

TRAVEL FOR ALL - DESTINATIONS FACE THE IMPACT OF MASS TOURISM



Travel has become something self-evident within a generation: Where it was previously a privilege of a small, wealthy elite and the more adventurous, today it is an obvious prerequisite for a happy and complete life. The good news is that this shift represents civilizational progress. But the bad news is that, precisely because of this democratization and its massive scale, we must ask ourselves

more and more often about how it is experienced by those who live in the places that are visited. Mass tourism has become a pressing problem.

The Boom After Silence

The pandemic did not invent the longing for a change of scenery, new people and experiences – but it made the longing of our society more tangible than ever. A large part of the population has simply had enough of the lockdown measures, restrictions and uncertainty of the years 2020 and 2021 and is now catching up on lost opportunities. **In 2025, there were about 1.52 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide.** In Europe, these were 793 million visits – about six percent above the pre-crisis level of 2019. In the EU there were almost 3.1 billion overnight stays in accommodation establishments – a new record.

Record values can be interpreted as confirmation of success: There is movement again, the tourism industry scores points, and local governments and their budgets benefit. But the figures could also be read as a warning signal: The relevant actors often ask themselves whether the places in which tourism is booming have really benefited from it – and if so, who exactly profited from it? An American study sums it up aptly: “We measure what tourism produces, not who benefits from it.” That is precisely the question that is now being asked with renewed urgency in Europe.

From Privilege to Basic Need

Mass tourism is a phenomenon of modernity, the democratization of travel and its means of transport. Until the 18th century, the Grand Tour was part of the education system of Europe’s aristocracy and the wealthy middle classes. The railways, paid holidays, mass motorization, charter flights and package tours opened up the world – and today, for many, travel is part of the idea of a good life. Not only does it promise relaxation and adventures, but also biographical enrichment: the experiences and places visited, the pictures and stories, shape a person’s self-image.

It is this democratization that is right. Travel can educate – precisely because it brings us out of our everyday lives and exposes us to the unfamiliar. The experience of other languages and ways of life teaches us that there are always alternatives to our own. In this respect, travel is education in relativization – which is another word for tolerance. Denying people this experience because they are too poor or too busy is a socio-political regression.

Democratization, however, does not mean that there should actually be no limits to who can travel where and when – and at what price. Freedom of travel means freedom to travel, but not freedom to overwhelm other people’s freedom of travel with our own. There is a world of difference between the freedom to travel and the freedom to visit St. Mark’s Square in Venice at all times of the day and year, the Jungfrauoch in the Bernese Alps, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Munich old town, or a high-

altitude valley in the Dolomites in the summer. The freedom to travel begins where other people's freedom to live takes priority.

Who Benefits - And Who Pays?

It is easy to list those who benefit directly from the boom: The travelers themselves, of course, but also the hotels, restaurants, mountain railways and tour operators, the airlines and attractions, the municipalities with their taxes and fees, and the owners of the coveted properties. The latter profit immensely from the increased demand: In the EU there were 952 million overnight stays in short-term accommodations such as Airbnb, Booking or Expedia in 2025 – eleven percent more than the previous year and more than 32 percent higher than in 2023.

The indirect costs are more difficult to assess. Who has to suffer the consequences of the increased traffic volume? Who has to finance the necessary overcapacities for waste, water, safety, and public space? Who suffers when apartments are permanently converted into holiday apartments, or when a district swaps its bakery, pharmacy and everyday shops for souvenir shops and catering eateries? A study by the EU Joint Research Center in Paris, Milan and Rome found no uniform cause-effect relationships, but correlations between a high share of short-term rentals, higher asking rents or property prices and the shift towards tourist-oriented services. Tourism rarely causes housing shortages, but it certainly exacerbates them in many metropolises.

Jobs do not always translate into shared prosperity. The OECD has long been calling attention to structural problems in many tourism jobs: Low wages, irregular and long working hours, seasonality and weak social security in part of the sector. If a waitress in a four-star hotel can no longer afford to live anywhere near her workplace because she earns her money on the road, tourism is creating real value – but not sharing it. Here, the difference between tourism as a local prosperity model and tourism as an extraction model becomes apparent.

The Wrong Answer: Making Travel Expensive Again

To conclude from the overhang in individual destinations that travel must become a privilege again may sound seductive, but it is politically short-sighted. Concentrating on the reduction of congestion by higher prices achieves order – but only for those who can afford it. Whoever thinks that the best travelers are those who can pay the most will always select assets, not qualities.

Limitations will be necessary, but they must be based on other criteria. The decisive factor for managing tourism is a combination of capacity management and fair fees, regulation and new quality standards. There are various levers for the respective bottlenecks: Daily visitor quotas for sensitive natural areas, time windows for historical centers, higher fees for overburdened attractions, or limitations for professional short-term rentals in times of housing shortages. In addition, the prices should be as socially compatible as possible and, where capacities are scarce, not necessarily higher admission fees, but quotas or time slots.

Quality Instead of Quantity - But What Does It Mean?

“Quality instead of quantity” has become a catchphrase, but it sounds empty if quality is understood as “more affluent guests”. Quality rather means the net contribution a visit makes to a place. Better tourism would mean longer stays instead of short photo stops, more money flowing into the local economy, public transport instead of additional rental cars, flattened seasonal peaks, the protection of natural and cultural assets through tourist revenues and an improved quality of life for the local population. In 2026 the OECD explicitly called for a shift towards value-based tourism models that

focus on social and environmental benefits, local value creation, visitor management and data availability.

Talk of value sounds virtuous, but contains politically explosive content: Destinations would have to disclose different key figures – not just the number of visitors, but the added value achieved per guest day. What share of tourist taxes went to public transport, housing, culture or nature conservation? How are rents and commuting distances developing among tourism workers? What is the actual acceptance rate among residents? What is the carbon footprint, water and traffic footprint of an additional overnight stay? And finally: Is there really an improvement in the quality of life for year-round residents?

A Tourism Dividend - Not Necessarily as Cash

An American tourism expert has called for a “tourism dividend”. In Europe it need not take the form of an annual sum, but the idea behind it is worthwhile: If a place offers its natural and cultural foundations, its infrastructure and public space as a basis for a booming visitor industry, a share of the proceeds should go back into the community.

This could take the form of expanded public transport that also benefits the population, subsidized housing for employees, swimming pools, museums, hiking trails, urban maintenance or childcare. Or a residents’ pass that gives access to cultural offerings – or the renaturation of landscapes that score points with tourists. Transparency is essential: A tourism tax that ultimately only finances more advertising and thus more tourists is not a compensation payment, but a growth impetus disguised as a fee.

Equally relevant is the question of ownership: The more local companies, cooperatives, family businesses, regional value chains are involved, the more value creation takes place locally. The more a destination is subject to global platforms, real estate speculators or vertically integrated corporations, the greater the outflow of value. Tourism policy must therefore include other policies: Not only marketing, but also land use, housing, transport, labor market, cultural and environmental policy.

From Destination Marketing to Destination Management

Perhaps the biggest change in institutions is needed within tourism organizations themselves: **Their self-image and thus their budgets should no longer be geared solely towards generating demand.** A place that already has plenty of visitors does not necessarily need more visitors – it needs management. Marketing budgets could be partially converted into management budgets for data acquisition, guidance services, mobility concepts, resident dialog, capacity management and the development of less strained times and places. Simply to fight mass tourism. Caution is advised: “Dispersion” should not simply mean shifting mass tourism to the next idyll. New offerings should only be promoted if the carrying capacity of the population, infrastructure and nature allows and wants it.

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