

# High season

Despite the growing number of people who take language programmes outside of the peak season, the summer months in Europe in particular remain highly popular for language travel, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Travel and tourism, including language travel, will always be a business that has its busy times. Tourists typically flock to warmer climates or to locations that offer certain seasonal activities such as water or snow sports. In the language travel industry, which is largely reliant on school pupils and university students, the peak business periods are also dictated by vacation periods. And, despite the growing appeal of language travel to those less restricted by these factors, demand for courses during peak times remains strong.

Summer school operator Lines, for example, which runs junior programmes in July and August in the UK and France, has increased its sales by around 15 per cent over the last four years and has been fully booked for the last two years with an average of 250 students per week, says Director, Dirk van Nieuwenborgh.

## Seasonal patterns

The European language teaching market, which is largely dominated by teenage students who travel in the summer, experiences large peaks in enrolment from June to September. In the UK, Andrew Hjort at Melton College in York reports that they receive most of their students in July. This

*"Why put on specialist programmes when we need all the space we have for the basic course?"*

month alone accounts for 20 per cent of their annual enrolment and this figure has been increasing in recent years.

Despite its mild year-round climate, Malta's popularity as a summer vacation

destination has resulted in its language teaching industry being highly seasonal. Although recent years have seen an increase of non-European nationalities travelling to Europe and a targeting by schools of population sectors more likely to travel off-peak, the market remains summer-centred. John Dimech of the Institute of English Language Studies (IELS) in Sliema, Malta, reports that July and August account for 38 per cent of their annual enrolments and 32 per cent of total student weeks.

But not all markets are like those in Europe. Australia and New Zealand experience less marked seasonal highs and lows. Generally speaking, the main student nationalities in these countries herald from Asia, which provides long-term students year round, while they also attract Europeans seeking sunshine during Europe's winter months as well as those travelling during a long summer vacation. In Australia in particular, many locations enjoy favourable weather throughout the year, making seasonality less of a problem. All these factors iron out annual enrolment patterns, according to Peter Chapple at Southern English Schools in Christchurch, New Zealand. "We really don't have a peak season here," he explains, "we have 'ripples' [in enrolment levels] rather than 'waves' and the ripples can come at any time."

Peak periods can also be determined by a school's range of courses. Ecole Suisse International in Paris, France experiences slightly different peaks as its core student body is interested in vocational training. The school therefore has two highs for student registrations: one in April/May and one in September/October, when students enrol on four-week intensive exam preparation programmes. Similarly, Abbey College, an international boarding school that also runs summer programmes in Malvern Wells in the UK, enjoys two peaks in enrolment: one in July for its summer school



## The issue of quality

"I think any student who attends a language course in mid-summer does not get such a good deal as those who come outside [the] peak season, no matter what school they attend," asserts Brian Brownlee at Anglo European School of English in

the UK. "We do all we can to ensure that our summer students get as good a deal as possible but it is unrealistic to compare this with the low season."

Schools can experience many challenges during the peak business times that can affect the

quality of the language travel experience. These include a shortage of permanent, experienced teachers, larger class sizes and a lack of good host family accommodation close to the school.

John Dimech at the Institute of English Language

Studies (IELS) in Sliema, Malta, candidly recounts an experience at their school. "In the mid-90s we had a very high peak in the summer, running two big summer schools for teenagers besides our main one for adults. This meant that we were over-stretching our-

selves to the extent that we ran into quality problems," he says. "Since then we have managed to increase our business in the off-peak [months] and there is no more pressure to increase our volume in the peak months and this gives us the advantage that we

and one in September for the academic year, according to Philip Moere, Principal of the college.

### Peak student profile

The general characteristics of the peak student market remain unchanged, with mostly European students enrolling on relatively short courses of up to four weeks. Anglo European School of English in Bournemouth, UK, is typical of many schools with its nationality mix during peak times. Brian Brownlee at the school reports, "The main nationalities we get in the summer are European – West and East – with Spain being number one. Out of the summer, we have a higher percentage of Asians, particularly Koreans."

At IELTS in Malta, typical nationalities include German, Italian, Swiss, Austrian, Spanish and Russian, while during the rest of the year Japanese, Poles, Chinese, Koreans and Turkish also arrive at the school. Dimech explains why. "In some countries, Malta is mainly popular in the summer months and there are no direct flights other than during the summer months. On the other hand, some nationalities prefer to come to Malta in the winter when the climate is still mild and flights are available via a number of European hubs."

The average age of students during the peak months is also usually lower than at

other times of the year with Hjort reporting an average age of 16 during July compared with 22 for the rest of the year. According to some sources, there is also demand from even younger learners for language courses during the high season. As a result, Lines has launched a new intensive programme for students from the age of seven, which, according to Van Nieuwenborgh, has been "extremely successful".

### Full capacity

Although demand for summer programmes in Europe continues to grow, many schools are unable to increase their intake as they are running at full capacity during the peak months. At Anglo European, the months from June to September account for around 35 per cent of their annual intake, and Brownlee explains, "We are more or less jam packed at that time of year – there literally is not much room for growth."

Because of this, product innovation during the busy months remains low, with general intensive courses with activities being favoured by most peak season students. As Brownlee says, "The peak period is not a time for innovation. The basic 20 lessons [of] 15 hours of general English reigns supreme at this time. Why put on



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are never short of supply of the various resources, and can ensure these would be of a good quality."

Another problem during the peak months is that students, who are often on a tight budget, are looking for economy options, making schools

work hard to deliver quality at low prices. In addition, Brownlee says, many agents try to negotiate price discounts during the peak season to pass on to their clients. "The last thing we would do is offer 'peak season' discounts or offers. We can fill the school at

regular prices at that time so there is not sense in cutting prices," he attests.

Sylvie Wormser at Ecole Suisse International in Paris, France, believes the trend towards low prices is increasing. "We have noticed that students [of] all nationalities are

more demanding as far as the price is concerned," she says. However, Andrew Hjort at Melton College in York in the UK argues that students have become less price conscious in recent years. This finding is backed up by Dirk van Nieuwenborgh at Belgium-

based Lines, which runs summer schools in France and the UK. "Parents and students expect very high standards in our welfare and academic department. Price is not the major issue; service, security, staff and quality are," he says.

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Dimech also believes that there may not be demand for anything more fancy during this period. "There has always been the need to offer different products from the other schools and to be creative; however, it is not always so easy to determine in advance [how] new ideas will be perceived by agents and students. Also one can be very creative but unless new ideas [bring an] increase of business, it would be pointless to offer new programmes that are not likely to sell."

One way in which many schools seek to expand business during the busy period is by launching additional seasonal centres. Anglo European launched a junior residential programme last year, which, according to Brownlee, "sold like hot cakes". IELTS in Malta has also opened additional summer schools during its peak business months. "The main [school] is in Sliema which operates all the year round. We also have two summer schools: a small one for adults in Gozo [which operates from] May to October, and another one for teenage students that is open in July and August," explains Dimech.

But most providers intent on growing their business seek to spread their appeal to other months of the year. Ecole Suisse

International, for example, which is not as busy during the summer months, has launched two new summer programmes to plug this gap. Sylvie Wormser at the school reports, "In order to even out the seasonal peaks we have created two new programmes [to be] launched in summer 2006: a teacher training programme for three weeks which is going to take place in Paris and Dijon; and a complete beginner course launched in July."

Another common method of expanding the peak season is through attracting a wider range of nationalities. This strategy has also been adopted by Ecole Suisse International, which has expanded its marketing activities to a "selection of countries in South America and Northern Europe, from which the students are more likely to enrol during the low season", says Wormser. ●