

Sustainable Urban Tourism

Lecture 1: Tourism in Cities,
The Issues

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

Tourism development in art cities generates both huge benefits and important costs. If the use of these assets is simply left to the forces of the market, these costs can become unbearable and in some cases the net result rather damages the local economy and society at large than sustain them. In short, art cities ought to find a sensible balance between utilization and conservation. This can only be guaranteed leaving the traditional attitude of improvisation and embrace an explicit policy that ensures tourism development in cities to be truly maximizing benefits and minimizing costs.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

Cities are the privileged destinations for cultural tourists, facilitated by Internet, new types of accommodation and low-cost airlines. Tourism offers art cities huge opportunities for social and economic growth. However, these smaller and often vulnerable cities should be using these potentials 'wisely', which means that they ought to give top priority to:

- encourage the use of tourism assets in those areas that are insufficiently valorized from a tourist's perspective;
- control and carefully regulate tourism development in those areas that risk to see the (long term) integrity of their cultural and natural heritage compromised, and, hence, cause structurally damage to the development potential by exposing these assets to an excessive pressure from tourism.

In other words, tourism development ought to be sustainable. This first lesson of this course analyses these issues in detail.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

The University of Venice has been asked by the UNESCO to investigate the role of tourism in heritage cities already in 1991. Seven important art cities were analyzed: Aix-en-Provence, Amsterdam, Bruges, Florence, Oxford, Salzburg and Venice.

The results of this research, although already 15 years old, and located in a different geographical area than the South East Europe may still be used to help us identify the principal issues that regard tourism development in heritage cities. Worse, it may very well be that, with the introduction of low-cost flights, the Internet and a widespread rise of available income per head of the population, the problems have become even more pressing.

At the time of the research, Florence and Amsterdam, the two largest cities in the group, are also the ones that have the most tourist stays: more than 4 million nights. Venice follows with 2.6 million overnight stays. In Oxford and Salzburg, the number is smaller and Bruges and Aix-en-Provence registered less than a million overnight stays.

The picture is similar for the number of tourist arrivals. The average duration of the stay of the tourists varied significantly between the different art cities. The longest duration was observed for Aix-en-Provence, not only hotels, but also other types of tourist accommodation were included in the figure. In general, the length of the stay in the latter is slightly longer, consequently raising the average. The figures for the other heritage cities were more comparable. Oxford had the longest average duration of stay (three nights), while for Salzburg the average duration of stay is only 1.8 nights. Amsterdam, Florence and Venice have averages that are similar to those registered for most other European heritage cities.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

A tendency to an increasing demand for accommodation can be observed. Moreover, the average duration of the stay in the cities has not fluctuated much. However, the occupancy rate of hotels remained constant or dropped because of the entrance of new structures into the market. An increasing demand for urban based cultural tourism has proven capable of justifying a growing economic investment in the accommodation sector that reflects the growing economic significance of the tourist function in all of the analyzed destinations.

In the majority of destinations, official statistics still do not display crucial information on tourism demand. The subdivision between overnight visitors and day visitors has become a focal point of the analysis of tourism in heritage cities. Especially since the growing interest in cultural tourism is usually manifested in an increase in the number of day trips and much less in terms of overnight stays. Therefore, in order to understand the relevance of tourism in these cultural destinations better, it is essential to observe the composition of the visitor flow. Excursionists are most often blamed for problems related to an excess in tourism demand and to carrying capacity issues, since they bring the destination more costs and less benefits than traditional tourists.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

The cities, given the relatively high shares of excursionists in total tourist demand, find themselves in advanced stages of the tourism life cycle that has been discussed briefly above. Of the seven cities which the study has concentrated upon, Amsterdam and Florence cater to the most varied demand ranging from leisure tourism to congress tourism, with a significant business related sector.

Furthermore, the Dutch capital city, by far the largest city included in the study, is the only one that has a role as an international destination directly linked to its function as transportation hub. Amsterdam is also a notable venue for international congresses and it also benefits from being the cultural heart of the Netherlands and from the image of its historical core. Even in Florence, the second largest city in the study and a cultural destination with a global reputation, many tourist visits are based on reasons other than culture.

In fact, Florence is a very important business and congress venue. It ranks third in Italy, after Rome and Milan, as a congress venue for nationals. Nevertheless, all of the seven cities are leisure dominated tourist destinations. With the exception of Salzburg, the seasonal pattern of the heritage cities does not show a marked peak in the summer months.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

For all cities, the first trimester of the year is the one less frequented by tourists. Salzburg is the only destination with a particularly heavy concentration of tourists in the summer months, which is a serious threat to its socio economic structure. In fact, the fragile equilibrium of the urban environment in a city such as Salzburg can be challenged by an excessive concentration of visitors. This generates an increase in the level of pollution, an augmentation of real estate prices, a forced transfer of small artisan workshops to peripheral zones and a deterioration of historical heritage. Amsterdam, Bruges and Salzburg are predominantly hosting non national tourism.

They also enjoy a significant proportion of overseas tourists who are certainly very aware of the cities' cultural and artistic reputations. American and Asian tourists are often the most desired from an economic perspective; the Italian cities Florence and Venice benefit in particular from their presence.

The seasonal pattern differs for the different segments of the market. Generally speaking, the further away the origin country is, the more the demand is concentrated in the summer months. Surprisingly, overseas tourists on a leisure motivated vacation present the same length of the stay (two days) as the Europeans. A significantly longer duration of stay characterizes the tourists on an educational trip (ten days to three weeks) who are a relevant segment of the market in places like Florence, Oxford and Aix en Provence.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

More generally, the motivations of an urban visit can be classified as follows: business tourism, expressing merely the social economic vitality of a city; congress tourism and leisure tourism. Business and congress tourism are merely reflecting the economic rank of a city while leisure tourism reflects quality of life it provides. It is not easy to establish what exactly the pressure on a heritage city or site is.

One way of quantifying the pressure is by calculating the visitors/residents ratios for the seven case studies; it is thus possible to perceive how the different cities bear varying dimensions of visitor impact. With more than 320 visitors per inhabitant, Venice's historical core is by far the most "mature" of the seven destinations. It is the city that most clearly represents what the term 'touristification' means for an urban area.

Despite their reputations as cities of art, the tourist function of Florence and Amsterdam is proportionally minor in respect to their political, administrative, educational, economic and, of course, residential functions. In fact, although they benefit from large numbers of visitors, their vast resident populations numerically offset the social impact of tourism on the urban area. Being cities with a large, diversified economy, they are less vulnerable than the smaller heritage cities.

Tourism in Cities: The Issues

Interest in heritage cities is still growing. With the diffusion of the Internet and the boom of low-cost airlines, city tripping has intensified over the last five years. This has not only caused an increase in the number of traditional tourists, but also in the number of excursionists. The share of excursionists in tourism demand is already considerable in the seven cities studied. Moreover, the continuous expansion of the number of hotel beds has led to diminishing occupancy rates, explaining the ongoing intensification of promotional activities notwithstanding the pressure that tourism exercises on the stock of monuments and museums. The credit crunch and the consequent economic recession seem to have decelerated this growth temporarily. Many families seem to find it harder to sacrifice their summer and winter holidays and prefer to scrap the city trips at Easter or other bank holidays.

This dip in demand will be limited to the economic crisis; as soon as the economy takes up, city tripping will increase even more aggressively than before. This all leads to an increasingly excessive pressure on the more vulnerable heritage cities, menacing the vitality of the local economies, the integrity of the heritage and the quality of life of residents. The problems the considered cities are faced with, either caused or aggravated by tourism, can be summarized as follows: traffic and parking problems, pollution, crowding out, occasional irritation of the local population and 'wear and tear' of heritage. The answer to the above-mentioned problems is forsaking the principle of 'laissez faire' that currently dominates the attitudes of policy makers and entrepreneurs towards tourism development and adopting an explicit tourism management policy that goes much further than promotion alone.