

Texte 3

Wish you weren't here – The backlash against overtourism.

More people are travelling, and many are visiting the same places

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Ever since the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797, locals have complained that Venice, its former capital, is being overrun by visitors. Having spent decades trying to attract tourists, the city council is now rethinking its approach. In May it erected pedestrian gates across the historic neighbourhood's main entrances. When crowds get too thick, the police will close them, limiting access to locals who possess a special pass. Although this will restrict the number of visitors, the idea of ticketed entry has upset some locals. "It's the last step to becoming Disneyland," sighs one of the city's urban planners.

It is not only Venetians who think there are too many tourists. In Amsterdam locals are fed up with stag parties, unused to mixing alcohol and cannabis, leaving a trail of litter and vomit. In July protesters attacked tourist buses in Valencia, Palma de Mallorca and Barcelona (where one piece of graffiti read: "tourists go home, refugees welcome"). The newest word to enter the travel industry's lexicon is "overtourism", which was coined to describe the consequences of having too many visitors.

Governments are starting to react. In March President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines banned tourists from the popular island of Boracay for six months, because too many visitors and too few sewers had made it a "cesspool". On October 10th the Thai government restricted overnight stays on the Similan islands. And cities throughout Europe are beginning to investigate ways to crack down on overcrowding, home-sharing websites and anti-social behaviour.

This backlash might seem odd. The World Travel and Tourism Council, a trade body, says that tourism directly accounts for nearly 3% of the world's GDP. The industry employs 5% of the world's workforce. McKinsey, a consultancy, reckons that one in five new jobs are generated by tourism.

Policymakers also like its economic effects on poorer countries. Whereas oil drilling and mining employ relatively few people, tourism employs legions. And it can help the rest of the economy to develop, since policies designed to attract tourists, such as easy visas and good policing, also lure foreign investors.

The growing backlash against tourism has coincided with extraordinary growth in visitor numbers. According to the World Tourism Organisation, an agency of the United Nations, the number of international visitors making overnight stays grew to 1.3bn in 2017. That is twice the number in 2000, and more than four times the level in 1980. Even so, the rise in numbers is not the real problem, says Alex Dichter of McKinsey. "People in 99% of countries in the world are crying out for more, not fewer, tourists," he explains. The problem is that these extra tourists are converging on the same places.

This has surprised many in the travel industry. The spread of the internet was meant to disperse tourists by making less well-known places easier to find. Why has the opposite happened? Analysts at Skift, a travel website, attribute it to the rise of "bucket lists". Popularised by a film of the same name in 2007, which featured a "list of things to do

before I kick the bucket”, these internet lists direct tourists to the same “must see” places. The desire for the perfect Instagram snap has a similar result.

Mr Dichter also points to several other reasons for the shift. When flag carriers ran air travel as a cartel, flights cost a fortune—over £200 (\$230) for the 300-mile jaunt between London and Dublin in the mid-1980s, for instance. But low-cost carriers like Ryanair (whose average fare was €40, or \$46, last year) have transformed the industry. The rise of services like Airbnb, that allow locals to rent their homes to visitors, means that a place’s capacity for overnight stays is no longer limited by the number of hotel rooms.

Partly as a result, the share of tourists who are making their first trips has soared. Newbies often want to visit famous landmarks. In Amsterdam almost all first-time visitors head for the Van Gogh museum and Anne Frank’s house, says Geerte Udo of its tourist authority. Meanwhile tourists from China and India often dislike tanning and therefore skip beach destinations, adding to the crowds in a handful of popular cities.

Such overcrowding brings costs, which are borne by local residents. City dwellers find that pavements, roads and cycle lanes are clogged. In party towns, like Amsterdam and Prague, residents must put up with late-night hooliganism. Island resorts suffer from litter-strewn beaches and polluted water.

If tourist dollars push up the cost of living, locals may be priced out. Analysts at Islandsbanki, a bank, estimate that 1,225 properties in Reykjavik, Iceland’s capital, were listed on Airbnb in the peak season of 2017—more than the number of new homes that were built that year. The local population in Venice has roughly halved over the past 30 years. So, over the past two decades, has that of Dubrovnik in Croatia, an old walled city best known as King’s Landing in “Game of Thrones”. Academics now worry that services for ordinary residents, such as cheap cafés and doctors’ surgeries, will collapse if populations continue to fall.

Local authorities are cobbling together strategies to cope. An extreme reaction is to ban tourists entirely (as Mr Duterte did in Boracay) or to cap visitor numbers (as Easter Island has done). Many ports, including Venice, limit the number of cruise ships, and there are calls for cities to limit parking spaces for tourist coaches. Both ships and coaches bring tight-fisted visitors. A study in the British city of Cambridge found that the average coach day-tripper spends just £3.

A more subtle approach is to fiddle with taxes and charges, so that they better reflect the costs tourists impose. Tourists staying in hotels in central Amsterdam pay a higher tax rate than those staying farther away. In Edinburgh councillors are reportedly considering a tourist tax, revenues from which would be spent on rubbish collection or improving infrastructure.

Thordis Gylfadottir, Iceland’s tourist minister, says another part of the answer is to spread visits out. In 2010 half of the country’s tourists arrived during the summer. Thanks to marketing campaigns and better infrastructure for travel during winter months, now only a third do. Ms Gylfadottir hopes that new direct flights from Britain to northern Iceland will provide additional relief to Reykjavik and allow undiscovered sites to scoop up welcome tourist revenues.

Many cities are also tackling bad behaviour. Paola Mar, Venice’s tourism chief, thinks a change in the type of tourists has led to more problems. In the 1970s and 1980s most were from western Europe, America or Japan. They came to eat in traditional restaurants and visit art museums. Today tourists are often day-trippers from Italy’s resorts, or are

on their first trip abroad from Asia. They crowd the pavements with packed lunches rather than spend money in shops and restaurants. Locals call them “munch and flee” visitors.

The maturing taste of Chinese tourists may reassure Venetian locals. A recent survey by McKinsey finds that they increasingly dislike coach tours, group visits and seeing the main landmarks. First-time tourists travel in tour groups, but more experienced ones prefer independent travel. Nearly three-quarters of the Chinese tourists polled by Oliver Wyman, another consultancy, said they had mostly planned their trips by themselves in 2016, up from 49% the year before.

Venice is currently designing a plan to encourage tourists to stay longer by nudging them to visit more than just the main sights. Another option would be to improve its infrastructure. A study by the University of Venice in 1988 found the city could hold at most 20,750 visitors a day. That is around a quarter of traffic today. The increased demand has not been met by building better public transport.

Traditionalists may object to any new infrastructure in beautiful old cities. But Venice has already built a motorway and a railway station over the past two centuries. More links could benefit residents and tourists alike. One Chinese tourist jostling to see the Rialto Bridge told your correspondent he thought this was a good idea. “I might be able to see more of the history that way,” he explained.

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