

The Collapse of Mass Tourism: An Opportunity to Reflect on the Future of the Mediterranean Model and to Rethink Its Viability

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Exactly 20 years ago I was reading a post published by WWF (World Wildlife Fund)¹ about the opening of the annual Berlin tourism fair in which the big players of organized tourism were warned about the environmental and cultural risks that mass tourism posed for the Mediterranean tourist destinations over the following twenty years. It predicted for 2021 that total tourist arrivals would exceed 350 million a year and that this figure would mean a substantial destruction of the ecosystems in these territories. If we consider that the overall figure for Europe, source UNWTO, for 2019 (pre-Covid) was 746 million arrivals, we can now make some concrete assessments on the actual environmental, cultural and ethical sustainability of the “mass” tourism model. Multiple factors have led to these high numbers. The first is the development of air traffic following the affirmation of the “low cost” model, which democratized the possibility of travelling by transferring the costs, both economic and environmental, from the tourists themselves to the local communities. Another determining factor was the dizzying growth of cruise traffic. In both cases there are entire economies that have sprung up and are thriving right around the hubs of these two types of transport. In addition to these, there are two other factors that have contributed substantially: the “aerification” of the more “famous” urban centres in particular and the impact of social media and reviews on tourists’ purchasing choices. Then came Covid-19.

Mediterranean Tourism Brand: A Recipe for Dealing with Covid-19

The entire world’s tourism sector found itself completely unprepared for the coronavirus epidemic, which was particularly the case for the Mediterranean area because of the inherent fragility in the long-term unsustainability of mass tourism. In fact, this type of tourism is particularly sensitive to uncertainty and insecurity, based precisely on distribution models that focus on “all inclusive” and “no worries.” In fact, it should be noted how the Arab Spring had already had a strong impact on Egypt and Tunisia.

The first thing that the pandemic has made everyone realize, including mass tourists, is that environmental, ethical and social choices and the purchase of tourist services that are not centred on individual responsibility are no longer sustainable. Therefore, if fear has begun to move individual consciences towards more responsible tourism, now is the time to rethink the entire Mediterranean tourism offer.

From the handbook of the European Travel Commission (2020), we ascertain the main trends that can help us to define key concepts that are useful for the entire Mediterranean Basin.

In addition to the obvious purchasing choices focused on active tourism, in open and non-crowded spaces, the growing desire to show oneself, especially on social media, as safe and responsible is very important, and has actually become a major factor. In short, new influencers will no longer have to adapt to glamorous destinations but rather to niche destinations, where well-being and attention to the impact on the environment are the keywords.

¹ <https://wwf.panda.org/?2194/Destruction-of-the-Mediterranean-by-mass-tourism-poses-a-challenge-for-industry-warns-WWF>

The transition is epic and there can be only one answer: unite. Let's assume that the tourist destinations of the Mediterranean were united under a single umbrella brand where local peculiarities are kept and preserved but unnecessary parochialism is overcome, what would we get?

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I have tried to analyze the hypotheses by working on three themes.

Digital, Sustainable and Shared Tourism: Three Recipes for Real Cooperation between the Tourist Destinations of the Mediterranean

The first of the great challenges that the Mediterranean must take up to transform itself into a tourist destination is that of the widespread digitalization of services, meaning not only the accommodation facilities in Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) but also, and above all, the suppliers of tourist experiences that are increasingly becoming the real reason for choosing a destination by relegating accommodation (and catering) to simple commodities. Functional but simple and economic technological tools must be adopted in order to be truly inclusive towards all realities, regardless of technological skills and tourist flows. Making everything bookable online allows you to develop the entire destination based on the unique and unrepeatable attractions that each shore of the Mediterranean has to offer, overcoming linguistic and logistical barriers and helping to perceive all destinations as safe, even in terms of health. This leads to the creation of dynamic interrelations between destination and tourist in real time. Both of these features

involve an exchange of data, and managing this data becomes the key to managing target strategies.

A good example of data management in tourism could be the *Onlylyon CRM* tool from the city of Lyon. *Onlylyon* has developed its first city-scale CRM tool. This has been used to gain a greater understanding of visitors, and to improve the way they are guided around the city. The principle of *Onlylyon Experience* is to compile a common database of customer-related information (currently containing close to 2 million contacts). *Onlylyon Experience* resides in its extensive knowledge of the entire area, which means that it is able to provide visitors with highly relevant information and advice. The messages being sent out to visitors aim to enhance the customers' experience and enable them to truly enjoy all aspects of the city. This system can also be used to send itinerary suggestions, thus reducing traffic in congested zones during peak periods.²

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The second challenge is to expand the areas used for tourism, not only as described above, by digitalizing the experience providers, beginning with those in the less developed tourist areas and hinterland, but above all by finding new activities to be carried out in open spaces, in contact with nature, possibly in an active way, thus generating well-being for oneself and for the host community. Sustainable tourism also means striving for “well-being tourism,” based on doing something in the destination of choice so it can be configured as a sporting or even hiking/walking tour activity to extend the concept of experiential tourism, in which one is an active part of the performance of the host. This too could allow the Mediterranean destinations of mass tourism to upgrade their hospitality proposal by extending the flows beyond the summer

² Find out more at: www.onlylyon.com

season and above all by spreading the economic benefits of these flows throughout the territory. More and more travellers are asking to be protagonists of their experiences and love solutions combining tourism, entertainment, education and relational well-being with locals. The *Artès Project* proposes some small but useful innovations and, just as salt is useful in the kitchen (you only need a little to give flavour), the methodological system of the *Storyliving Experience disciplinary* conceived by Artès can help raise the perception of an innovative offer that is more attractive but safe and of high quality and professionalism. This can help bring new flows of higher-value “experiential” tourists to Italy, motivated to have special experiences tailored to be truly memorable, unique and unrepeatable. Each story is designed around a special passion shared between the “Artès Operator” and the prosumer (proactive consumer).³

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The third challenge is the shared understanding between the Mediterranean destinations which, it is hoped, can collaborate with each other to develop products, commercial and logistic synergies, and the tourists themselves who, it is hoped, can collaborate with each other to spread the growing sense of responsibility that each of us should have towards the environment and the community we are about to visit. An example of this could be the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO). Originally established in 1989, it is headquartered in Barbados and operates offices in New York and London. The CTO serves as the tourism development representative office for more than 30 countries and territories, and a myriad of allied private sector members from the Caribbean. The natural beauty and the year-round warm weather draws many

visitors from around the world to the Caribbean. With a large number of visitors each year, the CTO is missioned to provide the services and information needed for developing sustainable tourism for the social and economic benefits of the Caribbean countries.

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The CTO has been working with various countries and territories to provide instruments for collaboration in tourism. Their instruments are critical in maximizing economic results while minimizing the adverse social and psychological impact on the integrity of the Caribbean countries.⁴

After all, everything starts from the individual choices of those who will be the new tourists, and who have been affected by the pandemic, not so much in economic but psychological terms. This event has radically changed our approach to travel and we are still struggling to recognize it. The younger generations, from millennials onwards, are the custodians of this new approach and with their purchasing choices they will shape the future strategies of Mediterranean tourist destinations.

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³ www.progettoartes.it/turismo-esperienziale-professionale/

⁴ www.onecaribbean.org (Caribbean Tourism Organization) www.wttc.org/research/economic-impact-research/regional-reports/caribbean/ (World Travel & Tourism Council's regional report on the Caribbean)