



First Venice and Barcelona: now anti-tourism marches spread across Europe

Demos in San Sebastián and crackdowns in Rome and Dubrovnik as locals vent frustration at city-breakers and cruise ships

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With the continent sweltering under a heatwave nicknamed Lucifer, tempers have been boiling over, too, as a wave of anti-tourism protests take place in some of Europe's most popular destinations. Yet, as "tourism-phobia" becomes a feature of the summer, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has defended the sector, calling on local authorities to do more to manage growth in a sustainable manner.

The focal point for much of this has been Spain, which had a record 75.6 million tourists last year, including 17.8 million from the UK. In Barcelona, where tensions have been rising for years over the unchecked surge in visitors and impact of sites such as Airbnb on the local housing market, Arran, the youth wing of the radical CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy), have been filmed slashing the tyres of rental bicycles and a tour bus. An Arran spokesperson told the BBC: "Today's model of tourism expels people from their neighbourhoods and harms the environment." Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy described the group as "extremists".

There have also been protests in Mallorca and San Sebastián, where an anti-tourism march is planned for 17 August, to coincide with Semana Grande - a major festival of Basque culture.

Other demonstrations have taken place across southern Europe. Last month in Venice - which sees more than 20 million visitors a year and has just 55,000 residents - 2,000 locals marched through the city, voicing anger at rising rents and the impact of huge cruise ships and the pollution they cause to the city's delicate environment.



A resident holds a placard saying, in Venetian dialect "I'm not going, I'm staying" during a protest in Venice last month. Photograph: Manuel Silvestri/Reuters

Speaking to the Guardian, UNWTO secretary general Taleb Rifai said the rise in anti-tourist sentiment is “a very serious situation that needs to be addressed in a serious way”. If managed correctly, he added, tourism can be the “best ally” to conservation, preservation and the community.

“It should not be given up for the sake of mismanagement,” he said. “Ensuring that tourism is an enriching experience for visitors and hosts alike demands strong, sustainable tourism policies, practices and the engagement of national as well as local governments and administrations, private sector companies, local communities and tourists themselves.”

UNWTO recommends a number of proven methods for managing crowds in destinations, such as encouraging tourists to visit beyond the central sights, diversifying tourist activities, reducing seasonality and, importantly, addressing the needs of the local community. The focus should not be, it says, on simply stopping tourists arriving.

Earlier this year, Barcelona started cracking down on unlicensed Airbnb rentals, doubling the numbers of inspectors checking properties. Of around 16,000 holiday rentals in the city, 7,000 are believed to be unlicensed.



Messages against tourism in Oviedo, northern Spain. Photograph: Alberto Morante/EPA

In Venice, the mayor’s office has also been attempting to tackle the problem. In June it said it would introduce a ban on new tourist accommodation in the city centre, and “people counters” have been installed at popular sites to monitor overcrowding.

Italy has also been cracking down on anti-social behaviour in other tourist hotspots. In Rome, this means a ban on people eating or paddling in the city’s fountains and drinking on the street at night. Similar measures have been put into place in Milan - which introduced a summer ban on everything from food trucks to selfie sticks in the Darsena neighbourhood.

In Dubrovnik, another city where cruise ships unload thousands of visitors at a time, the mayor has introduced cameras to monitor the number of visitors in its Unesco-listed old town, so that the flow of people entering can be

slowed - or even stopped - once a certain number is reached. Meanwhile, the mayor of popular Croatian party island Hvar has pledged to put an end to debauchery by mostly British tourists by slapping them with huge fines.

For Duncan McCann, researcher at the New Economics Foundation, there are a number of factors underlying the recent tensions, including the rise of Airbnb, an increasing number of tourists making short city breaks, and the burden of cruise ships. Both city breakers and cruise ship passengers are far more likely to remain in a city centre rather than explore further afield.

The perceived threat of terrorism in north Africa has also led to an increase in tourists holidaying in the Mediterranean over the past two years.

“These shifts are really putting pressure on these locations, increasing the numbers and reducing the spread of the tourists,” says McCann. “Once you factor in the layout of a lot of these continental cities - old, and with a network of smaller streets - people start to get the sense that they’re being taken over.”

He adds that this plays into the wider politics of the continent, with economies not seen to be working for people, and politics not addressing the problems.

“Though tourist numbers have increased, I am not sure they have increased enough in five years to cause this much agitation,” he says. “What has really changed? A lot is that politics isn’t out for the ordinary person any more. Until that is addressed I don’t think we’ll see this protest movement subside.”

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