

# OVERTOURISM: ITS MEANING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE HOST COUNTRY

John Ebejer<sup>\*</sup>, Jim Butcher<sup>§</sup>, Marie Avellino<sup>¶</sup>

## Introduction

This report relates to a debate held at the University of Malta on the theme of overtourism. Following brief background information on overtourism, the report provides an account of the comments of the panel speakers followed by interventions by the audience, who were mostly students and academics.

## Meaning and impacts of overtourism

Tourism is often considered to be one of the more sustainable economic activity for cities. It is often given plenty of scope to develop because of its potential to drive economic. In recent years, however, the perception of city tourism has changed dramatically. Public transportation, infrastructure, roads, museums, attractions and other services that were primarily created for local use will be mostly utilized by the increasing tourist numbers.<sup>1</sup>

It is claimed that iconic cultural cities such as Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam are experiencing overtourism. For example, in the last two years Barcelona has seen a radical change in the public perception on tourism: *“from ‘manna from heaven’ to serious issues that are affecting the quality of life of its citizens.”*<sup>2</sup> In areas of strong concentration of tourist activity, public spaces are being taken over for tourism use. Las Ramblas in Barcelona is a case in point. This iconic avenue was once the main meeting place of Barcelona society. It is now perceived by the locals as having lost its symbolic significance and is steadily emptying out of traditional functions. The historic Gothic Quarter lost 15 per cent of its population from 2010 to 2015, largely because of the sharp increase in apartments for short tourism rentals (Russo and Scarnato, 2018). There are also evident signs of overtourism in Malta. Valletta, for example, is witnessing a declining population because of increase in property values, more shared accommodation for tourists and more inconveniences to residents from tourism and catering establishments<sup>3</sup>

The concept of overtourism has become one of the most discussed issues in tourism academic literature. The term however is still not clearly delineated and is subject to multiple interpretations (Koens et al, 2018). Some of the world’s most beautiful destinations will see tourists flocking to appreciate their wares, weather and wondrous treasures. But is there a cost?

---

<sup>\*</sup> Dr. John Ebejer is lecturer at the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta

<sup>§</sup> Dr. Jim Butcher is a geographer and author of several books on mass tourism

<sup>¶</sup> Dr Marie Avellino, Director of the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta.

<sup>1</sup> Koens, K., Postma, A., & Papp, B. (2018). Is Overtourism Overused? Understanding the Impact of Tourism in a City Context, *Sustainability*, 10(12): 4384

<sup>2</sup> Russo, A. P., & Scarnato, A. (2018). “Barcelona in common”: A new urban regime for the 21st-century tourist city? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 40(4): 455-474.

<sup>3</sup> Ebejer, J. (2018). Urban heritage and cultural tourism development: a case study of Valletta’s role in Malta’s tourism. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 1-15.

Tourism might mean revenue and appreciation, but it may also mean overcrowding and inconvenience for those who permanently live in these desirable locations. Is it worth it? Can cultures and economies adapt to meet the growing aspiration to see the world, be it for cultural enlightenment or just for fun?

These and other questions were debated in a public event held at the University of Malta.<sup>4</sup> The debate was moderated by Dr. Jim Butcher of Canterbury Christ Church University.

### **Comments from the Panel**

Dr Butcher, in his introduction, gave a brief overview on how tourism developed in the last sixty years and noted that there were always critics of tourism for one reason or another. In recent years there has been an upsurge of criticism of tourism primarily because of a sense of cultural loss due to commercialisation of places. “Is tourism at the tipping point?” asks Dr. Butcher. In recent years, there have been numerous media reports about Barcelona residents complaining about the impacts of tourism. Dr. Butcher noted that these reports should be treated with caution because the protests might not reflect the general views of the population. There are nuances of positives and negatives.

In his intervention, Dr. Dominic Standish<sup>5</sup> referring to tourism in Venice, argued that looking solely at the figures could misrepresent the issues that that city is facing. It is true that central parts of the city are subject to overcrowding because of tourists but a more pertinent problem is that Venice is losing its soul as people are moving out. Dr. Standish pointed out that there are many different reasons for this, other than tourism. In part it is because of restrictions on people restoring their homes. Moreover, some major employers have moved out of Venice. The authorities are mismanaging the situation as they allow the closure of important spaces for the staging of tourist-oriented events. Dr. Standish argued that separating residents from tourists is a kind of apartheid.

Dr. Marie Avellino noted that overtourism effects the experience of the tourists themselves. In tourism studies we read of a lot of buzzwords such as carrying capacity, experiential tourism etc. Now we have overtourism. We often read about concerns that tourism is destroying the places that residents love. Dr. Avellino argued however that it is tourism that generates revenue that can enable communities to preserve their culture and identity. Communities commodify their heritage and culture and sell it to tourists, and hence the need to make it more attractive. Destination Malta should ask itself the question on the sort of tourists that we are getting. “Are we getting sufficient financial benefit to justify the costs and impacts?” asks Dr. Avellino.

The next panel speaker was Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino.<sup>6</sup> He argued that we cannot assume that residents of a destination will always be sympathetic. At some point, residents get antagonistic to

---

<sup>4</sup> The debate was held on the 23 October 2018. It was organised by the Academy of Ideas and the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta. This is a satellite event of 2018 Battle of Ideas Festival Europe.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Dominic Standish is a lecturer and writer on Italian politics as well as the author of Standish, D. (2012). Venice in Environmental Peril?: Myth and Reality. University Press of America.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino, Professor of Sociology, Pro-rector, University of Malta.

tourists. In the late nineties a case was made to set a carrying capacity limit to the Malta destination at 1.2 million tourists. “But what were we supposed to do? Stop tourists from coming?” asks Prof. Baldacchino. Malta’s economic dependence on tourism is around 13 per cent. He noted that this is a reasonable level as greater dependence would make for a stronger tourism lobby and this will make it more difficult to regulate the sector.

## **Examples of overtourism and potential solutions**

In the ensuing discussion, there were various interventions that related to examples of negative tourism impacts. In Cyprus, a relatively short stretch of coastline is visited by millions of tourists. The local character is being lost, as is the case, for example, when the residents do not find a restaurant with a local menu due to the fact that catering outlets seek to satisfy tourist demands. Another intervention, referring to Dubrovnik, dealt with the visitor crush brought about by cruise ships. The mayor of Dubrovnik was recently quoted as saying that a reduction in cruise ships is desirable even if this will result in reduced income to the city.

Dr. Avellino pointed out how many Maltese tourism establishments are employing non-Maltese. It is now less likely for a tourist to interact with a Maltese when being served in a hotel or catering establishment. The presence of a large number of non-Maltese workers in the tourist industry and in other sectors, is also negatively affecting the Maltese language.

An interesting discussion developed on whether destinations should cap the number of visitors. A tourist guide who intervened during the discussion argued that the Malta destination has exceeded capacity and that tourist numbers need to be contained. The infrastructure is unable to cope and crowding at key sites has become far too frequent. In Summer, the rocky beaches of Comino are subject to extreme overcrowding making it impossible to truly enjoy the limpid blue waters. Comino is not the only instance of overcrowding at tourism sites in Malta and Gozo.

The counter view was that, rather than capping, there should be better management to ease the pressures at tourist hotspots. There should be more effort to spread the tourist load from heavily visited particular locations to other locations. This elicited further discussion in that spreading tourists to various locations could negatively impact areas that as yet have been untouched. Rather than being a solution, it might spread the problem.

To address overtourism, Prof. Baldacchino suggested the introduction of taxes on tourists. This has been tried out in some destinations such as Bhutan and the Galapagos Islands. Several expressed disagreement with tourist taxes, with a participant in the debate arguing that this would make it harder for poor people to travel. Poor people should be able to visit the most attractive destinations like everybody else.

A participant argued that one way of limiting tourist numbers in Malta is by reducing the number of flights in and out of Malta. The logic underlying this suggestion is that the tourism inflows is dependent on the seat capacity, as has been demonstrated in the last 12 years since the introduction of low cost airlines to Malta. Another participant pointed out that we should let the market operate as destinations go through product life cycles and if tourists do not like what they see because of overtourism, they will not come again.