

## Italians take 'hit and run' holiday as economy slows

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**A woman passes a sign at a beach in Rome's suburb of Ostia on Wednesday. Reuters**

sunbed for a few weeks at a favorite seaside "stabilimento" may be over, as a looming recession forces holidaymakers to tighten their budgets.

They will still head to the beach en masse at the end of the week for "Ferragosto" - the Aug 15 public holiday when Italy grinds to a halt, hardly a loaf of bread or carton of milk can be bought and the city streets fall eerily silent.

But, with data ringing in their ears showing they are heading for a third recession this decade, Italians are taking shorter holidays and spending less. They're even spurning the ranks of striped "ombrelloni" (parasols) on private stretches of beach costing as much as 20 euros a day for the anarchy of the "free beach".

"If a tourist arrives and says he wants a parasol for 10 days we look at him in amazement and build a statue in his honor," said Giancarlo Cappelli. He represents owners of beach "stabilimenti" (establishments providing parasols, sunbeds, food and drink, changing rooms and fresh water showers) in Emilia-Romagna.

The media are calling it the "summer of the closed parasols" and the "holidays of poverty" as the travel industry laments its fortunes and urges government investment to help Italy compete with cheaper destinations in Eastern Europe and North Africa.

SIB, the national association of "stabilimento" owners, says the crisis is such that a million fewer people have visited them in June and July than at the same time last year. August is the peak month but will not be able to make up for such a dreadful season, they say.

"What worries us most is the phenomenon of 'hit and run' tourists," said Riccardo Borgo, national president of SIB, referring to tourists making shorter visits to the beach.

He said Italian families' purchasing power has shrunk in the past five years.

The Italian hoteliers' association says the average length of holiday has shrunk to 12 days from 15 days and that nearly 23 million Italians will not go on holiday at all this year, nearly half of them citing the economic downturn.

Campsite operators also say visitors are down 10 percent. Campers now "spend less, eat less in the restaurants, watch their shopping in the camp shop, and at the cafe and on the beach they are just buying drinks and ice-creams for the children", the industry group Assocamping said.

Agencies