

MASS TOURISM DESTINATIONS: ATTEMPTS TO FIX PAST EXCESSES IN THE POST-COVID ERA



Crowds on the streets of Barcelona or Venice is a scenario that has changed dramatically due to the pandemic. Having tourists back is the current priority of cities, but some changes are already being devised before the recovery comes.

It was the main global subject until the pandemic hit: the explosive growth of tourism in cities, reaching excessive levels of massification, with negative effects for local inhabitants, sometimes pushing them away.

The scenario was completely reversed with COVID-19: **the cities that lived most from tourism are now the first to suffer an unparalleled crisis.** Now their streets are deserted, and the economy is on hold due to a lack of visitors. But experts say at this stage, where tourism is stagnating, cities should take back sustainability targets and plan more adjusted strategies for the moment of recovery, correcting excesses from the past.

The issue of mass tourism destinations was already prominently debated before the pandemic, but it may have accelerated reflection on the subject. Disruptive moments, like the pandemic crisis, naturally call for reflections on future development strategies, particularly responses to the need for more sustainable tourism in the long term.

Now, and given the economic crisis, cities are more focused on recovering tourists than on creating restrictions. The paradigm has reversed, everyone is in panic, they want tourists back quickly.

But tourism will not be able to return the same way and with the number of people who have been strolling around the cities until now. Sooner or later they will have to think seriously about strategies for the new normal – and, in this tougher phase of the crisis, the post-Covid era, there are still no examples related to that goal, because recovery in cities is predicted to be slower than in other destinations, even with a vaccine.

Below are some signs of change across different regions, known as the mass tourism destinations, many of them already planned before the pandemic.

Venice Will Charge Entry Fees from 2022 Onwards

It was something the Italian city had already considered before the pandemic, one of the worst examples in the world of tourism massification: charging an entry fee for daily visitors who do not stay in hotels, i.e. more than 30 million people per year pre-COVID year. The locally called ‘contributo di accesso’ fee was postponed in 2020 due to the outbreak, but Venice decided this month that it would be implemented from 1 January 2022.

Venice is one of the first cities to take concrete measures for the post-COVID era. “Given the pandemic, we have decided to make an important gesture to encourage the return of tourists”,

explained Michele Zuin, responsible for the city's economic affairs, when announcing the taxes.

Entry fees in Venice will vary according to the days when the city is busiest, to dissuade people from visiting it when it is most crowded. The rates have not yet been set but should be around 10 euros.

Lisbon Will Only Accept Cruises that Dock with Electricity

Having tourists back is Lisbon's current priority, the national destination most affected by COVID-19. More than 70% of hotels are closed due to a lack of guests. The city hall's priority is to help local commerce survive this most difficult period without tourists, through tax exemptions and outright grants. Establishments can apply for these supports through a portal that will be available in December.

But several measures are already being taken to correct the negative impacts felt in the recent past. One example is cruises. At the end of 2021, only tourist ships that use electricity during docking will be allowed in Lisbon, after a protocol was signed this summer between the city hall and the port of Lisbon. The restriction of cruises has a more environmental character, as "they were a major source of pollution in the city, almost as much as that generated by the airport", according to a spokesman for the city hall. He also adds that the measure will have an impact on tourism, considering that not all ships are equipped with alternatives to the use of diesel at the time of docking. Moreover, the cruise industry is likely to have a difficult post-COVID recovery.

Lisbon's city hall will also continue to ban local accommodation in the historic center - one of the most debated issues before the pandemic, due to the concentration of tourism in the city's most popular spots. This has also led to the displacement of residents and evictions from these neighborhoods, a process that also threatened to mischaracterize the city.

The scenario has changed radically with the reduction of tourists due to the COVID-19, but the city hall wants local accommodation to be converted into a normal rental, and this has already happened in over a hundred cases. "We don't expect tourism in the coming years to reach the 2019 figures, but we hope that the second and third quarters of next year will already be slightly different," summarizes the same source from Lisbon's city hall. He also says that the Portuguese capital has always been far from the massification levels of Venice or Barcelona.

Barcelona Maintains Ban on New Hotels

The Catalan city, the cradle of Gaudí's art - whose magnum opus is the Sagrada Família, one of the world's most visited monuments - is also one of the mass tourism destinations and a case study of how this causes antibodies in the local population. But Barcelona's economy lives mainly from tourism, a sector where 120 000 people work. The paralysis caused by COVID-19 is generating an unprecedented crisis in the city.

Barcelona maintains the urban law created in 2017, a moratorium on the number of hotel beds and tourist flats, prohibiting the issuing of permits to build new hotels or accommodation. But, given the current desertification caused by the pandemic outbreak, the city's current goal is not to have empty hotels and to alleviate the economic and social crisis created by the pandemic.

Machu Picchu Had Already Set Limits for Number of Visitors

Several places in the world, which attract crowds of tourists, had already established restrictions before COVID-19. This is the case of the Machu Picchu archaeological site, visited annually by over a

million people. Admissions were limited to 2500 per day in a joint decision by the Peruvian government and UNESCO - and, since the beginning of 2019, anyone wanting to go hiking for several days has to hire an official guide and walk the trails in a restricted time.

The Taj Mahal in India has also limited visits to 180 minutes to reduce the tourist crowd inside the temple. In the Asian kingdom of Bhutan, each tourist must pay a daily fee of \$200 (€162), which includes accommodation, meals, transport and a guide. A substantial part of the fees ends up financing improvements to the country's education system and infrastructure.

The Greek island of Santorini had already imposed a limit of 8,000 cruise tickets, and Cinque Terre, on the Italian Riviera, had also adopted a visitor-counting system, limiting them to 1.5 million annually. The Galapagos archipelago in Ecuador decided to limit landings by touristic vessels to four within 14 days as a protective measure for the islands.

Examples of recent restrictions, but applied even before the outbreak, including Antarctica, where cruises with more than 500 people have been banned and only 100 passengers can be on land at a time. And New Zealand has established that only 100 people can walk simultaneously the 'Milford Track' in the fjord area.

Cities are Expected When the Pandemic is Brought Under Control

Cities will face tough months until the spring of 2021, when some recovery in tourism is expected, albeit more slowly in urban destinations.

Nobody is speeding up the restriction measures, everything is very focused on getting to March and April and attracting tourists, because the vaccine will reach the market and there will be some normality in flights.

Cities that debate the 'excessive' number of tourists, the current top priority on the agenda of local authorities and tourism industry professionals is to recover the lost flow of tourists, because it is obvious their importance to the economy of the cities.

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