

Post pandemic tourism: Scenario setting

Joseph M. Cheer

Center for Tourism Research, Wakayama University, Japan

Keywords

Sustainable tourism, Responsible tourism, Overtourism, Tourism resilience, Tourism restart

Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 has dealt a severe blow to the global tourism industry and its wide cross-section of stakeholders from government and industry, to communities, non-government organisations and wage earners and micro-enterprise holders whose livelihood are derived from tourism. In this brief, I will broadly map the thinking around tourism and its trajectory from overtourism to undertourism as a result of the pandemic. Previous tourism downturns might have been limited to one or a small number of source markets to destinations, or limited to international arrivals only and only for a relatively limited duration. The entire tourism industry has slowed to a trickle for most of 2020 (Figure 1), and many projections are that the global tourism sector may not fully recover until 2023 at the earliest.

This raises questions about how destinations and their communities might be able to build greater resilience

to crises, and how the circumstances borne from the pandemic might cause a rethink of tourism. While many scholars are suggesting that the sudden, and long running shock affords the opportunity to take stock and shift to more benign forms of tourism, this remains to be seen. This assumes a number of things, including; (1) Dismantling current growth centric business models and shifting to more human centered tourism, (2) Destination government's recalibrating economies where tourism dependence is entrenched (3) Tourist behaviour change towards more sustainable consumption.

Then

It wasn't too long ago that overtourism was a key gripe in many popular tourist destinations round the globe. In 2018 we commenced an intensive global examination mapping overtourism discourses and its manifestations around the globe (Milano, Cheer & Novelli, 2018). The push to 'live like a local' gained



Figure 1 International Tourist Arrivals – January to October 2020

Source: UNWTO (December, 2020)

enormous momentum in cities like Barcelona, such that locals themselves weren't able to live like they did anymore. This was due to the intensification of housing shifting from accommodation for local residents, to real estate speculation with an eye on the sharing economy, displacing longstanding residents in favour of tourists. In our summation, overtourism is characterised as "the excessive growth

of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have enforced permanent changes to their lifestyles, access to amenities and general well-being". Moreover, while residents where overtourism was evidenced tended to bear the costs of growth through the diminishment of their overall well being, the lions share of benefits from growth was often accrued by others, including multinationals and property investors in cities far away from the tourism action.

We advanced this research agenda further, redoubling efforts to come to terms with what measures were required to alleviate and mitigate the grip of too much tourism on host communities (Milano, Cheer & Novelli, 2019c). In the Preface, Founder of Lonely Planet, Tony Wheeler argued (p. xvii);

"Over and over, its wise to remind ourselves that many of the problems of overtourism can also be sheeted home to undermanagement. Too often local authorities simply don't plan ahead or exert control when and where they should".

The theme of tourism policy and planning laxity resonates in Palma, Majorca where gentrification patterns highlight how overtourism evolves and manifests. According to Blazquez-Salom et al (2019), this is most obvious in the gentrification of the high street where once local artisans and producers, largely focused on local clientele, have been displaced by multinational brands transforming the streetscape into a bland version found in popular tourist destinations.

New retails shops on the main streets are thematized in a new 'boutiquing' landscape by means of proliferating franchises and branches of major commercial chains. (Blazquez-Salom et al., p. 63).

Overtourism demonstrates how the economic lure that the sector provides tends to overcome clear eyed and rational policy and planning as policy makers rush to avail themselves of the rivers of gold, as it were This is often exacerbated in situations where tourism is one of the most

or the only viable sector leading to a blind spot about the wider imposts that tourism puts on local communities (Cheer, Milano & Novelli, 2019a). Consequently, as is argued (Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019b):

The terms "overtourism" and "tourismphobia" have their genesis in the rapid unfolding of unsustainable mass tourism practices and the responses that these have generated amongst

One of the upshots of growing local community angst against too much tourism is the rise in social movements, particularly evident in tourist destination in the Mediterranean (Ibid.). These grassroots movements have their origins in their exasperation over long running policy inertia that has ignored the plight of local communities, with governments all the while fixated on a tourism growth model very much focused on increasing arrivals and the associated expenditures that come with it, alongside vehement appealing for outside investment. While the petition from social movements has been to degrow tourism, this can also have significant and inadvertent impacts:

What is also clear is that strategies based only on tourism degrowth may not be sufficient to fully shift from a sector engrained with the 'growth for development' paradigm, to a 'degrowth for liveability' one, and it may be too optimistic to think that such an approach could cope with the underlying complexity of urban tourism settings. (Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019b, p. 1870)

In many destinations suffering from overtourism, one of the most remarkable shifts has been from tourism that was once seasonal and largely manageable, to tourism that has become difficult to control raising concerns about exceeding limits to growth (Cheer, Milano, Novelli, 2019a). So called 'temporal overtourism' emerges during the usual holiday periods but to unparalleled levels where community and ecological resilience is severely tested, year in year out. Such tendencies breach the threshold for community tolerance and overwhelms the rhythms local communities rely on, testing social systems in situ:

While the effects of temporal overtourism are palpable as seen in the intensification of crowding and escalation of traffic volumes, as well as impact on natural values, this has not carried over into commensurate economic gains. This confirms stakeholder sentiments that the primary beneficiaries from tourism growth are not within the local area and instead in the travel supply chain beyond the region. (Ibid., 2019, p. 566)

Now

However, as 2020 set in, the global tourism pendulum swung to the other end of the spectrum with the arrival of COVID-19 and the ensuing stranglehold on global mobilities escalated to the point where by the end of the year, borders across the globe were closed and tourism enterprises fell by the wayside. Geopolitical anxiety took its toll where touristic encounters and conceptualisations of the Other have become mired in fear and distrust. Indeed, "While geopolitical anxiety has perhaps always punctuated the touristic encounter, COVID-19 has brought these symptoms into sharp relief" (Mostafanezhad, Cheer & Sin, 2020, p. 183). This bears thinking about particularly as vaccine nationalism and vaccine equity loom as flashpoints or hurdles for tourism recovery.

At the height of pandemic anxiety midway through 2020, researchers cogitated over just what prospects lay in store and what pathways might eventually emerge. Transformation of the new normal resonates with argumentation that we cannot go back to the way tourism used to be. However, if any such transformation is to take place, this will require massive institutional shifts on both the supply and demand sides of the sector (Brouder, 2020). The massive disruption of the global economy is most obvious in the tourism sector where enormous business closures have been evidenced, alongside large scale furloughs and job losses, and communities shifting to return to previous livelihood modes or seeking to develop new ones.

The question of just when tourism is likely to make a recovery is the concern of industry stakeholders across the globe keen to make up for lost time and regain a semblance of viability. Key to any

recovery is the extent to which the global community can achieve vaccination levels that take into account the greater share of the global population. With vaccinations rolled out early in 2021, fear has made way for hope that this might just be the tourism restart (Cheer, Hall & Saarinen, 2020). Three variables are integral to any recovery including (1) Travel regulations that are globally harmonised – a vaccine passport system will only work if there is widespread multilateral cooperation, (2) Airlines successfully restarting from what has been a devastating blow and (3) The recovery of traveller confidence to overcome pandemic anxiety and be assured that safety and sanitation protocols are reliable (Ibid.).

Closing

Tourism is no stranger to crises and the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001 is a reminder- the thought then

was that tourism would never recover and that travellers will have lost confidence in the safety of air travel. The memory of 9/11 quickly receded and nearly two decades later, tourism reached unparalleled highs with a chorus of voices calling for a scaling back. However, as Michael Hall, Daniel Scott and Stefan Gössling (2020) argue, any hopes of tourism transforming to a better version of its former self will face stiff resistance unless a whole-of-planet approach to change is achieved.

Vaccines are now being deployed and true to form, countries have squabbled and sought to outbid each other for the limited vaccine production that has come available. Vaccine nationalism has risen its ugly head, as the countries of the global North jostle to be first in line, oblivious to the concerns of other countries who find themselves in grimmer circumstances. Consequently, vaccine equity has arisen as a bone of contention, with many in the

global South highlighting the selfishness of their more developed counterparts. This is what Hall et al allude to – how can we expect tourism be transformed after the pandemic when in a time of crisis, getting any kind of multilateral consensus is impossible? While tourism transformation might be a worthy cause to propagate, in reality, the new normal might not look too different to what was previously in place.

References

- Blázquez-Salom, M., Blanco-Romero, A., Gual-Carbonell, J., & Murray, I. (2019). Tourist gentrification of retail shops in Palma (Majorca). In C. Milano, J.M. Cheer & M. Novellie (Eds.), *Overtourism: excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*, 39-69, CABI.
- Brouder, P. (2020). Reset redux: possible evolutionary pathways towards the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 484-490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760928>
- Cheer, J.M., Hall, C.M. & Saarinen, J. (2020) Vaccines may soon make travel possible again. But how quickly will it return – and will it be forever changed? *The Conversation*, 28 December. <https://theconversation.com/vaccines-may-soon-make-travel-possible-again-but-how-quickly-will-it-return-and-will-it-be-forever-changed-150268>
- Cheer, J. M., Milano, C., & Novelli, M. (2019a). Tourism and community resilience in the Anthropocene: accentuating temporal overtourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(4), 554-572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1578363>
- Cheer, J. M., Milano, C., & Novelli, M. (2019b). Afterword: *Over overtourism or just the beginning?* *Overtourism: Excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*, 227-232.
- Hall, C. M., Scott, D., & Gössling, S. (2020). Pandemics, transformations and tourism: be careful what you wish for. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 577-598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1759131>
- Milano, C., Cheer, J.M. & Novelli, M. (2018). Overtourism: A growing global problem. *The Conversation*, July 18. <https://theconversation.com/overtourism-a-growing-global-problem-100029>
- Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Cheer, J. M. (2019a). Overtourism and tourismphobia: A journey through four decades of tourism development, planning and local concerns. *Tourism Planning and Development*, 16(4), 353-357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1599604>
- Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Cheer, J. M. (2019b). Overtourism and degrowth: a social movements perspective. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(12), 1857-1875. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1650054>
- Milano, C., Cheer, J. M., & Novelli, M. (Eds.). (2019c). *Overtourism: Excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*. CABI.
- Mostafanezhad, M.; Cheer, J.M. & Sin, H.L. (2020). Geopolitical anxieties of tourism:(Im)mobilities of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 10(2), 182-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620934206>

Joseph M. Cheer



Dr. Joseph M. Cheer < jmcheer@wakayama-u.ac.jp > is a Professor at Center for Tourism Research, Wakayama University, Japan and Adjunct Research Fellow, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Australia. He is Co Editor in Chief of *Tourism Geographies* by Taylor & Francis and has guested edited special issues in a number of other tourism and interdisciplinary journals such as *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Sustainability*, *SHIMA* and *Tourism Management Perspectives*. His recent collaborative book projects include "Overtourism: Excesses, Discontents and Measures in Travel and Tourism" (2019); "Modern Day Slavery & Orphanage Tourism" (2019); "Masculinities in the Field: Tourism and Transdisciplinary Research" (2021).