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Headline: Europe's sweltering summer a turnoff for tourists

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People walk on Fori Imperiali during a heat wave across Italy as temperatures are expected to rise further in the coming days, in Rome, Italy July 17, 2023. (REUTERS FILE PHOTO)

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LONDON/ROME — Soaring summer temperatures across southern Europe could prompt a lasting shift in tourist habits, with more travelers choosing cooler destinations or taking their holidays in spring or autumn to dodge the extreme heat, tourism bodies, and experts predict.

European Travel Commission (ETC) data show the number of people hoping to travel to the Mediterranean region in June to November has already fallen 10 percent compared to last year when scorching weather led to droughts and wildfires.

Destinations like the Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, and Bulgaria have meanwhile seen a spike in interest.

"We anticipate that unpredictable weather conditions in the future will have a greater impact on travelers' choices in Europe," said Miguel Sanz, the head of ETC.

A report by the trade body also shows 7.6 percent of travelers now see extreme weather events as a major concern for trips between June and November.

Among them are Anita Elshoy and her husband, who returned home to Norway from their favorite vacation spot of Vasanello, a village north of Rome, a week earlier than planned this month as temperatures reached around 35 degrees Celsius.

"[I] got a lot of pain in the head, legs and [my] fingers swelled up and I became more and more dizzy," Elshoy said of her heat-related symptoms. "We were supposed to be there for two weeks, but we couldn't (stay) because of the heat."

The demand for travel has soared again this summer as tourists leave behind years of pandemic restrictions, and travel companies say the heat hasn't caused many cancellations — yet.

Britons, in particular, have booked fewer holidays at home and more in the Mediterranean, often many months in advance, as they continue to crave post lockdown beach escapes, said Sean Tipton of British travel agent group ABTA.

But that balance could shift as heat waves are set to become more grueling. Scientists have long warned that climate change, caused by CO2 emissions from burning fossil fuels, will make weather events more frequent, severe, and deadly.

Meteorologists predict that temperatures in the coming week may surpass Europe's current record of 48.8 C (119.84 Fahrenheit), set in Sicily in August 2021, raising fears of a repetition of last year's heat deaths.

Stories of tourists being airlifted off Italian beaches or ferried away in ambulances from Athens' Acropolis have flooded European media in recent weeks.

"Our recent research indicates a decline in the number of people interested in traveling in August, the peak month, while more Europeans are considering autumn trips," Sanz said.

Tourists in Rome told Reuters they would think twice about booking a trip there again in July as they struggled to drink enough water, stay cool and find air-conditioned spots to rest.

"I would come when it's colder. Only June, April," said Daphna Niebuhr, an American tourist on holiday with her husband in Rome this week, who said the heat was making her visit "miserable."

That's bad news for Italy's economy, which thrives on busy summer traffic.

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Italy's Environment Ministry warned in a report this year that foreign tourists would in the future travel more in the spring and autumn and choose cooler destinations.