

Living on a Diet: A Brief Study of the Daily Allowances of Public Workers in Spain

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Abstract

Academic researchers in Spain are entitled to financial compensation to cover accommodation and meals when attending conferences. The amount of this compensation, known as *per diem* or daily allowance, varies with the destination country and is defined in an official table set by the government in 2002. This study examines the adequacy of these allowances by comparing them to current accommodation and meal costs, defining a score to find countries where researchers can attend conferences without incurring financial loss. Our results show that only 55 countries offer neutral or positive results, highlighting the need to update the official table to suit current cost of living conditions.

1 Introduction

When traveling outside their workplace, Spanish public workers (from Ph.D. students to civil servants) are entitled to receiving a monetary compensation for their travel expenses. This compensation is known as *per diem* or daily allowance and covers both accommodation and meals. The daily allowance amounts are officially defined in a royal decree published back in 2002 [1] and change depending on the country of destination, presumably to account for differences in the cost of living. Despite remaining unchanged for more than two decades, no previous research has studied the fairness of the *per diems* mandated by the Spanish government, neither their adequacy compared to current day prices. Looking at these amounts is of particular interest to academic researchers, who are known to work under precarious conditions and have to decide which foreign conferences to attend in order to avoid losing money.

In this paper we try to answer a simple yet so far ignored question: what are the best and worst countries to attend a conference as a researcher in Spain from a monetary point of view? To do so, we define a score per country based on its daily allowance and average price of accommodations and meals. Our findings show that only 55 out of 95 countries are neutral or net positive for researchers, who have to pay out of pocket for the remaining destinations. We also find that the official daily allowance table has miscalculated total amounts for 25 countries, which have remained unchanged for the past 20+ years.

Artifacts. For reproducibility and to encourage new research on this topic, we provide the whole dataset and results as Apache Parquet and CSV files at <https://zenodo.org/uploads/13923674>.

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2 Methodology

For this research, we build a thorough dataset comprising the following sources:

Daily Allowance Table. We use the Spanish government’s official *per diem* table published in Annex III of the Royal Decree 462/2002 [1]. This table shows the maximum amount in euros that a Spanish public worker is allowed to spend per day on accommodation (lodging) and food (meals), which varies depending on the country of destination. Other expenses, such as transportation, are not subject to this table. This amount also varies with the body and scale of the public worker. All personnel are classified in 3 groups according to Annex I of the same document. We focus on prices from the 2nd group since close to all academic staff fall into it. To give some context, the 1st group is for senior officials such as the Prime Minister of Spain and university rectors, and the 3rd group consist of employees without a bachelor’s degree.

Accommodation Prices. Due to the complexity of the hospitality sector, we could not find a current or public dataset that met our needs. As a compromise, we crawl the popular lodging reservation website Booking.com to get aggregated data on room rates per night [2]. We search for hotels and guesthouses in the capital of each of the countries listed in the previous daily allowance table, filtering out all locations more than 5 km away from the city center. We acknowledge that not all academic events take place in a nation’s capital city. However, this serves as a nice compromise to keep the methodology simple for this brief preliminary study. We pick the same travel dates for all searches to consistently compare rates across cities.¹

Average Meal Prices. We use Numbeo’s to get the current average meal price in euros at an inexpensive restaurant per country [4]. Numbeo is the largest crowd-sourced, publicly available database of consumer prices, having been cited by several newspapers in the likes of The New York Times, the BBC and The Guardian [3].

2.1 Score Calculation

To assess the suitability of a country with regard to traveling to an event as a Spanish public worker, we define a metric called *Profit or Plummet Score* (PPS). The PPS is the daily amount of money in euros that a researcher gets to keep when returning from their trip (profit) or has to pay out of pocket to cover their expenses (plummet). This score is comprised of two parts:

$$PPS = PPS_{\text{lodging}} + PPS_{\text{meals}} \quad (1)$$

¹We chose Monday, March 10 through Friday, March 14, 2025 because they are far enough away from October 2024 when we did the searches, they span a work week, and they do not overlap with a major holiday.

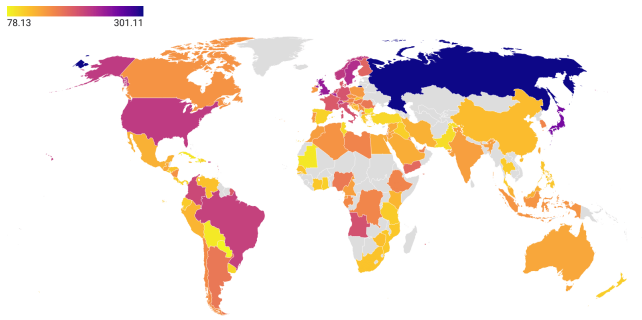


Figure 1: Map of daily allowances for Spanish public workers.

The lodging part is calculated as the difference between the maximum daily lodging allowance and the actual average room price. This amount is zero when the accommodation is cheaper than the allowance, and otherwise negative if the researcher has to bear the extra cost:

$$PPS_{\text{lodging}} = \min(\text{MaxLodging} - \text{AvgLodging}, 0) \quad (2)$$

Public workers always receive the full amount of the meals allowance and may keep any unspent funds. For simplicity, we assume that researchers eat two meals a day disregarding breakfast, which is usually provided by the venue. Therefore, the meals part is calculated as follows:

$$PPS_{\text{meals}} = \text{MaxMeals} - 2 \cdot \text{AvgMeals} \quad (3)$$

3 Dataset Overview

Figure 1 shows a worldwide map of the daily allowances adjured to Spanish public workers. In total, the official table lists 98 countries including Spain, plus an additional entry for diets that applies to the rest of the world. The average total diet is 142€, with Malta and Paraguay having the lowest amount at 78€, and Russia having the highest at 301€, followed by Japan at 256€. Spain sits slightly above the average at 103€ per day.

Given this table was elaborated in 2002 and has not been updated since, it still lists the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which broke up into Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. To account for this when dealing with current world borders, we use Yugoslavia’s *per diems* for the former countries, and the unlisted North Macedonia and Slovenia. Also of interest is that the official total daily amount is miscalculated for 25 countries because the lodging and meals amounts do not add up to it, differing by exactly one cent. We suspect that this is due to a rounding error in the spreadsheet used by the Spanish government to produce the table, although we have no official confirmation.

Excluded Countries. While Numbeo has meal prices for all countries listed in the daily allowance table, Booking.com does not have data for Cuba, Iran, Libya, Russia, Syria and Yemen. Thus, we exclude the former countries from our analysis.

Table 1: Most and least suitable countries to go to an event as a Spanish public worker. All amounts in euros (€) per day.

#	Country	Lodging	Meals	Score
1	Japan	-2.75	84.50	81.75
2	Colombia	0.00	69.47	69.47
3	Brazil	0.00	69.31	69.31
4	Norway	0.00	44.66	44.66
5	Nicaragua	-2.74	45.57	42.83
6	Nigeria	0.00	42.70	42.70
7	Ivory Coast	0.00	42.42	42.42
8	Belgium	-6.49	46.94	40.45
9	Sweden	-12.54	52.29	39.75
10	Cameroon	0.00	39.54	39.54
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
86	Australia	-81.91	20.03	-61.88
87	Andorra	-75.13	10.86	-64.27
88	Israel	-90.93	20.70	-70.23
89	South Africa	-108.11	32.38	-75.73
90	New Zealand	-100.37	12.23	-88.14
91	Ireland	-100.33	12.08	-88.25
92	Spain	-106.81	11.40	-95.41
93	Malta	-103.06	1.85	-101.21
94	Jamaica	-166.43	32.42	-134.01
95	United States of America	-222.95	33.30	-189.65

4 Results

Table 1 shows the top countries with the highest and lowest PPS values (see Section 2.1). That is, the most and least suitable countries for Spanish public workers to attend a research conference or similar event in 2025 based on their daily allowance.

The best country for attending a conference is Japan, with a monetary gain of almost 82€ per day, followed by Colombia and Brazil. At the other end of the scale, the US is the worst performer, with a daily loss for the researcher of 190€. Interestingly, Spain is the 4th worst country to travel as a Spanish public worker, having a loss of 95€ per day. To put these numbers into perspective, researchers attending a 5-day event save 405€ when traveling to Japan, and lose 477€ and 948€ when traveling to Spain and the US, respectively. Looking at the PPS distribution, merely 55 countries (57%) have a neutral or positive value, meaning that visiting any of the remaining countries incurs in a loss for the public worker.

The PPS_{meals} is always positive, thus we consider the meals allowance to be adequate for all countries in the table. However, its lodging counterpart is negative for 68% of countries and has an average value of -33€. As such, we conclude the accommodation *per diems* are not suitable for current market prices.

5 Discussion

Daily allowances for academic staff working in Spain are not commensurate with current prices, either nationally (for domestic venues) or globally. As shown in Section 4, this is particularly pronounced in the case of allowable accommodation costs. We argue that the main reason for the inadequacy of the official *per diem*

table is that it has not been updated for more than two decades. Therefore, it does not take account of inflation and other price index changes since then. We believe that these rates need to be updated to reflect current prices. Since the biggest difference is in lodging, we suggest using the accommodation prices from our dataset as a reference or starting point for setting new allowances, or obtaining more up-to-date values based on our methodology.

6 Conclusion

This paper presents the first study on the daily allowances granted to public workers in Spain. Specifically, we compare the official *per diem* amounts with the most recent average prices of accommodation and meals per country at the time of writing. Our study finds that the official list includes only 55 countries where researchers can attend a conference without incurring a personal financial loss.

This is influenced by the high disparity between the current room rates and the outdated lodging allowances set in 2002, which should be updated to reflect the cost of living. Also in this list, we identify miscalculations for the totals of 25 countries. These errors have persisted for over two decades, suggesting that they have gone unnoticed or intentionally unaddressed by the Spanish government.

References

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