



**eurac**  
research

## REPORT **OVERTOURISM: HOW MUCH TOURISM IS TOO MUCH?**

**Eurac Research - Center for Advanced Studies**  
**October 2018**

*Authors: Greta Erschbamer, Elisa Innerhofer, Harald Pechlaner*

Popular travel destinations around the world are suffering from overcrowding, and in some cities inhabitants are even taking to the streets because they feel overrun by the masses of visitors. Some locations in South Tyrol are also very full during high season. What can we do to keep tourism from becoming a burden for local residents, while keeping vacation locations attractive for both visitors and inhabitants? How should we prepare ourselves for a future in which experts forecast an increase in the global streams of tourists? What possibilities are opened up by new technologies? In this report, tourism researchers Greta Erschbamer, Elisa Innerhofer and Harald Pechlaner discuss the various aspects of the phenomenon of overtourism and offer approaches for its management.

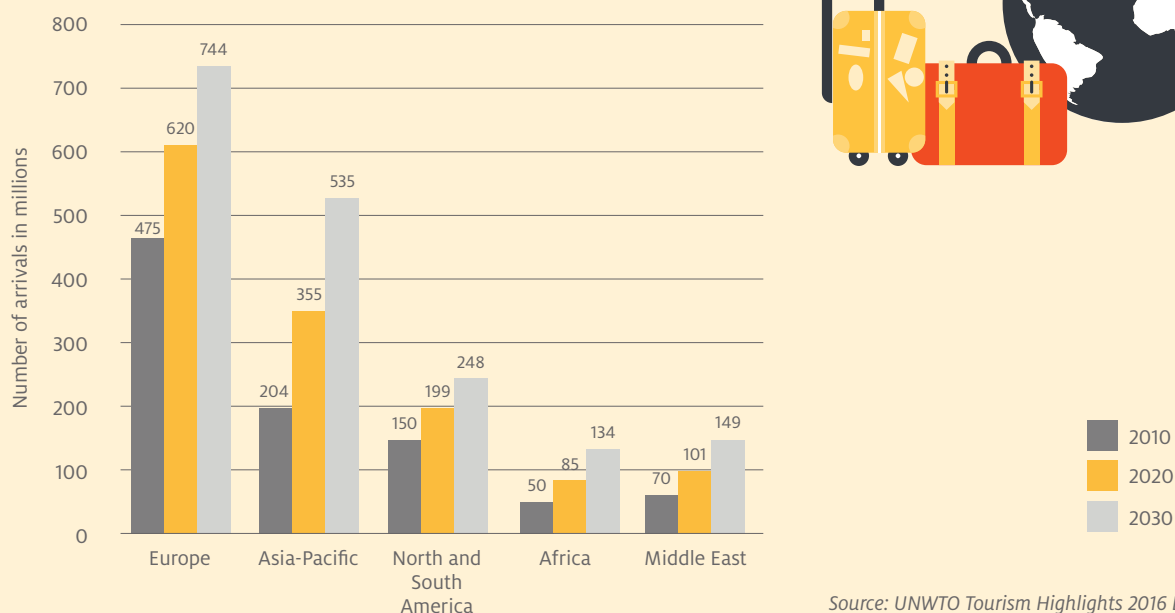
## Overtourism – What is it all about?

Popular vacation destinations are suffering increasingly from cases of overload. Over-crowded beaches, long line-ups at attractions, incessant traffic jams and packed town centres are just a few of the effects that both guests and locals have to deal with in varied destinations throughout the world. More than ever, developments in tourism are influenced by global events and trends. These include changing relationships to mobility, overall demographic change and digitalisation, as well as increasing urbanisation and resultant migration to urban centres. Budget airlines make it possible to travel long distances in a short time at economical prices, thus making destinations throughout the world accessible to more and more people. People in good health live longer and have the personal and financial freedom to travel in old age. People travel more often and for shorter durations of time. In countries with large populations, such as China and India, there is a growing middle class that enjoys travel. As a result of digitalisation, new travel products and offers are available from international companies. The result of all this is that not only are the most beautiful and most popular places and locations are overfull, but even second tier destinations are crowded at times. Tourists and locals alike are feeling the effects. Within this context, overtourism is more of a selective phenomenon

that is present in specific locations rather than a generalised issue in a region or country. The challenges concern more than just cities and urban centres: rural areas too, such as certain ski areas, are among highly-frequented tourist destinations. Particularly during high season, locals and the tourists often feel disturbed by the large gatherings of visitors. In cities such as Amsterdam, Venice, or Barcelona, but also in rural vacation areas, enormous tensions have at times arisen because of overtourism. Traffic jams, high consumption of resources such as water – and, as a result, a shortage of water at the end of the season – as well as high rents and a shortage of living space caused by new online platforms such as Airbnb have even recently led to demonstrations against the growth of tourism.

These developments have a substantial influence upon the tourism consciousness of the local population. Within this context, tourism is an important economic factor for many countries. Cities and regions do not want to miss out on income from tourism and attempt—through regulations and other measures—to change tourists’ behaviour by appealing to their sense of responsibility, and in so doing, change the perceptions of residents. Current developments demonstrate the necessity for a coordinated management of tourist streams between the international travel industry and national, regional and local tourism bodies. The challenges are not going to diminish: analysis of global tourism shows that tourism has not peaked, and numerous destinations continue to strive for growing numbers of visitors.

**FORECASTED NUMBERS OF WORLDWIDE ARRIVALS OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS FROM 2010 TO 2030 BY REGION (IN MILLIONS)**



Source: UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2016 Edition, p. 15

## Overtourism – A new phenomenon?

Even though the phenomenon of overtourism has been in the press in recent months and has been increasingly taken up at conferences and in discussions, the perception of “too much” is not new to some tourist destinations. For example, as early as the 1980s tourism researcher Jost Krippendorff dealt with travel as a mass phenomenon and drew up twenty-three guidelines “for a humanization of travel”, which offered tourism planning support to destination stakeholders. When Krippendorff designated tourism as a “landscape devourer”, he drew attention to missteps in tourism planning and demonstrated how a tourism economy that destroys landscapes deprives itself of its own resources. In 1980, the magazine GEO even asked critically, “How many tourists per hectare of beach?” and then discussed the concept of “carrying capacity”, which was subsequently also used in the 1990s by various tourism researchers to shed light upon the maximum load of a destination.

It looks as though there has been sufficient research on the subject, but to date it has only been possible to transfer part of that knowledge into practice. Furthermore, in the first studies reference was made to the fact that tourism managers were not exactly thrilled with the term “overtourism” (the term that describes the discomfort with tourism that has gotten out of hand). Who would like to label his or her destination with the moniker of “too much tourism”? In spite of that, those in charge of tourism also increasingly recognise the necessity to make a greater investment in the distribution of the guest streams in terms of time and space.

But the findings from studies, conferences and publications on the subject of overtourism show that the problem cannot be linked solely to numbers. Thus it also cannot be solved merely by a numerical restriction, but rather, a variety of instruments should be developed for a proactive structuring of tourism in a destination.

## What leads to overtourism?

The causes of overtourism may be varied and may differ greatly depending upon the destination. On one hand there are global developments—for example societal changes such as increasing mobility—that create a “critical mass” which for many people represents “too much”. On the other hand, factors that are specific to the location come into play that must be taken into consideration more precisely to get to the bottom of the phenomenon. Thus, for example, better connections and accessibility to a destination, the professionalism in the service sector, or aspects of currency policy may have the effect of increasing visitors and tourists. The aspect of changed perception is also important: in numerous desti-

nations in which tourism has become a strong branch of the economy and has brought prosperity to the locals, subsequent generations come to experience this tourism differently than the founding generation did, and also perceive its drawbacks, such as the effects of the guest streams upon the environment. Traffic overloads or crowded, dirty beaches and hiking trails are no longer immediately accepted.

## How much tourism is too much?

When the local population orients its everyday activities too much toward tourists and has to adapt to the streams of visitors, tourism can turn into a problem. The danger ensues that the feeling of “too much” changes the local population’s opinion of tourism. Resultingly, people call tourism into question in an ever-critical manner and, in so doing, shift its advantages to the background. Overtourism first and foremost deals with the perception of the locals and thus how much a society can withstand. That refers on one hand to the physical capacity, for example, how many visitors and hikers can a nature park accommodate, but also the psychological and societal capacity: how much tourism can the locals bear? When is the amount of guests perceived as too much? The answer depends upon the locals; there is no definition that is generally applicable. Not every destination that is greatly frequented and is counted among tourist “hot spots” grapples with overtourism. Excess is not necessarily perceived as such by the local population. Overtourism is therefore greatly tied to the acceptance by the locals in the corresponding individual situation.

It is necessary to take into consideration the fact that these days many guests and also many locals are themselves experienced travellers. And it is recognised more and more that the search for exclusivity or for something special runs through the list of motives of guests and travellers as a guiding principle. But too many people at attractive locations increasingly ruin this “exclusivity”. Another important aspect is that international target groups are first of all interested in the “hot spots” and want to visit internationally recognised attractions, which as a consequence are felt by many visitors to have lost their attractiveness.

## Where do measures need to be taken to counteract overtourism?

As mentioned above, the most important factor in the discussion of overtourism is the perception of locals. The ideas and expectations of the local population must be taken into consideration when discussing the kind of tourism a destination wishes to have in the future and the strategies to be taken to achieve it. Destination management must take much better care of the concerns of the local population than it did in the past and it must seek out and lead the dialogue of arranging the living space in such a way that both quality of life and competitiveness can be insured.

The challenge lies first and foremost in managing tourists and visitors without restricting growth, in particular qualitative growth. Within this context, current and future technological developments may be viewed as opportunities above all others. Thus, for example, apps for the guiding of visitors may be put to use to guarantee better distribution.

## What can be done?

One possibility lies in staggering the streams of guests in terms of both space and time. Visitor guiding systems can be an important measure for staggering streams of guests and, in the end, they can also give the guest the feeling of being in good hands through the avoidance of long lines and large crowds. Guiding visitors is understood as a measure for influencing visitors with regard to their distribution in terms of space, time, and quantity. Attractive offers during the shoulder seasons (the travel period between peak and off-peak seasons), for example, may contribute to taking the pressure off of peak periods.

Another possibility for the management of locations heavily visited by tourists is concrete measures such as upper limits or restrictions on access. These restrictions should be established with reference to the ecological and social capacity of a destination or point of attraction. Sustainable success in tourism is created in harmony with the environment and with the local culture. Thus, for example, roads may only remain open for individual travel at certain times, or the traffic may be restricted through controlled frequencies. One example of this is the pilot project #Dolomitesvives, which restricts traffic on the road over the Sella Pass between South Tyrol and Trentino (see the example in the box).

### DUBROVNIK

Historical points of attraction are regarded as visitor magnets, above all else when they carry the internationally recognised title of UNESCO World Heritage Site, such as the Croatian port city of Dubrovnik. It has only forty thousand inhabitants, but it is visited by 1.5 million vacationers every year. Along with international tour operators, the city has now attempted to master the masses of tourists through staggered times and access restrictions. Thus starting in 2018, fewer cruise ships may dock at the same time. In addition, the surrounding cities and beaches are advertised as likewise interesting destinations in order to better distribute the streams of tourists in terms of both space and time.

*Source: Dubrovnik Tourism.*



### #DOLOMITESVIVES

One drawback to mass tourism is extreme traffic and the stress to the environment and increase in noise that accompany it. Sustainable mobility can be an alternative to this. The initiative #Dolomitesvives took place on the Sella Pass in the months of July and August 2017. It was an initiative for sustainable mobility supported by the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano. The goal of the regulation was to improve the quality of the experience on the pass through the reduction of traffic jams, noise, and exhaust emissions. Within that context, a policy mix was applied: on nine Wednesdays in July and August, the road over the pass was closed to individual motorised vehicles from 9am to 4pm, while an additional cultural and culinary experience was offered. Only public transportation, electric vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians were granted access. The research team from Eurac Research carried out monitoring within the framework of the initiative to determine how locals, guests, and business people experienced the reduction in traffic for that limited time.



Data and information on tourist streams are necessary to implement such measures in an efficient and effective way. The monitoring of guest movement in a region can serve as the basis for this. Legal regulations can control offers such as Airbnb, thus helping to manage accommodations capacities; this is important for ensuring that the demand by tourists does not overly reduce the living space for the local population. Tourism can also be controlled qualitatively and quantitatively by a targeted pricing policy. Date-dependant pricing options make it possible for the guests to decide for themselves when they will come or when they will visit an attraction and how much they wish to pay for it. In addition, income can be generated through a variety of taxes in order to compensate for the negative consequences of too much tourism (one example of this is the ecotax on Mallorca).

#### MEASURES AND APPROACHES TO SOLUTIONS

Guiding visitors: staggering in terms of space and time

Concrete countermeasures, such as setting a top limit

Access restrictions, such as a reduction in traffic

Development of alternative touristic products and offers

Monitoring to access the basis of concrete data

Regulations, such as regulating offers like Airbnb

Supporting quality tourism through price policy

Introduction of an ecotax in addition to local taxes (for the care of the natural landscape)

#### TOURISM MONITORING: THE INSTO (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM OBSERVATORIES) AND THE OBSERVATORY FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SOUTH TYROL



The International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO) was created by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2004. Its goal is the regular monitoring of tourism at the destination level through a systematic and long-term observation of tourism performance and the effects upon society, environment and the economy. By creating networks and knowledge exchange between international destinations, a new basis will be created for future standards in sustainable tourism. With the establishment of an observatory in South Tyrol and the inclusion of South Tyrol in the network, the preconditions have been created for systematically observing developments in tourism at the local level and profiting from the experiences of other destinations along the path to greater sustainability.

## Who should intervene upon signs of overtourism?

This aspect has a close connection with the measures. Above all else, it concerns observing the signals of the perception of too much tourism and interpreting them correctly. There may be no one who works in the tourism industry who uses the term overtourism with a great deal of sympathy, nevertheless in view of changing societies, it might be sensible to not sweep the first weak signals of it under the rug, but rather to proactively bring them into the discussion.

On one hand, there are political figures who can become active through regulations, such as those that concern development planning. On the other hand, tourism organisations can be challenged. Within this context, cooperation is important, in particular when achieving a balanced relationship between highly-frequented points of attraction and less frequented surroundings. In dealing with overtourism, it is expedient to think and act in larger geographical units. Several locations in one area, such as cities and the surrounding communities, can together attempt to stagger the streams of guests in geographical terms. In addition to the political figures and the tourism organisations, though, the hotel industry can also have an effect upon the amount of visitors through a targeted structuring of products and offers.

## How does the situation look in South Tyrol? Can we talk about overtourism?

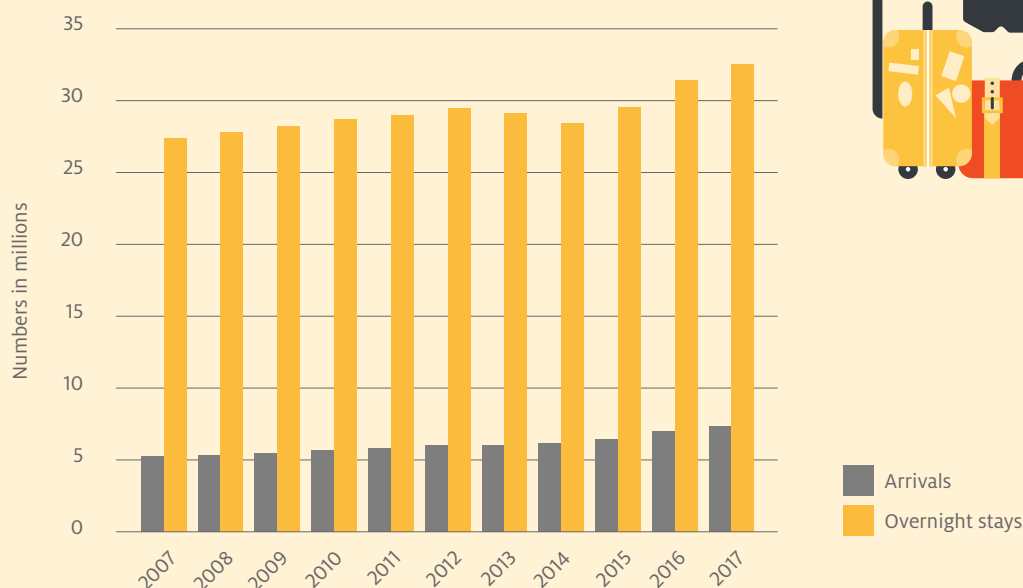
During the high season, overcrowding can definitely be identified in certain locations in South Tyrol, above all where the concentration of traffic (for example, at the main thoroughfares and roads over passes) and visitors (such as at points of attraction in the Dolomites World Natural Heritage Site) is especially high. What is also new is the increase of guests from overseas and from Asian countries. Since these guests are predominantly interested in the best known points of attraction and hot spots, the challenge consists of making them familiar with the other attractions so that their stay at the hot spot is as short as

possible. In general, tourism in South Tyrol is perceived as an important economic factor in the region. As a cross sector, it has a positive effect on other sectors and, in so doing, creates many direct and indirect jobs.

Destination management in South Tyrol lies primarily with the regional institution IDM (Innovation Development Marketing). In 2017, three units were created to involve larger geographical units in operational destination management. IDM focuses on guiding visitors and projects through cooperation with various regional and local actors to find solutions for locations experiencing an especially high numbers of visitors. In this context, a working group has been set up to discuss challenges and solutions for visitor management in South Tyrol.

For further information:  
[advanced.studies@eurac.edu](mailto:advanced.studies@eurac.edu)

### ARRIVALS AND OVERNIGHT STAYS IN SOUTH TYROL 2007-2017



Source: ASTAT, 2018