

# Putting sustainable tourism on top of the EU policy agenda for the benefits of society

### OVERTOURLISM: A PRESSING ISSUE OF CONCERN FOR SOCIETY



With international tourist arrivals forecast to rise by 250 million over the next decade, the challenges facing Europe's destinations shall urgently be addressed, and consequently the ones facing the tourism sector. However, we concur with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) which stated in August 2017: "Tourism growth is not the enemy; it's how we manage it that counts". Indeed, one of the most pressing issues is to measure tourism flows, as well as the exponential growth of short term rentals through online platforms, which have so far taken place 'off the radar' of destination authorities.

The global rise in the number of travellers to, and around Europe for the purpose of tourism is, in principle, good news for the European hospitality industry, and the tourism sector as a whole. However, the main challenge is that demand has not yet evenly spread. Instead, it is concentrated in a few destinations, especially cities where citizens live and work, and which therefore suffer from pressure on public infrastructure and the environment as well as from the lack of available rentals and the rise of housing costs. However, the negative effects of this concentration cannot all be attributed to tourism alone. What is often reduced to the

simple issue of 'tourist overcrowding' should also be linked to complex challenges such as population growth and its concentration in cities.

To sustain tourism and its many benefits to all stakeholders alike, solutions are to be found in the diversification of the tourism offer throughout regions and seasons, while giving back the cities to their residents and facilitating the creation of even more jobs and growth.

As the umbrella Association of Hotels, Restaurants and Cafes in Europe, HOTREC is committed to the goals of sustainable development, and to playing a leading role in contributing to the prosperity of European destinations. The goal of this position paper is to map the causes and consequences of Overtourism in European destinations, taking the example of case studies from five destinations and to put forward recommendations on ensuring the sustainable management of increasing tourism flows.

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### What is HOTREC?

HOTREC represents the hotel, restaurant and café industry at European level. The sector counts in total around 1.9 million businesses, being 99,5% small and medium sized enterprises (90% are micro enterprises, i.e. employing less than 10 people). These businesses make up some 60% of value added. The industry provides some 11.1 million jobs in the EU alone. Together with the other tourism industries, the sector is the 3rd largest industry in Europe. HOTREC brings together 43 national associations representing the interest of this industry in 30 different European countries.

# UNDERSTANDING OVERTOURISM

5 complex, interrelated factors have caused overtourism to rise rapidly up the policy agenda for the tourism sector in Europe:

## 1) Increased affordability and accessibility of travel:

Travel is acquiring greater importance among consumers who are seeking to discover new destinations and new experiences. Younger consumers, in particular Generation Z and Millennials are prioritising spending on travel. Low cost airlines and the internet have put travel within easy reach of the mass market of global consumers.

## 2) Overall growth in international arrivals:

These have risen steadily since the 1950s from 25 million to 1.3 billion globally. In Europe in 2017, an 8% growth was recorded, the highest over the past 7 years. Earlier forecasts by UNWTO on expected tourism arrivals in the EU are many years ahead of 'schedule' as the half-billion arrivals forecasted in 2014 for the year 2023 for the EU-28 were already reached in 2016.

## 3) Leveraging of private residences for tourist accommodation:

Online platforms, as the drivers and protagonists of the so-called 'collaborative' economy, have enabled the widespread conversion of private residences into tourist accommodation, placing tourists in city centres and pushing residents out. Furthermore, platforms have fuelled the uncontrolled development of the so called "collaborative" economy also by not providing data in their possession on the tourism flows that they generate.

## 4) 'McDisney-isation' of destinations:

Large concentrations of tourists in certain locations have caused neighbourhoods to change as traditional stores move out. The growth of certain activities, such as segway and 'beer-bike' tours has caused considerable nuisance to local residents.

## 5) Bucket-list tourism:

Increased awareness of destinations through the internet and use of social media by travellers has also generated a 'bucket-list' attitude among some travellers who travel to 'tick-off' certain destinations and attractions, often bringing more nuisance than benefits to the local eco-system and contributing to further congestion around those locations.

# CONSEQUENCES FOR DESTINATIONS

**Increased congestion:** Increased tourism leads to huge congestion by crowds in specific locations, e.g. around specific iconic places and attractions, in open public spaces, on the roads and on public transport. This can also be exacerbated by the effect of day visitors (e.g. cruise passengers) and the presence of large groups.

**Infrastructure under pressure:** Footpaths, bridges, roads and public transport can be strained by large crowds, while large numbers of visitors can place pressure on local eco-system and life, including energy and water supplies.

**Degradation in the quality of life of local residents:** Changing neighbourhoods, inappropriate behaviour among some tourists and large crowds can cause a negative impact on local residents' quality of life. In some places this has caused strong protests and overt conflict by local residents, known as 'tourismphobia'.

**Rising cost of living:** Gentrification and the increasing use of private residences for tourist accommodation has taken property off the market for local residents, forcing up the cost of buying and renting a place to live. As a result, residents in some cities have been forced out of city centres, making central districts losing their identity further.

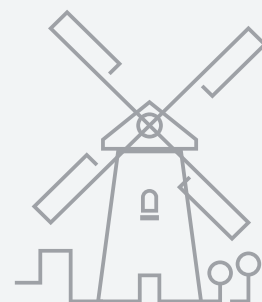
**Impact on built and natural environment:** High numbers of visitors can increase pollution, causing damage to ecosystems and wildlife. Increased numbers of visitors and inadequate visitor management facilities may also cause damage to historic buildings and monuments. This is visible in several European cities where waste management has spiralled out of control, contributing further to the sense of insecurity among local residents.



# EUROPEAN DESTINATIONS IN FOCUS

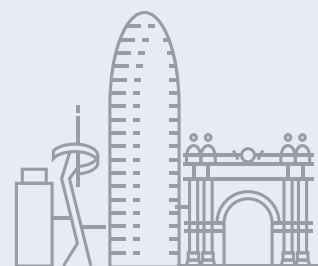
## Amsterdam:

The relatively small, historic and densely populated city of Amsterdam has experienced a rapid rise in visitor numbers (17m arrivals in 2017), placing pressure on public infrastructure and provoking opposition from local residents. In 2015 the city government reached an agreement with AirBnB, effectively legalising short-term rentals (STR), within certain limits. However, as property prices have risen sharply, these limits have gradually been reduced. The city has also introduced limits in the centre on hotel development, and on the spread of stores aimed only at tourists.



## Barcelona:

Barcelona is frequently referenced in the debates on Overtourism. Between 2010 and 2016, overnight stays in the city have increased by 27% (from 7.1 million to 9.1 million), however, it is crucial that this does not take into account the estimated 30 million daily visitors per year (hikers and cruise ship passengers). These visitors consider that the neighbourhoods and places where residents live and work to be the best tourist spots in the city, which results in a high concentration of people in a few places and at the same time. Nor does it take into account stays in the 17,000 tourist residential properties rented through P2P platforms such as Airbnb. The city has reached an agreement with the business platforms to limit rents in the historic centre. There were certain violent movements, produced by highly politicized radical groups, which have been rejected by all the inhabitants of the city, including those who are affected every day by the great concentration of visitors.



## Cinque Terre:

The five picturesque, UNESCO-listed villages that together make up the Cinque Terre National Park have seen a steady influx of overnight and day visitors. Currently, an area with 4,000 residents now sees 2.4 million tourists per year. With only 3,000 beds available, the majority of these are day-trippers. For this reason, in 2013 the Cinque Terre card was introduced giving access to walkways connecting the villages. In 2017 limits were placed on the numbers of cards sold per day, and an app was introduced indicating congested areas to avoid<sup>1</sup>.



## Santorini:

The small island of Santorini in the Greek Cyclades saw almost two million visitors in 2017, 850,000 of those being cruise passengers who visit for a matter of hours. A limit of 8,000 cruise passengers per day has been imposed by the island's mayor<sup>3</sup>. In 2017 the issue of the island's 'homeless teachers' made global headlines as new rules allowing STPAR caused an affordable housing shortage, making local accommodation unaffordable for teachers<sup>4</sup>.



## Venice:

Another often-cited city in the overtourism debate, Venice's overtourism challenges have in recent years become characterised by the 'Ven-exodus', as local residents leave for the mainland the city's population has halved over 30 years<sup>5</sup>. There is particular concern about the impact of cruise passengers on the city, and public debate has in recent years focussed on plans for relocating the city's cruise ship terminal.



# 5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND DECISION-MAKERS

Overtourism is a complex and rapidly evolving issue, involving diverse stakeholders, often with competing interests. It is also infused with emotive sentiments over the rights of visitors vs. the rights of local people, and global trends vs. local habits. The hospitality industry has not all answers to these complex issues, however it strongly contributes to sustain, as an integral part of the global travel and tourism sector, the local eco-system by providing jobs and growth and therefore strongly and positively impacts life and society.

HOTREC is committed on a global and European level to continue participating in dialogue with governmental and intergovernmental

organisations and to develop sustainable tourism for the benefit of society. Above all, the hospitality sector places great importance on dialogue with the public sector, in order to ensure that any measures taken to tackle Overtourism are fair and proportionate in order for the industry to keep playing its economic and social role, i.e. by creating tens of thousands of jobs every year. HOTREC considers that the hospitality industry shall be recognised as a strong provider of economic and social value to national economies. To feed the current debate, HOTREC proposes five areas for policy and decision-makers to be addressed in order to tackle Overtourism in European destinations:

- 1 TOURISM ACTIVITY MUST BE ACCURATELY GOVERNED.** Comprehensive data collection is crucial in order to gain a clear picture of the extent of tourism activity in each destination, so that proportionate resources may be dedicated to the planning and management of a sustainable tourism policy. This includes measuring STR activities, which require the registration of all hosts with the local authorities, the collection of information on nights spent and the obligation for them to pay all relevant local taxes (e.g. income tax, city tax), and comply with consumer protection. This is also required in matters of local security governance. For more information please refer to the HOTREC Chart.
- 2 CONSIDER APPLYING SENSIBLE THRESHOLDS ON VISITOR CAPACITY.** While it is clearly impractical to impose physical limits on the number of visitors who enter most towns and cities, other ways of applying limits include placing a fair limit on accommodation provision through limiting STR to a fair number of nights per year and better coordinating the flow of cruise passengers who may disembark in a city on a given day. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Instead, sensible limits must be agreed through dialogue among all parties in each destination.
- 3 EASE THE PRESSURE, SPREAD THE DEMAND.** Overtourism does not affect every destination; in fact, it has only become a challenge in some specific and well identified destinations. Nevertheless, the yearly growth of tourist arrivals requires that public and private sectors must work together to spread the visitor demand more evenly throughout the year, and throughout their territory. This necessitates policies inter alia better promoting less-visited destinations and that seasonal businesses stay open for longer. This will positively impact rural areas as well.
- 4 HELP EVERY VISITOR TO BECOME A RESPONSIBLE VISITOR.** Public and private sector bodies must work together to reduce 'flashpoints' which cause particular concern to local residents and educate visitors about enjoying their destination in a manner which is respectful of local people, their local environment and way of life.
- 5 DIALOGUE & CONSULTATION GO A LONG WAY.** It is particularly important that structures are set up in each destination to ensure effective dialogue between local residents, professional tourism organisations and authorities about the impacts and the concerns related to tourism, and to discuss common solutions. This is an essential part of the development of a sustainable tourism policy which has to be customised with local needs and particular situations.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Travel and Leisure (2017) How Cinque Terre is handling the pressure of being on every traveller's bucket list (17-04-2018)
- <sup>2</sup> Tourism Review (2017) Overtourism in Europe is a critical problem (29-05-2017)
- <sup>3</sup> CNN (2018) 12 places travellers might want to avoid in 2018 (03-02-2018)
- <sup>4</sup> GTP (2017) Santorini mayor proposes housing solutions for 'homeless' teachers (20-10-2017)
- <sup>5</sup> McKinsey & Company and WTTC (2017) Coping with success: Managing overcrowding in tourism destinations (p.18)



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