupation of Space

Urban growth over the last six decades has caused a series of changes in the landscape due to non-compliance with existing regulations at the time, or because of their non-existence. In any case, it has given rise to effects that are difficult to correct. As a result of the field work, some consequences and visible examples on the landscape are shown below (Table 8).

Table 8. Effects on buildability and urban planning infractions in La Manga.

Description of Impacts	Visible Consequences	Visible Example
Barrier effect	Appearance of the shadows of buildings on beaches in the early afternoon.	Las Sirenas (km. 2). Estates on Pudrimel beach (km. 17)
Lack of control of building volumes	Fifteen-storey buildings alternate with terraced houses, densifying the population and accumulating houses even in steep areas with significant slopes.	Monte Blanco estate and Torre Navarra (km. 3.5). Hotels: Galúa, Cavanna and Casino. (km. 4 y 8). Generalised over the whole space.

Table 8. *Cont.*

Description of Impacts	Visible Consequences	Visible Example
Aesthetic anarchy and unevenness of cornice level in buildings	Architectural styles, colours, and materials are mixed, creating an environment that resembles a slum, or villages typical of the 1960s.	Eurovosa estate (km. 6) Castillos de Mar (km. 5)
Social spaces of low construction quality	Small spaces, densified by street stalls and coffee and ice-cream shops that occupy most of the public road.	Plaza Bohemia (km. 3)
Land speculation	On the beachfront the estate ‘Beach’ was built between 2009–2010.	Veneciola (km. 17) next to Mar Menor and the Góndolas estates
Collapse in started macro-projects	It was intended to build a marina (950 moorings) to provide an alternative for the overwhelmed port of Tomás Maestre. The problem was that, on public domain land, a series of private developments was also planned.	Puerto Mayor on Estacio beach (km. 11–12)
Alteration in the dimension of the street layout	Initially planned streets of eight metres in width were reduced to half their original width. In this way, developments gained four metres in width.	Existing Street between Puntamanga and Beach Veneciola (km. 17)
Construction of seafront promenade with the beach disappearing	The estate was so close to the sea that an attempt was made to gain ground by building a beach, which after a few years disappeared due to ‘the push’ of the sea.	Aldeas de Taray (km. 17)
Abandonment of the scarce ethnographic heritage	The existing salt and wind mills are abandoned and in an advanced state of ruin.	Veneziola estate and golf II (km. 17–18)

Source: [63].

Several housing developments have led to the disappearance of dunes and a clear retreat of the beaches. In some cases, construction has taken place less than five metres from the water, making it difficult for bathers to reach these stretches of beach. Water sanitation also continues to be an important issue [64,65]. Likewise, the supply of drinking water is not free of occasional problems.

Despite the negative effects of this high load, construction continues with great intensity, making use of urban planning that is still in force and which aspires to a practical constructive overcrowding. Thus, in 2024, work began on another 12 new large-scale constructions on plots of up to 10,000 m², at a short distance from the seashore (less than 50 m) and higher than previous constructions (seven floors, as opposed to the previous five) (Figure 19).

As noted, La Manga del Menor has a high level of housing density. The following figures reflect this reality in terms of total number and percentage of consolidated residential developments, highlighting a greater intensity in the first four kilometres corresponding to the municipality of Cartagena with 49.3%, compared to the rest of La Manga (km. 5 to 22), with an occupation of 51.7% (Figures 20 and 21).

As for the space dedicated to commercial areas or places of commercial concentration (supermarkets, bars, restaurants, nightlife, etc.) (Table 9), there is a clear imbalance in the first four kilometres from Cabo de Palos to the Zoco. Specifically, 12 commercial spaces are located here, which represents 63% of the total in La Manga. On the other hand, from km 5 to the end of La Manga, which is in the municipality of San Javier, only seven commercial spaces (37%) can be found, which shows a clear preference for installations in the first kilometres of access to La Manga, within the municipality of Cartagena. This is understandable given that this area was the first to be urbanised and also had the greatest spatial amplitude (Figure 22).

Mobility problems are frequent in urban bus parking, the lack of bicycle lanes and/or restricted public spaces, which sometimes make it impossible to access beaches (Figure 22). The survey results highlight this structural disorder and the consequences of lack of parking, insecurity for pedestrians and light vehicles.



Figure 19. New constructions in El Oasis (km 14) and Veneziola (km 16–17) in La Manga del Mar Menor. Source: [50].

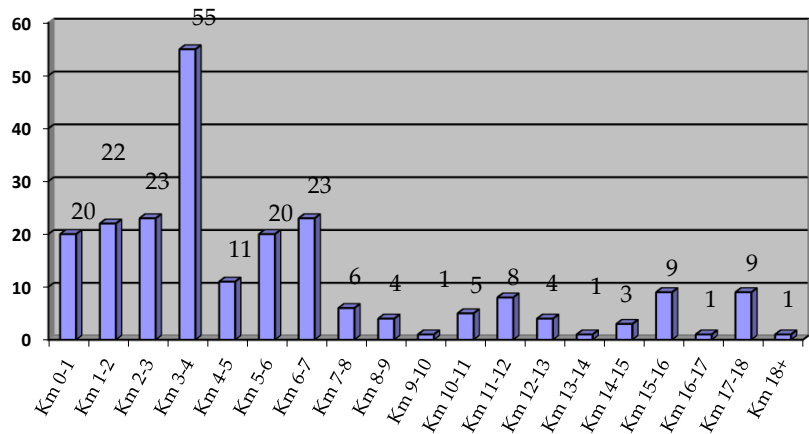


Figure 20. Total number of residential developments in La Manga according to kilometre interval. Source: [63].

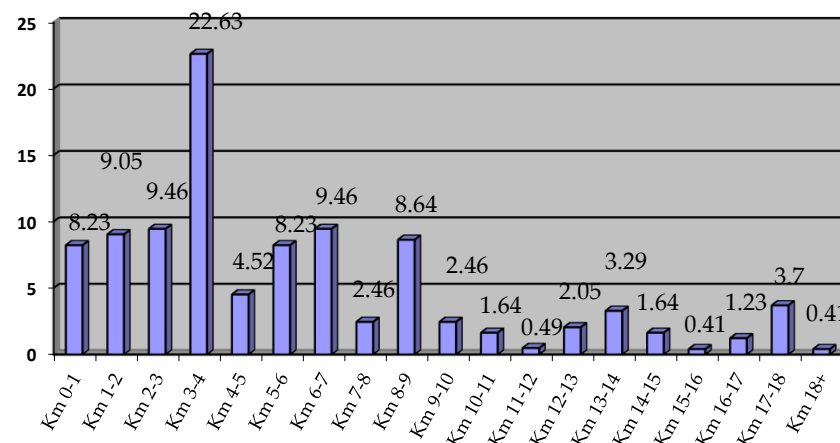


Figure 21. Percentage (%) of occupancy of the total build in La Manga according to kilometre range. Source: [63].

Table 9. Location of commercial spaces in La Manga.

Kilometre Point	N° Commercial Spaces	Name of Commercial Space
km 0–1	3	La Baliza, Entremares and Mangamar
km 1–2	1	Sirenas
km 2–3	2	El Faro and El Jardín
km 3–4	3	Plaza Bohemia, Mangagas and Flamenco
km 4–5	3	Alcazaba Zoco, Cabila and Zoco Levante
km 5–6	1	Castillos del Mar
km. 6–7	0	
km 7–8	1	Casino
km 8–9	0	Sunset Area
km 9–10	0	
km 10–11	0	
km 11–12	0	
km 12–13	2	Dársena 0, Hipercor
km. 13–14	1	Tomás Maestre port
km 14–15	1	El Oasis
km 16–17	1	Veneziola/Las Góndolas
km 17–18	0	
km 18+	0	

Source: [63].



Figure 22. Traffic problems in La Manga del Mar Menor. Source: [50].

4. Discussion

La Manga del Mar Menor has been affected by intense urban development resulting from tourism. It is a good example of inefficient spatial organisation where land speculation and lack of urban planning have had repercussions on a series of different types of spatial organisation [64,65].

Among the most relevant consequences are the serious mobility and traffic problems during the summer months. This is the result of a high building capacity that far exceeds the initial load capacity of the urban development project, with the frequent occurrence of urban planning infringements. This has resulted in a poorly ordered territory, in need of urgent action, such as the drafting, approval and implementation of a new joint urban development plan that can, among other objectives, halt or slow down environmental deterioration [66] y patrimonial [67].

There was some hope for a fresh urban planning and development policy in La Manga del Mar Menor with the so-called “Strategy for sustainable and integrated urban development in La Manga del Mar Menor (2020)”, proposed by the Ministry of Development and Infrastructures of the Region of Murcia [68]. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic paralysed its implementation, although there have been some urban improvements, for example, a greater number of bike lanes or collective facilities.

From the end of 2023 onwards, new building permits were approved, giving rise to another trend of speculation and expansion of an already saturated residential park with serious difficulties for the planning of collective services, road traffic, parking or water provision and supply.

Summer turns La Manga into a major tourist destination, with the number of registered inhabitants increasing from 6000 to over 300,000 [38]. Therefore, land-use planning, the creation of collective spaces, and the protection of beaches and areas of ecological interest are necessary [69] to address the impact of this enormous influx of visitors, who demand all types of services.

To improve this urban scenario, it is necessary to comply with the phases that comprise ordered territorial planning and development. Firstly, a regulatory phase is required that defines the objectives and instruments with total transparency, placing special emphasis on compliance with the ‘rules of higher rank’ and in the realisation of a coherent and complementary planning between the PGMO of the municipalities of Cartagena and San Javier, with an urban policy that encourages the recovery process and curbs speculation by developers and private owners. Secondly, urban planning is vital to better use collective spaces. La Manga combines a linear city with high building density, when it should move towards lower density and incorporate other models of garden-city and cohesive poly-cores [64,70].

The area is currently highly denatured by a historical invasive urban development resulting from tourism, which has forever altered the natural environment and its initial characteristics. This accelerated process, generated over the last half century, complicates any recovery, although it is not irreversible if the proposed opportunities are considered.

From the perspective of the geography of perception, the analysis of interviews and questionnaires corroborates the idea of launching initiatives to contribute to a comprehensive improvement. Differences in spatial perception behaviour related to the age of the participants and where they come from can be observed, with older people focusing their criticism on the lack of health and cultural facilities, as well as on the aesthetics of the buildings, while younger people allude to the problems of mobility and the lack of public sports facilities. In short, there is a clear need for a substantial improvement of the space in terms of functionality and high densification. Thus, both the application of the SWOT and CAME analysis point to the need to improve urban planning, halt densification and create more collective spaces that have a positive impact on environmental quality and the natural environment. If this were carried out, economic activities and the need for environmental care highlighted by various authors [64,71–74] and ratified by the results of our field work (through interviews, surveys and visual tours) could be made compatible.

In sum, it would be advisable to have a new urban plan for the whole area, with collaboration between the two competent municipalities, which would involve progress in environmental, heritage and landscape issues. Priority objectives would include improving citizens’ quality of life, the strengthening of year-round senior tourism, containing environmental degradation and planning for the location’s comprehensive recovery. Some of these proposed initiatives are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Ideas–impetus for the integral recovery of La Manga del Mar Menor.

-
- Continue with the rehabilitation of buildings for residential, cultural, commercial and sports activities.
 - Combine public and private initiatives for the provision of services and the improvement of habitability.
 - Maintain a population that resides all year round. This population would have an impact on the maintenance and improvement of more services, such as health centres and spaces for elderly care.
 - Promote initiatives for effective citizen participation.
 - Monitor compliance with urban planning regulations.
-

Source: [45].

5. Conclusions

La Manga del Mar Menor is the leading tourist destination in the Region of Murcia, and has a huge impact on its economy and employment. It also provides an image of an Autonomous Community that promotes tourism as a thriving economic sector.

The climatic and environmental conditions of La Manga del Mar Menor explain the birth and development of this tourist destination, as they are very advantageous throughout the year, and offer great potential not only for sun and beach tourism, but also for water sports and/or cultural tourism.

From the tourist promotion perspective, it is necessary to present La Manga as a place of rest and active leisure, such that its seasonal pattern is tempered by a holiday offer throughout the year. This would contribute to the stability of businesses, such as hotels and accommodation, that would affect not only La Manga but also the whole region of Campo de Cartagena, other areas in the Region of Murcia and the nearby province of Alicante.

Despite the extraordinary urban growth, it is still possible to implement actions to help and ensure a better future in this unique area. From the urban planning perspective, a policy is needed to curb land speculation and offer new opportunities to owners, so that their plots can be transformed to provide facilities or better residential areas with less buildable land. In this sense, improving existing buildings' aesthetics is also important to offer a renewed view of the city.

La Manga del Mar Menor sustainability also requires urban environmental improvements. By employing the geography of perception, we have seen that the most pressing needs are those related to building conservation, potential new systems for collecting solid organic waste, street furniture maintenance, road cleaning, universal accessibility, the creation of more green areas and reduced noise pollution. At the same time, there is a lack of awareness of the need to protect natural heritage and few private sector initiatives to create spaces that are better adapted to the environment. The results also show the need for political action in the creation and enforcement of regulations, as well as greater public awareness so that the location can recover its natural and cultural heritage. In general, these are circumstances and problems that exist in other Mediterranean urban tourist centres and that, undoubtedly, can be corrected with political will, effective work and, above all, structured urban planning.

Author Contributions: All the authors contributed equally to the present paper. For its proper development, each phase has been discussed and worked by the authors. Writing—review & editing, all authors. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Teaching Innovation Project 2023–2024: Geography of perception and behaviour, an innovative methodology for the significant learning of university students, approved on 21 November 2023 by the Governing Council of the UNED, after hearing the Evaluation Committee of the Teaching Innovation Projects presented in the Ordinary Annual Call for new Teaching Innovation Projects 2023–2024 (Annex II. BICI n° 28, of 03/05/2023), and promoted by the Teaching Innovation Group N°: GID2017-10 Acronym: MapsOnline Name: Learning using online maps, recognised by agreement of the Governing Council of 27 June 2017 (BICI n° 36 of 3 July 2017). PI Dr. Francisco José Morales Yago. Department of Geography of the UNED.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: The translation has been supported by the Centro de Patrimonio Histórico, Cultural y Natural of the University of Huelva and the National University of Distance Education of Spain.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix A. Questionnaire on the Geography of Perception and Behaviour—La Manga del Mar Menor

This questionnaire was carried out by means of an interview with semi-structured questions and other questions of an evaluative nature on a Likert-type scale of 1–5. It is organised into several sections. The first is dedicated to personal data. A second block, from questions 2 to 7, assesses the main elements of the geography of perception and the degree of attraction or rejection of this space. The third block (question 8) is devoted to the mobility of people. The fourth block (questions 9–10) seeks to identify spatial preference. Finally, by way of closure and reflection, the interviewee is asked to make a contribution (question 11) that is not reflected in the previous blocks but which might help gain a better understanding of the participants' perception.

QUESTIONNAIRE:

1. Personal details: Age, sex, level of education, profession, place of birth, current place of residence and years of residence.
2. Indicate at least 5 landmarks, paths, nodes and edges of La Manga.
3. Degree of attraction of La Manga del Mar Menor for tourist activity.
4. When you leave La Manga, what feelings are you left with?
5. What things would you show to a newcomer who does not know this area?
6. What advantages do you see in this area?
7. What disadvantages are there?
8. Which means of transport do you use to get around La Manga?
9. Indicate your preference for this place compared to other coastal leisure areas.
10. How would you order the different areas that make up La Manga?
11. Add any further comments relating to the image of this area and its perception that are not included in the above.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COLLABORATION!

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