

Guest Post: Time to think smarter about overtourism

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As politicians prepare for the WTM London Ministers' Summit on Tuesday 7th November, how will they tackle 'overtourism' exactly? Asks Charlotte Lamp Davies, VP Travel & Hospitality, DataArt

In this particular picturesque city, there's a sector that employs 4,300 people, provides business for 200 local companies, and generates an income of €283 million annually. Related sectors also see €170 million in expenditure.

Sounds good? Unfortunately, these tourism sector statistics for Venice are a double-edged sword as the city joins the growing ranks of destinations protesting about "overtourism". These stats, presented to residents of Venice at the end of September by Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), are based just on the cruise passengers arriving at the city. However, activists are marching amid calls to limit tourism, to preserve Venice's infrastructure, which at times has to cope with up to 80,000 tourists a day.

Venice isn't alone. Other destinations voicing their anger over the pressures of tourism include Hawaii, Amsterdam, Iceland Thailand, Machu Picchu, Everest, Santorini, Dubrovnik and Barcelona, among others. In fact, Spain is proving the poster child for the anti-tourism movement. And their voices are getting louder; demonstrations more violent with physical attacks on tourists.

Global aviation event World Routes took place in Barcelona in September, with the Tourism Foundation charity an apt partner, thrusting the conversation into the limelight. At the event, Albert de Gregorio, deputy manager at Barcelona Tourism, said the city's bed-space capacity had grown 10% over the past four years following the popularity of Airbnb. "Flats and bedrooms being rented out is a new reality," he told Routesonline. "It's part of the negative reaction against tourism."

As well as Airbnb, don't forget Barcelona is Europe's largest cruise port, with more than 2.5 million cruise passengers passing through every year. You get the picture...

Meanwhile, Doug Lansky, the keynote speaker at World Routes, noted how "humans have been hunter gatherers for 200,000 years while mass travel has only really got going in the last 60 years which explains why dining and shopping,

the modern equivalent of hunting and gathering, are the two most popular occupations for travellers”.

Looking for a way out

Overtourism is a challenge for our industry. For local residents, for travel companies and organisations, and for customers. Solutions are being proposed: capping numbers at tourist landmarks, charging fees, calls to limit overall arrivals, promoting other destinations or even a good old raise in increase tourist taxes – the latter something Amsterdam is now considering to squeeze out low-spending visitors and prevent the city becoming “Venice of the north”. However, these short-term solutions could anger locals if the queues get longer, and questions may be raised over who exactly gets the extra money.

So what can be done? It’s easy to blame the travel industry, but the travel industry does what it knows best. It pushes boundaries, rightly or wrongly. Planes will fly further, faster and from more airports than ever before, and cruise lines will carry on building new ships at an unprecedented rate. But ultimately governments have the final say, and most power to act.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is calling on local authorities to do more to manage growth in a sustainable manner, but tourist authorities must also play their part. While traditionally there to promote a destination, to ensure it gets the right airlift or ship calls, there’s also an argument for tourist authorities to monitor tourist flow, to keep on analysing data, to gauge the impact. To say enough is enough, and also become guardians and protectors.

One way to get a clearer picture is through data – and governments have at their disposal a vast range of methods to build up that picture, to see the warning signs before it’s too late, and monitor bottlenecks, collaborate more effectively and empower locals. To get smarter with data, tourist boards can take the lead of several initiatives.

Smart cities.

These have been around for many years, and offer a way for different organisations to tap into different types of data. A smart city uses information and communications technology to collect and measure conditions in streets, buildings, transportation and the air. IBM, meanwhile, has defined a smart city as one that makes their system instrumented, inter-connected and intelligent. Abu Dhabi’s Masdar City claims to be the world’s smartest eco-neighborhood. India is aiming to have 20 smart cities, while Malta is already a “smart island”.

Meanwhile, Lisbon recently set up the “Smart Open Lisboa” initiative, a long-term hackathon project that looks at crowd management solutions, among other aspects, and involved many mentors and technology partners, including Cisco.

Measurement methods.

Another area to tackle is how a tourist authority reports a destination’s capacity.

With the sharing economy rooted into almost every city, measuring capacity simply by looking at the number of hotel beds, or overnight stays, is becoming redundant. There are other sources of data to consider. Pull in social media, geolocal data, TripAdvisor data and more.

Intent data can also be factored in. Skyscanner's Travel Insight tool also informs route planners who can see where demand and competition is on certain routes, while companies like Sojern are able to reveal intent to travel data, based on the searches and enquiries it receives across its travel partners. Metasearch companies also offer insight into pent up demand.

Mobile operator collaboration.

Partnerships with mobile network operators could also be exploited by tourist authorities wanting to find out more about what's really happening in the destination. Last year, the GSMA published two reports about Barcelona, looking at smart cities as well as overcrowding in Barcelona, at the Sagrada Familia. This involved a public-private partnership project, with the city of Barcelona working with local network operator Orange. Together, they monitored the number of visitors to the iconic cathedral. They identified that although many visit the site, few actually pay to enter. The city of Barcelona wanted to track more precisely the number of visitors to the immediate area, and using sensors capture the number of visitors throughout the day, their arrival route, find out how to limit bottlenecks and also discover where best set up ticket booths to encourage the sale of tickets.

As with any project involving big data and personal information, questions arise over the use of that data, so mechanisms will be needed to ensure the data gathered is not exploited for commercial gains. But let's be inspired by the data that's out there, waiting to be harnessed.

Can tourist authorities run hackathons with technology partners? Can they build apps that benefit both local residents and tourists? Can travel companies sign up to an "overtourism" charter, to show they really care about the destination? Let's create an era of "intelligent tourism", one that is able to merge real-time information with future demand. With new generations of smartphones, and the rise of the Internet of Things, it's not beyond the realms of reality.

WTM London rightly states: "Overtourism is the key issue in the industry at the moment, so it is right that ministers and senior private sector leaders debate the topic as part of the UNWTO & WTM Ministers' Summit."

We need to collaborate and get a clearer picture, because when we return to WTM London in 2018, few will want to see this being discussed by ministers on the Global Stage for a second year running.

Original article can be found here:

<http://www.travolution.com/articles/104722/guest-post-time-to-think-smarter-about-overtourism>