

COVID slashed mass tourism—and some cities want to keep it that way

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, cities that usually accommodated thousands of tourists per day got a taste of life without mass tourism—and some of them don't want all of those people back.

A gradual post-pandemic reopening is giving many popular destinations the opportunity to try out new methods. Venice, long plagued by overtourism, has [banned](#) large cruise ships from entering its waters. Amsterdam locals feel like they "[got their city back](#)," and the [city](#) council has launched an online advertising campaign encouraging visitors to enjoy the city's culture, but warning away "nuisance tourists"—especially the large bachelor parties that previously flocked to Amsterdam's Red Light District. Lawmakers in Maui are seeking to impose a [tourist tax](#), proposing a 3% tax for visitors staying at hotels and short-term rentals, and the island's mayor is [pleading with airlines](#) to schedule fewer flights.

Each idea aims, in some way, to balance the much-needed income tourists bring with the damage that huge crowds can do to natural or historic places and the needs of a city's own residents. We asked Jessica Sewell, an associate professor of urban and environmental planning at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, how cities can balance those needs in a post-pandemic reset.

Sewell's research explores connections between culture and [urban design](#). Among many projects, she is working with UVA's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities on a digital [Urban Cultural Landscapes Guide to Suzhou, China](#), where she previously taught at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. The guide aims to provide cultural and historical context for those visiting Suzhou, a major tourist destination in China that is home to several UNESCO World Heritage gardens.

Here's what she had to say about some of the questions surrounding post-pandemic tourism.

Q. As cities reopen to tourists, what questions might

they consider to promote responsible tourism? What does that look like?

A. One thing to think about is ways to promote tourism that keeps people in one place for a while. "Bucket list" tourism—zooming in to quickly hit a few popular sites and then leaving—causes a lot of harm to a city like Venice or Florence. It does not bring as much money into the local economy, because people might not be staying locally, or might not stay long enough to eat many meals or buy many groceries.

My colleague in China, Christian Nolf, has done work around the idea of slow tourism. Suzhou is a huge tourist attraction, but people tend to go to the same few places, mostly classical gardens and historic Pingjiang Street. Those places are absolutely mobbed, but other parts of the city don't get the same number of visitors and aren't benefiting economically. Cities should think about how to get people to slow down and really experience a place—not just its popular hotspots, but other neighborhoods and smaller attractions. Often, the smaller things that you find when you just wander a city are even more memorable than the big, famous sites.

Q. How can cities balance preserving the places and cultures that make them distinctive with welcoming people in to see those places?

A. That is not an easy one to answer. It's a really tough conundrum, compounded by the fact that many attractions have to use money from tourists to pay for their own preservation. I think it is important to try to spread tourism across a longer period of time, by using things like timed tickets and reservations. A lot of places that had not used timed tickets before switched to them during COVID for crowd control. I expect many will continue, as it helps to mitigate the harmful effects of large

crowds. Just spreading people out, physically and over time, helps reduce wear and tear.

Q. What other ideas have come up in your work in Suzhou?

A. China is undergoing a shift from mass tourism—typically involving large bus tours—toward more individual, independent tourism. That shift is part of a larger cultural shift from a more collective mindset to a more individual mindset, influenced by the large numbers of middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese who are traveling or studying abroad and seeing other ways of doing things. It does provide some opportunities for Chinese attractions to change how they approach tourism.

Some villages have started to charge a fee for visitors to enter, which is an interesting method, though I am not sure it is ideal. It keeps those cities from being dependent on selling [tourist](#)-specific things, such as souvenirs or tickets to particular sites. It also spreads money around the city, rather than keeping money tied to particular sites or attractions. That might help sustain local businesses and bring some benefits to residents.

Q. What role do short-term rental companies like Airbnb play in these debates?

A. There are many positive aspects to short-term rentals like Airbnb. Sometimes, it is locals who own a place, and the rental income helps support them and the local economy. It also promotes a kind of slow tourism, encouraging people to stay longer and to spend their money in neighborhoods. It can be problematic, of course, if it is particularly disruptive to a neighborhood or adds stress to the local housing market. I

think that might say more about the ills of the housing market, though, than of Airbnb.

I think a bigger problem for many major cities comes when very wealthy people buy up apartments in multiple places and don't spend much time in them. In some big cities, such as New York City or Paris, you can find neighborhoods that look like they are inhabited, but that can no longer support a grocery store or local business because so many people who own property there do not live there. That can really hollow out a city.

Q. If you were advising cities concerned about the impact of returning tourism after the pandemic, what questions would you raise?

A. First, I would ask, "What is your ideal?" Do you not want tourists? Do you only want a small number or a certain number of tourists? Where do you want those people to be? How can you make this a better place for them to stay for a longer period, rather than zooming in and out? How can you change how people are relating to your city?

Amsterdam is a good example. They have said they do not want as much bachelor party tourism. How do you change the environment to discourage that kind of tourism while welcoming other tourists? What kind of tourists do you actually want?

It is also important to consider transportation. How many buses do you really want to let in? Do you really want to have those big cruise ships? Idling buses or big ships in a harbor can actually be much more destructive to a place than the people who are on them. So I would advise cities to think about how they transport people through spaces. Can they have buses and cars park elsewhere and have tourists take a tram line in? Can they create spaces where people walk and move slowly

through streets, building a different relationship with a place than they would in a bus or car?

Finally, you have to think about what else affects your residents. How can you ensure that affordable housing options remain available? Do you have enough places for people to buy groceries and get what they need to make a life in your city? How can you make your city a good [place](#) to live, as well as visit? Often, planning policies that have nothing to do with [tourism](#), such as housing policies, can make a huge difference.

Provided by University of Virginia

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