

## Destinations and sustainability: addressing anti-tourism sentiment in cities

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How do destinations remain viable and desirable places to live, work and visit as visitor flows increase? This challenge faces us all, not just the tourism industry. The social sustainability of tourism matters, and so too does business continuity; local jobs depend on it. These are vexed topics locally, polarising opinion and fuelling antagonism. Resentment in some cities is real and growing: between residents and visitors, local business and policy makers. On 20th December 2018, the city of Rome was treated to the spectacle of exasperated coach operators blockading the historic centre with their vehicles, providing a photo-opportunity for the Mayor to claim victory for a controversial new coach access plan.

In many European destinations, at national and local level, there is a policy shift away from a growth model of tourism measured by volume, to one whose success is measured by value. This leads to questions about how value is added and perceived. While it is for destinations to decide what they want, they cannot achieve it in isolation. Better conversations about city tourism will lead to better management, more product development and diversification, and capacity optimisation.

Cities and the jobs they sustain are in a state of constant flux. Transformation will continue to be driven by technology, consumer demand and economic circumstances. We must manage change in a way that safeguards employment and the business environment it depends on. That requires constructive dialogue and evidence-based decision making. It also needs investment to bring about the conditions both local communities and their visitors will appreciate. We all want improved infrastructure, accessibility and air quality. We want an environment within which urban heritage may be safeguarded and enjoyed for the foreseeable future, and urban communities may remain socially rich and distinctive. This vision is appealing, but it requires a strategic plan that is sufficiently insulated from short-term political calculation. It also requires funding.

It is important to remember that most decisions affecting tourism are made locally: licensing arrangement for rental accommodation; taxes levied on overnight and day visitors; traffic access. Do policy makers have sufficient data, tools and resources at their disposal? Local politics is hard and often friendless work; some decisions are difficult and divisive. Many of the most necessary decisions might not be appreciated until well after the next election. Industry thinks hard about how it can adapt to build community understanding and acceptance of tourism and be seen to add value. There is growing recognition that travellers want that too: they want to make a positive contribution. So do suppliers: hostels and hotels offering their facilities for the local community's use demonstrate the positive change that imagination and determination can bring.

There is an urgent need for practical solutions. Demand for leisure tourism is growing, as is the size of the potential market (only 8.7% of the Chinese population currently hold passports). Peer-to-peer



accommodation adds valuable capacity and in-destination spend but it is routinely attacked for its effect on the private rental market, the consequent displacement of permanent residents and the domestic demand they represent. While hostel and hotel rooms do not affect accommodation supply for locals, their occupants still need to get around. Are they welcome, or just tolerated as an economically necessary irritation? Can existing public transport infrastructure cope?

In an age of price comparison websites and empowered consumers, 'mass tourism' is characterised as a crowded race for diminishing returns in a highly competitive market. It is also a dangerous simplification: a commoditisation, a label for something seen as distasteful and damaging. 'Overtourism', an unhelpful word, conjures up the same Malthusian calculation as 'overpopulation'. Who deserves to be a tourist? Who decides the carrying capacity of a city? Who puts the sign on the gate that says 'No Vacancies'? Tourism is a vital part of the economy; it deserves support, not stigmatisation. Where it causes difficulty, collaborative and creative problem-solving are required, not despair at the 'invasion' of visitors.

We need bridges, not barriers. At a major EU tourism event recently, a keynote speaker invited delegates to agree that any restaurant or bar that contained more than 50% non-locals was somewhere a discerning traveller should avoid. And who, the speaker inquired, would want a tourist coach parking in her street? Is this about aesthetics (you could be forgiven for preferring a cityscape's façades to the super-saturated colours of some touring coaches), or something else? The tacit assumption seemed to be that the presence of tourists makes a place 'inauthentic', and that group tourism especially is an unwelcome imposition tolerated only for its economic value. Rhetoric against tourism has evolved from being the preserve of an indignant traveller who objects to sharing his view, to mainstream pop-wisdom and populist opposition. This can unintentionally find itself uncomfortably close to xenophobia.

To build acceptance, increased awareness and engagement is necessary. ETOA directs an increasing amount of resources to this. Ideally, the visitor economy and the resident community would enjoy a perfect symbiosis: local demand sustains a distinctive culture which in turn appeals to visitors who make a valuable economic contribution and furthers inter-cultural awareness and understanding. It is not fanciful to suggest that tourism promotes peace, contested spaces notwithstanding. It is important to remember that more tourism, in most parts of Europe, would be a welcome development. Only a minority of destinations find themselves struggling to cope with demand, especially at peak times. But better tourism is wanted by everyone, including the visitors themselves, on whose curiosity and interest more than one-in-ten jobs in Europe depends. We owe it to them, and to the communities they visit, to do a better job of working out how to deliver it.

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