

Destinations

Cities Take Baby Steps to Address Overtourism This Summer

Dan Peltier, Skift - Apr 02, 2018 1:30 am



Skift Take

It took years for overtourism to happen in some destinations and the problem won't be solved overnight or this year. But to start, destinations could begin paying tourism workers more fairly and give locals more access to programs and services that tourism revenue supposedly helps to fund.

— Dan Peltier

Destinations are starting to take some measures to address overtourism for this summer season following protests across Europe last year that shined a light on the problem of overcrowding and costly disruptions to local economies.

Governments for years had neglected overtourism and treated travel like any other industry. That complacency in cities like Barcelona, Dubrovnik, and Venice left many residents railing for answers and accountability.

The lack of effective tourism planning, regulation, and investment caused residents' anger to spew over last year in some destinations like Barcelona. Organized street protests in Barcelona and other cities demanded action from elected officials.

With peak tourism season about to kick off in much of the world, much of the travel industry is probably wondering: what, if anything, has changed since last year?

Angered residents will likely still feel crowded this year, but more destinations have demonstrated they know they have a problem. Dubrovnik announced that this year it will start limiting the number of tourists that can enter its city center on a daily basis, which could impact some cruise lines that call on the city.

Barcelona hosted the [Barcelona Global Summit](#) last month that included discussions between policymakers and tourism officials from global destinations on their common challenges and learnings from overtourism.

The event also proposed solutions for how to address Barcelona residents' concerns and spread tourism throughout the year to reduce crowds in the summer.

Skift has extensively covered overtourism trends during the past few years and recently talked to tourism officials and companies to get their take on what to expect this year.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The pressure to grow tourism arrivals weighs on every destination marketing executive to show their work is effective, said Justin Francis, founder and CEO of [Responsible Travel](#), a UK-based booking site that offers tours around the world that educate travelers about how their behavior impacts local cultures and environments.

"How many times have we heard, 'I'm a new tourism minister or CEO and I'm going to double tourism numbers in the next 10 years?'" said Francis.

Francis said the travel industry isn't reacting to the full problem. "I think overtourism is misunderstood by industry leaders," he said. "If we just better address the crowds, I don't think that that will fully address the question. The era we're entering is one when travel will be regarded as any other industry."

The [United Nations World Tourism Organization](#) last year, in response to anti-tourism protests, said that growth is not the enemy and that overtourism is a management issue. "In my view, there are some places in the world where that's true," said Francis.

"In other cases, we have to accept that there is a numbers issue," said Francis. "No matter how well we manage them, there will just be too many tourists. I don't find [the United Nations World Tourism Organization's] statement at all helpful."

[Cruise lines have also shrugged off blame for their roles in making some places too popular.](#) "Cruise lines are absolving themselves of responsibility," said Francis. "The scale of the response is not matching the scale of the problem. I see little leadership."

Francis said overtourism has been building since the 1960s and 70s in many destinations. "The tourism industry cannot say they're innocent in the growth of tourism numbers," he said. "We've tracked 25 to 30 destinations where there's been media coverage of overtourism. Places like Bath and Oxford in England are now concerned with overtourism, for example."

WHAT HAVE DESTINATIONS LEARNED?

The [European Tourism Association](#), which represents more than 900 tour operators, tourism boards, hotels, and attractions across Europe, increasingly works with destinations on their overtourism obstacles.

"We find ourselves working with destinations to help them figure out how we keep them a place people want to live in," said Tim Fairhurst, director of policy at the European Tourism Association. "Barcelona has been reaching out."

Amsterdam, Paris, and Rome have put restrictions on coaches in their city centers, said Fairhurst. "This may well be the intention to deter tourism, but be careful what you wish for," he said. "Some attractions are also experimenting with dynamic pricing."

Non-European destinations like Machu Picchu implemented a ticket reservation system last July to limit how many people can visit during different parts of the day.

In January, Thailand's new minister of tourism, Weerasak Kowsurat, said that the country's bureaucracy led to decades of mismanagement and unchecked tourism growth, in stark contrast to his predecessor's public comments.

Thailand's government also announced last week that Maya Bay, on Phi Phi Leh island in the Andaman Sea, will be closed to all visitors for four months annually starting this June to help with the recovery coral reefs and other marine habitats.

The U.S. National Park Service has also had a reckoning during the past year about many years of inadequate funding to keep up with hundreds of millions of annual visitors but still isn't sure how to deal with overtourism.

Canadian tourism officials held the first Impact Sustainability Travel & Tourism conference in Victoria, Canada earlier this year to discuss overtourism throughout the country. But a Canadian city like Montreal said crowds aren't at a tipping point.

Montreal is coming off its 375th-anniversary last year, and Canada's 150th anniversary, that helped put it on a number of top places to go lists in 2017. Montreal's current strategy is to develop itineraries for different neighborhoods to get tourists to explore other areas than Old Montreal, said Catherine Binette, a spokesperson for Tourisme Montréal, the city's tourism board.

"Overtourism is not an issue for Montreal yet," said Binette. "We still have plenty of room to welcome tourists and many great initiatives to encourage them to discover other parts of town."

"We've don't promote some events to tourists because we already have so many residents attending them," said Binette. "But we're still growing and our cold winters really help with managing tourism. There's been some stuff over Airbnb but no other problems."

BARCELONA'S PLAN

Barcelona Global, a private, independent and non-profit association made up of 130 of the city's companies, research centers, entrepreneurs, business schools, universities, and cultural institutions, released recommendations for how to address residents' angst towards tourism after its summit last month.

The association analyzed tourism strategies of 16 other cities such as New York, London, Miami, and Melbourne to create the recommendations, which include getting tour operators to improve wages and working conditions for local workers and making sure tourism doesn't continue to drive up housing costs and create social mobility challenges.

Barcelona's city government is developing a system to track and issue short-term rental licenses to measure the impact of companies like Airbnb in the city. The recommendations note that Barcelona's tourism tax revenue, which comes from hotel and short-term rental stays, has increased about 44 percent in the past five years, from \$15.5 million in 2012 to more than \$22 million last year.

Francis said 22 countries have a tourism tax. "Taxation helps them address some of the problems around tourism," he said. "Barcelona, for example, has a substantial tourism function within government and has the ability to take action and manage this. In that case, I don't see taxation as the best answer."

Small destinations without tourism officials in local government are more likely to be pro-tourism tax, said Francis. "The tourism industry always throws up its hands against taxation but if it had done more to support preservation it might have escaped calls for taxation," he said.

CAUTIONARY TALES

[Iceland](#) is unique in that its population is only 338,000 but its visitor arrivals were nearly three times that last year. Tourism officials feel that the country has the capacity for more tourists but in mostly undiscovered regions.

Iceland's government started an airline route development fund to bring in more airlines, and is in talks with airlines and tour operators to start flights and tours to the north and east parts of the country, said Inga Hlín Pálsdóttir, director of [Visit Iceland](#) & Creative Industries at Promote Iceland.

Some 60 percent of Iceland's tourists visit during the winter months (September to May), but Pálsdóttir said local tourism officials expect a busy summer this year. "According to a survey that we do with tour operators around the world over 70 percent say that they are expecting the same numbers of bookings or more for this upcoming summer," she said. "We are not anticipating that the summer will be too crowded as we are seeing new accommodation and activities opening up this year."

While Iceland tourism officials insist the country doesn't have an overtourism problem, at least not yet, some destinations like the Azores are careful to not meet a similar fate.

Delta Air Lines will start a nonstop route in May from New York City to the Azores, a group of Portuguese islands about 1,000 miles west of the mainland. Luis Nunes, founder and CEO of booking site [Azores Getaways](#), said he's been working with Azores tourism officials to make sure the destination doesn't become the next Iceland.

Albeit, Nunes business still needs to make money and it remains to be seen if his company can grow if tourism doesn't follow an upward trajectory.

The Azores' tourism arrivals grew 25 percent year-over-year in 2017, said Nunes. "The number of beds is the issue for us," he said. "There are about 10,000 beds in traditional hotels across all the islands and hopefully we will have 1000 more beds within two years."

But Nunes said the Azores wants to limit new hotel builds. "New hotels in the Azores now must be only 5-star and can't have more than 150 rooms," he said. "But even 100 rooms is big for us."

Fairhurst said his organization is noticing a shift in European destination popularity with emerging visitor markets. "With the Myanmar source market, some operators are saying their first trip to Europe is to Bulgaria rather than London or Paris," he said. "I think that might be companies like Qatar Air enabling that."

Eastern European destinations might be perceived as less expensive than Western Europe and in many cases they are, said Fairhurst. "And there may well be a visa facilitation piece," he said.

"The single biggest risk for Western Europe destinations is complacency," said Fairhurst. "They're getting quite expensive and there's not that reassurance that money will go as far as people want it to. And right now some of the popular places just aren't that much fun during the busy times of the year."

WHAT TO EXPECT THIS SUMMER

If last year was any indication, Europe's tourism and economy is on an upswing after a couple years of sluggish growth due to terrorism, Brexit, and a weak euro.

Many travelers' safety perceptions have improved for Paris and Istanbul, which both had terrorist attacks in recent years, according to data from travel data company Mabrian, which analyzed more than 2.7 billion social media mentions for nearly 250 destinations in the past year to measure how travelers perceive various destinations.

Barcelona and London, however, are perceived as less safe than they were a year ago, Mabrian found. Both cities also had terrorist attacks in the past year.

Will Barcelona and other destinations' actions in recent months to try to appease residents – and better regulate tourism – be enough? Francis and others aren't convinced.

"If people aren't happy, there's the possibility that we could even see class action lawsuits," said Francis. "When I look at other industries, if local people don't get what they want by their street protests there are other ways to achieve their objectives. Will there be a turn from big tourism like there has been towards big food? I don't know, but I also don't currently know of any class action lawsuits."