What's the problem with overtourism?

By Kate Leahy on 7 Sep 2023



As major cities are starting to impose bans, fines and taxes to combat tourism, we take a look at what it means for locals — and visitors. Photograph Maxiphoto/Getty Images.

With visitor numbers around the world increasing towards pre-pandemic levels, the issue of overtourism is once again rearing its head.

When locals in the charming Austrian lakeside village of Hallstatt staged a blockade of the main access tunnel, brandishing placards asking visitors to ‘think of the children’, it highlighted what can happen when places start to feel overrun by tourists. Hallstatt has just 800 residents but has opened its doors to around 10,000 visitors a day — a population increase of over 1,000%. And it’s just one of a growing number of places where residents are up in arms at the influx of travellers.

The term ‘overtourism’ is relatively new, having been coined over a decade ago to highlight the spiralling numbers of visitors taking a toll on cities, landmarks and landscapes. As tourist numbers worldwide return towards pre-pandemic levels, the debate around what constitutes ‘too many’ visitors continues. While many destinations, reliant on the income that tourism brings, are still keen for arrivals, a handful of major cities and sites are now imposing bans,

fines, taxes and time-slot systems, and, in some cases, even launching campaigns of discouragement in a bid to curb tourist numbers.

What is overtourism?

In essence, overtourism is too many people in one place at any given time. While there isn't a definitive figure stipulating the number of visitors allowed, an accumulation of economic, social and environmental factors determine if and how numbers are creeping up.

There are the wide-reaching effects, such as climate change. Coral reefs, like the Great Barrier Reef and Maya Bay, Thailand, made famous by the Leonardo DiCaprio film, *The Beach*, are being degraded from visitors snorkelling, diving and touching the corals, as well as tour boats anchoring in the waters. And 2030 transport-related carbon emissions from tourism are expected to grow 25% from 2016 levels, representing an increase from 5% to 5.3% of all man-made emissions, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). More localised issues are affecting locals, too. Renters are being evicted by landlords in favour of turning properties into holiday lets, and house prices are escalating as a result. As visitors and rental properties outnumber local residents, communities are being lost. And, skyrocketing prices, excessive queues, crowded beaches, exorbitant noise levels, damage at historical sites and the ramifications to nature as people overwhelm or stray from official paths are also reasons the positives of tourism can have a negative impact.

Conversely, 'undertourism' is a term applied to less-frequented destinations, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. The economic, social and environmental benefits of tourism aren't always passed on to those with plenty of capacity and, while tourist boards are always keen for visitors to visit their lesser-known attractions, it's a more sustainable and rewarding experience for both residents and visitors.



Scenic views of Hallstätter See, Dachstein Mountains and the town itself is what draws the crowds to Hallstatt. Photograph by Alan Tow/Getty Images.

What's the main problem with it?

Overcrowding is an issue for both locals and tourists. It can ruin the experience of sightseeing for those trapped in long queues, unable to visit museums, galleries and sites without advance booking, incurring escalating costs for basics like food, drink and hotels, and faced with the inability to experience the wonder of a place in relative solitude. The absence of any real regulations has seen places take it upon themselves to try and establish some form of crowd control, meaning no cohesion and no real solution.

Justin Francis, co-founder and CEO of Responsible Travel, a tour operator that focuses on more sustainable travel, says "Social media has concentrated tourism in hotspots and exacerbated the problem, and tourist numbers globally are increasing while destinations have a finite capacity. Until local people are properly consulted about what they want and don't want from tourism, we'll see more protests."

A French start up, Murmuration, which monitors the environmental impact of tourism by using satellite data, states that 80% of travellers visit just 10% of the world's tourism

destinations, meaning bigger crowds in fewer spots. And, the UNWTO predicts that by 2030, the number of worldwide tourists, which peaked at 1.5 billion in 2019, will reach 1.8 billion, likely leading to greater pressure on already popular spots and more objection from locals.

Who has been protesting?

Of the 800 residents in the UNESCO-listed village of Hallstatt, around 100 turned out in August to show their displeasure and to push for a cap on daily visitors and a curfew on tour coach arrivals.

Elsewhere, residents in Venice fought long and hard for a ban on cruise ships, with protest flags often draped from windows. In 2021, large cruise ships over 25,000 tonnes were banned from using the main Giudecca Canal, leaving only smaller passenger ferries and freight vessels able to dock.

In France, the Marseille Provence Cruise Club introduced a flow management system for cruise line passengers in 2020, easing congestion around the popular Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde Basilica. A Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) spokesperson said, “Coaches are limited to four per ship during the morning or afternoon at the Basilica to ensure a good visitor experience and safety for residents and local businesses. This is a voluntary arrangement respected by cruise lines.”

While in Orkney, Scotland, residents have been up in arms at the number of cruise ships docking on its shores. At the beginning of 2023, the local council confirmed that 214 cruise ship calls were scheduled for the year, bringing around £15 million in revenue to the islands. Following backlash from locals, the council has since proposed a plan to restrict the number of ships on any day.



Large cruise ships have been banned in Venice's Giudecca Canal since 2021.

What steps are being taken?

City taxes have become increasingly popular, with Barcelona increasing its nightly levy in April 2023 — which was originally introduced in 2012 and varies depending on the type of accommodation — and Venice expects to charge day-trippers a €5 fee from 2024.

In Amsterdam this summer, the city council voted to ban cruise ships, while the mayor, Femke Halsema, commissioned a campaign of discouragement, asking young British men who planned to have a 'vacation from morals' to stay away. In Rome, sitting at popular sites, such as the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps, has been restricted by the authorities.

And in Kenya's Maasai Mara, meanwhile, the Narok County governor has introduced on-the-spot fines for off-roading. He also plans to double nightly park fees in peak season.

What are the forecasts for global tourism?

During the Covid pandemic, tourism was one of the hardest-hit industries — according to UNWTO, international tourist arrivals dropped 72% in 2020. However, traveller numbers have since been rapidly increasing, with double the number of people venturing abroad in

the first three months of 2023 than in the same period in 2022. And, according to the World Travel Tourism Council, the tourism sector is expected to reach £7.5 trillion this year, 95% of its pre-pandemic levels.

While the tourism industry is forecast to represent 11.6% of the global economy by 2033, it's also predicted that an increasing number of people will show more interest in travelling more sustainably. In a 2022 survey by Booking.com, 64% of the people asked said they would be prepared to stay away from busy tourist sites to avoid adding to congestion.

Are there any solutions?

There are ways to better manage tourism by promoting more off-season travel, limiting numbers where possible and having greater regulation within the industry. Encouraging more sustainable travel and finding solutions to reduce friction between residents and tourists could also have positive impacts. Promoting alternative, less-visited spots to redirect travellers may also offer some benefits.

Harold Goodwin, emeritus professor at Manchester Metropolitan University, says, "Overtourism is a function of visitor volumes, but also of conflicting behaviours, crowding in inappropriate places and privacy. Social anthropologists talk about frontstage and backstage spaces. Tourists are rarely welcome in backstage spaces. To manage crowds, it's first necessary to analyse and determine the causes of them.

Francis adds: "However, we must be careful not to just recreate the same problems elsewhere. The most important thing is to form a clear strategy, in consultation with local people about what a place wants or needs from tourism."

As it stands, overtourism is a seasonal issue for a small number of destinations. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, a range of measures are clearly an option depending on the scale of the problem. For the majority of the world, tourism remains a force for good with many benefits beyond simple economic growth.

Discussion Qns:

1. *What are the negative impacts of overtourism?*

2. *How can countries mitigate the negative impacts of overtourism without losing out on tourist revenue/positive impacts?*