

POST-PANDEMIC TOURISM - IS OVERTOURISM COMING BACK AGAIN?



On June 10, the city of Amsterdam sent out a press release to the world: "Visitors who disrespect our residents and our heritage are not welcome."

Amsterdam, with a population of about 860,000, had 20.3 million visitors in 2018, and about two million more in 2019. Many, or even the majority, come for the Rembrandts in the Rijksmuseum, for Van Gogh's sunflowers, for the Anne Frank House or for the canals. But many others are problematic tourists. They come on a beer tour, on a dope tour, get drunk, get stoned, roam the streets bawling. **Now, alcohol may no longer be sold after ten in the evening**, and anyone who bawls around at night, sleeps in their car or simply parks somewhere, urinates in the canals, has a loud boat party, or carries cannabis or laughing gas must pay a fine. "Hosts" will support the work of the police.

There have been umpteen approaches to curbing problem tourism in recent years. "City in Balance" sought to prioritize the needs of residents; "Enjoy & Respect" used Facebook and Instagram targeting to make potential problem tourists aware of the steep penalties for undesirable behavior and proactively curb them. Since tourists are apparently not expected to change, the city must change. As a first step, prostitution is to move out of De Wallen and into erotic centers, on the outskirts of the city.

Has the Mood Finally Changed?

"We missed an opportunity," says Andreas Kagermeier. Kagermeier is a tourism researcher, he teaches at the University of Trier. In 2017, when the resistance of city dwellers spread from Barcelona to Dubrovnik, to Venice and also to Amsterdam, and the media finally invented the word "overtourism," the tourism industry and tourism science were equally surprised. "We hadn't established early warning systems," says Kagermeier. "We only woke up when the population suddenly went to the barricades." The problem, as he sees it, is that "once the mood tips, it's almost impossible to fix. You can go for limits, as Hallstatt is trying to do, or with entrance fees like Dubrovnik. However, in the end, you have to draw hard lines." Dubrovnik's hard line is currently just under 40 euros strong. That's how much it costs to see the city within its walls.

Amsterdam, Barcelona or Venice, Salzburg, Hallstatt or even Dubrovnik have something in common that seems to predestine them for the phenomenon of overtourism: tourists and locals can hardly avoid each other. Tourists appear en masse, flock the same sights over and over again, usually staying for a short city break or even just a day trip. It is relatively easy to perceive overcrowding as congestion.

This form of mass tourism slowly emerged with the ever-growing cruise ships, with the new preference for short vacations, and with city governments and an industry that both wanted one thing above all else: Growth.

In Barcelona, the number of overnight stays has risen by ten percent each year since 1995. What sounds moderate and steady is not: from 2010 to 2019, tourist numbers more than doubled from

seven million to 20.3 million. For Palma de Mallorca, the boom came after the financial crisis with the cruise ships. Instead of around 550,000 tourists as in 2009, 1.2 million now disembark in the island capital. In Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca or Venice, the giant ships discharge between 15 and 20,000 passengers a day into the narrow streets and pollute the air with far more sulfur dioxide than car traffic.

In Venice, the MS Orchestra already sailed through the middle of the lagoon at the beginning of June. It's impossible to speak of a banishment of cruise ships from Venice, writes the author Petra Reski in her Venice blog. The tourist use of Venice, which began around 2000 at the latest, will continue, despite all declarations to the contrary by the city administration, before and after Corona. Venice has about 33 million tourists a year, the port is privatized. Even the planned new berth for cruise ships will be financed by investors such as the steel group Duferco and will not change anything about the structural problem.

The fact that locals don't want this sellout isn't slowing down the development. "The Corona phase was not used to listen more closely to the population," says Kagermeier in reference to all cities. During the compulsory pause, despite the protests, some of which were massive, there was *grosso modo* no focus on participatory approaches. The result: "There are no signs that post-pandemic tourism looks any different than before."

Overtourism as a Symptom

Something could have been done about it: While approaches such as "equalization," where you try to draw tourists' attention to other destinations or spread them out more evenly over the year, usually don't work: tourists who want to see the Sagrada Familia want to see the Sagrada Familia. Those who want to go on a cruise want to go on a cruise. Those who want to party want to party and will go to Ballermann in Mallorca accordingly. The cities, financially strained by the crisis, hope that tourism will soon pick up again. Only eight million visitors came to Amsterdam in 2020. 11 percent of Amsterdam's jobs depend on tourism. Accordingly, the municipality of Amsterdam describes a scenario according to which there could be even fewer, namely seven million, in 2021 as a "worst case".

In Barcelona, tourists began to take painful notice when Airbnb hit a housing and labor market battered by the financial crisis. A 2019 study by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona concluded that seven percent of rent increases were due to Airbnb. With rents already high, unemployment high and real wages stagnating, this effect then becomes a problem.

Are Visitors Better Than Tourists?

Overtourism, Kagermeier emphasizes, is not a clearly defined concept. Rather, it describes a mood that can only be loosely linked to specific causes. No city wants the mood to change. Cities such as Vienna, Copenhagen, and even Barcelona are certainly monitoring how their populations are faring with tourists. For Copenhagen, it is already a warning sign when the approval rating for tourism falls below eighty percent, reports Kagermeier. In Barcelona, approval is currently at seventy percent. How high the approval ultimately also depends on how many female residents profit from tourism.

Before Corona, Vienna had just developed a new strategy for Vienna tourism. Without much need, as one might assume, because according to a survey by "Wien Tourismus," the city agency responsible for tourism management, nine out of ten Viennese are fully behind tourism.

Norbert Kettner, director of Vienna Tourism, also attributes the fact that Vienna has never been affected by overtourism to the city's generous layout. There is enough space for everyone.

The "Visitor Economy Strategy," developed in 2019 with the City of Vienna, the tourism industry, urban and real estate developers, district representatives trade, mobility providers, universities and an international advisory board, has its own kind of broken-window theory, like New York once had in the early 1980s: if too many souvenir stores appear, restrictions are imposed, such as street sales of concert tickets. "Anything that contributes to a 'selling off' of public space - tacky electric cars or overflowing street sales - should be seen as a warning sign," says Kettner.

Vienna also has an Airbnb problem, suspended for corona reasons, similar to Barcelona. In 2017, a study by the Vienna University of Technology showed that the Viennese housing market was deprived of about 2,000 apartments due to tourist rentals. A problem for the Viennese and hotels alike that remains in limbo.

Now, after the pandemic or rather in the pandemic break, the situation in Vienna is ambivalent. Vienna Tourism wants to continue to promote "quality tourism" and to lure visitors to other districts as far away as Transdanubia, on the other side of the Danube. For those who come to Vienna by car, the idea is to increase arrivals by train.

However, the "drastic damper" on the pandemic means that many hotel businesses no longer have any reserves. "In the reverberations of the crisis, we must above all generate frequency again," summarizes Kettner. However, he also expects tourism to recover by 2023. More than twenty new hotel projects have been registered, there are new additions to luxury hotel chains, and convention tourism is also derailing cautiously.

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