

Cities as Empty Shells: Urban Tourism in a Post-Pandemic World

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November 30, 2020

The tourism industry employs almost five times as many people as car manufacturing in the EU. In much of Southern Europe, it has been a lonely growth area throughout years of stagnation. But for cities such as Rome and Venice, its side effects have been gentrification, environmental degradation, and the decline of traditional trades. The pandemic leaves tourist destinations in the lurch: caught between a unique opportunity to build a more balanced relationship with tourism and the immediate pressure of economic need.

New York, Milan, Tokyo, Barcelona, Paris. The world's leading cities were the first places to be hit by the pandemic, with infection rates spiking immediately. Modern urban centres proved to be perfect breeding grounds for the virus due to the intrinsic risk of high density, chronic air pollution, and their huge flows of people.

Covid-19 has drastically changed the narrative about large cities. Hitherto seen as the vital organs of modern society, they are now regarded as overcrowded, smog-choked concrete jungles. When the spell wore off, the major metropolises began to empty.

Migratory flows between rural and urban areas reversed, leading to an urban exodus across the world. The influx of tourists to major destinations also ground to a halt. Partly due to new rules on national and European travel, and partly due to the risk of infection, domestic and international tourists turned away from traditional destinations.

Data from cities such as Barcelona, Prague, Amsterdam, and Rome paint a worrying picture of a tourism industry in crisis, one that threatens to undermine the stability of major European urban economies. According to Italy's national statistics body, ISTAT, the country (among the world's top tourist destinations) lost over 81 million visitors in 2020. In March, the number of tourists visiting cities such as Florence, Rome, and Venice fell to practically zero. Given the contribution of cities to GDP globally, the potential economic effects are disastrous.

Battered by a pandemic, rendered sterile by years of policies incentivising mass tourism, and threatened by an unprecedented crisis in the industry, cities have been forced to re-evaluate this relationship at the heart of their urban planning.

Devoured by tourism

In 1851, the British entrepreneur Thomas Cook, founder of travel agency Thomas Cook and Son, arranged the travel of 150 000 people to London's Great Exhibition. It was the largest package tour in modern history. In an era when disposable incomes were growing and the public transport network expanding, the grand tour model offered by Thomas Cook quickly took root, leading him to replicate it abroad with great success. In it lie the origins of the phenomenon known today as mass tourism. Much has changed since: travel giant Thomas Cook went bust in September 2019, while the tourism model on which its success was built has gone from being a symbol of 20th-century prosperity to a capitalist industry where rampant overexploitation reigns.

In a 2016 report on booming visitor numbers to Iceland, [online travel magazine Skift](#) coined the term “overtourism” to describe the dark side of democratising travel: now that we can move from one part of the world to another faster, more comfortably, and cheaper than ever before, travel is no longer a luxury. But are the world’s major destinations ready to receive ever-increasing numbers of tourists? And what are the potential impacts on the economies and ecosystems of these places?

The tourism industry has profoundly transformed the structures and socio-economic dynamics of Europe’s cities. One only need think of the business ecosystem supported by accommodation, dining, entertainment, transport, and shopping for tourists. In Italy and Europe alike, the waves of visitors that flood into cities each year have reshaped urban centres, commodifying local heritage in exchange for ever greater numbers.

Mass tourism often means overcrowding, increased consumption, and administrative problems for cities, exerting constant pressure on limited resources, infrastructure, and services, from refuse collection to water and energy consumption. The concentration of tourists in the most famous and iconic areas of a city only exacerbates these problems.

Paola Minoia, a geographer at the universities of Turin and Helsinki, explains in an interview how today’s Venice is the result of deregulation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when radical changes in local government policy removed trading restrictions and a cap of 11 000 tourist beds. This precipitated a proliferation of accommodation and businesses aimed at tourists, to the detriment of residents.

In just a few years, Venice became a city of “shops selling tourist tat and carnival masks made goodness knows where”, with what were once homes given over to hotels and disposable, single-occupancy apartments. The arrival of cruise ships worsened the environmental impact of tourism: “Cruise ships are the apotheosis of unsustainable tourism in Venice”, continues Minoia. “Swell generated by large motorboats and cruise ships causes shore erosion, leading to land loss and destabilising the foundations of bridges and buildings, which are now at risk of collapse. ‘Seaification’, on the other hand, creates imbalances in the lagoon ecosystem, eating up land, and introducing alien species.”

In Rome, the commercialisation of urban space to encourage corrosive low-quality tourism has hijacked [urban regeneration](#) plans for profit, leaving the city with enormous space problems and “regenerated” buildings that have been removed from the reality of their neighbourhoods. In 2017, it became official that the “Ex Dogana” building – previously an important hub for cultural events and concerts in the diverse student quarter of San Lorenzo – would become a hostel owned by the Dutch company The Student Hotel. Rather than being returned to the people who live there, swathes of the city’s borgate (quarters) have been given over to exclusive marketing, events, and hospitality catering to tourists.

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Mass tourism remakes the space, demographics, and labour markets of urban centres in its own image. It starts with historic centres: growing demand from tourists empties them of their inhabitants who are pushed out by an unaffordable housing market. In their place come luxury apartments selling an artificial local experience at an extortionate rate. Known as the “Airbnb effect”, the phenomenon demonstrates the threat posed by speculation and unregulated property markets.

In Venice, Rome, and Florence, local culture is commodified for the benefit of tourists to create an artificial local flavour that damages the sustainability of the urban system. Rome's iconic Trastevere quarter has lost its identity and historic population due to rental prices and the closure of craftspeople's workshops and local businesses.

Respite for cities, collapse for economies

Blessed with an enduring historical and artistic heritage, Italy has for years sought its fortune in the influx of tourists that pack the country's streets and museums. Considered a safe bet even in times of crisis, the absence of a prudent economic policy of diversification has left Italy critically exposed to tourism's collapse. The promise of lucrative returns led many regions and cities to funnel investment into the sector. Although extremely profitable in the short term, this investment has wrought long-term socio-economic damage.

In light of a drop of over 60 per cent in foreign visitors in 2020, the principal Italian "cities of art" face economic and social upheaval. Urban economics reproduce on a local scale the same dependency on tourism that afflicts the national economy: now that the pandemic has left Italy's most visited cities empty, urban economic ecosystems are collapsing.

While the Airbnb behemoth is showing signs of recovery after the initial shock of the pandemic, the urban tourism sector that once revolved around it is struggling to get back on its feet. In all the historic centres conquered by Airbnb, tourist districts have remained deserted throughout the pandemic. Even when the lockdown was lifted, there were few signs of life: among for sale and closing down signs, the shutters of many shops remain closed.

In the absence of the usual supply of visitors, owners of apartments that before the pandemic only accepted short-term bookings are now switching to the long-term rental market. Nevertheless, in Rome, many Airbnb apartments and public spaces previously privatised for tourism lie vacant, black holes in the fabric of the city.

But while urban economies have been hard hit, the lack of tourists has brought relief from social and environmental pollution. According to Minoia, the number of cruise ships berthing in Venice reached its peak in 2019. During the pandemic, they have stopped clogging the Canal Grande, enabling an extraordinary recovery in the lagoon ecosystem. With the sharp fall in tourist transport like water taxis and boat traffic, the water in the canals cleared up, allowing glimpses of the rich biodiversity below.

Venice isn't the only example. Air and water quality has improved in cities across Italy because of the reduced level of pollution produced by tourism. With 30 million fewer tourists in Rome alone, the drop in waste water brought respite to the compromised maritime ecosystem in the surrounding Lazio region.

A new face for urban tourism

While it is still difficult to see what the post-pandemic era will hold for Europe's major urban centres, the one certainty is that their future will be determined by the political choices made in the next few years. The central problem in re-imagining urban centres is that cities have become empty shells.

In a period of severe economic crisis, the risk is that Italy continues to bet on a short-sighted policy that puts its flawed tourism model at the heart of its economy. Yet, the existential crises that have hit the urban centres of Italy and Europe provide an opportunity for a new, more equitable and sustainable paradigm for urban tourism.

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Can social justice and sustainability ever be reconciled with mass travel? Speaking in a series of [interviews with The Guardian](#), the mayors of some of Europe's most visited cities argue it is possible. According to Xavier Marcé, the Barcelona councillor responsible for tourism, the problem lies not in the volume of tourists but their distribution: sharing them out more evenly across sites and seasons would make it easier to manage.

Although redirecting where people want to go is not easy, the decentralisation of tourist destinations would allow more peripheral places to benefit from the prosperity that tourism can bring. However, according to an [OECD report on tourism trends in 2020](#), without adequate policies in place, redistributing visitors may simply just move problems elsewhere.

Even before the pandemic, major European tourist destinations like Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Paris had outlined containment strategies to make tourism more sustainable. To tackle gentrification, pollution, and overcrowding, these cities have drawn up policies to regulate housing and curb excesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

The most pressing question for many cities remains how to repopulate historic centres and establish a new basis for residents and tourists to live alongside one another. For Minoia, cities must prevent tourism from dominating, even capping numbers if necessary. “This period has brought respite to people and the environment; the urban tourism model that we had before involved a takeover of land and cities which, in itself, we can't even call tourism. We now need to defend urban life”. In the wake of the pandemic, there are hopes that Venice's unlet apartments and empty buildings will be redistributed to university students, social enterprises, and affordable housing for residents.

But without adequate government incentives and regulation, not to mention a plan for restoring the ecosystems of historic centres and districts, the hearts of cities will continue to be at the mercy of mass tourism or, worse, remain deserted. “It's not enough to find houses and give them back to residents; we also need to make the city liveable once again: to restore neighbourhood shops and spaces for crafts and culture”, says Minoia.

“Venice's history is steeped in a type of craft that is being lost; the conditions created by the pandemic offer an opportunity to revive these traditions while promoting new types of employment. Among young people, there's a real desire to breathe new life into these trades.” Rebuilding the social fabric will also help to prevent a tourism monoculture and promote greater diversification so that a social crisis like that triggered by Covid-19 does not happen again.

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However, the possibility for a sustainable tourism remains subject to the whims of politicians. While cities were emptying, the political debate in Italy was about bringing back tourists as quickly as possible, focusing on encouraging domestic tourism and making urban centres safe and attractive once more. Speaking in September 2020, Italy's tourism and culture minister, Dario Franceschini, announced that some of the money received from the European Recovery Fund would be invested in “rebuilding mass tourism”: it was a sign that narrow, short-term economic needs are dictating policy priorities once more.

“In Venice, water pollution has never been officially studied,” explains Minoia. “The reasons are fundamentally political and born out of cross-cutting interests.” In the absence of a will for change on the part of government, non-profits and local movements have provided the pockets of resistance necessary to rekindle the debate on urban tourism. “The conflict of interests became clear when the City of Venice recently approved changes in the zoning of buildings from residential use to tourism, showing that it isn’t interested in maintaining the city’s urban fabric. Social movements like No Grandi Navi [a group campaigning against cruise ships] are the only visible opposition.”

Although political decisions are crucial to tourism’s future, industries, start-ups, and consumers also have a role to play. In this delicate phase as we try to design more sustainable urban tourism, the challenge is to avoid falling into the trap of greenwashing. Before the pandemic, many initiatives under the umbrella of sustainable tourism turned out to be ethically dubious or difficult to implement. Indeed, there was even a time when Airbnb claimed to be a green alternative to the tourism industry. Today, with the renewed awareness generated by the modern green movement, some in business congratulate themselves for having ticked the environmentally friendly or solidarity economy box while flooding the market with half-baked solutions that confuse the consumer.

Among the flurry of green consumption initiatives, there are nevertheless innovative approaches to be found in the urban tourism market. In contrast to the venality of Airbnb, the community vision promoted by the Fairbnb. coop model suggests that not everything about the pre-pandemic tourism market should be thrown away. By giving half of the profits to local projects, the platform aims to share the benefits of tourism more fairly and widely. Although not a silver bullet, the model could point towards a viable alternative if backed by the right policies.

Phenomena like corporate greenwashing, the hollowing out of historic centres, and the commodification of culture and urban space are just some of the symptoms of a global model of tourism that is coming apart at the seams. For a production model based on commodification, hyper-consumerism, and speculation, issues like preserving local environmental and social ecosystems take a back seat.

Although feared to be a new dark age for cities, this period offers a chance to change the terms of the debate around the social and environmental sustainability of urban planning. With the challenges of the post-pandemic era, urban centres are entering a critical transition period that presents an opportunity to redefine cohabitation between residents, tourists, and the environment.



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Published November 30, 2020

Article in English

Translation available in Italian

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/cities-as-empty-shells-urban-tourism-in-a-post-pandemic-world/>

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