

“Wish you weren’t here” - the overtourism phenomenon

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Abstract

The paper is focused on the multilayered phenomenon of overtourism, which is in certain attractive tourist destinations increasingly considered as excessive or harmful. Huge challenges in the daily life of local communities as well as the negative impact on the unique and precious environment and, consequentially, steadily growing anti-tourism sentiments are pushing political decision makers on local and regional levels to act with the aim of reducing tourism influx to some destinations. The research points at key drivers that causes overtourism (traditionally strong seasonality of tourist demand, the growth of world middle-income class with more time and money to be spent for travel, the emergence of low-carriers, new types of accommodations, the possibility of self-organized low-budget holidays, a huge impact of the social media/platforms). To the internationally known examples of overtourism (Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam, Machu Pichu, Oahu, Galapagos, Nepal and Altamira) and countermeasures (such as entry tax to the cities/destinations and states, ban of cruise ships, high daily tourist tax, reduction of hotels and short-term rentals of private accommodations, ‘respect the city’ campaigns, discouraging certain types of tourists’ behavior, obligatory booking and specific time slot for visiting certain attractions), we added two examples of potentially overtourism sites in Slovenia.

Key Words:

Overtourism, negative impacts, countermeasures

Introduction

The term overtourism is closely linked to the development and growth of tourism in the last decades. The positive contribution of the growing tourism industry to the world's economy has brought unpleasant effects in overcrowded destinations - damage to the unique environment, to specific heritage sites, to the daily routines of the locals, to the balanced economic and social development of local communities, etc. Some acclaim the Late Prince Philip on his tour in Slovenia 2008 was right branding tourism as 'national prostitution', and tourists as people who 'ruin cities' (Michael Hall & Lew, 2009, p. 1).

A more than a decade later, media are reporting on overtourism, antitourism and touristophobia in many diverse destinations - Barcelona, Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam (Mihalic, 2020). After a temporary recess during the pandemic period these destinations are facing even worse situation than before despite implementing crowd management policies to protect the natural attractions and civil rights of local people (Birtles, 2023). A renewed debate in public and in tourist academic forums about the adequacy of those policies early 2024 was triggered by widespread protests against tourism, mostly in Spain. Again, publications reported on "wish you weren't here" (Sophie 2019) destinations and protesters in Barcelona, who sprayed tourists with water and shouting 'tourists go home' (Pitrelli, 2024).

The term 'overtourism' come into use in 2016 as an alternative to the term 'Tourismfobia' (Koens et al, 2018). After years, the term still lacks a standardized academic characterization. Koens et al. (2018) describe it as negative impact of tourism on host communities and on natural environment, while UNWTO's definition (2018) emphasizes its excessive influence on the perceived quality of life of citizens and/or the quality of visitors' experience. Mihalic (2020, n.p.) conceptualizes it from the standpoint of sustainability. According to Goodwin (2018), the places that are overcrowded by tourist are changing their character, losing its authenticity, causing irritation and annoyance to residents. Therefore, overtourism is related to conflicts among tourists and local residents in the hosting communities (Rangus et al., 2018).

Contrary to the above, certain academics claim that there is no such thing as overtourism, particularly not in the sense as it is often discussed. For Buhalis (Butcher, 2024, n.p.) overtourism can only be a label applied to many different capacity-related issues that attend the democratization of tourism, and 'a good coin' for numerous books, papers, conferences, non-governmental organizations and global bodies. He also stated that "there is no overtourism - there is only badly managed tourism" (Buhalis, 2020, n.p.).

There is an on-going discussion over distinctions between overtourism, mass tourism and overcrowding (Verissimo, 2020). For example, overtourism is predominantly discussed from the view point of the hosts, while mass tourism is related with places where thousands of tourists are in the same place at the same time to enjoy holidays in the cheapest way.

According to European Parliament (2018), overtourism is not limited only to urban places (e.g. Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam, Dublin, Reykjavik, Stockholm). It is also present in many heritage sites and attractions (e.g. Bagan, Machu Picchu, Tallin Old Town, Prague Old Town, Vatican City, Rovaniemi etc.), coastal areas and islands (Isle of Sky, Maya Bay, Santorini, Mallorca, Galapagos, etc.), as well as in some rural areas (e.g. Bled, Grand Canyon, Plitvice, Yellowstone, etc.).

The purpose of the study is to give answers to three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What are the drivers of overtourism?

RQ2: How some most 'endangered' destinations/cities from overtourism try to 'fight' against it?

RQ3: Can we talk about overtourism in Slovenia?

The paper presents initial step in further empirical research on overtourism.

Research design and methods

The study is based on qualitative data and applies mixed research methods.

Most of the data were collected in desk-top research and are based on secondary sources (on selected scientific articles, published from 2016 to 2024 and on relevant non-academic publications published in 2023 and 2024). The secondary data for answering the RQ2 are supported with data collected from on-site observations of the author, who visited destinations/sites, mentioned in the second subsector of the Findings. Two on-site interviews have been performed to get the answer to the RQ3. Content analysis was used to process the qualitative data (text condensation, interpretation, citation), and descriptive method to present the findings. Findings of the research are presented in three subsectors and follow the answers to RQs.

Findings

Drivers of overtourism

Strong seasonality in tourism demand is the most important driver of overtourism (Butler & Dodds, 2022), together with demographic and economic growth which results in more middle- and upper-income individuals with time and money to be spent in tourism. Against increasing demand, transportation enterprises have enlarged their capacities. The emergence and growth of low cost-carriers (particularly in USA and in Europe) revolutionized air travel for mass market. Moreover, the technology has allowed instant online reservations for travel, accommodation and other services. Technological platforms like AirBnB are promoting affordable prices for private accommodations in central locations in most visited destinations (ibid).

These developments together with the possibility of self-organized low-budget holidays, have opened the travel opportunities to lower-income groups of customers who could not afford them in the past. City break holidays have become more attractive for Westerners where domestic travel was traditionally rather expensive. On the other hand, coastal cities with nearby attractions have become overcrowded due to the low prices of large cruise ships that can bring ten to twenty thousand visitors per single day to a certain location (e.g. Dubrovnik, Venice, Santorini, etc.).

Research show that the entertainment industry has through social media significantly contributed to overtourism by shooting movies on certain attractive locations and thus becoming a source of ideas about 'hot-spots' and 'must be' places. When tourists reach the spot, a 'must do' activity of the new-age travelers is to make selfies and post them to notify their followers: 'I was there'.

Examples of overtourism destinations/sites and their 'fight' to decrease the number of tourists

In the following cases of overtourism we show the policies imposed by authorities on a destination's level. There is, however, only limited reports on the results and success of these policies. We have chosen three cities (Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam), three natural sites (Oahu, Galapagos, Sagarmatha Natural Park) and two historical sites (Machu Picchu, Altamira).

Some cities have started charging *entry fees* for daily visitors. Having an influx of over 30 Mio visitors annually, **Venice** have recently implemented daily entry fee of 5 € per visitor. With this measure, the city continues to heed the UNESCO warning of "irreversible damage" to historic center. In 2019, local government *banned cruise ships from the center* (Wilson, 2024).

Dubrovnik (Croatia) has gained popularity after appearing in TV show Game of Thrones. Birtles (2020) reports on over 500 cruise ships bringing over 800.000 passengers to Dubrovnik in 2016, who usually stay only for few hours. The noise and crowds forced residents out. There were 5,000 residents living in the Oldtown in 1991, but only 1,100 in 2017. In 2019, municipality implemented a strategy *to cap number of cruise ships* to two per day with a limit of 5,000 tourists and to schedule better cruise ships' arrival and departure time (Saraogi, 2019). A '*respect the city*' campaign banned visitors to walk around in swimwear, eat and drink around cultural monuments, as well as climb to the city walls.

Amsterdam (Netherlands) was visited by 20 Mio people in 2019. In 2024, ocean-going cruise ships were banned from docking in the city (Wilson, 2024). Local government plans to cut in half the number of docking river cruise ships in next five year (there were more than 2,000 of them). The City imposed stricter regulations for the construction of new hotels (a new hotel can only be built/opened if an existing one closes down - Trout, 2024) and reduction of short-term rentals of private accommodation units. The local authority has taken measures to discourage certain types of tourists' behavior, mostly related to drugs and overdrinking, has banned new tourist shops in city center, beer bikes and is encouraging visitors with apps to visit less busy areas of the city (Birtles, 2020).

Oahu (Hawaii) tries to reduce the tourism influx of 10 Mio travelers a year by implementing 'green' tourist fee of 25 USD to tourists when checking into hotels or short-term rentals. Local government would use this money to take care of unique natural environment, repair coral reefs and maintain state parks and trails (Wilson, 2024). To protect flora and fauna, some natural attractions (e.g. Hanauma Bay, n.d.) are closed for public certain days of the week. Visits must be pre-booked for the date and hour of entrance.

The beauty and unique ecosystem of the **Galapagos** islands was initially meant to be shared in small, environmentally friendly doses. However, more than a quarter of million tourists visited archipelago in 2022. Endangered species are at risk of extinction because of improper practice. Over 200 new hotels were built in the years and external competition heavily reduced opportunities for the local people to fully profit from the tourism. It soon became obvious that these economic and ecological imbalances cannot be solved only by an entry fee of 100 USD for the visit (Reale, 2022).

In **Nepal**, the entrance fee to Sagarmatha national park (Everest base camp hike) is only 16 USD. Due to high number of hikers, there are tons of human excrement piled up every year on the way to Everest base camp. Because of the cold climate, it will take decades to decompose (Sophie, 2019). In opposite to Nepal, the neighboring Bhutan (opened to tourism from 1974) is an example of the country that so far managed to keep tourist number low due to high daily tourist visa of 200 USD, which encourages 'high-value, low impact tourism'.

The iconic destination in Peru, **Machu Picchu**, was not built to handle enormous increase of visitors, jumping from 400.000 tourists a year to close to 1.5 million in two decades. The UNESCO threat of putting the site on its "List of World Heritage in Danger", resulting in limitation of daily tickets to 5,600 (Birtles, 2020). Visitors must arrive within a specific time slot with four-hour time limit for each visit and can enter the site only with official tourist guide. Group sizes have been limited to 16 people and visitors can only walk on defined routes (Wilson, 2024).

An example of how to match the tourism growth with protection of historical sites is the replica of prehistoric cave **Altamira**, Spain. As an icon of humanity and art through paintings and engravings dating back 15,000 years, Altamira also became a major tourist destination. In the 1970s, it attracted more than 150,000 visitors per year. Due to deterioration, it was closed in 1977, but reopened few years after. Allowance of only 11,300 visitors per year resulted a waiting list up to three years long. Thus, original cave has been closed again and its replica 'Neo-cave' has been built for visiting purposes. It attracts now on average quarter of million of visitors per year (Dans & Gonzales, 2018).

The chosen cases attract a lot of media attention, however, there are many usually neglected small places that also experience the mixed blessing of being touristically attractive.

Overtourism in a small Central European Country: Ljubljana and Bled

By the number of visitors in 2023, Slovenia (2 Mio inhabitants on 20.000 km²) was ranked 38th in the world's tourism. More than six million visitors spent 16 million nights (GOV.SI, 2024). This was a new record, with which Slovenia's tourism not only exceeded the numbers from 2019, but also did better comparing with the world and Europe (Tourism in numbers, 2024). The most popular destinations were mountains regions and the capital, Ljubljana. "Green boutique-ness, smaller footprint and greater value for all" is the vision of Slovenia tourism development (Strategy, 2022). But the reality is different.

With 20 % of annual increase in the number of visitors, Ljubljana saw the highest increase (GOV.SI, 2024). The city is struggling to balance between being a good place for people and the place for making money. At the expense of tourists, the city centre is barely passable at the height of the season, the structure of the population in the city has changed (Rebuza, 2023). "In the past, the cars were superfluous, now residents are" (ibid). The interviewee, a resident of the city centre, complained:

"I was very happy when I have moved to the City Centre 25 years ago, but not anymore. The public space has become so commercialised that sometimes it is difficult to move around. Tourists drink late in the night, yell and laugh, without respect to the locals, who want to sleep. They pollute our neighbourhood with thrash. Many apartments in the building, where I live, are short-rented to tourists, which make the life of permanent residents miserable".

Bled, one of the most beautiful Alpine resorts in Europe, with the lake and island in the middle and with a castle perched on a cliff, is described as an "image of paradise", "a tourist gem of global dimensions", which was nominated one of the seven new wonders of the world (I feel Slovenia, n.d.). Yet, over 80% of residents are not happy with the tourism development of the site and with negative effects of tourism, e.g. increase of real estate prices, traffic, management of public space, etc. (STA, 2024). In the high season, the number of visitors and their behaviour discomfort the residents. "There are so many tourists that we can only walk like in a funeral procession" (Svet 24, 2023). The resident of Bled stated:

"The road infrastructure is 30 years behind, causing enormous traffic jams when entering the town. The swimming spaces are overloaded and too many boats and surfs are on the lake. Despite this, every

local still rents his/her last private room or garage to tourists. Increasing number of daily visitors calls for similar measures as in Venice: entrance fee. Bled deserves the prevalence of quality tourism above quantity of tourists."

The opinion of representatives of public tourism sector and scholars about overtourism in Slovenia is slightly different to the opinion of the residents of the two presented destinations. Yet, both groups of 'tourism designers' of the above-mentioned sites acknowledge that future tourism development needs to include the wellbeing of the residents more that it has been in the past.

Conclusion

The study gives some insights into how complex and multilayered phenomenon overtourism is. It certainly demands a multidimensional effort of tourism stakeholders with respect to the capacity limits, destination specificity and diversification of tourism services. It should include better congestion management, improving and adapting specific infrastructure, suggest measures towards reduction of seasonality, provide for careful planning and pricing, and sometimes include banning certain activities.

The negative impact of overtourism on local people with their historical and natural heritage clearly shows disrespect to the limitations of resources and sustainability in general. To safeguard its economic benefits, tourism development has to reorient itself from quantitative to qualitative growth, towards broader objectives of socially, culturally and ecologically sustainable qualitative growth (Benner, 2019). Only in this way, tourists can still expect a friendly smile on the lips of their hosts and feel hospitality of the chosen destination.

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