

Crowds, water guns and protests: Could 'slow tourism' be the answer to an overtourism backlash?

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With overtourism in the spotlight as the travel industry continues to rebound after the pandemic, popular destinations around the world are feeling the strain.

Bali is overwhelmed by [waste and traffic](#), Australia's sacred sites have suffered [environmental damage](#), New York is facing rising rents [due to short-term rentals](#), and Singapore's scenic spots are becoming [clogged with crowds](#).

Frustrated locals are pushing back—from [spraying water at tourists](#) in Barcelona to [organizing protests in Venice](#). As the northern hemisphere high season ends, Aotearoa New Zealand is preparing for an influx of visitors ahead of its summer tourism season.

And much like those other [tourist hotspots](#), the government is looking at how to manage the negative effects of tourism on [local communities](#) and the environment. This includes tripling the [international tourist tax](#) from NZ\$35 to \$100.

The aim of the increase is to [attract tourists](#) who are more mindful of their impact and willing to contribute to its mitigation, while also reducing visitor numbers to protect the country's unique landscapes and cultures.

But are there other ways the [tourism industry](#) can evolve to ensure benefits for both travelers and the communities they are visiting? So-called "slow [travel](#)" could be the answer.

Hunting the perfect photo

Overtourism isn't just about too many people in one place. It's also about *how* people travel.

[Instagram-famous](#) landmarks draw massive crowds, [disrupting local life](#) and sometimes even [leading to closures](#).

Travelers often pack their itineraries with as many sights as possible,

racing from one place to another in a frenzy to capture the perfect photo. This hurried approach not only creates [congestion](#) but also limits [meaningful engagement with the destination](#).

And it's not just a numbers game. The way tourists behave also plays a critical role.

A [2019 report](#) from the United Nations raised concerns about trash from tourists in developing small island states, including the Pacific Islands. According to the report, a tourist visiting these communities produced about 7kg of waste a day, compared to about 2.5kg produced by a local.

The issue is not necessarily about traveling less, but about [traveling more responsibly](#). The tourism industry needs to be encouraging travel habits that allow both visitors and locals to enjoy tourism without compromising the integrity of the destination.

The rise of slow travel

Mindfulness—being fully present in the moment—has gained popularity since the 1970s. The concept has influenced a number of sectors, including [slow food](#), [slow fashion](#), and now [slow travel](#).

It's about [experiencing destinations](#) at a relaxed pace, focusing on deeper connections with local cultures and sustainability. This often means [staying longer in fewer places](#) and choosing eco-friendly transport.

Understanding slow travel and mindfulness is important because they create [richer, more memorable experiences](#). Fast, [hectic travel](#) often leaves little positive impact. Slow immersive travel, on the other hand, fosters lasting memories and reduces overtourism, pollution and cultural damage.

[Research](#) shows when we consciously immerse ourselves in our surroundings we can have more meaningful experiences. Surprisingly, [even luxury travel](#)—often dismissed as wasteful—can encourage respect and mindfulness for those who invest financially and mentally in their journey, unlike cheaper, mainstream tourism.

Activities such as "[forest bathing](#)," [hiking](#) or engaging with [local cultures](#) [boost well-being and meaning](#), going beyond just "taking a photo for likes."

This mindful approach can [change our behavior on a personal level](#). By focusing attention on fewer experiences, [travelers can heighten](#) their sense of awe and appreciation, making the travel more memorable.

This idea is evident in "[peak experiences](#)." Disney, for example, creates [emotionally-charged moments](#) that stick in visitors' minds. Other experiences, such as "[digital detoxes](#)" or [pilgrimages](#) can leave a contemplative impression.

By concentrating on a single aspect of a visit, it [becomes special and memorable](#). Even in busy places like Disneyland, focusing on one unique element can make the experience feel slower and more meaningful.

The sustainability of tourism

In the [Faroe Islands](#), slow travel helps protect local traditions and landscapes by encouraging thoughtful visitor behavior, such as using local guides to minimize environmental impact.

New Zealand can leverage its natural beauty to offer similar immersive experiences. [Tramping](#) (hiking), for example, can promote a mindful connection with the environment.

But even here, there needs to be a focus on balancing tourism with preservation. Popular spots, such as the Department of Conservation huts and the Te Araroa Trail, are [already becoming crowded](#). It is essential to educate visitors on [responsible practices](#)—such as cleaning equipment—to ensure they understand their [role in protecting nature](#).

Travel that fosters a deeper appreciation for local cultures and environments benefits both visitors and the destinations they explore. The challenge is finding the right balance—encouraging meaningful travel experiences while still ensuring accessibility for all.

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