



TRENDS AND CHALLENGES FOR MODERN TOURISM

Marko Koščak*

Faculty of Tourism, University of Maribor,
Brežice, Slovenia

Abstract:

Tourism has rebounded strongly after the sharp declines triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused tourism flows to plummet in 2020-21, following six decades of consistent growth. In 2022, tourism's direct contribution to GDP in OECD countries with available data had recovered to 3.9%, half a percentage point below 2019 levels, and the evidence suggests that the recovery has continued since. The return of international tourism demand, driven by the lifting of travel restrictions, has been a significant driver of this recovery, with tourism's share of services exports growing to 14.8% in 2022 in OECD countries. Although this figure remained 5.6 percentage points below pre-pandemic shares, international tourist arrivals have continued to strengthen and already exceeded pre-pandemic levels in some OECD countries in 2023.

A full global recovery is projected by the end of 2024, buoyed by positive traveller and business sentiment, with growth anticipated to return to pre-pandemic trends as demand and supply imbalances continue to unwind. However, the recovery remains uneven, and challenges persist. While tourism demand has demonstrated resilience, businesses struggle to attract and retain workers and, although inflation is abating, price pressures continue to impact transport, accommodation, and hospitality costs. Geopolitical tensions remain high, and the increasing frequency of wildfires, floods, heatwaves, and other extreme weather events is impacting the sector. Looking ahead, tourism is expected to continue to grow steadily in the long run, presenting significant opportunities but also posing renewed challenges. This underscores the need for policies that support a resilient, sustainable, and inclusive future for the industry.

Keywords:

Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Planning and Management, Tourist destinations, Over-tourism, Carrying Capacity, Partnership approach.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was a sobriety moment for society in general and the tourism sector in particular. It has produced the most serious crisis the sector has ever experienced. The level of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was far more severe than that of previous crises (e.g., SARS or the 2008-09 financial crisis) and has led to fundamental changes in the travel industry worldwide. The global health crisis left governments across Europe grappling with a public health emergency while struggling to support their economies, and it has taken a severe toll on the tourism sector.

Correspondence:
Marko Koščak

e-mail:
marko.koscak@um.si



Global international travel was expected to decline by over 50% in 2020, with 2019 levels not being achieved until 2023, according to Tourism Economics' latest forecasts. The fundamental nature of tourism has changed, and the sector's recovery is expected to be as gradual as the reopening of different economies (ETC, 2020).

In addition, there are new challenges for sustainable tourism, which relate not only to the post-COVID era, but also to current political and security issues, the energy crisis, the cost-of-living crisis driven by inflation, as well as resource shortages in many tourism destinations (e.g. financial, managerial, labour and structural). Tourism planning and management should, therefore, provide a strategy for the sustainable development of tourism destinations. It is critical to examine and resolve conflicting interests through mutually acceptable and participative planning solutions, ensuring the compatibility of different strategies and the long-term satisfaction of all stakeholders in the tourism destination. Local people in tourism destinations are the most important stakeholders, as they provide local resources to visitors in exchange for economic benefits and an improved quality of life (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023). Adequate returns on the resources utilised by tourists must be ensured. Measures should be taken to rationalise, regulate and legislate on the use of economic, socio-cultural and environmental resources. Appropriate types and levels of tourism activity should therefore be determined according to the goals and objectives established through a coherent and well-orchestrated planning process that examines all vulnerabilities and involves all stakeholders (Buhalis, 2000).

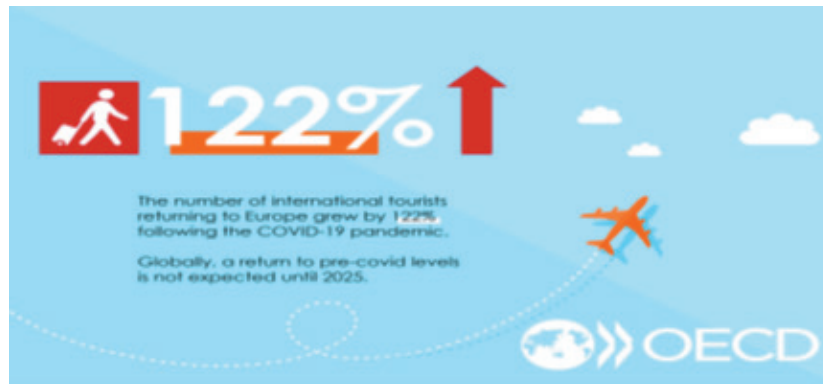
The expectation that pre-crisis levels of tourism demand would not recover before 2023 proved accurate for some tourism destinations, which provides an opportunity to reshape the industry into one that is more sustainable, innovative and equally beneficial for travellers, local communities, the environment and local economies. The COVID-19 crisis emerged as an unprecedented global challenge, highlighting the need for universal support, collaboration, and understanding to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the pandemic (ETC, 2020).

The events in the aftermath of the pandemic were harrowing for the tourism sector; unfortunately, predicted trends show that more negative events will likely continue to cripple the industry in future. On the other hand, tourist destinations that offered individual safety, distance, high-quality natural environment, and remoteness from crowds proved to be more successful survivors of the global health crisis. This highlights the need to thoroughly rethink the concept of sustainability. Pre-pandemic keywords associated with the concept included responsible management, adding value to local products and services, safety and social responsibility, accessibility for all, assessment of environmental carrying capacity, excessive tourism or "overtourism", participatory planning, and a partnership approach (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023).

All these factors remain highly important for the future development of sustainable tourism. However, the post-pandemic discourse on sustainability has shifted towards understanding how an experiential approach to product design, security, general and personal hygiene, social distance, "green" practices – focusing on preserved environment rather than mass tourism - guest well-being, and targeting nearby markets should be considered to sustain tourism in the long run. Naturally, this also requires transforming development strategies and seeking new development paradigms that can no longer ignore the principles of sustainable and responsible tourism or be allowed to move away from them (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023).

Some tourism trends and policies in 2024

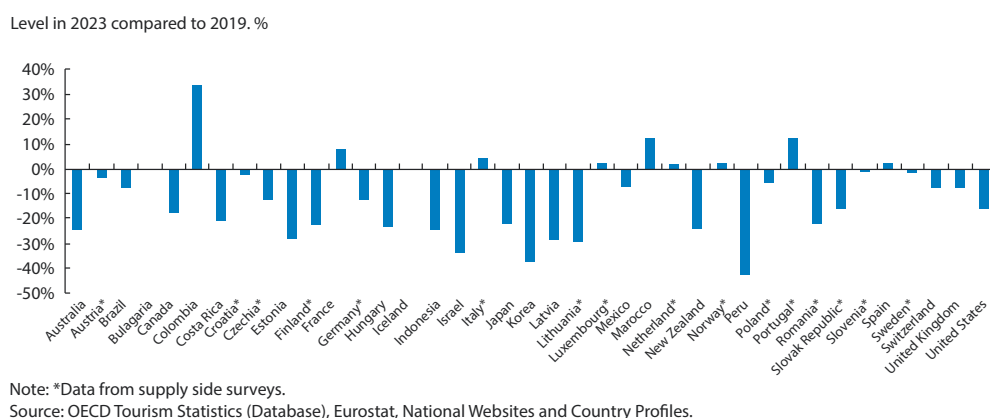
Tourism remains an important driver of economic growth, playing a key role in stimulating economic activity, creating jobs, generating income and foreign exchange, promoting regional development, and supporting local communities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector directly contributed 4.4% to GDP and 6.9% to employment, while accounting for 20.4% of service-related exports in OECD countries on average. The unprecedented shock from COVID-19 caused the average direct contribution of tourism to GDP to drop to 2.5% in 2020 across OECD countries with data available, resulting in significant knock-on effects for the wider economy. By 2022, this figure had rebounded to 3.9% on average across the same countries, with four countries returning to or surpassing pre-pandemic levels. According to UN Tourism, global direct tourism GDP reached pre-pandemic levels in 2023 (UN Tourism, 2024[1]).

**Figure 1.** The return of the tourists, Source OECD, 2023

Tourism is a labour-intensive sector and labour shortages and skills gaps have constrained its recovery amid tight labour markets. In 2022, employment in the accommodation and food services sector across the OECD remained 5.3% below pre-pandemic levels, while job vacancy rates in 2023 were higher on average than in other sectors of the economy. Although not all jobs in accommodation and food services are directly linked to tourism, this sector accounts for approximately half of tourism employment, offering a partial yet valuable proxy. While labour markets are now easing, significant challenges persist in attracting, retaining and developing a skilled tourism workforce (OECD, 2024).

International tourism flows have bounced back strongly and are projected to fully recover by the end of 2024. However, the recovery remains uneven, and challenges persist. After falling by 68.3% in 2020 – slightly below the global drop of 72.3% – by the end of 2022 international tourist arrivals to OECD countries had recovered to 77.3% of 2019 levels – ahead of the global recovery rate 66.6%. OECD countries accounted for 65% of international tourism arrivals in 2022, up from 56% in 2019, highlighting their stronger performance compared to non-OECD countries since the pandemic (UN Tourism, 2024[2]). This recovery momentum has continued, driven by strong tourism demand, which has proven surprisingly resilient. Globally, an estimated 1.3 billion international tourists were recorded in destinations worldwide in 2023, making a recovery to 89% of pre-pandemic levels, and this figure is projected to reach 1.5 billion by the end of 2024 (UN Tourism, 2024[3]).

International tourist arrivals exceeded pre-pandemic levels in some OECD countries in 2023, with European countries leading the way. Portugal welcomed a record 19.4 million international tourists, 12.1% more than in 2019. Other countries that saw arrivals reach or exceed pre-pandemic levels include Colombia (up 34%), Luxembourg (2.1%), Netherlands (1.4%), Norway (1.2%) and Spain (2.0%). Figure 2 presents the available data on international tourist arrivals to selected OECD member countries and partner economies in 2023 compared to arrivals in 2019. Countries in Europe benefited from significant intra-regional travel, while a strong US dollar boosted outbound travel from the United States to Europe.

Figure 2. International tourist arrivals, selected OECD and partner countries, Source: OECD, 2024



Geopolitical conflicts and tensions are also affecting tourism flows and the wider tourism economy, including Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and evolving conflicts in the Middle East. International tourism remains below pre-pandemic levels in Finland (by 22.3% at the end of 2023) and other countries neighbouring Russia and Ukraine. The terrorist attacks and the subsequent war have severely impacted Israel's tourism economy, significantly reducing inbound tourism (down 33.9% in 2023). This is affecting service exports and economic growth in the country more broadly (OECD, 2024[2]). Uncertainty about the evolution of these and other geopolitical conflicts and tensions risk impacting tourism in surrounding areas as well as denting traveller confidence more broadly, as safety and security are key conditions for tourism.

Domestic demand helped sustain the sector during the pandemic, and domestic overnight trips recovered to 90.5% of 2019 levels in 2022 among OECD countries. However, its importance and the extent to which domestic tourism is helping to support recovery vary considerably by country.

Challenges to adapt and manage tourism for sustainable outcomes

Looking ahead, tourism demand is expected to remain buoyant as supply and demand imbalances unwind. In the near term, the sector continues to navigate uncertainties, while unchecked longer-term growth, could bring challenges for the sustainability and future of the sector. Geopolitical tensions remain a significant near-term risk, although demand growth could prove stronger than expected if households and firms draw more fully on the savings accumulated during COVID-19 (OECD, 2024[2]). Inflation is falling faster than initially projected, including for energy and food prices, which have a strong impact on transport, accommodation and hospitality costs for tourists. Real incomes are rising in many OECD countries as inflation moderates, and private sector confidence is improving, which may further stimulate tourism demand. Supply and demand imbalances in labour markets are easing, with unemployment remaining at or close to record lows. This should ease the labour shortages faced by tourism businesses, but challenges remain in attracting and building a strong and sustainable workforce.

The strong tourism rebound is resulting in some destinations struggling to manage demand and its impacts on local communities and the environment. This has been exacerbated as supply has struggled to keep pace with demand. In some destinations, these capacity constraints are expected to limit further growth (OECD, 2024[2]). In other destinations, the social licence for tourism is increasingly challenged as tourism exceeds critical thresholds, putting pressure on infrastructure, the environment, and the local community, as well as on other economic sectors and the tourist experience.

Due to its strong local dimension, tourism can play a key role in fostering economic development that creates decent jobs, enhances social cohesion, and contributes to the shared interests of tourists, residents, and businesses. However, the impacts of tourism development are often economically, socially, and environmentally unbalanced. More needs to be done to manage the social impacts of tourism, particularly those caused by unplanned growth, and to maximise the sector's potential to enhance well-being and promote social progress and inclusion, both in traditional and emerging destinations.

As tourism resumes its growth trajectory, some popular tourism destinations are again feeling the pressures from increased visitor numbers on local infrastructure, environment and host communities. This has led to growing calls for more proactive policies and government action to better manage tourism development at all levels of government, as well as for a stronger voice for local communities in the development of tourism. This includes taking action to diversify and diffuse the impacts of tourism both temporally and spatially, and balancing trade-offs to achieve more sustainable outcomes. It also involves anticipating when tourism in a destination could reach or surpass optimal levels, leading to detrimental impacts (OECD, 2024).

Accelerated climate change is impacting tourism, with implications for structural shifts in destinations and travel patterns. Warmer winters are shortening the ski season in mountain destinations, while heatwaves may reduce the attractiveness of destinations during traditional peak periods but encourage visitation at other times. Tourism businesses and destinations are adjusting their offer in response, for example by no longer scheduling hiking tours during periods when temperatures peak, while expanding their offer during traditional shoulder season.



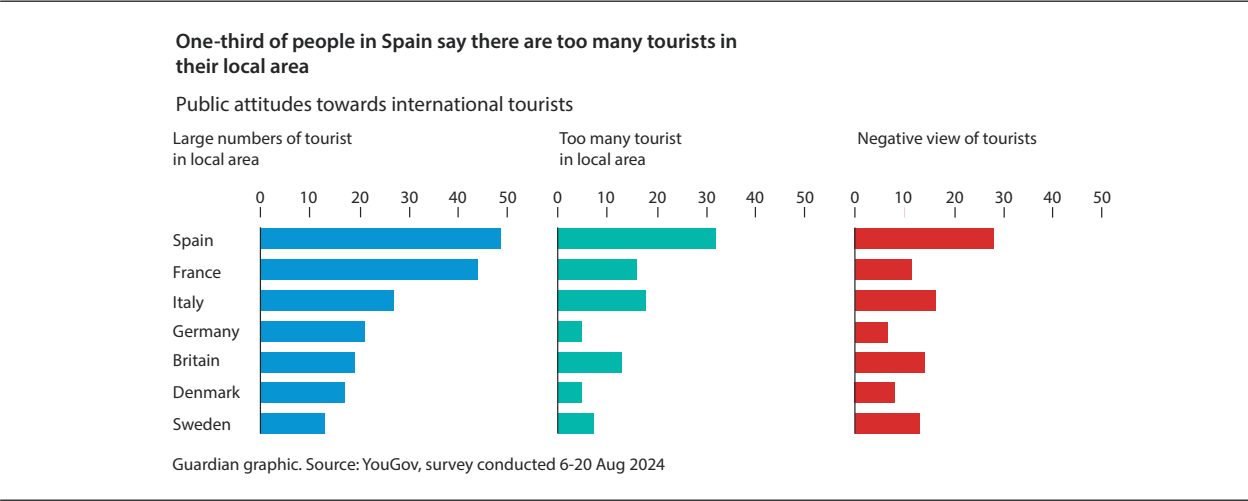
The sector must also play an active role in delivering on climate goals. Wildfires, floods and heatwaves have the potential to directly impact visitors, businesses and local communities, both through the initial shock and from the loss of infrastructure and the time it takes for tourism to recover. The world experienced unprecedented climate change impacts in 2023, and as these climate-related weather events become more extreme, losses are increasing (OECD, 2023). Climate change is also expected to make incidents of severe turbulence more common for air travel.

Technology is changing the nature of work, business operations and service delivery, facilitating the adoption of innovative business models and the shift to more sustainable tourism practices. It is also changing the way tourists plan travel and experience destinations. Digital technologies present not only an opportunity to respond to the evolving needs and desires of travellers, but also a chance to reach new consumers with novel tourism products and services (McKinsey & Company, 2024). The current uptake and use of new technologies vary across countries, sectors and businesses. Small tourism enterprises with low-tech business practices face particular challenges in benefiting from digital opportunities and preventing the gap from widening between them and technology driven, globally connected tourism businesses.

Anti-tourism activism: new or not new discourses?

For many destinations, tourism growth in recent years has been the result of rapid and unplanned growth in visitor numbers, which can negatively affect not only the visitor experience but also the environment and host communities upon which tourism depends. While the economic importance of tourism for destinations shall not be underestimated, overtourism leads to social (e.g. conflicts with local population) and environmental (e.g. pollution) problems. We have witnessed anti-tourism protests sweeping across Europe this summer, with demonstrations taking place in the Netherlands, Greece, and of course, Spain (see Figure 3 and 4 below). In early July, protesters marched through popular tourist areas in the Spanish city of Barcelona spraying unsuspecting visitors with water pistols while chanting, “Tourists, go home.”

Figure 3. Local people’s opinion about the volume of tourists in their local area, Source: YouGov, 2024



Moreover, most recently, thousands protested on the Spanish island of Mallorca, with organisers claiming that the island’s tourism model “impoverishes workers and enriches only a few.”



Figure 4. Anti-tourism protests in Barcelona, Source: CNN Travel, 2024



Anti-tourism activism and the specialisation of social movements in tourism-related struggles are not new phenomena. Historically, grassroots organizations have occasionally mobilised to oppose the construction of tourism infrastructure, often revealing a reality of resource extraction and exploitation. The first of these instances occurred in the late 1990s and 2000s. Fifty years later, the nature of these movements has evolved. They are no longer isolated cases targeting specific infrastructures, limited spaces or environmental struggles. Instead, grassroots organizations have become specialised in addressing the broader social and environmental tensions caused by tourism growth. This activism now encompasses and addresses a complex set of socioeconomic dynamics affecting entire cities, islands, and coastal territories highly dependent on tourism. While most critical discourses have been generally associated with the unmanageable growth of the tourism sector—especially in urban settings, most of the claims and demands for action have been linked to the housing rights, commercial specialisation, privatisation of public space, and fair labour. Accelerated tourism growth has also led to dramatic changes in the commercial landscape and the transformation of residential housing into short-term rental properties. (Milano, Novelli, Russo, 2024). The impacts on housing affordability, visitor economy-oriented businesses, residential displacement and the ‘Airbnbisation’ of the housing market, along with other extra-urban settings, contrary to common narratives of dispersion and empowerment of local communities, have further contributed to overtourism in both central and increasingly peripheral areas (e.g., Cocola-Gant, 2018; Celata & Romano, 2020; Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2017; Valente *et al.*, 2022).

While destinations’ over reliance on tourism has been widely analysed and has become the subject of widespread societal contestation, particularly during the post-pandemic recovery period, the protests and demonstrations in various Mediterranean destinations is symptomatic of a local ‘enough is enough’ sentiment that can no longer be ignored. It is within urban social landscapes, especially their historical cores, that tourism excesses have acquired clear political connotations. A new policy approach, recognising the disruptive agency of tourism growth and supported by radical revisions of governance frameworks is now more necessary than ever (Novy, 2018; Russo & Scarnato, 2018).

Negative impacts of overtourism

Overtourism is a term that carries negative connotations. Associated with a range of environmental, economic and social impacts of tourism, overtourism is almost always seen as a harmful phenomenon. Below is a list of typical issues associated with overtourism (Koščak & O’Rourke, 2023, Haxton & Camacho, 2023):

- Locals resent tourists
- Litter
- Environmental degradation
- Increased pressure on finite resources
- Overuse of public facilities and infrastructure
- Devastating impacts on local flora and fauna



- Gentrification
- Lack of economic control and benefits in the local community
- Changes to society
- Globalisation
- Reduction in authenticity
- Tourist needs prioritised over local needs
- Increases in crime
- Rises in the cost of living in the area

The root causes of overtourism are as complex and diverse as the phenomenon itself. For a systematic analysis, they can be divided into the following categories (EC, 2022):

- External driving forces, including general global developments as well as tourism-specific trends.
- More recent tourism trends, such as the emergence of new source markets and the proliferation of information and communication technologies in tourism;
- These external driving forces lead to tangible effects, such as increasing tourism-induced pressure at the destination level.
- Internal factors within a destination may exacerbate or mitigate tourism pressure.

These factors can be general or tourism specific. The potential impacts of overtourism are likewise diverse, depending on the specific combination of driving forces, pressures and destination characteristics. Impacts can be physical, environmental, (socio-) economic or socio-cultural (including psychological). They can also be differentiated with respect to which stakeholder group is predominantly affected. To this end, there are five main categories of impacts (EC, 2022):

- The degradation of the local infrastructure – such as roads, port facilities, garbage collection or sewage treatment facilities – usually occurs when high numbers of tourists encounter limited local capacities.
- The degradation of the natural environment tends to be more pronounced in rural areas, where ecosystems are often fragile and even relatively low visitor numbers may have negative effects, such as water and air pollution, soil erosion or wildlife disturbance.
- Imbalances in the local economy can occur when tourism becomes predominant in certain areas (“touristification”), pushing out traditional stores or professions and leading to rising prices for real estate or everyday consumer goods.
- Impacts on the social environment become an issue when residents feel psychologically, socially or culturally disturbed by the presence of too many tourists, especially if these tourists behave in an unacceptable way (e.g., by making noise or littering).
- Finally, tourists themselves may be negatively affected by the presence of a large number of other visitors in the same area.

Some recent research (EC, 2022) has shown that unbalanced tourism is a process that evolves uniquely at each destination, despite some clear common mega-trends and drivers. International tourism growth is a key driver of unbalanced tourism developments at most destinations. Secondly, the evolution of social media use contributes to overtourism at specific sites, resulting in these sites becoming hotspots without key management organisations in place to implement rapid and necessary controls. Destination governance was shown to be a decisive factor in the emergence of overtourism. Varying governance levels within a destination can present challenges and impact the management of tourism. In terms of impacts, the most visible effects of overtourism include various types of congestion, such as a concentrated number of visitors or vehicles in a limited geographic space. This includes beaches, parking facilities, queues in front of museums, or ports. The non-visible impacts of unbalanced tourism are more diffuse and include several socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts, such as touristification, increased prices and biophysical impacts throughout the year.



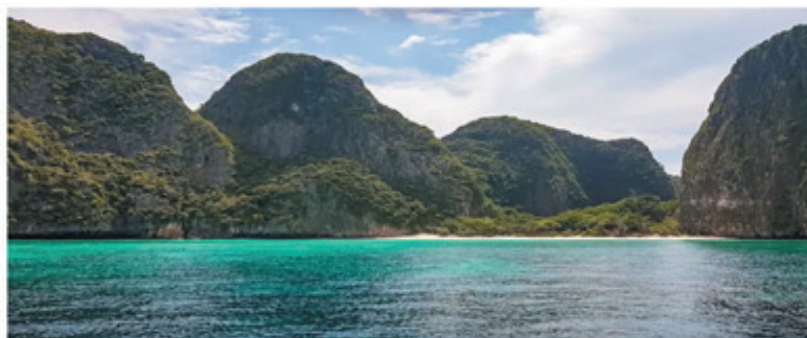
Therefore, how destinations experience unbalanced tourism varies significantly and, in part, relates to the destination type. Nevertheless, many commonalities are observable amongst cities, coasts and islands, rural areas, and mountain destinations (EC, 2022):

- Urban destinations (e.g., Venice, Lucerne, Vienna, Barcelona) experience extremely high tourist densities in certain neighbourhoods, but appear to have more flexibility and local alternate tourism attractions and infrastructure available to implement physical dispersion strategies compared to rural destinations.
- The rural areas researched (e.g., Plitvice Lakes, Regional Park of Monts d'Ardèche, Cliffs of Moher) demonstrate how regions depend on tourism flows, and that the sudden appearance of large crowds at a few attraction points is not easy to manage. Furthermore, rural areas all seem to be confronted with the contradiction of capturing the economic benefits that tourism may bring while offering idyllic rural landscapes and unique attractions. This applies particularly to destinations where protected area management goals to conserve ecological integrity do not always easily align with the goals of providing more tourism infrastructure.
- The coastal and island destinations (e.g., Santorini) all show biophysical fragility, especially in beaches, dunes and places of biodiversity value. Collectively, island destinations have limited geographic space and share challenges with respect to further tourism growth. The absence of neighbouring land destinations makes them unique, as any management solution implemented can be set in a very specific scope, suitable and adapted to a “closed” destination. As a result, island settings provide advantages in monitoring arrivals from outside, while the local movement and management of crowds remains equally comparable to all other destination types.
- The mountain destinations analysed (e.g., Dolomites, Rigi, Bled, Mount Everest) highlight the fragility, both biophysical and socio-cultural, of such areas. These destinations showcase how contemporary visitor masses can easily be channelled even to relatively remote locations, as more and more visitors seek nature experiences at unbalanced tourism growth destinations with “instagrammeable” spots. Similarly, to coastal areas, mountain destinations, particularly within protected areas, are suitable for management approaches aiming at stricter regulations and controls.

Some Overtourism examples

To truly understand the concept of overtourism and its effects on a destination and its people, here are some examples.

Overtourism in Maya Bay



Maya Bay in Thailand was made famous when the book ‘The Beach’ was published, which was later adapted into a movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Almost a right of passage for backpackers, this book and movie encouraged thousands of tourists to flock to the secluded bay. Overtourism in Maya Bay caused significant environmental damage, with negative consequences for the local flora, fauna and marine life. In attempt to combat this, the Thai government closed the island to tourists for a period of four months.



Overtourism in Barcelona

Barcelona is home to 1.6million people, yet it welcomes an excessive 32 million tourists each year. These tourists arrive in flocks during school holidays, summer weekends and when cruise ships dock. While this brings significant economic value to some areas of the city, such as Las Ramblas, tourists rarely venture much further, meaning that businesses outside the main tourist hotspots see little benefit. Residents have expressed resentment towards tourists and the tourism industry on many occasions, as evidenced by protests and signs placed around the city.

Overtourism at Macchu Picchu



Macchi Picchu is one of the most well-documented examples of overtourism. This is because it was one of the first tourist attractions to implement restrictions on tourist numbers in an attempt to manage overtourism. Fortunately, there have been reports in the past year or so that these efforts have worked and that the crowds at Macchu Picchu have been significantly reduced - evidence that careful tourism management does work.

Overtourism in Venice



Venice attracts around 20 million tourists each year. On its busiest days, Venice welcomes approximately 120,000 visitors! In comparison, the city has just 55,000 permanent residents. Overtourism in Venice has had a significant impact on the local community - economically, environmentally and socially. Members of the host community are forced to navigate crowds and endure the nuisance of noisy wheelie suitcases and selfie sticks on a daily basis. Many tourists display disrespectful behaviour, such as swimming in the canals, having picnics on the famous bridges and dropping litter. Additionally, numerous boats emit harmful pollutants into the atmosphere each day.



Overtourism in Santorini



There are some concerns that the picturesque island of Santorini has experienced overtourism to such an extent that it is now close to saturation point. Over 5 million overnight tourists visit Santorini each year- an island that spans just 76km². Traffic jams, overcrowding and pollution have become serious issues on the island. There is also evidence of rising water consumption and excessive energy use. The island is striving to combat the problem by placing limits on tourist numbers. Additionally, a new desalination plant, the largest in Greece, has been constructed. There are fears, however, that these measures will not suffice, given the rapid growth in recent years.

Overtourism at Mount Everest



Overtourism at Mount Everest is not only detrimental for the environment and the host community, but also poses significant dangers to climbers. Along with issues such as discarded oxygen canisters, littering, and the erosion of pathways, recent media reports have highlighted climbers queuing in hazardous conditions while ascending and descending the mountain. In fact, there have even been recorded deaths, with overtourism cited as a contributing factor.

Carrying capacity

The concept of overtourism is closely linked to the carrying capacity of a destination (Knezevic *et al.*, 2018). To prevent overtourism, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the local tourism system's carrying capacity (Weber *et al.*, 2017). The UNWTO defines the term as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, and socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction" (WTO 1983 in UNWTO *et al.*, 2018, p.14). The concept of carrying capacity predates the term overtourism and can be considered "a precursor to current concerns with overtourism, which emphasises that the number of tourists, and their behaviour can overwhelm the places that they visit, damaging both the tourism resources and the lifestyles of those living in destination areas." (Wall, 2020, p. 1).



Some key questions regarding the concept of carrying capacity remain, such as determining how and when to set limits on tourism, and identifying effective management strategies to successfully balance tourism supply and demand. Simultaneously, new issues and developments are shaping the tourism industry. Examples include the growing pressure from cruise ships and the emergence of higher capacity accommodation facilities (Wall, 2020). Peeters *et al.* (2018, p. 26) summarise that “rapid tourism growth is provoking many discussions on destinations’ carrying capacity and their capacity to handle the overwhelming inflow of visitors versus maintaining a balance with residents’ numbers.” Consequently, carrying capacity remains a highly relevant concept, directly related to the phenomenon of overtourism and its mitigation and prevention.

Social carrying capacity is particularly challenging to measure because it is linked to the psychological characteristics of both tourists and residents at a destination (Weber *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, maintaining a balanced socio-psychological perspective is crucial, as low tolerance towards tourists can negatively affect visitors’ experiences and lead to dissatisfaction. Therefore, effectively managing social capacity can enhance the overall tourist experience (Weber *et al.*, 2017).

Rethinking tourism success – experience of the tourism destination worldwide

With careful tourism planning and management, we can mitigate the negative effects of overtourism or prevent it from occurring altogether. The adoption of sustainable and responsible tourism principles is fundamental to managing overtourism effectively. From a top-down perspective, policies should be implemented to address issues such as overcrowding. Examples include adjusting fees or limiting ticket sales. From a grassroots perspective, tourists can take various actions to help prevent overtourism. These include visiting destinations during off-peak periods or quieter times of the day, exploring less-known destinations, and demonstrating responsible behaviour while travelling. Thus, solutions to overtourism exist, and it can be managed or even avoided entirely with careful planning and implementation. There are already excellent examples of responsible tourism initiatives worldwide. The pressing question for many DMO’s in Europe’s tourism destinations now is: *What can be done to enhance the attractiveness of regions to visitors while supporting a more sustainable and resilient recovery?*

The solution approaches most frequently applied by the different destinations analysed (EC, 2022) can be summarised as follows:

- Laws, regulations and policies: Most destinations have implemented various legally binding rules and regulations to address unbalanced tourism development. These include imposing limits to the construction of new hotels or the numbers of cruise passengers, regulating privately rented accommodation, and setting capacity limits for heavily visited sites. Additionally, pollution control measures for cruise ships are often enforced. Less restrictive policies may incentivise the use of public transport instead of private vehicles.
- Nevertheless, stakeholder cooperation, i.e., collaboration among different interest groups, tourism companies and even visitors, has been established as a prerequisite for developing effective solutions to unbalanced tourism. The participation of residents in policymaking, as well as their consultation, have been identified as a critical success factors.
- New and expanded tourism infrastructure, such as additional parking lots or increased waste collection capacities during peak season are obvious ways to accommodate higher visitor numbers in an orderly manner. Moreover, new infrastructure, along with new tourism offerings or enhanced information campaigns, has been employed to disperse tourists to other parts of a destination. These “deconcentration” strategies and the redirection of visitor flows not only help alleviate the burden on areas with “must-see” attractions, but also enable other areas to benefit economically.
- Digital solutions, particularly the use of big data from mobile technologies and centralised tourism data observatories, are key components in successfully managing unbalanced tourism, as they enable data-driven decision-making. Shared information provides a common ground for stakeholders with differing interests and levels of influence to consider appropriate solutions from their own perspectives. Real-time and up-to-date information provision was frequently highlighted as a viable approach during workshops. Nevertheless, several challenges remain, including the need to purchase datasets from providers. Furthermore, the systematic monitoring of unbalanced tourism using a comprehensive set of key indicators is still underdeveloped in most of the destinations studied. This lack of systematic monitoring contributes to overtourism being perceived as a subjective phenomenon in certain locations.



Recommendations for the regional and the local level

First, it is essential to shift the focus from simply achieving high visitor numbers to delivering socio-economic and environmental benefits. As travellers increasingly look for environmentally friendly and sustainable travel options, adopting a more environmentally and culturally responsible approach can meet this growing demand, while preserving these assets. Furthermore, it provides destinations with a significant advantage to differentiate themselves as sustainable tourism destination.

Finding a balance between environmental, economic and social impacts remains a challenge (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023). For many destinations, this will require taking steps to diversify the tourism offer and reducing or redistributing demand away from high-profile tourism hubs, both geographically and temporally. For instance, in 2021, due to concerns over the number of cruise ships and tourists visiting the *Balearic Islands in Spain* during peak periods, an agreement was reached to limit the number of cruise ships docking at the Port of Mallorca. By capping the volume of passengers that disembark, typically for short visits, this measure aims to enhance the visitor experience, alleviate the pressure on the city's historic centre, and benefit local residents. Similar strategies have been proposed or implemented in Dubrovnik, Barcelona and Venice to address the challenges of cruise tourism.

In *Argentina*, La Ruta Natural programme organises nature tourism through 17 major territorial routes that span the entire country, each based on the natural, environmental, or geographical identity of its region. The programme also promotes responsible travel through its website, while enhancing infrastructure and improving services to support sustainable tourism. In *Canada*, a “high- value guest” approach is central to Destination Canada's new strategy, which views tourism through the lens of “wealth and well-being”. This approach prioritises deeper, more strategic collaboration with partners to identify higher-value visitors – those who appreciate nature, engage with the locals, are less time-sensitive, and are eager to explore lesser-known areas and engage in cultural exchanges. It targets visitors with a higher propensity for return travel, resulting in greater returns and a higher contribution to GDP.

The following recommendations are directed at tourism and non-tourism stakeholders responsible for regional and municipal policies, planning and management, particularly local governments, destination management organisations and local tourism industry associations (EC, 2022):

- Destinations need to adopt an appropriate definition of overtourism to enable an objective understanding of the phenomenon in their local context.
- Destinations should integrate the risk of overtourism into their broader planning and management frameworks.
- Destinations may consider adopting a framework to address overtourism as a phenomenon beyond traditional economic key performance indicators, enabling a more data-driven and systematic analysis of the sector in a holistic way.
- To achieve this, it is recommended to collect and analyse data systematically and continuously, ensuring relevance, frequency and reliability across the economic, social and environmental facets of tourism.
- Incorporating resident and stakeholder participation in policymaking- such as through surveys- as well as their consultation (e.g., via surveys) helps identify “pain-points” and enhances tourism acceptance in destinations.
- The social dimension needs to be captured to effectively monitor overtourism. This can be achieved through surveys of both residents and visitors, preferably conducted at local and regional levels.
- Steering mechanisms (e.g., awareness campaigns, dynamic pricing and pre-booking systems) may be used to mitigate visitor burdens. These measures can be further enhanced by leveraging big-data to identify and manage tourist hotspots.
- Visitor management systems should be based on real-time and up-to-date information. They can be exercised in different ways, including crowd monitoring, improving infrastructure in heavily visited areas, and employing dispersal strategies by creating additional infrastructure and alternative tourism offers in less visited parts of a destination.



- De-marketing strategies may be used to discourage certain undesirable tourist groups from visiting a destination.
- Systematic capacity building in the context of indicator systems and monitoring is necessary at DMOs to enable the use of comprehensive monitoring systems. In cases where capacities or resources are limited, DMOs may wish to implement reduced sets of indicators, focusing on easily collectible data.
- Effective planning may have to include various regulatory provisions or taxes aimed at mitigating harmful tourist activities. In particular, curtailing individual automobile traffic, one of the most noxious sources of negative overtourism impacts, and shifting traffic flows toward public transportation options is crucial.

Key lessons learned

Researched destinations (EC, 2022) across Europe illustrate how unbalanced tourism growth can develop. The experiences gathered highlight certain similarities, as well as significant differences, in unbalanced tourism patterns. These destinations represent good practices, and many of the specific initiatives and measures implemented can be transferred to other destinations in Europe where tourism may be, or become, unbalanced. Although many destinations have a complex set of solutions to address unbalanced tourism, none represent a case where the issue is fully “solved for good”. Instead, each case highlights a unique context with broad solution approaches that can be adapted to other destinations facing similar challenges.

In summary the cases collectively contribute to the following key lessons (EC, 2022):

- Unbalanced tourism is a process that evolves uniquely at each destination, despite some clear common mega-trends and drivers.
- International tourism growth is a key driver of unbalanced tourism developments at most destinations.
- Unbalanced tourism is often subjectively perceived by local stakeholders, particularly residents, as an undeniable reality, and is influenced by seasonal variations. Summer is the most important season when unbalanced tourism is most visible, even if tourism occurs during other times, and even spreads across seasons.
- The evolution of social media use contributes to unbalanced tourism by turning specific sites into hotspots, often without key management organizations having the necessary control measures in place.
- The most visible impact of unbalanced tourism includes various congestion, such as the concentrated number of visitors or vehicles in limited geographic areas, including beaches, parking lots, museum lines, and ports.
- The non-visible impacts of unbalanced tourism are more diffuse and include several socio-economic impacts, such as touristification, rising prices and biophysical impacts throughout the year. The issue of increasing housing prices was also discussed, as they affect local residents (via out-pricing) as well as (seasonal) employees in the sector, who may not find affordable accommodation due to price increases. Cultural alienation is another factor affecting local residents, as they may lose a sense of belonging due to the increased touristic transformation of their area.
- How destinations experience unbalanced tourism varies significantly and is partly related to the type of destination. Many commonalities are observable among cities, coastal areas, rural regions and mountains.
- The solutions to manage unbalanced tourism need to be multidimensional, as tourism is a complex and dynamic sector. No single solution is suitable for all destinations, as stakeholder values, beliefs and attitudes are key factors in the successful management of unbalanced tourism. Each case offers transferable lessons for other destinations, regardless of the destination type or classification. However, whether a solution approach is appropriate must be decided by the local stakeholders.
- The monitoring of unbalanced tourism is not well advanced, as there is no key set of indicators that allows for cross-destination comparison or an objective understanding of the issues at each destination. This contributes to unbalanced tourism remaining a subjective concept at some destinations. Systematic collection and analysis of relevant information is key to managing unbalanced tourism. This information needs to be made accessible to all stakeholders, including residents of the destinations.



The importance of impact measurement was also confirmed in the coastal workshop, as impacts may vary even within smaller regions (e.g. between municipalities).

- Visitors and residents are key stakeholders to consider when defining appropriate solutions to unbalanced tourism. The participation of residents in policy-making, as well as their consultation (e.g. via surveys), and means for residents to be financially compensated or to take part in benefit-sharing, were identified as success factors.
- Tourism intensity and density are important indicators that need to be a part of the data collection framework of tourism observatories. The case studies have highlighted clear challenges in defining tourism intensity and density due to the lack of statistical frameworks for data collection, including information on day visitors, cruise ships passengers or coach bus passengers. Furthermore, destinations need to clearly define the spatial boundaries for managing tourism; otherwise unbalanced tourism risks continuing to be a subjective issue, making it difficult to define among local stakeholders. It is unlikely that specific intensity or density levels can be defined across destinations. Rather, each destination should define a spectrum of acceptable levels for their tourism activities.

CONCLUSION

The shift in focus towards more sustainable tourism development should lead to a greater awareness of the role of tourism flows in destinations. Diversifying tourism to better manage the movement of visitors, both spatially and temporally, provides opportunities to strengthen destinations, build resilience to future shocks, and optimise economic benefits while balancing environmental and social impacts. Efforts to sustainably disperse visitors and better spread the benefits of tourism both within and across destinations are becoming more common and are increasingly part of the strategic agenda for tourism, as is the integration of tourism into broader national and regional development agendas. The development of a more diverse tourism offer requires investments in tourism and community infrastructure to support increased visitation. Successfully encouraging tourists to visit new destinations can have significant economic and social benefits for local communities, if supported by adequate planning and resources (OECD, 2024).

The focus on balancing tourism flows has brought a renewed emphasis on the concept of carrying capacity in destinations. While there is no clear approach or methodology for determining the carrying capacity of tourism destinations, the sector can learn from the extensive work and experience in managing visitor flows in protected areas. Improved access to data and communication with local communities can also help better understand destination capacities, balance trade-offs, and determine critical thresholds, which may differ for visitors and residents. National stakeholders should work with attractions, destinations, and local governments to better identify the critical thresholds for tourism. Optimising the socio-economic value of tourism requires better planning, improved understanding and management of the trade-offs involved, and engagement with the local community to create a more inclusive sector where the benefits (and costs) are more widely shared. One area of increased focus is measuring tourism acceptance, local sentiment, and the social aspect of tourism. Creating liveable destinations and ensuring that the local population benefits from tourism has become a policy focus for many destinations. In this context, participatory approaches that involve local communities in tourism planning and development decisions can support more balanced outcomes for residents, and in turn lead to greater acceptance of tourism (OECD, 2024).

Recognition of the need for tourism to transition towards more sustainable and resilient models of development has grown in recent years. Coordinated policy action across all levels of government is needed to address structural weaknesses that have impeded the sector in the past, not least to address issues linked with unbalanced tourism development and ensure that jobs, resident well-being, and other benefits from tourism flow to local communities. However, preparing for the future will require accelerating mitigation and adaptation measures so tourism can play its part in the low-carbon transition, as well as continued progress to support digital uptake by businesses, particularly SMEs (OECD, 2024).



Rethinking the tourism system and preparing for future shocks, while addressing long-term priorities and transitioning to more balanced and sustainable models of tourism development, require policymakers to seize new opportunities to deploy transversal approaches that achieve multiple objectives. More granular, timely, and robust evidence is needed to inform policy and business decisions, manage and track progress on potential trade-offs, determine ‘what works’, and identify emerging policy impacts and risks, as well as the costs of inaction.

REFERENCES:

- Buhalis, D. (2000). Marketing the competitive destination of the future. *Tourism Management*, 21(1), 97–116.
- Celata, F., & Romano, A. (2020). Overtourism and online short-term rental platforms in Italian cities. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(5), 1020–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1788568>
- Cocola-Gant, A. (2018). Tourism gentrification. In L. Lees & M. Philips (Eds.), *Handbook of gentrification studies* (pp. 281–293). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- CNN Travel, (2024). Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/08/travel/barcelona-tourism-protests-scli-intl/index.html#:~:text=Protesters%20in%20Barcelona%20have%20sprayed%20visitors%20with%20water,with%20slogans%20including%20%E2%80%9CBarcelona%20is%20not%20for%20sale.%E2%80%9D>, retrieved: 290824
- ETC (2020). European Travel Commission: Handbook on Covid -19 recovery strategies for national tourism organisations. ETC & Toposophy Ltd., Brussels, September 2020.
- European Commission, (2022). Unbalanced tourism growth at destination level – root causes, impacts, existing solutions and good practices. Final report, PDF ISBN 978-92-9469-420-1, doi: 10.2826/782120, EA-07-22-856-EN-N
- Gutiérrez, J., García-Palomares, J. C., Romanillos, G., & Salas-Olmedo, M. H. (2017). The eruption of Airbnb in tourist cities: Comparing spatial patterns of hotels and peer-to-peer accommodation in Barcelona. *Tourism Management*, 62, 278–291. 05.003 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017>
- Haxton, P., Camacho, M. (2023). The return of the tourists: Regions rethinking attractiveness and sustainability, Available at: <https://oecdcoito.blog/2023/07/04/the-return-of-the-tourists-regions-rethinking-attractiveness-and-sustainability/>, Retrieved: 18.8.2024
- Knezevic, L., Clarke, M., & van der Graaf, A. (2018). *Carrying capacity at sensitive cultural heritage sites*. European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual (EENCA).
- Košćak, M., & O'Rourke, T. (2023). *Ethical and Responsible Tourism - Managing Sustainability in Local Tourism* - 2nd edition. London, Routledge.
- McKinsey & Company (2024), *What is the future of travel?*, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featuredinsights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-the-future-of-travel>.
- Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Russo, A. P. (2024). Anti-tourism activism and the inconvenient truths about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism, *Tourism Geographies*, DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2024.2391388. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2391388>, retrieved: 28.8.2024
- Novy, J. (2018). ‘Destination’ Berlin revisited. From (new) tourism towards a pentagon of mobility and place consumption. *Tourism Geographies*, 20(3), 418–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2017.1357142>
- OECD (2023), *The Climate Action Monitor 2023: Providing Information to Monitor Progress Towards Net-Zero*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/60e338a2-en>.
- OECD (2024), *OECD Economic Outlook*, May 2024, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/may-2024/>.
- OECD (2024), *SME digitalisation in 2024 Managing shocks and transitions. An OECD D4SME Survey*, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/networks/oecd-digital-for-smes-globalinitiative/FINAL-D4SME-2024-Survey-Policy-Highlights.pdf/_jcr_content/renditions/original/FINAL-D4SME-2024-Survey-Policy-Highlights.pdf.
- Peeters, P., Gössling, S., Klus, J., Milano, C., Novelli, M., Dijkmans, C., Eugelaar, E., Hartman, S., Helsinga, J., Isaac, R., Mitas, O., Moretti, S., Nawun, J., Papp, B., & Postma, A. (2018). *Research for TRAN Committee—Overtourism: Impact and possible policy responses*. European Union. <http://bit.ly/2srgoyg>
- Russo, A. P., & Scarnato, A. (2018). “Barcelona in common”: A new urban regime for the 21st-century tourist city? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 40(4), 455–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2017.1373023>



- UN Tourism (2024), *Policy Guidance to Support Climate Action by National Tourism Administrations*, UN Tourism, <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284425365>.
- UN Tourism (2024), *UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex*, January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18111/wtobarometereng>.
- UN Tourism (2024), *UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex*, May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18111/wtobarometereng>.
- UNWTO, Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism & Hospitality, NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, & NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. (2018). 'Overtour-ism'? *Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions*. UN-WTO. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420070>
- Valente, R., Russo, A. P., Vermeulen, S., & Milone, F. L. (2022). Tourism pressure as a driver of social inequalities: ABSEM estimation of housing instability in European urban areas. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 29(3), 332–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09697764221078729>
- Wall, G. (2020). From carrying capacity to overtourism: A perspective article. *Tourism Review*, 75(1), 212–215. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-08-2019-0356>
- Weber, F., Stettler, J., Priskin, J., Rosenberg-Taufer, B., Ponnappureddy, S., Fux, S., Camp, M.-A., & Barth, Martin. (2017). *Tourism destinations under pressure Challenges and innovative solutions*. Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts Institute of Tourism ITW.