(Re)igniting tourism in cities after COVID: The same old risks of the "new normal"

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Abstract
The current COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected global travel and tourism, particularly international and urban tourism. The spread of the virus and the measures of lockdown in urban areas considerably decreased the flow of international visitors to year-round urban destinations like London, Paris, New York, and Shanghai. However, questions should be asked as to whether the rhetoric of "reigniting tourism" is appropriate for urban destinations. Re-opening for tourism with an emphasis on a return to "normal", arguably, poses a threat to urban spaces and a return to pre-COVID tensions as a result of overtourism and tourismphobia. This chapter provides a critique to the emerging narrative in tourism crisis and post-COVID management in urban destinations and calls for alternative approaches to reposition cities as liveable spaces for local communities.

Introduction

The ongoing COVID19 pandemic has severely hit global travel and tourism. According to the latest UNWTO data, tourism suffered its worst year on record in 2020, with international arrivals dropping by 74% and a drop of nearly 1 billion international arrivals compared to 2019 (UNWTO, 2021). Established destinations across the globe were particularly affected by the lockdown measures and travel restrictions put in place to help control the pandemic. As the IATA (2020) reports, travellers have refrained from travelling internationally due to the likelihood of quarantine enforcement upon arrival and the fear of contracting the virus during the journey. The pandemic has also had repercussions on urban tourism. Estimates for London suggest a forecasted decrease of overall tourism expenditure of approximately £ 10.9 billion (Mayor of London, 2020), while Paris reported an estimated loss of around € 23.1 billion from tourism receipts (Desai, 2021). Temporary letting in cities via platforms like Airbnb have also seen a contraction as result of COVID19. A recent study of 15 cities across the world shows a drastic decrease in actively listed properties and daily average reservations between January and March 2020 (Boros, Dudás, & Kovalcsik, 2020). Early attempts to reopen leisure activities and ease lockdown restrictions during the summer of 2020 have proven to be counteractive. In Rome, for instance, the local hotel association estimated that less than 10% of hotels in the Italian capital were open during the summer (Sofia, 2020). Similarly, in Lisbon, the estimated loss in tourism revenue for summer 2020 was -79% compared to the previous year (Villalobos, 2020).

The COVID19 pandemic significantly affected established practices of urban tourism consumption across thousands of cities worldwide. In the case of New York City, the repercussions of the pandemic are expected to last past 2021, with overall visitor figures not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels until 2025 (McGeehan, 2020). Annual hallmark events such as the New York City Marathon and the Tony Awards were cancelled (New York Road Runners, 2020; Whitten, 2020), while the postponement of the musical season on

Broadway to 2021 has had repercussions on the city's hospitality and leisure economies (Whitten, 2020). The pandemic has similarly impacted regional capitals and prime urban tourism destinations. Milan, for instance, has been reporting downward trends across 2020 and early 2021 in relation terms of hotel activity (CAST, 2021). The regional capital of Lombardy was among the first cities in Europe to cancel events on the eve of the first national lockdown in March 2020, including *Milan Fashion Week* (Cartner-Morley, 2020) and Carnival (Anonymous, 2020). Mega-events scheduled for 2020, such as the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics (IOC, 2020) and the 2020 BIE Expo in Dubai (Expo2020 Dubai, 2020), have currently been postponed to 2021. In the case of Tokyo, rising concern about the ongoing pandemic and criticism from the public have called the hosting of the games into question, with professional athletes, sponsors and tourism and leisure businesses expressing doubts due to the lack of transparency by the organizers in regard to any contingency plans in the event of a definitive cancellation (McCurry, 2021).

The pandemic has come at a time of critique and reflection on the future direction of urban tourism. Between 2017 and 2019, overtourism was among the primary concerns among both scholars and professionals in tourism. As the 2019 TRAN report highlighted (European Parliament, 2018, p. 15), "overtourism is a much broader and more complex phenomenon" that goes beyond overcrowding and poor destination management. Overtourism is especially tied to the recent developments in urban tourism, with cities being the preferred destination among European tourists in 2017 (Amore, Falk, & Adie, 2020; PK International & ITB Berlin, 2018). Increased socio-cultural clashes between tourists and residents have been reported in cities like Barcelona, Lisbon, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam, Prague, and Budapest (Amore, 2019; Amore, de Bernardi, & Arvanitis, 2020; Milano, 2018; Panayiotopoulos & Pisano, 2019; Smith, Sziva, & Olt, 2019). Arguably, the pandemic has exacerbated episodes of tourismphobia towards international tourists, especially those from China and East Asia (Xie, 2021). Notwithstanding the rising tourismphobia in the midst of the pandemic, the prevailing discourse emphasizes the need to expedite the economic recovery and resilience of urban destinations (OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2020). In turn, the rhetoric of reigniting tourism (Buhalis, 2020) and the overemphasis on the impact of COVID19 on travel, tourism, leisure, and hospitality has shifted current academic debate on the original sins of contemporary urban tourism.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a timely reflection on this conjunctural turning point in urban tourism discourse. It does so by reframing the current debate on COVID19 and tourism within the wider theoretical discussion of urban mobilities and hypermobile society. Additionally, the rhetoric of urban tourism recovery post-COVID19 and reigniting tourism portray a "new normal" narrative that overlooks the same old risks that have been previously identified in overtourism research. Finally, we argue that the effects of the pandemic on global tourism mobility should also acknowledge the very likely surge in destination congestion once the COVID19 crisis is resolved. Rather than *reigniting* tourism, we argue that this time of crisis should be an opportunity to *rethink* tourism and urban tourism in particular.

Urban mobility, tourism and COVID19.

Over the last several decades, academic debate has gone back and forth on the role and importance of cities in the globalising world. The shift from places of production to spaces of consumption – including tourism – is now undisputed (Spirou, 2010). In this context, global urban mobility represents one of the most evident elements of the contemporary city (Amendola, 2009; Amore, 2019; Florida, 2003; McNeill, 2017). Scholars from regional and urban studies have stressed the role that global cities and regional capitals play in further clustering economic activities, talent, and people (Florida, 2009; Glaeser, 2011). Nevertheless, there are scholars that discuss contemporary mobility as the expression of an elitist group of highly mobile individuals who account for the highest proportion of the overall distance travelled (Gössling, Ceron, Dubois, & Hall, 2009). Hall, Amore, and Arvanitis (2019) discuss contemporary tourism mobilities as being closely tied to globalization. Political, technological, and societal factors ultimately frame the capacity and the ability of people to travel. Travel restrictions due to political and, more recently, health and safety reasons (Hall & Seyfi, 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2019), further illustrate that the emphasis on travel and tourism as an agency-driven phenomenon overlooks "the macro issues of contemporary human mobilities, or the importance of structure in framing trajectories of social practices" (Hall et al., 2019, p. 63).

Building from the work of Harvey (2000) , Hall et al. (2019) identify financial deregulation, technological change, and cost and time of moving commodities, services, and people as globalising forces of tourism and human mobilities. Looking at financial deregulation in tourism and globalization, it can be argued that cities are the epicentre of a hyperneoliberal urban regime in which the mobility – and volatility - of capital affect and frame global tourism (Britton, 1991) and urban tourism in particular (Amore, 2019). In the latter case, the circulation of capital over time and space determines *where* and *when* urban regeneration projects for leisure and tourism are implemented (Amore, 2019). In the former, instead, sharing economy platforms like Uber and Airbnb operate in hundreds of cities but are financially managed from tax-heaven countries to reduce taxation and maximize economic returns at the urban level (Gössling & Hall, 2019). Focusing on technological change, the reduction in per-passenger-per-distance costs has led to a global competition among cities in the expansion of airports and cruise terminals to accommodate large aircrafts and cruises (Hall et al., 2019; Sigala, 2017). In this global context, the mobility of goods and people have grown exponentially. Over the last 30 years, the air travel industry has grown at an annual rate of 5% (IATA, 2018a, 2018b), with a record-high of 4.5 billion passengers in 2019 (ICAO, 2019).

Prior to COVID19, the role of this hypermobile population of city users and tourists alike within cities has been acknowledged in the literature. As Martinotti (1996) observes, city users consist of mobile populations moving to a city to use and consume its private and public facilities and amenities. Day-trippers and tourists are a sub-category of this urban population that, in a limited range of cases, is likely to outnumber the resident population. In the case of Venice, for example, the average daily ratio between excursionists and residents in 2018 was 1.13 (Bertocchi, Camatti, Giove, & van der Borg, 2020). Similarly, evidence from Prague shows how uncontrolled development of tourism in the city centre has had a negative impact on residents' quality of life (Colston, 2019). With the rise of budget airlines and short city

breaks (Ejarque, 2003; Hall & Page, 2014), travel frequency per person per year has grown significantly over the last decade. A recent study by Amore, Falk, and Adie (2019) on European short-stay travellers illustrates how tourist from Scandinavia and Central Europe are much more likely to take up to ten short-stay trips in a year than tourists from Southern Europe and the Balkans. The study further suggests that there is a high probability of incoming urban tourism flows from other cities across Europe, a feature that further reinforces the role of cities as both generating and receiving tourism regions. Finally, the study determined that high-frequency tourists are likely to be young professionals belonging to Florida's (2002) *Creative Class*.

The consequences of the COVID19 pandemic in urban destinations are threefold. First, it highlights the dependence of cities on the direct and the indirect economic impacts of tourism. The leisure and hospitality sectors in global cities and national capitals heavily depend on traditional work commuters and short-time seasonal workers. The latter can be ascribed to a newly defined urban population known as *Voluntary Temporary Populations* (Hall & Adie 2019) which also encompasses students, second homeowners and fly-in/fly-out workers. The pandemic's resulting involuntarily immobility has not only dynamically changed these populations but also created instances of related socio-economic hardship. Second, several cultural attractions and purpose-built leisure spaces in cities were forced to close at the time of the first lockdown and are currently struggling to keep staff. Around 1 in 8 museums worldwide are likely to permanently close due to COVID19 (Antara & Shuvro, 2020). This figure soars to 1 in 3 based on the latest estimates from the American Alliance of Museums (2020), where the financial sustainability of museum institutions heavily depends on ticket sales and complementary leisure services. Finally, urban spaces in hundreds of cities worldwide were designed with the goal of attracting tourists while displacing local residents. This goes beyond the concept of tourism gentrification as the "transformation of a middle-class neighbourhood into a relatively affluent and exclusive enclave marked by a proliferation of corporate entertainment and tourism venue" (Gotham, 2005, p. 1102). Rather, the touristification of the urban space is soft form of spatial exclusion for least affluent urban populations (Amendola, 2009; Porter, 2009; Spirou, 2010).

The current COVID19 pandemic has constrained the ability of hundreds of millions of people to travel, both internationally and domestically. There is nevertheless evidence suggesting that the desire to travel still exists. Gallego and Font's (2020) study on air passenger demand and intention to travel shows that the American tourism market is likely to reach similar figures in terms of the volume of flight searches and selection as was observed in 2019. Overall, an upward trend was observed towards the end of 2020 for key international tourism regions home to prime urban tourism destinations like Southern Europe and North East Asia (Gallego & Font, 2020). Similarly, a study by Das and Tiwari (2020) on travel desirability among Indian tourists indicates that risk perception of COVID-19 does not hinder intention to travel internationally. In their view, "as the end of COVID-19 is not in sight, people may desire and intend to travel once the lockdowns are relaxed" (Das & Tiwari, 2020, p. 4). As international travel is still heavily restricted, urban and national DMOs have turned their attentions to domestic tourism forecasts in 2021 to fast-track recovery. As Visit Britain (2021) reports, overall domestic

tourism and leisure spending is expected to increase 82% compared to 2020. However, these figures can be questioned in light of the national and local lockdown restrictions in cities across the United Kingdom, like London and Liverpool.

Undeniably, people's desire to travel does not translate into business profitability. In particular, for urban destinations, the current COVID19 pandemic poses a significant challenge for leisure and hospitality business survival. A recent study of tourism-dependant businesses in selected towns across England shows how COVID19 further exacerbated an already vulnerable tourism business environment (Ntounis, Parker, Skinner, Steadman, & Warnaby, 2021). Business owners stressed that the uncertainty of reopening timeframes, lockdown durations and demand seasonality are key factors in the greater vulnerability of tourism-dependent businesses in the longer-term. National authorities considered dedicated travel corridors as a way to persuade international tourists to travel abroad over the summer of 2020. For example, the air corridor between the United Kingdom and Portugal in late summer 2020 briefly benefited urban tourism in Lisbon, with hotel business operativity rising from 37% to 75.3% between June and September last year (Turismo de Lisboa, 2020). However, as COVID19 cases soared in the country in the fall of 2020, the tourism figures in Lisbon sharply declined, with a -62.2% decrease in the rate of hotel occupancy between January 2020 and December 2020 (Turismo de Lisboa, 2020). At the time of writing, travelling between Portugal and the United Kingdom is suspended as new variants of COVID19 have been reported in both countries (Foreign Office, 2021; MNE, 2021).

COVID19 and Overtourism

Overtourism has been described as "a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of what is perceived as too many tourist visitors and too much tourism-related development in specific destinations" (Butler, 2019, p. 76). Perceptions of overtourism are driven by social tension between local residents and tourists on aspects such as touristification of the urban space, tourism gentrification and loss of authenticity (Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017; Rickly, 2019), overcrowding, and decreased quality of live for the locals (Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019a, 2019b). This poses visitor and destination management challenges. Ultimately, "issues of overtourism are primarily, but not exclusively, challenges for destinations" (Wall, 2019, p. 28) that can be addressed by looking at the concentration of visitors around attractions. Research on overtourism has looked at overcrowding and perceived negativities of tourism in cities, historic towns, natural sites, and festivals (Adie, 2019; Adie, Falk, & Savioli, 2020; Gonzalez, Coromina, & Gali, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). In particular, with cities, "the increasing volume of visitor nights, expenditure and related investments towards urban tourism has brought tensions between tourists and residents" (Amore, 2019, p. 3). Not surprisingly, overtourism is mostly associated with mature urban destinations like Amsterdam, Barcelona and Venice (Amore, Falk, et al., 2020) or cities where Airbnb has severely impacted residential neighbourhoods, as has been noted in Lisbon and Reykjavik (Amore, de Bernardi, et al., 2020; Mermet, 2017). In fact, in Europe, urban residents, in general, are more likely to complain of overtourism (Adie, Falk et al., 2020).

The current COVID19 pandemic has shifted the debate from overtourism to the urgency of rethinking cities from a destination resilience perspective (Haywood, 2020; López-Gay, Cocola-Gant, & Russo, 2021). Cities that were previously at the centre of the debate due to increasing tourism pressure and negative socio-economic repercussions at the neighbourhood level found themselves free from unwanted and unwelcomed tourists and day-trippers. In the case of Venice, the lockdown measures and the restrictions on air travel and cruise arrivals unveiled the overdependence of the lagoon city on international tourism (Nadeau, 2020). In Barcelona, inner city areas like the *Ciutat Vella* and the *Rambla* have paid the consequences for years of market-driven tourism development in the city. Many local businesses in the city soon realized that the demand from residents was not enough to compensate for the loss of income from tourism (Burgen, 2020). At the same time, lockdown restrictions from the Catalan authorities over the summer of 2020 led to a further loss of income from residents and domestic tourists alike (Burgen, 2020). Other cities, instead, saw the COVID19 pandemic crisis as an opportunity to design and implement a new urban tourism vision that closely aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals. This was the case in Amsterdam, which embraced the regenerative model of doughnut economics in order to realign the urban economy with social and environmental goals (Bianchi, 2020).

The discussion on the future of tourism and the city in a post-COVID19 world is not limited to established urban destinations. In June 2020, the UNESCO Cities Platform ran a special session on transformative city tourism with speakers from the UNWTO, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the Mayor of Phuket (Thailand), the Head of the Macau Government Tourism Office and the Deputy Mayor of Barcelos (Portugal) among others (UNESCO, 2020). The Platform acknowledged the "importance of balancing needs and interests of both residents and visitors" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 25). The session speakers convened on security, sustainability, innovation, and collaboration as short-and long-term key pillars for urban tourism in a post-pandemic world (UNESCO, 2020). Creativity and creative tourism were identified as strengths that can benefit both locals and prospective domestic and international tourists (UNESCO, 2020). Overall, it was agreed that the pandemic was an opportunity for destinations to open up to local residents and encourage people to re-discover the beautiful and diverse peculiarities of towns and cities (UNESCO, 2020). As the session concluded, cities will see "a shift towards not just more digital travel, but also towards local travel and an expansion in cultural and intangible heritage education" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 28).

It should come as no surprise that the academic debate on current and future trends of tourism had previously approached the same themes years before the COVID19 outbreak. According to Dredge (2017), the debate on overtourism is "simply resetting the clock on well-established debates" that were central in tourism planning and destination management. In their concluding remarks on overtourism, Dodds and Butler (2019, p. 273) acknowledge that "if residents are given the chance to express their opinions about tourism and long-term development, they potentially have the power to change the state of affairs by influencing decision makers". However, it should be noted that community-driven and participatory modes of decision making and governance in urban destinations have been long debated in academia (Amore & Hall, 2016). In particular, bottom-up initiatives of institutional innovation at the neighbourhood

level are well established and extensively researched (Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & Gonzalez, 2010; Vitale, 2009), including the mechanisms of exclusion and non-decision-making that cities have carried over to legitimize the rhetoric of urban growth coalitions (Amore, 2019; Amore, Hall, & Jenkins, 2017). Finally, the identification of creative tourism as the new way of urban tourism is a well-established notion, with early works on the topic dating to the mid-2000s. Since the seminal work of Richards and Wilson (2006), in fact, cities have been "seeking to capitalise in their creative resources" (Richards & Wilson, 2007, p. 1) in response to the changes in recreation and leisure tied to the rise of the creative class (Amore, 2019; Florida, 2002).

We can therefore conclude that much of the ongoing debate on tourism, overtourism and the future of cities in a post-pandemic world is *old wine in new bottles* (Dredge, 2017). The current debate on the future of tourism simply exacerbates the dichotomy between those advocating for a boosterist approach to post-COVID19 tourism recovery and those seeking to provide an alternative sustainable tourism paradigm that reflects the aspirations and views of a diverse range of relevant stakeholders and takes into account the finite nature of destinations.

Reigniting tourism: the same bad medicine?

Throughout the summer of 2020, scholars and industry stakeholders discussed ways and solutions to enable a speedy recovery of tourism and international tourism in particular (e.g.Buhalis, 2020). The emphasis on the role of technology and innovation is paramount, with scholars suggesting that the ultimate IT shift, a result of the pandemic, "will bring unforeseen opportunities, challenges and risks, particularly for business travel and the MICE sector" (Buhalis, 2022, p. 4). From a demand perspective, instead, the desirability and intention to travel is reinforced by arguments in favour of advanced systems of travel safety and security, including the introduction of a "vaccine passport" to enable seamless border-crossing (World Economic Forum, 2021). This echoes the UNWTO (2020) advocacy for cross-border management and safe air travel. In their view, one of the priorities in restarting tourism is to "harmonize travel and tourism related health protocols and procedures at global level and work towards the international interoperability of visitors' tracing apps" (UNWTO, 2020, p. 11). Additionally, those who favour the recovery of travel and tourism stress the socio-economic aspects like job retention in the sector and the creation of mechanisms to financially support leisure businesses throughout the lockdown (Buhalis, 2022; Hall & Seyfi, 2021). Nevertheless, almost no attention is paid to what measures should be put in place in order to manage the likely surge in visitor numbers once the global pandemic is resolved. Early signs of such short-sightedness were already visible at key attractions like the Great Wall of China site outside Beijing (Westcott & Culver, 2020).

The rhetoric of reigniting tourism is rooted in a pro-growth narrative and appraisal of tourism development that has already been questioned in tourism policy and planning (Hall, 2008, 2011). Nevertheless, destinations and cities that heavily depend on tourism have seen key tourism stakeholders exerting pressure to go back to business-as-usual once the health emergency is resolved (Bianchi, 2020; Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020; López-Gay et al., 2021). The discourses on limits to growth, overtourism and destination carrying capacity have been

side lined or silenced to address alleged priorities that, ultimately, benefit the big tourism and travel players (i.e., airline companies, hotel chains and sharing economy platforms) (Gössling et al., 2020). However, we should not forget the many issues and challenges caused by tourism before the pandemic. As Gössling et al. (2020, p. 13) state, "the COVID19 crisis should thus be seen as an opportunity to critically reconsider tourism's growth trajectory, and to question the logic of more arrivals implying greater benefits". Furthermore (Gössling et al., 2020, p. 15):

> This raises a considerable number of related questions and research needs, i.e. whether the pandemic will support nationalism and tighter borders even in the longer-term; the role of domestic tourism in the recovery and the longer-term transformation to more resilient destinations; the behavioral demand responses of tourists in the short- and longer-term, including business travel and widespread adoption of videoconferencing; the financial stimulus and its consequences for austerity and climate change mitigation; as well as the world's perspectives on the SDGs.

Rather than reigniting tourism, it is paramount to critically rethink contemporary travel. As Bianchi (2020, p. 80) notes, this counter-narrative provides a more cautious appraisal of the current COVID19 pandemic as a "critical juncture and a moment to challenge the current growth trajectory of tourism and re-align it with social and ecological limits". A recent editorial by Susanne Becken (2021) concludes that "travel should be closer to home, slower, and with a positive contribution at its core". This alternative paradigm accentuates the reduction of contemporary global mass tourism-driven erosion of natural, cultural, and social capital. In turn, it challenges the pro-growth narrative in favour of a tourism degrowth paradigm "that encourages qualitative development, with a focus on quality of life and social and ecological well-being measures" (Hall & Seyfi, 2021, p. 226). Arguably, the shift from recovery to the resilience of destinations can represent a solution in the post-pandemic world as long as it is not exclusively rooted in the will of the market and is a collaborative effort among diverse locally embedded stakeholders (Amore, Prayag, & Hall, 2018).

Cities are the ideal setting for this shift. First, cities are home to most of the latent tourism demand seeking to travel once the pandemic is over, and they are likely to be among the first destinations to which tourists will travel. Second, cities provide the ideal mix of attractions and amenities that favour slow tourism and walking tours for residents, city users and visitors alike. Third, many cities provide modes of urban mobility that closely align to net carbon zero emissions (Le-Klaehn & Hall, 2015). Fourth, there are cities already experimenting with community-driven urban destinations strategies to mitigate years of pro-growth tourism development, as in the case of Copenhagen (Wonderful Copenhagen, 2017). From a resilience standpoint, cities are "sustainable networks of physical systems and human communities … able to survive and function under extreme and unique conditions" (Godschalk, 2003, p. 137). However, it is in the interest of local residents and civic society advocates to frame the future of urban destinations. As Meerow, Newell, and Stults (2016, p. 39) state "resilience is framed as an explicitly desirable state and, therefore, should be negotiated among those who enact it empirically".

Conclusions

This chapter addressed issues on global mobilities, cities and tourism from a COVID19 perspective. Evidence from a range of cities around the world were used to illustrate the ongoing consequences of the pandemic and the shift from overtourism to reigniting tourism in current debate. This chapter then challenged the emerging rhetoric of swift economic recovery for tourism and urban tourism by illustrating initiatives and alternative solutions that were already under discussion on the eve of the pandemic. Cities as hubs of global and local mobility can greatly contribute to enabling a post-COVID future for urban destinations that is not exclusively tied to the visitor economy and an increased volume of visitors. As Hall et al. (2019, p. 63) suggest, "a more structural appraisal of contemporary mobility may contribute to a new form of tourism mobility governance wherein the mode and their interventions measures become mutually positively reinforcing, rather than the present state of unsustainability".

This chapter was written in the midst of the third national lockdown in the United Kingdom. Many of the arguments raised in the chapter are likely to be resolved in one way or another when the pandemic crisis is resolved. Nevertheless, this is the time for rethinking and applying modes of destination metagovernance and resilience by the people and for the people. Cities as destinations provide an excellent range of initiatives and things to do which have no parallel in leisure and tourism. Additionally, they have the potential to enhance civic engagement and grassroot movements aimed at creating a more liveable, desirable, and sustainable urban future.

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