

WILL CORONAVIRUS BE THE END OF OVERTOURISM?



Threatened jobs, reduction in the number of air flights, museum collections freely accessible online... The health crisis linked to COVID-19 is already having very tangible consequences on the tourism industry. Is this the end of overtourism though?

Recent photographs show a few places around the world that are usually crowded, but where no one ventures since COVID-19 compelled 3 billion people to stay at home.

"These photos are haunting and disturbing, like frozen images from films about disasters or the apocalypse," the American daily writes. "But in some ways, they are optimistic. They remind us that beauty requires human interaction (...) This will be when we go back there." Go back, yes, but when? And especially under what conditions? Could the health crisis, which is hitting the four corners of the globe with varying degrees of intensity, sound the death knell for mass tourism... and the heavy ecological footprint that accompanies it? Not so simple.

Never Seen Before in History

The immediate impact of the outbreak on the tourism industry is, of course, already being felt. Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for the Single Market and Digital Agenda, acknowledged this even before total confinement was decreed in a number of countries: in the absence of the "constant flow of visitors" to which the Old Continent is usually subjected, the European tourism industry is expected to suffer "a financial loss of around €1 billion per month". Italy alone could lose 7.4 billion euros in revenues between March and May 2020, according to estimates by the Confturismo-Confcommercio organisation.

Concerned about the short- and medium-term impacts of the virus on the sector, the European Tourism Manifesto, which brings together more than 50 public and private organizations covering "the entire tourism chain", published a call for specific new measures on 17 March. "Support for tourism must be a priority in the recovery plans", the text pleads. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in particular are at risk, with millions of jobs at stake.

The Oxford Economics Institute estimates that tourism could have an impact "six times greater than that caused by September 11", with "4.6 million fewer jobs" due to trip cancellations. These job losses would then push the US unemployment rate from 3.5% to 6.3% in the coming months. To make up for this delay, the Oxford Economics report considers two scenarios: either a return to normal in June, in which case 1.6 million jobs could be restored; or a return to "50% of normal" in June, in which case only 823,000 jobs could be restored.

Assuming that economic activities return to normal in a few coming months, how long will it take for tourists to return to their cherished habits? Can everything really get back to the way it was before, as if nothing had happened? Projections by some scientists, who believe that social distancing measures should be applied for 'a year or more', seem to suggest otherwise. Some, such as Dr. Bruce Aylward of the WHO, also warns of the risk of a return of the virus in other seasons, potentially very dangerous (and costly) if a vaccine is not found by then.

Once the coronavirus episode is behind us, good and bad habits will resume, inexorably. Following the first oil shock, the 1973-1974 crisis had also blocked the flow, but it picked up again immediately afterward. In addition, we now have increasingly distant tourist flows, which was not necessarily the case before. This is a phenomenon that will be put on hold for a while, but which will resume fairly quickly. On the other hand, the "positive" aspect of this crisis is that pollution flows have been considerably reduced, both for air and car mobility."

Towards a Reduction in Air Traffic?

Due to the numerous border closures and visa restrictions decided in recent weeks, the number of air flights is indeed falling. According to the Flightradar24 website, which provides a live overview of air travel around the world, it has recorded 44% of the number of flights at the same time last year, with "only" 7,150 simultaneous flights at the time.

A glimpse into the future? This is good news for the environment since aviation alone is responsible for about 2% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. According to data from the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME), it is even possible to say that a kilometer by plane is 45 times more polluting than a kilometer on a high-speed train.

As a result of the stoppage of air flights (but also of other economic activities, particularly industrial ones), NASA has observed an impressive decrease in the rate of air pollution in the Wuhan region of China at the height of the crisis. Quoting data from Columbia University, the BBC already notes similar declines in the New York area. Especially since the pollution emitted by an aircraft on a journey must be divided by the number of passengers on board. Once this calculation has been made, the result is quite clear: Taking average occupancy rates, the European Environment Agency comes up with a rate of emissions of 14 grams of CO₂ per passenger per kilometer for the train compared to 104 grams for the car and 285 grams for the plane.

Visits from the Couch

As an even more direct consequence of the epidemic, museums around the world are moving into the digital age. Some of them offer entirely virtual tours. Museums worldwide are finally offering to discover some of the exhibition's contents from home. Fifteen of the world's largest museums, for example, decided to remain (at least partially) "open" online, including the Louvre in Paris, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Met in New York. Not to mention the Google Arts and Culture platform, which since 2011 offers virtual visits to certain museums or places, and the possibility of viewing thousands of works in high definition.

Is this online cultural offer capable of dissuading some people from travelling? What defines tourism is mobility, the fact of going to a place. These measures are to be welcomed because they open up horizons and help to maintain the activity of the cultural sector, but isn't it also a way of attracting real visits in a second phase?

It can be expected that overtourism should easily recover from the current crisis. Even if localized rejections, already existing before the appearance of COVID-19, could be reinforced: For several years now, we have been observing demonstrations by local populations tired of the saturation of tourists, as with "Tourists go home" in Barcelona or Venice. These processes will reappear as soon as tourism resurfaces - they could even multiply and increase in intensity.

Date: 2020-04-06

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/corona-crisis-cannot-stop-overtourism-for-long-news11472>