

## Six reasons why mass tourism is unsustainable



Global tourism is destroying the environment and cultural identities - and doesn't make good business sense, argues **Anna Pollock**

Benidorm on Spain's Costa del Sol. Photograph: Jose Jordan/AFP/Getty Images

*"You never change things by fighting the existing reality.*

*To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."* -- Buckminster Fuller

Despite the slow but steady increase in the number of enterprises claiming to be responsible or green, the fact remains that the current system of mass international tourism is utterly unsustainable.

Thanks to the application of the same industrial model developed for cars, houses and consumer goods, international tourism has exploded in size since the 1950s and swept into virtually every nook and cranny of the planet, washing up cash, jobs, golf courses, airports and enormous amounts of real estate.

Claimed by the UN [World Tourism Organisation](#) as a stimulant of economic recovery, tourism is, undoubtedly, a force to be reckoned with. It generates more

than \$2.1tn in annual revenues. In many countries and regions of the world, tourism is now the primary source of foreign exchange, employment and cash.

The to 1.8 billion travelers within the next 17 years, yet many remain in denial that the industry is based on a finite and limited supply of attractions, or accessible places rich in scenic beauty or culture.

The industry resembles a high-speed train, crammed with passengers with cheap tickets, racing toward a cliff edge. So it's worth asking why this challenge generates so little debate in the press and in general business literature.

### Ending the unsustainable travel addiction

Clearly the media makes a lot of money from advertising holiday locations around the world, but on a broader level, perhaps providers, customers and regulators have each become so addicted to the promise and pleasures of cheap and frequent travel that the prospect of going without is simply too much to contemplate. Perhaps a form of "willful blindness" has infected us all.

The challenge turns out to be far more complex than just the prospect of runaway volume growth on a finite planet. Many sectors are running themselves into the ground financially as margins dwindle to razor thin. Meanwhile, thanks to congestion or overuse of scarce water and land resources, many destinations are destroying the landscapes and attractions, both natural and cultural, on which they depend.

I have come up with six key reasons why the current tourism model is way past its prime and why more of us need to focus on creating alternatives:

1. Mass industrial tourism is based on the assembly, distribution and consumption of packaged products and, as a consequence, one product is substitutable for another. The commodification of what should be revered as unique is further aggravated by the application of industrial cost cutting strategies of homogenisation, standardisation and automation that further strip out any remaining vestiges of difference, let alone mystique. Tourists "do" places and rarely get the chance to stand in awe and wonder.

2. In most youthful destinations, low barriers of entry and zero regulation encourage rapid growth and speculation. Both local politicians and often not-so-local developers benefit enormously from this growth, but rarely stay put long

enough to have to cope with the crises caused by overcapacity and volatile demand.

3. The product is perishable - it's a time-based service - and can't be stocked. So when capacity goes up and demand declines, price discounting is the adaptive tactic of choice.

4. Technological connectivity and price comparison engines have shifted purchasing power to consumers, who have been convinced, by repeated discounting, that cheap travel is now a right - not a privilege. This accelerates the downward pressure on prices and yields.

5. Residents of tourism hotspots, who may have welcomed the first influx of visitors, soon find that cheap travel doesn't reduce their costs. Visitors cause land, food, water, housing and infrastructure prices to increase at a rate closely correlated with the decline in tourism operators' margins. Sadly, more tourism often means less benefit to the host communities.

6. Having fought so hard to be recognised as an industry, the tourism community fragments back into its specific sectors when issues of waste, carbon, water scarcity and other "externalities" are raised. Airlines don't pay taxes on aviation fuel and have fought carbon-related charges for decades.

### **What's to be done**

We need to develop the idea of conscious travel and start to imagine a better alternative. Unfortunately, there is no magic wand or silver bullet; change will need to occur at the grassroots level, one destination at a time.

It will first and foremost require hosts to wake up and see their world differently - not as a resource to be exploited, but as a sacred place to be protected and celebrated for its uniqueness.

Second, it is important they start to view their customers not as mere units of consumption, but as guests seeking to be healed and transformed. Our conscious or mindful alternative is about less volume, congestion, hassle, destruction and harm and about more meaning, purpose, value, peace and fulfillment. In short, not more but better