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# ‘Overtourism’?

## Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions

Executive Summary





## Acknowledgments

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## Foreword

Terms such as ‘overtourism’ or ‘tourismphobia’ have made headlines in recent times. They reflect challenges of managing growing tourism flows into urban destinations and the impact of tourism on cities and its residents.

Over half of the world’s population lives in urban areas and it is estimated that, by 2050, this proportion will reach 70%. In addition, the growing number of urban tourists increases the use of natural resources, causes socio-cultural impact, and exerts pressure on infrastructure, mobility and other facilities.

Adequately managing tourism to the benefit of visitors and residents alike has always been a fundamental issue for the sector. Long before the emergence of buzzwords such as ‘overtourism’, UNWTO defined tourism’s carrying capacity as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic and sociocultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors’ satisfaction”.

Tourism will only be sustainable if developed and managed considering both visitors and local communities. This can be achieved through community engagement, congestion management, reduction of seasonality, careful planning that respects the limits of capacity and the specificities of each destination, and product diversification.

This report takes a close look at the perception of tourism by residents in European cities and proposes a set of 68 measures to manage and promote dispersal of tourism flows in urban areas.

Addressing the challenges facing urban tourism today is a much more complex task than is commonly recognized. There is a pressing need to set a sustainable roadmap for urban tourism and position the sector in the wider urban agenda.

Tourism is one of the few economic sectors relentlessly growing around the world, translating into socio-economic development, employment, infrastructure development and export revenues.

It is therefore critical to ensure that urban tourism is aligned with the role of cities in the global agenda. The United Nations New Urban Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 11 “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”, must be priorities for all.

Zurab Pololikashvili  
*Secretary-General,*  
World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)



# Executive summary

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Over the last decades, urban areas have been rapidly transforming and their populations have grown remarkably. According to the United Nations, in 1990, 43% of the world's population lived in urban areas; by 2015, this share had grown to 54% and is expected to reach 60% by 2030.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside rapid urbanisation, the growth of the tourism sector led by economic development, lower transport costs, travel facilitation and a growing middle class in advanced and emerging economies, made cities increasingly popular destinations for business and leisure tourists. Over the past decades, international tourists have gone from 25 million international arrivals in 1950, to over 1.3 billion in 2017. UNWTO forecasts that the sector is expected to continue growing 3.3% annually until 2030 a year in which 1.8 billion tourists will cross borders.

Today, the income generated from both domestic and international tourism contributes significantly to the socio-economic and cultural development of many cities and their surroundings. Yet, the growth of urban tourism also creates important challenges to ensure sustainable growth and practices that minimize any adverse effects that the development of tourism may have in terms of the use of natural resources, socio-cultural impact, pressure on infrastructure, mobility and congestion management. In recent years, these challenges have been coupled with the growth of supply of tourism accommodation through new platform tourism services in cities.

As a consequence, we have witnessed a rise in negative attitudes among local populations towards visitors due

to issues of perceived overcrowding, noise and other nuisances attributed to tourists, the emergence of protests in some cities and the spread of terms such as 'overtourism' and 'tourismphobia' in the media. To better understand the challenges arising from visitors' management in urban contexts, particularly the relationship between residents and visitors, this report includes besides a set of recommendations also an analysis of residents' perceptions towards tourism in eight European cities – Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Copenhagen, Lisbon, Munich, Salzburg and Tallinn.

## What do we mean when we talk about 'overtourism'?

In 2016, Skift is said to have created (and later trademarked) the word 'overtourism'.<sup>2</sup> Several definitions of 'overtourism' have emerged since. According to the universities collaborating on this project, 'overtourism' can be defined as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way". The Responsible Tourism Partnership refers to 'overtourism' as "destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably. It is the opposite of Responsible Tourism which is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit. Often both visitors and guests experience the deterioration concurrently."<sup>3</sup>

In essence we are talking about the absence of good management and uncontrolled development. With increasing tourist numbers, tourism must be developed and managed in a sustainable manner for both visitors and local communities. This is key when it comes to what is being labelled as ‘overtourism’.

Tourism is an opportunity for communities and their people to share the benefits of tourism, which is why the relations between the sector and the communities need to be strengthened. This can be achieved through community engagement, congestion management, reduction of seasonality, careful planning which respects the limits of capacity and the specificities of the destination, as well as product diversification. Therefore, the *tourism carrying capacity* of a destination, defined by UNWTO as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors’ satisfaction”<sup>4</sup> is a key challenge for tourism developers and managers alike.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, when defining and setting mechanisms to monitor and manage tourism congestion, carrying capacity and ‘the limits of acceptable change’ it is essential to consider quantitative as well as qualitative indicators to ensure a comprehensive vision of tourism’s impact.

## Rebuffing myths

At the outset of this discussion it is central to rebuff four myths associated with tourism congestion.

1. **Tourism congestion is not only about the number of visitors but about the capacity to manage them.** There are cities that are able to handle a high number of visitors, while others struggle with far fewer visitors. To have a better understanding of the causes of tourism congestion, it is useful to clearly delineate the three main factors that contribute to ‘overtourism’.<sup>6</sup>
  - I. **Too many visitors, possibly aggravated by seasonality:** in this case it is the absolute numbers of visitors that are seen as disturbing. This can be a perception of overcrowding in parts of the city, or the feeling that there are no pleasant spaces in the city anymore where residents can shy away from visitors.
  - II. **Too much adverse visitor impact:** here the impact of visitors is perceived negatively. This can be congestion on the roads due to tour

buses stopping near attractions or on the streets when large crowds of tourists inadvertently block main streets. It also entails issues like noise disturbance, rowdiness and other disturbances visitors are perceived to cause (even when it may be local people causing the disturbance).

- III. **Too much physical impact of the visitor economy:** the physical impact of services aimed at visitors can also cause agitation. This includes, for example, the over-proliferation of hotels, facilities or retail aimed at visitors.

2. **Tourism congestion is commonly a localised rather than a citywide issue.** Tourism pressure is predominantly linked to popular areas of the city or main attractions. Nevertheless, even in the most visited cities, it is possible to find areas where only few or even no tourists can be seen. Such areas can often be found near main tourism attractions or central areas. In looking for solutions it is therefore particularly important to closely examine the specific nature of and locations where tourism congestion is an issue.
3. **Tourism congestion is not a tourism-only problem.** Tourism congestion can be perceived when the resources and infrastructure of a city are excessively under pressure, or parts thereof. However, it is not only tourists or other visitors that make use of these services and infrastructure. Residents and commuters also compete for the use of the space and services with those temporarily visiting the city. In addition, issues often associated with tourism congestion such as the expansion of short-term rentals via new platform tourism services, concern not only the tourism sector but also the real-estate market. Addressing tourism congestion is a much more complex issue than is commonly recognized, therefore should be treated in a comprehensive manner within the overall city agenda.
4. **Technological or smart solutions alone are important but will not solve the issue of tourism congestion.** Smart technologies are considered the most effective solution to tackle congestion management. Yet notwithstanding the immense potential benefits of such tools, they alone are not enough. Addressing the challenges facing urban tourism requires intense cooperation between multiple stakeholders, which is a long-term effort, particularly if stakeholders have conflicting interests.



## Key conclusions

- Rapid urbanisation and the recent growth of tourism in urban areas has led to a significant increased demand for urban tourism;
- Global tourism trends such as increased mobility, growing middle class, more affordable transport and accommodation option, will continue to stimulate increased demand for urban tourism;
- Well managed tourism can contribute to advance the New Urban Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 11 on “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”;
- ‘Overtourism’ is a new buzzword for existing concepts of tourism congestion management and tourism carrying capacity;
- When defining and setting mechanisms to monitor and manage tourism congestion, carrying capacity and ‘the limits of acceptable change’ it is essential to consider quantitative as well as qualitative indicators to ensure a comprehensive vision of tourism’s impact on the destination and its residents;
- Tourism development and management in cities needs to be part of the wider urban agenda. The scope of action of tourism policy makers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) is limited and these cannot alone address the challenges of tourism congestion and tourism impact on cities;
- Tourism congestion in urban destination can only be addressed through close cooperation among tourism and non-tourism administrations at the different levels, private sector, local communities and tourists themselves;
- The complexity of the economic, social and environmental issues faced by cities today requires stakeholders to rethink their current practices and look for innovative solutions;
- Measures cannot focus only on altering tourist visitor numbers and tourist behaviour – they should also focus on local stakeholders. To ensure the positive aspects of tourism remain visible to and understood by residents, it is necessary to understand residents’ concerns and grievances and include them in the tourism agenda;
- Understanding residents’ attitude towards tourism and engaging local communities is central. According to the research carried out for this report among residents of eight European cities – Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Copenhagen, Lisbon, Munich, Salzburg and Tallinn – the majority thinks that “there should be no limitations to the growth of visitor numbers” and only a very small percentage considers tourism development and marketing should be stopped;
- The research also shows that the most relevant positive impacts from tourism as perceived by residents are: greater international atmosphere (different cultures in the city); more events; a more positive image; protection of historical parts of the city; and restorations of traditional architecture. Whereas, the most negative impacts are: increase in house prices; increase in taxi prices; increase in shop prices; increase in the restaurants and cafe prices; and increase in the public transport cost;
- Eleven strategies and 68 measures have been identified in this report to help understand and manage visitors’ growth in cities. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of measures is highly dependent on their specific context. There is no one-size-to-fit-all solution. Even within cities, management measures can differ between neighbourhoods;
- Among the proposed strategies, residents surveyed for this research tend to favour the following measures:
  - Improve infrastructure and facilities in the city;
  - Communicate with and involve local residents and local businesses in tourism planning;
  - Communicate better with visitors on how to behave in the city;
  - Distribute visitors better over the year; and
  - Create city experiences where residents and visitors can meet and integrate.
- A comprehensive evaluation and planning is essential to determine which strategies can be successfully applied to a destination. Destinations that currently do not have any problems with tourism congestion need to be aware of the potential impact of increased visitor numbers and plan accordingly; and
- Urban tourism makes an important contribution to the socio-economic development of cities and the well-being of their residents and should contribute to create better cities for all: citizens, investors and visitors.

## Strategies and measures to address visitors' growth in cities

### Strategies and measures to address visitors' growth in cities

Strategies	Measures
<p><b>Strategy 1</b> Promote the dispersal of visitors within the city and beyond</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Host more events in less visited parts of the city and in its surroundings</li> <li>– Develop and promote visitor attractions and facilities in less visited parts of the city and in its surroundings</li> <li>– Improve capacity of and time spent at attractions</li> <li>– Create joint identity of city and its surroundings</li> <li>– Implement travel card for unlimited local travel</li> <li>– Mark entire city as inner-city to stimulate visitation of less visited parts</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 2</b> Promote time-based dispersal of visitors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Promote experiences during off- peak months</li> <li>– Promote dynamic pricing</li> <li>– Stimulate events in off-peak months</li> <li>– Set timeslots for popular attractions and/or events aided by real-time monitoring</li> <li>– Use new technologies (apps and others) to stimulate dynamic time-based dispersal</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 3</b> Stimulate new visitor itineraries and attractions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Promote new itineraries at the city entry points and through the visitor's journey, including at tourist information centres</li> <li>– Offer combined discounts for new itineraries and attractions</li> <li>– Produce city guides and books highlighting hidden treasures</li> <li>– Create dynamic experiences and routes for niche visitors</li> <li>– Stimulate development of guided tours through less-visited parts of the city</li> <li>– Develop virtual reality applications to famous sites and attractions to complement onsite visits</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 4</b> Review and adapt regulation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Review opening times of visitor attractions</li> <li>– Review regulation on access for large groups to popular attractions</li> <li>– Review regulation on traffic in busy parts of the city</li> <li>– Ensure visitors use parking facilities at the edge of city</li> <li>– Create specific drop-off zones for coaches in suitable places</li> <li>– Create pedestrian-only zones</li> <li>– Review regulation and taxation on new platform tourism services</li> <li>– Review regulation and taxation on hotels and other accommodation</li> <li>– Define the carrying capacity of the city and of critical areas and attractions etc.</li> <li>– Consider an operator's licence system to monitor all operators etc.</li> <li>– Review regulation on access to certain areas of the city for tourist related-activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 5</b> Enhance visitors' segmentation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Identify and target visitor segments with lower impact according to the specific city context and objectives</li> <li>– Target repeat-visitors</li> <li>– Discourage visitation of the city of certain visitors segments</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 6</b> Ensure local communities benefit from tourism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increase the level of employment in tourism and strive to create decent jobs</li> <li>– Promote the positive impacts of tourism, create awareness and knowledge of the sector amongst local communities</li> <li>– Engage local communities in the development of new tourism products</li> <li>– Conduct an analysis of supply-demand potential of the local communities and promote their integration in the tourism value chain</li> <li>– Improve quality of infrastructure and services considering residents and visitors</li> <li>– Stimulate development of impoverished neighbourhoods through tourism</li> </ul>



## Strategies and measures to address visitors' growth in cities

Strategies	Measures
<p><b>Strategy 7</b> Create city experiences that benefit both residents and visitors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Develop the city to fit with the residents' needs and desires and consider tourists as temporary residents</li> <li>– Develop tourism experiences and products that promote the engagement of residents and visitors</li> <li>– Integrate visitor facilities within local festivities and activities</li> <li>– Create and promote local city ambassadors</li> <li>– Promote art and culture initiatives such as street art to provide fresh perspectives on the city and expand visitation to new areas</li> <li>– Extend opening times of visitor attractions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 8</b> Improve city infrastructure and facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create a city-wide plan for a well-balanced, sustainable traffic management</li> <li>– Ensure that major routes are suitable for extensive tourism activity and that secondary routes are available at peak times</li> <li>– Improve urban cultural infrastructure</li> <li>– Improve directional signage, interpretation materials and notices</li> <li>– Make public transport better suited for visitors</li> <li>– Set up specific transport facilities for visitors during peak periods</li> <li>– Provide adequate public facilities</li> <li>– Create safe cycling routes and stimulate bicycle rentals</li> <li>– Set up specific safe and attractive walking routes</li> <li>– Ensure that routes are suitable for the physically impaired or elderly visitors in line with accessible tourism principles</li> <li>– Safeguard quality of cultural heritage and attractions</li> <li>– Ensure cleaning regimes fit with tourism facilities and with peak times</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 9</b> Communicate with and engage local stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ensure that a tourism management group (including all stakeholders) is set up and is regularly convened</li> <li>– Organize professional development programmes for partners etc.</li> <li>– Organize local discussion platforms for residents</li> <li>– Conduct regular research among residents and other local stakeholders</li> <li>– Encourage locals to share interesting content about their city on social media</li> <li>– Communicate with residents about their own behaviour</li> <li>– Unite disjointed communities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 10</b> Communicate with and engage visitors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create awareness of tourism impact amongst visitors</li> <li>– Educate visitors on local values, traditions and regulations</li> <li>– Provide adequate information about traffic restrictions, parking facilities, fees, shuttle bus services, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy 11</b> Set monitoring and response measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Monitor key indicators such as seasonal fluctuations in demand, arrivals and expenditures, patterns of visitation to attractions, visitor segments, etc.</li> <li>– Advance the use of big data and new technologies to monitor and evaluate tourism performance and impact</li> <li>– Create contingency plans for peak periods and emergency situations</li> </ul>

## Policy recommendations

The implementation of the strategies proposed in this report can help manage urban tourism growth, yet the long-term sustainability of urban tourism depends on the implementation of key policy measures including:

1. Ensure urban tourism policies are aligned with the city's global agenda, the United Nations New Urban Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely Goal 11 on "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" and the principles of the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism;
2. Set a strategic long-term plan for sustainable urban tourism including the definition of the carrying capacity for the city and for specific areas and attractions. This is particularly useful to implement strategies that aim at dispersal of visitors, visitor segmentation and those where new itineraries and attractions are developed more effectively;
3. Determine the acceptable levels of impact of tourism on the city through a participatory process involving all relevant stakeholders. This will make it easier for local communities to benefit, create joint city experiences for visitors and residents and help in the communication with residents;
4. Set governance models that engage administrations at all levels (tourism and other relevant administrations), the private sector and local communities. Improvement of the city infrastructure in particular requires cooperation with other departments, but, practically all strategies strongly benefit from more cooperation between administrations at multiple levels, also beyond tourism;
5. Foster communication and collaboration mechanisms among all relevant stakeholders. Management strategies will be far more effectively if all relevant stakeholders work together compared with initiatives of individual stakeholders;
6. Enhance the integration of local communities in the tourism value chain promoting their engagement in the sector and ensuring that tourism translates into wealth creation and decent jobs. Integrating local communities from the start will ensure they benefit from tourism from the start and will help bring together local stakeholders;
7. Regularly monitor the perception of local communities towards tourism and promote the value of the sector among residents. This will make it possible to identify local communities' concerns early on and jointly develop management strategies to deal with perceived issues;
8. Promote monitoring and evidence-based decisions and planning of key issues such as carrying capacity, mobility, management of natural and cultural resources and residents' attitudes towards tourism;
9. Invest in technology, innovation and partnerships to promote smart cities – making the best of technology to address sustainability, accessibility and innovation;
10. Promote innovative products and experiences that allow the city to diversify demand in time and space and attract the adequate visitor segments according to its long-term vision and strategy;
11. Plan ahead through methodologies such as strategic foresight and scenario planning. The dynamic, volatile, uncertain, and complex global developments of today require an approach that does not (only) take the past but also identifies the driving forces of change and key uncertainties, to create plausible scenarios; and
12. Consider tourists as temporary residents, ensure tourism policy promote the engagement of visitors and residents and build a city for all.

### Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (online), available at: [www.esa.un.org](http://www.esa.un.org) (28-07-2018).
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The management of tourism flows in cities to the benefit of visitors and residents alike is a fundamental issue for the tourism sector. It is critical to understand residents' attitude towards tourism to ensure the development of successful sustainable tourism strategies.

This report analyzes the perception of residents towards tourism in eight European cities – Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Copenhagen, Lisbon, Munich, Salzburg and Tallinn – and proposes 11 strategies and 68 measures to help understand and manage visitor's growth in urban destinations.

The implementation of the policy recommendations proposed in this report can advance inclusive and sustainable urban tourism that can contribute to the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The **World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)**, a United Nations specialized agency, is the leading international organization with the decisive and central role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. It serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how. Its membership includes 158 countries, 6 territories, 2 permanent observers and over 500 Affiliate Members.



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