**Urban Tourism Challenges**

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Town and cities have always attracted visitors interested in experiencing dynamic and cosmopolitan places that offer a variety of activities and entertainment facilities. They provide an excellent infrastructure for tourism activities, benefiting from good transportation and accommodation facilities. Yet, it has been only a few decades since urban environments started to be recognised as an important setting for tourism and to attract more attention from researchers (Maxim, 2019). In a seminal work that ignited interest in urban tourism, Ashworth (1989) pointed out a double neglect – tourism scholars tended to overlook urban environments, although cities accommodate many tourism activities, while urbanists neglected tourism despite the large number of visitors attracted by these environments. Since then, more progress has been made towards better understanding this *complex phenomenon*.

Tourism is now recognised as an integral part of the life of many cities, with more studies looking into different challenges and issues faced by urban destinations (Maxim, 2021; Morrison and Coca-Stefaniak, 2021). These challenges relate to either the complex nature of the urban tourism phenomenon and its limited understanding, the negative impacts of urban tourism and the management and planning around these, the sustainability debates, or the external factors that threaten to affect these popular destinations. Figure 1 summarizes the key challenges faced by urban destinations, which are introduced further on.

*\*insert Figure 1 here\**

Figure 1. Key challenges faced by urban tourism destinations

One of the main challenges that the urban tourism concept has been facing for years is its *imprecise definition*, with many definitions limited to just placing tourism activities in an urban context, and failing to acknowledge its complex nature (Romero-García et al., 2019). Tourism is only one activity among many social and economic forces in a city, making it less visible and therefore easier to overlook by policy makers. Furthermore, urban tourists often use the same facilities and infrastructure as the locals, e.g. restaurants, public transport, museum and other cultural venues or shopping facilities, with the boundaries between tourism and other activities becoming more blurred than ever (Maitland, 2012). This makes it *difficult to distinguish* between touristic and non-touristic behaviour, which may create issues for policy makers when planning and managing tourism in cities. Furthermore, visitors in large cities tend to *compete with the local people* for the services and facilities they use during their stay, which in some cases leads to property, resources and development conflicts.

Another challenge posed by the phenomenon of urban tourism is the very *limited availability of comparable data*, which made this form of tourism one of the most underestimated activities for decades. Different countries and organisations take different approaches to interpreting urban tourism, linked to the various ways of defining urban areas. Most countries define a city or town by using a minimum population size, however this varies considerably, ranging from a few hundred inhabitants in Denmark to 100,000 in China, with the majority adopting a threshold of 5,000 inhabitants.

The *protection of the natural and built environment*, together with the conservation of the cultural heritage and the preservation of the local culture, by *maintaining their distinctiveness* in the face of pressure from globalisation, represent additional challenges faced by urban destinations. Local managers are therefore presented with the difficult task of *balancing* the economic benefits of tourism development in cities with the associated negative impacts, while trying to improve the quality of life for the local people. Examples of negative impacts include overcrowding, pollution, congestion, increased cost of living, and an increase in crime rates. Another challenge is developing *more sustainable forms of transport* and good public transport infrastructure to facilitate the move of visitors within the city and reduce the CO2 emissions associated with tourism development in these environments (Maxim, 2019).

Cities used to accommodate large numbers of visitors seemingly without much effort, but lately the phenomenon of “*overtourism*” has been recognised as an issue by many cities in Europe, including Barcelona, Venice, Amsterdam and Berlin, as well as by cities in other parts of the world. Overtourism was found to generate conflicts between visitors and locals, drive down wages and deteriorate working conditions in popular destinations (Walmsley et al., 2021), leading to a number of protests in high profile city destinations. As a result, there have been calls for a *better management* of tourism activities in cities, taking into consideration the sustainability principles and focusing on the needs of the local communities.

Large cities are more *vulnerable to crises and disasters*, with such events usually having serious consequences for tourism in the wider region. Examples include the 2007/2008 global economic crisis that affected many cities worldwide; 2010/2011 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand; the 2012 Hurricane Sandy that hit New York City; and the 2019/2020 bushfires in Australia that forced airports in Sydney and Canberra to close temporarily. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted tourism cities worldwide, these environments being among the most affected destinations due to the many travel restrictions put in place in trying to limit the spread of the virus. Cities, in particular large cities, are well connected, densely populated environments that have consequently recorded high levels of coronavirus infections, with visitors tending to avoid such places during the pandemic. It is expected that this trend will reverse gradually, with the rollout of vaccination programmes in many countries, and once travel restrictions are lifted.

*Safety and security* are two other important issues faced by policy makers in cities (Coca-Stefaniak and Morrison, 2018), which are usually linked to terrorist attacks and crime. The high number of (international) visitors congregating around the most important attractions and a vibrant night-time economy make cities more vulnerable to disrupting events that can have serious consequences for tourism.

The *sharing economy* has become a common feature in popular urban destinations, with platforms such as Airbnb threatening the traditional accommodation sector and pushing locals away from certain areas. Airbnb is thus considered to contribute to displacement and touristification of central areas, which led many world cities to take action and introduce restrictions. Amsterdam, for example, has included a limit of 30 nights per calendar year that hosts are allowed to rent out their entire property through Airbnb.

*Climate change* has been recognised as one of the key challenges that cities, in particular large cities, will be facing in the coming decades. Changes are expected in the weather and climate patterns that can lead to more frequent disasters such as heat waves, storms and water shortages. This could have implications for the urban infrastructure and the services offered to visitors and locals, with some cities in the southern hemisphere expected to suffer the most.

Urban destinations therefore face many challenges that require *smart solutions*. Technology innovation, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and the Internet of Things (IoT) can help address these challenges, by contributing to smarter urban transport networks, safer public spaces, energy efficiency, and better solutions in addressing the impacts of tourism.

Cities are very dynamic environments that are constantly evolving, and so are the new technologies that are expected to reshape urban destinations. The development of artificial intelligence (AI) and connected and autonomous vehicles (CAV) are two examples of future challenges that city destinations will need to be prepared for. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are needed to progress the urban tourism agenda and to help policy makers better understand the evolving challenges associated with this form of tourism.

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Better planning & management

Overtourism

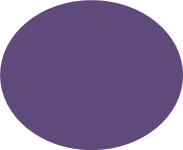
Imprecise definition

Sharing economy

Difficult to distinguish between visitors & locals

Visitors compete with the locals for services & facilities

Implementing smart solutions



Complex phenomenon

Vulnerability to crises & disasters

Climate change

Safety & security

Sustainable transportation

Maintaining their distinctiveness

Limited data available

Balancing benefits of tourism with the negative impacts

Protecting the built & natural environment

**Urban Tourism**

***Key Challenges***