

Responsible Tourism as a Model Solution to the Overtourism Crisis: A Case Study of Barcelona (2018–2023)

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to address a highly sensitive and important issue that has garnered widespread media attention in both the Western and Arab worlds: the phenomenon of overtourism, which has become increasingly prevalent in several European countries such as Venice, Paris, and others. The World Tourism Organization has warned that this phenomenon may expand to affect countries worldwide by 2030. This study focuses on the city of Barcelona, Spain, where the issue has recently resurged strongly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. This resurgence is seen as a global retaliatory reaction to the lockdown measures, airport and port closures, and enforced social distancing implemented to overcome the pandemic. These developments have prompted the Catalan city of Barcelona to consider adopting responsible tourism as a model and strategic solution to mitigate the negative impacts caused by overtourism on this unique tourist destination with its timeless landmarks.

Keywords: Overtourism, COVID-19, Responsible Tourism, Barcelona.

Introduction:

The global tourism recession caused by the COVID-19 crisis did not last long, and the sector soon began to recover, reaching pre-pandemic levels by 2024. According to statistics from the World Tourism Organization, approximately 975 million international tourists traveled between January and September of 2023, marking an increase of (38%) compared to the same period in 2022. Moreover, international tourist destinations recorded a (22%) increase in foreign visitors in the third quarter of 2023 compared to the same quarter in 2022. International tourist numbers reached (91%) of pre-pandemic levels during the third quarter of 2023.¹

Following the COVID-19 crisis, the issue of overtourism reemerged. The term was first used by Freya Petersen in 2001, when she expressed her regret about the serious excesses of tourism development and the inability of local management to control the situation in Pompeii. *Overtourism* refers to the influx of massive numbers of tourists to popular destinations, negatively affecting them by creating pressure, disturbance, road congestion, overcrowded neighborhoods, noise pollution, and many other adverse effects that disturb the local residents. These impacts have sparked anger and resentment among locals, as well as environmental, historical, and cultural advocates. This discontent has led to widespread public protests and movements opposing the phenomenon, which had briefly receded during the COVID-19 crisis but returned forcefully once the global health emergency ended and people sought to break free from the routines and restrictions imposed during that time.

One of the cities most affected is Barcelona, making it necessary to find a solution to address this crisis and mitigate the consequences of this growing phenomenon, which has turned tourism from a blessing into a burden. This is where the concept of responsible tourism emerged as a model solution, based on the principle of creating better places to live in. It encourages tourists to choose

less crowded periods to visit their dream destinations and enjoy a unique and enriched tourism experience.

Research Problem:

Based on the above and given the importance of the study's two key variables—overtourism and responsible tourism—the research problem can be formulated as follows: How can the phenomenon of overtourism be addressed by investing in the responsible tourism model, with a focus on the city of Barcelona during the period 2018–2023?

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this paper lies in its analysis and diagnosis of the reality of overtourism globally, with a focus on the post-COVID-19 period. It highlights the experience of Barcelona and how it implemented responsible tourism practices to mitigate the negative impacts of overtourism.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to achieve several objectives, including:

- Establishing the conceptual framework for overtourism and responsible tourism
- Discussing the factors behind the spread of overtourism, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era
- Presenting the Catalan experience as a victim of overtourism and its shift toward the responsible tourism model as a strategic solution that ensures tourism in Barcelona supports the economic, environmental, and social dimensions

Methodology:

This study is based on the **descriptive inductive method** to explain the concept of overtourism, focusing on the various factors that contributed to its emergence and spread. The study draws from a wide range of foreign sources, including previous studies, books, and reputable internet sites, due to their comprehensive approach to the topic. We then applied the theoretical part to a practical case, focusing on the **Barcelona experience during the period 2018–2023**. Overtourism has long been associated with Barcelona, and although it declined during the global outbreak of COVID-19, it returned vigorously during the post-recovery phase. This resurgence highlights Barcelona's orientation toward addressing the consequences of overtourism through a sustainable tourism model known as **responsible tourism**.

Study Axes:

The study is divided into two main axes:

Axis One: Theoretical Framework of Overtourism

Axis Two: The Barcelona Experience in Addressing Overtourism (2018–2023)

Axis One: Theoretical Framework of Overtourism

Since its inception, tourism has been considered a vital activity—unsurprisingly, given that the appeal of the holiday industry lies in recreation, pleasure, and an escape from the hardships of life. Additionally, tourism has played a crucial role in generating wealth for isolated rural communities, alleviating economic downturns, preserving biodiversity and wildlife, and restoring dilapidated historical cities. The benefits of tourism are countless. However, the mistake lies in assuming that it only brings positives. Tourism has many serious negative impacts, both direct and indirect.

It was only recently—in the summer of 2017—that the media and travel industry began addressing the negative effects of mass tourism, leading to the coining of the term "**overtourism**."

1. Definition of Overtourism:

According to Koens, Postma, and Pap (2018), the term “overtourism” emerged in media discourse, though it lacked a solid theoretical foundation. It became more widespread in academic circles after several journal special issues focused on the topic in 2017.² The origin of the terms “overtourism” and “tourismphobia” reflects growing awareness of the unsustainable practices of mass tourism and the widespread public reactions they triggered among academics, activists, and social movements. These groups criticized the harmful exploitation of green spaces, water bodies, wildlife, and rural areas for purely touristic purposes.

These negative practices have had commercial consequences that influenced policymakers, destination managers, and key tourism stakeholders (especially airlines and cruise lines), resulting in unsustainable tourism outcomes and actions that often violate the ethical principles of tourism. Consequently, the quality of life and well-being of local residents have been compromised, sparking grassroots social movements across the globe protesting the unplanned pressures caused by tourism growth.³

There is no universally accepted definition of overtourism, as the phenomenon varies according to visitor numbers, visit timing, duration, and the destination’s carrying capacity. Moreover, perceptions of overtourism differ depending on the stakeholders involved—whether residents, visitors, or institutions. According to a recent study by McKinsey & Company and the World Travel & Tourism Council (2017), the term “overtourism” refers to challenges related to isolated residents, degraded visitor experiences, overstressed infrastructure, damage to nature, and threats to culture and heritage.

Today, a growing number of destinations—including Berlin, Prague, Santa Monica, Hong Kong, Belfast, Venice, Rio de Janeiro, Barcelona, Shanghai, Amsterdam, Palma de Mallorca, Lisbon, Reykjavik, and Dubrovnik—have reported suffering from overtourism.⁴

One commonly used definition of overtourism describes it as a condition where the impact of tourism—during specific times and in specific places—exceeds environmental, financial, social, economic, political, and psychological thresholds.⁵

According to Cheung and Li (2019), overtourism is characterized by the massive and unregulated influx of tourists to popular destinations, where both tourists and residents experience pressure, leading to the decline in the quality and value of the tourism experience.⁶

In 2018, the term “overtourism” was officially added to the Oxford English Dictionary, defining it as the excessive number of people visiting popular destinations, causing environmental harm and affecting local residents’ lives. It is regarded as a general public term.⁷

Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary describes overtourism as the process in which an overwhelming number of people visit a destination during holiday periods, resulting in its deterioration and making life difficult for residents, as is the case in Venice and Barcelona—two cities considered victims of overtourism.⁸

Large cruise ships are considered a key factor contributing to overtourism. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines overtourism (or tourism saturation) as the perception among local residents that their way of life is being erased due to the dominance of tourism activities. This perception leads to hostility and resistance toward tourism, tourists, and decision-makers at all levels—government authorities and economic entities active in the sector.⁹

Chesky provided a concise definition:

“Overtourism isn’t too many people traveling the world. Overtourism is too many people going to the same place at the same time”.¹⁰ This definition effectively captures the core essence of overtourism.

From the above definitions, we conclude that overtourism—or what is also called "over tourism"—refers to the mass, unregulated, and poorly planned influx of tourists to the same destination during the same time period, leading to various negative effects that differ year by year. These include harm to local residents, pressure on tourist sites, damage to land and water resources, noise, and congestion, all of which prevent residents from living their normal lives and tourists from enjoying their dream destinations. These effects are often driven by purely commercial and economic motives that prioritize profit without adequately considering the long-term consequences.

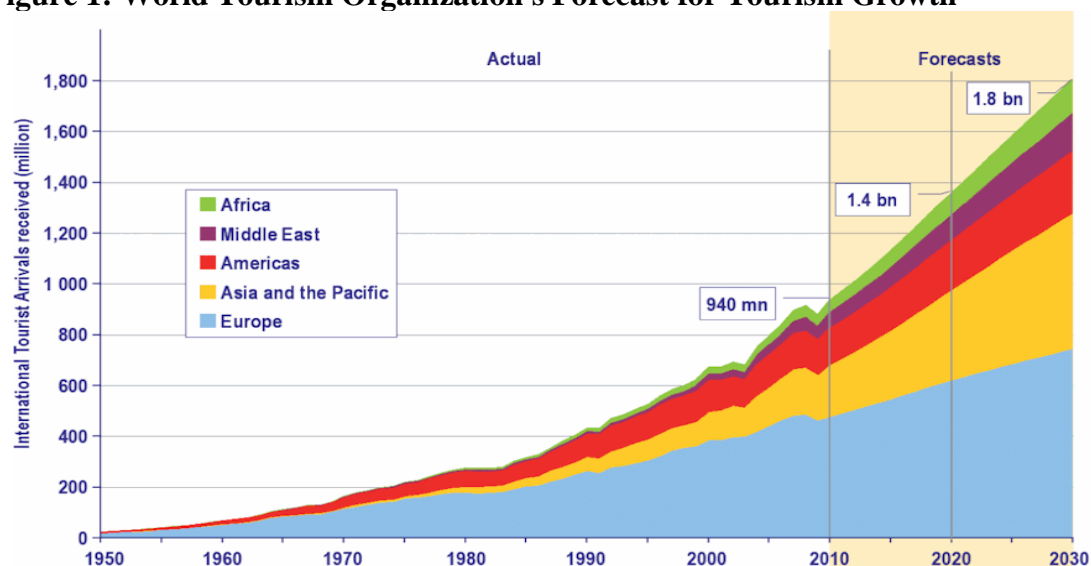
2. Characteristics of the Overtourism Industry and Growth Trends:

This figure highlights the rapid growth of tourism, or what is now referred to as overtourism—a global problem, not just a local or regionally confined issue, as is often portrayed in certain European countries. In the coming years, we will witness increasing and widespread impacts of overtourism around the world—a phenomenon that has long been neglected.

As illustrated in the following figure, despite seasonal tourism setbacks, the World Tourism Organization recorded only 25 million tourists in 1950. This number increased to 277 million visitors in 1980, then more than doubled to 675 million in 2000, reaching 922 million tourists in 2010. By 2020, the number had grown to 1.4 billion tourists, despite the outbreak of COVID-19, which had paralyzed global mobility. Yet, the tourism industry quickly rebounded and resumed its rapid growth.

It is projected that the number of international tourists will reach 1.8 billion by 2030—a truly alarming figure in terms of the scale of global travel for tourism. This projection entices investors and governments eager to capitalize on the tourism sector to maximize profits and returns. Meanwhile, activists and local residents express fear, concern, and discomfort regarding their local environments and the negative impacts that are now becoming increasingly evident.

Figure 1: World Tourism Organization's Forecast for Tourism Growth



Justin Francis, "Overtourism Mapped: Tourism is Headed into a Global Crisis".

Source: consulted on: 05/01/2024, see:

<https://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/overtourism-map>

Third: Causes of Overtourism

The causes of the overtourism phenomenon are multiple and diverse, which has drawn the attention of researchers and digital media to investigate the factors behind its widespread emergence. We attempted to identify and summarize these factors by reviewing various sources and references that analyzed and discussed the topic. Among these causes, we mention the following:

1. The COVID-19 Pandemic

The lockdown rules resulting from the COVID-19 wave created a global sense of repression due to the suspension of all types of movement, which significantly affected the travel and tourism sector. This led to a condition called “**revenge travel**”, referring to a phenomenon where those who experienced prolonged boredom from over a year of restrictions impulsively traveled to various tourist destinations to spend their vacations.¹¹

This was addressed through an online survey conducted by **IPSOS** of 1,000 people from different countries between March 20 and April 17, 2023. Regardless of destination, the passion for travel had clearly returned. The results showed that more than 70% of participants were either genuinely excited about traveling or happy to travel in 2023 in most countries. However, the United States, Belgium, and Germany showed slightly less interest in traveling compared to other nationalities included in the study. Notably, Germany recorded a significantly higher percentage of participants who were not interested in traveling in 2023.

Table No. 1: Rising Enthusiasm for Travel in 2023

Country	Excited to travel	Happy to travel	Not interested in travel
Australia	45%	35%	20%
Switzerland	38%	43%	19%
Malaysia	38%	42%	20%
Ukraine	35%	47%	18%
Germany	34%	35%	31%
Czech Rep.	34%	46%	20%
Spain	33%	50%	17%
USA	32%	43%	25%
Belgium	30%	45%	25%
Portugal	30%	53%	17%

Source: Prepared by the researchers based on: Thomas Hinton, “Travel Enthusiasm is High in 2023”, consulted on 05/01/2024, see: <https://www.statista.com/chart/30511/travel-enthusiasm-in-2023-by-country/>

2. Trends

There is a significant tendency toward travel consumption and experiencing new places among various segments of society. The rise of social media has played a substantial role in pushing people toward popular destinations—commonly referred to as “trending” spots. Social media accounts and pages belonging to influencers or dedicated to promoting famous cities and shopping locations have motivated many to join the race and try out the same experiences. This has led to overcrowding at these destinations, resulting in overtourism.¹²

On average, travelers visit 38 different websites during their trip planning process before finalizing and booking their travels, according to a Skift study.

Furthermore, 70% of travelers conduct their research using mobile devices, confirming the importance of mobile platforms in the travel planning process, as stated by StratosJets.

The impact of “trending” on people’s travel decisions is evident through data from several studies, some of which are cited below:¹³

A. Trust in influencers:

About 45% of millennials place their trust in travel recommendations made by influencers. This statistic highlights the crucial role influencers play in shaping the preferences of the millennial generation (Source: *Passport-photo.online*).

B. Choosing destinations with Instagram-worthy views:

Nearly 40% of millennials choose their travel destinations based on the potential to capture and share Instagram-worthy photos. This underscores the impact of visual aesthetics on millennials’ travel choices (Source: *Passport-photo.online*).

C. The impact of celebrities and digital content creators:

About 38% of millennials are significantly influenced by celebrities and digital content creators when choosing their travel destinations, according to Travel Market Report.

D. Low-cost flight tickets:

According to Goodwin (2017), who studied several popular destinations suffering from overtourism, there are two main causes. The first and most important is the reduction in travel costs, which led to an increase in the number of trips. Air travel became more appealing and the preferred option after World War II, particularly following the emergence of numerous airlines in the 1990s and the tax exemptions on international aviation fuel and value-added tax, which significantly lowered the cost of travel.¹⁴

This encouraged people to travel more frequently, often taking several short flights per year. Air travel became more accessible than other modes such as trains, cars, or buses, which are generally more expensive, exhausting, and time-consuming by comparison.¹⁵

The second cause, as discussed in Fuellhart (2015), is the increased consumer awareness of airline pricing through web-based, consumer-oriented tools such as Skyscanner and Kayak. These platforms highlight opportunities to purchase discounted travel tickets—such as catching a fare that drops in price momentarily—and simplify and accelerate the ticket purchasing process. This increased convenience has led to more air travel usage.

Supporting statistics from Sales Cycle¹⁶ indicate a notable shift in booking preferences: 64% of ticket purchases were made online using desktop computers, while 44% were made via mobile devices. This reflects a change from the previous year, when 59% of bookings were on desktops and 41% on mobile devices.¹⁷

E. Seasonal periods:

According to Butler, seasonality is defined as a “temporal imbalance in the tourism phenomenon, which can be expressed in terms of visitor numbers and spending, traffic on highways, other forms of transportation, employment, and admissions to a specific tourist destination.”¹⁸

In other words, tourism seasonality refers to an imbalance in the tourist flow to a particular place or area—either with high surges or significant declines. Seasonality tends to concentrate tourism and inflate visitor numbers during peak times. While extending the tourism season is viewed positively

by profit-driven institutions, local residents often grow weary of the noise, discomfort, and violations of their lifestyles caused by large tourist influxes.

F. Public space is free:

This refers to the fact that tourists do not pay to take a souvenir photo in places like Trafalgar Square or St. Mark's Square. They enjoy these sites—whether historical, religious, cultural, or natural—free of charge if such access is government-mandated. However, it is the local taxpayers who bear the cost of maintenance and repairs.¹⁹

G. A Boom in Sharing Economy Platforms

Online home rental platforms such as Airbnb have witnessed a significant boom. Founded on August 1, 2008,²⁰ in San Francisco, California, Airbnb has grown to over 200 million users across 220 countries, offering 7 million listings. The platform has facilitated 394 million nights booked, reaching a market valuation of \$73.34 billion as of the second quarter of 2023.

Its revenues have shown a remarkable upward trend:

- In 2018, Airbnb generated \$3.65 billion,
- In 2019, \$4.81 billion,
- In 2020, revenue declined to \$3.38 billion, a drop attributed to the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The platform rebounded in 2021 with \$5.99 billion, and
- Reached \$8.4 billion in 2022.²¹

These substantial revenues reflect Airbnb's ability to dominate the global short-term rental market, allowing tourists to immerse themselves in local life by staying in private homes—without formal planning permissions, permits, or taxation.²²

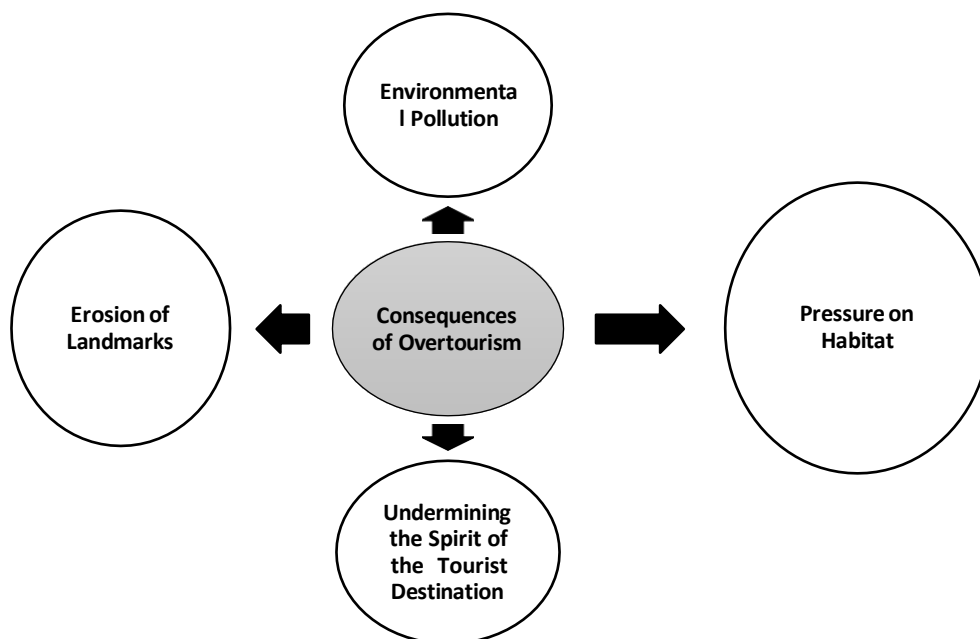
Bookings are made entirely online, using apps, with services that include ride-sharing and home-sharing with foreign visitors, enabling travelers to enjoy more authentic and safer experiences.

You can practically know where you'll stay, what the neighborhood looks like, and where you'll dine on your first night—just by sitting on your couch and checking your laptop at home. However, these conveniences and innovations have contributed to unsustainable growth in tourist numbers heading to the same global destinations, adversely impacting both tourists and local residents alike.²³

IV. Consequences of Overtourism:

The consequences of overtourism can be summarized in a number of key elements, which are illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 2: Consequences of Overtourism



Source: Prepared by the Researcher

A- Environmental Pollution

Plants and animals are often the first to face the dangers of overtourism in the most famous natural tourist attractions, as a result of deforestation, soil exploitation, and waste dumping. In contrast, there is no policy to raise awareness and protect natural environments. In many cases, this situation seems irreversible, as is the case with coral reefs around the world, which are now endangered, in addition to the worsening global warming crisis, climate change, etc.²⁴

B- Pressure on Habitats

Overtourism can often cause environmental, economic, and social damage of varying severity, depending on the destination. These include erosion, pollution, loss of natural habitats, forest fires, and the gradual extinction of coral reefs and other natural tourist attractions. Even if tourists act responsibly, the majority will still contribute to the damage. Old buildings, monuments, statues, mosques, and temples struggle to cope with the increased movement of people and frequent visits, especially during peak seasons and holidays of the destination. These sites become prone to wear and tear, and the increasing human presence severely disrupts the delicate balance of food networks. It also encourages excessive water consumption, causes depletion of ecological communities, and damages infrastructure due to traffic and overnight stays.²⁵

C- Erosion of Landmarks

Historical and archaeological sites occasionally face individual attacks from reckless tourists who neither care for nor appreciate the historical and archaeological value of these landmarks, such as graffiti and scratches on walls, among other irresponsible, juvenile behaviors. For example, in 2015, two tourists destroyed a 300-year-old Hercules statue, a symbol of the city of Cremona, by climbing on it to take a perfect selfie. In 2016, two tourists scratched a 5,000-year-old rock carving of a skier.²⁶

D- Undermining the Spirit of the Tourist Destination

The enormous number of tourists primarily affects the local population, especially throughout Europe, in cities like Barcelona and Venice. Due to overtourism, strong tensions and conflicts have arisen among the residents, who now suffer from rising house and rental prices, inflated due to the spread of platforms like Airbnb. They also spoke about the disappearance of small local shops, replaced by tourist shops, and the gradual disappearance of their simple local customs and cultures. The result has been the displacement of locals from their cities, which have now become tourist theaters, leading to the loss of their authenticity—what is known as the undermining of the spirit of the tourist destination.²⁷

Second Axis: The Barcelona Experience to Overcome Overtourism during 2018-2023

Tourism in the city of Barcelona is one of the most vital economic sectors it relies on, as it opens its doors to tourists year-round from all over the world. This has placed the city under the strain of overtourism, a problem it has been struggling with since 1992. The situation saw a kind of stagnation due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it returned to rapid growth after the end of the global emergency. This ongoing crisis triggered both the local government and citizens to search for realistic and radical solutions to overcome the consequences of overtourism and achieve a more sustainable and high-quality tourism.

First: Overview of Barcelona

Barcelona is a Spanish city located in the northeastern part of Spain, with an area of 101.9 km². It is the sixth most densely populated city in the European Union, with a population of 1.6 million as of local government data for 2023. It has its own language and culture. Barcelona is the largest cruise port in Europe and has experienced remarkable tourism growth over the last 20 years, becoming one of the most popular destinations in Europe. In 2000, the number of international visitors in Barcelona was 3.14 million, a number that increased to 8.36 million by 2016.²⁸ In 2022, approximately 2.3 million travelers visited the city, a 350% increase over 2021 statistics, despite the pandemic.²⁹ The reasons for this popularity are not a great secret, as for over 150 years, Barcelona has steadily built its reputation as a city shaped by cultural creativity and architectural beauty.³⁰ Barcelona is also particularly known for its art, cuisine, sports, and the Barcelona football club, a well-known institution that made it a global tourist destination, in addition to its rich history and cultural diversity. The city is also famous for its many festivals, street events that bring locals together, the National Art Museum, the Magic Fountain light show,³¹ and its traditional culinary arts, including seafood, "Patatas Bravas" (fried potatoes with spicy sauce), which can be found everywhere in the city, as well as paella, fideuà, and arroz negro.³²

Barcelona emerged as a city suffering from overtourism after the 1992 Olympic diving competition. In 2004, overtourism was officially recognized as a problem, and in 2008, local authorities took official measures,³³ following social movements opposing this situation, which raised awareness of the phenomenon and the need to address it before it worsened.³⁴

A significant year in Barcelona's overtourism history was 2017, when 30 million tourists visited the city, compared to a local population of 1,625,137, leading to the emergence of hostile behaviors toward tourists. For example, masked individuals slashed the tires of a tourist bus and wrote on it "Tourism Kills the Living." Among the most famous anti-overtourism slogans were: "We oppose

mass tourism, which turns our country into an amusement park benefiting only the bourgeoisie and capital," and "We oppose the development model that turns the country into an amusement park just for the economic interests of a small minority." Despite tourism being one of the strongest economic drivers, accounting for 14% of the city's revenue and providing 65,000 direct jobs,³⁵ this did not prevent locals from demanding their right to live in peace.

Second: Indicators of Overtourism in Barcelona during 2018-2023

Based on the indicators discussed in this study, we observe that from 2018-2023, the phenomenon of overtourism in Barcelona went through three phases:

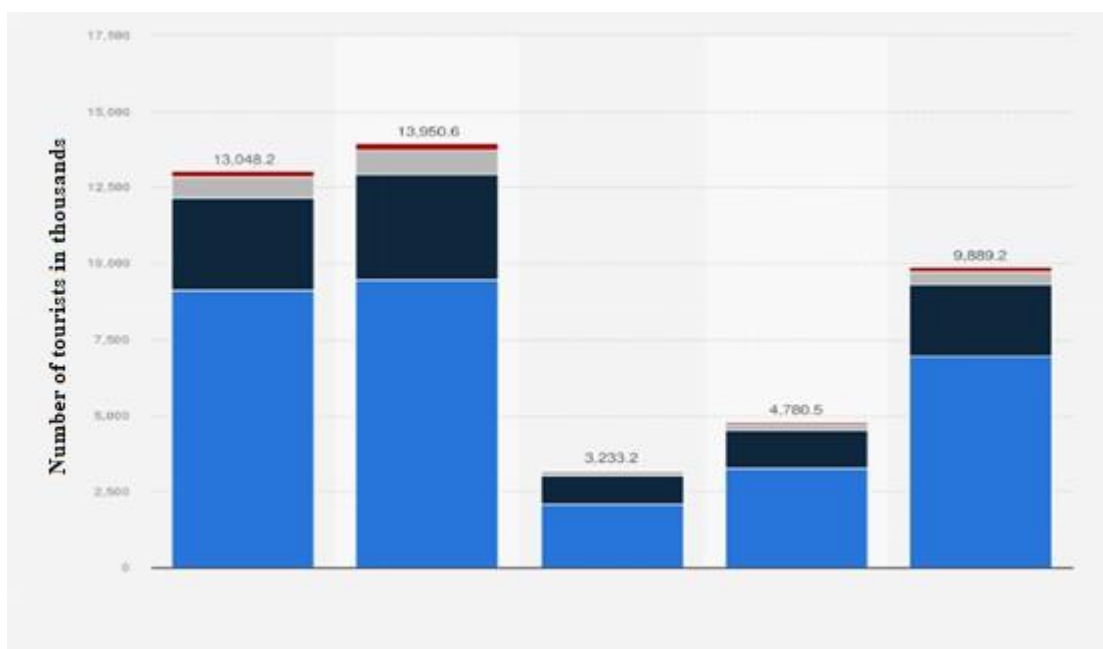
A- **2018-2019:** A period of expansion and growth of the phenomenon, as indicated by the statistics in the study. Barcelona was a major tourist hub due to several cultural, historical, natural, and sports-related factors.

B- **2019-2020:** A period of stagnation, explained by the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of lockdown measures.

C- **2021-2023:** A period of recovery in overtourism starting in the last quarter of 2021 and continuing through 2023, due to the discovery of the vaccine, global vaccination campaigns, and the easing of lockdown measures, signaling a return to normal life.

Third: Number of Tourists Staying in Tourist Accommodations in Barcelona from 2018-2022

The following chart shows the growth rates of tourists staying in various accommodation facilities from 2018 to 2022. In 2018, 13.048 million tourists were recorded, and this number continued to rise, reaching 13.950 million in 2019. However, after the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the implementation of lockdown measures, including the near-total closure of airports and ports, the number of tourists staying in accommodation facilities dropped to its lowest level, reaching 3.233 million tourists in 2020. The situation quickly recovered, with an average of 9.9 million visitors recorded in 2022, an increase of about 107% over 2021, marking an improvement from the decline in the previous two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that hotels hosted the largest number of tourists who stayed one night in Barcelona, with a total of around 7 million. By the end of 2022, Barcelona had more than 440 operating hotels.



Source: López, Ana M, "Number of tourists in commercial accommodation establishments in Barcelona, Spain from 2018 to 2022, by type," consulted on: 08/01/2024, see: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/772271/tourists-in-barcelona-spain-by-kind-from-accommodation/>

Fourth: Air Travel to Barcelona Airport (2018-2023)

In 2018, passenger statistics showed a steady upward trend at Barcelona Airport, which recorded 50,172,457 passengers. In 2019, with the beginning of the global health crisis and the spread of related concerns, a slight decline of 4.00% was observed, bringing the number to 48,164,257 passengers. However, in 2020, a significant drop occurred due to the pandemic's spread, the implementation of quarantine measures, airport closures, and personal concerns about movement due to the fear of infection and virus transmission. The number of passengers did not exceed 12,738,769, representing a terrifying decrease of 73.55% compared to the previous year. In 2021, recovery was witnessed with 18,874,896 passengers, reflecting a 48.17% increase. This can be attributed to the discovery of the vaccine and the global vaccination campaign, which helped lift the restrictions imposed on citizens. In 2022, Barcelona Airport saw significant growth, with a 120.61% increase, totaling 41,639,622 passengers. Finally, in 2023, airport traffic returned to pre-pandemic levels, with statistics showing 49.98 million passengers, a figure indicating the return of normalcy.

Table 2: Passenger Traffic at Barcelona Airports (2018-2023)

Year	Number of Passengers (Millions)	Percentage Change (Increase, Decrease)
2018	50,172,457	-
2019	48,164,257	-4%
2020	12,738,769	-73.55%
2021	18,874,896	+48.17%
2022	41,639,622	+120.61%
2023	49.8	+10%

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on Barcelona Airport website.

Fifth: The Consequences of Overtourism in Barcelona

Despite the optimistic future forecasts for the tourism sector, tourism still has a darker side. It is evident that the recovery of travel movements has contributed to the spread of overtourism, particularly in Barcelona, a city known for its vibrant tourism activity. Among the main consequences of overtourism, we can mention the following:

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A. Environmental Consequences:

Barcelona has witnessed a massive influx of tourists, which has been accompanied by the deterioration of its environmental health. The Barcelona metropolitan area is the second largest contributor when it comes to plastic waste dumping into the Mediterranean Sea. According to a 2019 report by the World Wildlife Fund, between Barcelona and Vilanova i la Geltrú, waste accounts for 38% of the catch by fishermen. Due to the massive number of tourists, the transportation methods used for movement have a significant negative impact on the environment. High noise levels also contribute to increasing noise pollution in a densely populated city with narrow and crowded streets.³⁶ Air travel to Barcelona accounts for approximately 75% of total carbon emissions related to tourism, as a single tourist arriving by plane uses an average of 605.7 kg of carbon dioxide. Furthermore, 82% of tourists to Barcelona arrive by plane. There is also an abundance of cruise ship arrivals, which pollute the air and the sea. Cruise ships use fuel with a high sulfur content, 2000 times greater than the amount found in regular diesel. In 2019, cruise ships in Barcelona produced 32.8 tons of sulfur oxide. Additionally, 28.5% of the carcinogenic nitrogen oxide in Barcelona and 3.5% of particulate pollution are linked to maritime traffic.³⁷

B. Economic Consequences:

From one moment to the next, the conversation shifted to the significant revenues, rapid growth of the tourism industry, and its essential role in boosting the country's economy. Barcelona, however, has found itself suffering from the adage "too much of a good thing." The city has been incurring losses in infrastructure such as roads, ports, and airports due to the heavy traffic and the vast number of individual movements. It is now forced to allocate part of the tourism revenues to repair the constantly damaged tourist landmarks. Among the notable economic consequences are the following:

In 2017, reports indicated that there were 125,000 legally registered beds in hotels and tourist apartments, with 50,000 illegal beds. The demand for tourist accommodations led to local residents struggling with rising rents. Additionally, complaints were raised regarding the disturbance caused by tourists.³⁸ Ada Colau, the mayor of Barcelona since 2015, stated that overtourism "not only affects the quality of life of residents but also their ability to live in the area." Overcrowding, loss of identity, and increasing hostile behavior from locals toward tourists have become prominent. Although tourism brings in substantial revenue to the city, "the poor redistribution of generated

wealth and the poor quality of jobs" have created disparities between social classes and inequalities. Moreover, everyday shops are being replaced by souvenir stalls, bike rental shops, and cafes, which may not be accessible to many local residents or are simply unnecessary.³⁹

C. Cultural Consequences:

There are concerns that Barcelona may soon become a "ghost town" due to the continued transformation of apartments into tourist rental units via platforms like Airbnb. This is not a proactive prediction of what the place will become, but rather an anticipated outcome of the ongoing social and cultural erosion in the destination. Among the negative social impacts of overtourism are the changes in dress style, accents, urban architecture, overcrowding in infrastructure, accommodations, and services, as well as the rise of gambling and prostitution. Cultural consequences include the erosion of local customs, traditions, and manners that govern the tourism destination. This leads to a gradual breakdown of the community's identity, values, and landmarks.⁴⁰

Sixth: Strategies to Address Overtourism in Barcelona:

A variety of strategies and policies have been adopted by the city of Barcelona to address overtourism, which saw stagnation in 2020-2021 due to the global health crisis, but returned strongly in late 2022 and early 2023. Some of the key proposed solutions to absorb the phenomenon and reduce its impacts include:

A. Responsible Tourism: This refers to making a place suitable and comfortable for living. In this regard, it is essential to ensure that any tourism-related activity does not disturb the balance of the tourist destination.⁴¹

The responsible tourism strategy in Barcelona includes an action plan with 16 objectives and 48 actions. The objectives are linked to three pillars: environmental, economic, and social-cultural. These will be implemented in the period from 2023 to 2025, with the commitment of the Union Tourisme de Barcelona.

Table 3: Barcelona Strategy for Responsible Tourism 2023-2025

Code	Objective	Strategies
1	To ensure environmental commitment and sustainability from tourism companies in Barcelona.	Environmental policies and practices in tourism institutions.
2	To make Barcelona's brand known worldwide as a sustainable destination.	Marketing sustainable tourism.
3	To offset and reduce Barcelona's carbon footprint.	Climate change and type of tourism.
4	To encourage visitors to taste local food, the Mediterranean diet, and provide locally sourced products.	Climate change and type of tourism.
5	To ensure that visitors adopt sustainability standards.	Tourists participate in preserving the ecosystem.
6	Involve stakeholders in the destination's tourism strategy.	To make tourism part of local/regional planning.
8	To ensure the economic viability of tourism.	Economic benefits at the local level for residents and the destination.
9	To redistribute and deconcentrate tourists to improve the economy across the region.	Fair distribution.
10	To promote fair and decent work in tourism.	Labor market.

11	To improve the competitiveness of tourism businesses.	Competitiveness of tourism businesses.
12	To build knowledge for more sustainable tourism management and promotion.	To make tourism part of local/regional planning.
13	To rely on digitalization as a means to achieve more sustainable tourism.	Digitalization to achieve sustainability in the tourism sector.
14	To enhance Barcelona's status as a global destination for art and culture.	Protect the destination's image.
15	To preserve Barcelona's culture, art, and cultural landmarks.	Preservation of cultural assets.
16	To enhance Barcelona's status as an accessible destination with global recognition.	Flexibility.
17	Monitor the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program.	Integrating CSR policies and tourism practices for companies.

Source: Barcelona Turisme, Sustainable tourism strategy, consulted on 09/01/2024, available at: https://barcelonaturisme.com/uploads/web/bst/EstrategiaTurismeSostenibleBarcelonaTurisme23-25_ENG.pdf

B. Creating New Spaces:

Jaly and Donier argue that expanding infrastructure is the ideal solution to relieve overcrowding caused by the large number of tourists, which increases every year.⁴² An example of this expansion is the 2018 agreement between port authorities and the city council, which aimed to "move cruise activities away from urban areas to make them more sustainable." This also included creating new public spaces where the city of Barcelona would reclaim 13,935 square meters, including 609 meters of port dock area, to provide new spaces and alleviate congestion in the city.⁴³

C. Imposing Taxes on Tourists:

Starting from April 1, 2023, the tourist tax in Barcelona is distributed as follows:

Table 4: Taxes Imposed on Tourists in Barcelona Starting from 1/4/2023

Type of Accommodation	Tax According to Catalonia Province	Additional Cost from the City of Barcelona	Total Person (Per Night)
5-Star Hotels, Luxury Camping or Similar (EB1)	€3.5	€2.75	€6.25
4-Star Hotels or Similar (EB2)	€1.70	€2.75	€4.45
Other Accommodations (EB3)	€1.00	€2.75	€3.75
Tourist Rental Housing (EB4)	€2.25	€2.75	€5.00
Cruise Ship Stay for More Than 12 Hours (CR1)	€2.00	€2.75	€4.75
Cruise Ship Stay for Less Than 12 Hours (CR2)	€3.00	€2.75	€5.75

Source: Agència Tributària de Catalunya, Tarifa Barcelona ciudad y recargo municipal, consulted on: 09/01/2024, available at: <https://atc.gencat.cat/es/tributs/ieet/quota-tributaria/>

Conclusion

Overtourism is a shared responsibility, and both sector officials and stakeholders, including investors and travel agencies, must acknowledge that there is a limited capacity that should not be exceeded. This will allow local residents to feel comfort and independence, as overtourism presents a real threat to the economy, cultural heritage, and the environment. It has caused significant

damage to many cultural landmarks, and the result remains the same: humanity has lost and will continue to lose significant parts of its creative legacy and cultural memory. On the other hand, responsible tourism ensures more enjoyable experiences for tourists through spontaneous interactions with locals while also preserving the environment and fostering economic development in a sustainable manner.

Interpretations

- The term "overtourism" goes beyond being a media buzzword designed to provoke emotions from environmental and human rights advocates or stir concern among local communities, and it is not just about organizing tourism supply chains. In fact, it is a real threat to various countries around the world and has negative consequences similar to those of competing industries. Failing to recognize its true scale will undoubtedly turn the blessing of tourism into a curse.
- Responsible tourism creates economic opportunities for local citizens, enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions, engages locals in decision-making processes that affect their lives, and contributes positively to preserving natural and cultural heritage. It also works to maintain global biodiversity and offers tourists more enjoyable experiences by fostering spontaneous connections with locals and a deeper understanding of local cultural, social, and environmental issues, while instilling pride and trust at the local level.
- Overtourism is a reflection of tourism demand that exceeds the carrying capacity of local communities in tourist destinations.
- The resurgence of overtourism coincided with the global recovery from COVID-19, with a growing desire among people to break free from the constraints of lockdown and routines. Tourism supply chains often stimulate demand without considering the capacity of tourist destinations and the negative consequences it has on the well-being and lifestyle of local communities.

Recommendations

- Emphasize the need for measures that involve community elements in preserving heritage sites by educating and raising awareness about their national, cultural, and historical value, as they are testaments to authenticity and heritage.
- Create new tourist routes to ensure fair distribution of tourists, as many tourist destinations are still undiscovered due to pessimistic and negative images of those destinations caused by a lack of promotional opportunities compared to others or due to negligence by local authorities.
- Impose entry fees for the most popular tourist attractions and use those taxes to find solutions to overtourism, rather than viewing them as profits and returns from tourism.
- Local authorities should implement political measures that set boundaries on the carrying capacities of a destination and ensure the monitoring and compliance with these measures.
- It is necessary for investors in tourism and public institutions in the tourism sector to support initiatives that focus on local priorities and needs, rather than simply embodying a tourism model aimed at maximizing benefits for those involved in the tourism supply chain.
- Tourists themselves should also bear responsibility for their decisions and behaviors while traveling, as these can make a significant difference in the impact on host communities.

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