

CHANGING FACES OF CROATIAN TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

The present and future of the Croatian tourism are once again certain and no one is interested in its further improvement. It seems today as if the COVID-19 pandemic never took place. Contrary to suggestions and desires, the pandemic period was not utilised for the redefinition of Croatian tourism or the modernisation of its development. Croatian tourism, apart from the sea and sun, has failed to introduce anything new. Tourism development continues to rely on circumstances that work in its favour, such as the fact that Croatia is still a safe country relatively close to the emissive markets that guests decide to visit out of inertia. Croatia is in desperate need to change the course of its tourism development and create new products and services instead of just building numerous new accommodation capacities which only contribute to the uniformity of the tourism offer. The central argument of this paper is that the traditional notions of Croatian tourism development and practices have to be modified because of a range of contradictory socio-economic developments occurring in the field of contemporary tourism. The article outlines the nature of such changes and points out that Croatia needs tourism on a smaller scale which involves the growth of quality tourist services and offers in order to attract fewer tourists with higher purchasing power which would put a stop to the devastation of space and resources and achieve the preservation of the quality of life of local communities.

Keywords: Croatian tourism, capacities, devastation, prices, sustainable tourism, uniformity of offer, quality, value for money.

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is of central importance to social, cultural and economic lives in the 21st century and it is one of the most exciting and relevant phenomena in today's times of great mobility. As a social, economic and cultural phenomenon, tourism is in the process of permanent and powerful changes. Due to the increase in both standards of living and free time, tourism has developed into a mass phenomenon and directing of a large number of people towards tourist destinations led to specific ecological, cultural and social consequences. In the context of a fast-changing world and forces of geographical transformation, globalisation and international migration, tourism undoubtedly acquires new dimensions, properties and directions. By utilising the sociological social action theory, it is our aim to reveal and indicate new trends and tendencies in Croatian tourism and encourage readers not just to understand contemporary tourism from the binary of supply and demand perspectives, but also to encourage them to begin to think critically and question the assumptions inherent in much writing and talking about tourism. As Franklin and Crang argue: 'tourism has broken away from its beginnings as a relatively minor and ephemeral ritual of modern national life to become a significant modality through which transnational modern life is organised' [1]. Writers such as Lash and Urry [2] argue that a significant change has taken place within contemporary societies, involving a shift from organised to disorganised capitalism or from Fordism to post-Fordism, that is a shift from mass consumption to more individuated patterns of consumption. These changes have been characterised by Poon [3] as involving the shift from old tourism, which involved packaging and standardisation, to new tourism, which is segmented, flexible and customised.

The mass tourism of cheap package tours, which characterised escape from the modern economy of Fordist industrial production, has given way to tourism based on the consumption of a broad palette of sights, attractions and, above all, experiences. The paradigm has shifted



from the modern notion of mass tourism to the post-modern notion of lifestyle experience tourism.

Tourism has become a key element of national development strategies and a very important tool in hands of many governments as the initiator of economic renovation. However, tourism is much more than this. It is a complex activity including much more than the commonly simplified understanding of this industry as a relatively simple source of revenue.

This article is the authors' independent attempt to review the contemporary nature of Croatian tourism and trends from the sociological point of view. This critical analysis is based on information collected from various resources and sites including publications of the Institute of Economics in Zagreb, Croatian National Tourist Board's publications and well-established sociological literature, which have all been used by the authors to identify the most important social and cultural features or consequences related to the development of contemporary tourism in the Republic of Croatia. It begins by reviewing the most prominent features of the contemporary tourism development in general and the common characteristics of the contemporary Croatian tourism in particular. Subsequently the article considers the nature of a large-scale Croatian tourism development in order to reveal the inadequate quality of the Croatian tourism offer and to state that Croatia has failed to redefine its tourism or modernise its development. The last section of the article highlights Croatia's efforts to tackle overtourism and develop sustainable tourism that preserves rather than consumes spaces and resources contributing to the preservation of destination's natural and social capital.

2 POSTMODERN TOURISM

Early sociological conceptualisations of the tourist experience emphasise its distinctiveness from everyday life. For example, Cohen [4] describes tourism as a quest for novelty and a temporary reversal of everyday activities. Similarly, Smith [5] sees the tourist as a person who visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing change. The differentiation between everyday life and tourist experience was also highlighted by MacCannell [6], who argues that tourism is a modern form of the religious quest for authenticity in which process authentic experiences are believed to be available only to those people who try to break the bonds of their everyday experiences and by Turner and Ash [7] who suggested that the temporary distance of tourists from their regular environments allows them to suspend the power of norms and values that govern their daily lives.

The notion of the tourist experience as disparate from the routine of everyday life has been challenged since the 1990s by scholars who introduced the perspective of postmodern tourism [2], [8], [9]. Mowforth and Munt [10] describe occurred changes in the field of tourism in several different levels. First, the Fordist production model has been turned into post-Fordist model. Secondly, modern has changed to postmodern. Thirdly, the change has occurred from readily packed tourism towards individual and flexible tourism. Postmodern tourism is characterised by the multiplicity of tourist motivations, experiences, and environments. In this respect, the notion of a diverse and plural realm of postmodern tourism goes one step beyond Cohen's [11] proposition regarding the variety of tourist experiences. While Cohen proclaimed that different people perform different tourist activities, Feifer [12] characterised the 'post-tourist' by his/her enjoyment of moving across the different types of tourist experiences. Such conceptualisations which emphasise the multiplicity and flexibility of postmodern tourist experiences react against the tendency of modernist theories to view societies as totalities [13]. Bauman [14] describes tourism by stating that it is a substitute to genuine needs, the real, which cannot be reached. Therefore, unlike Rojek's [15] claims,



tourism can be seen to represent a larger scale of motivation than just escapism. Tourism is a practice which is more complex than the one concentrated on simple need satisfaction [16].

In the context of tourism, it means that the mass tourism of cheap package tours, which characterised escape from the modern economy of Fordist industrial production, has given way to tourism based on the consumption of a broad palette of sights, attractions and, above all, experiences. The paradigm has shifted from the modern notion of mass tourism to the post-modern notion of lifestyle experience tourism. Tourism has become highly diverse; a miscellany of different interests involving visits to sacred, informative, broadening, beautiful, uplifting or simply different sites. The whole phenomenon is based on consumption although the product itself is immaterial. The development of differentiated products and services has become unavoidable in tourism as well as the creation of experiences in all tourism products. Tourists are no longer passive consumers but they actively participate in the process of creation of the tourist experience. Increased market saturation, educated and conscious consumers, with higher income and more free time have determined the viability of those who offer services in the tourism industry. Consumers have numerous choices and possibilities, and often undertake seemingly incompatible activities simultaneously in order to capitalise on this array of opportunities. Therefore, the number of overnight stays and the profit of a destination have long ceased to be the main criteria and more emphasis has been given to the quality, diversity and particularities of the tourism offer.

The next section elaborates the nature of the Croatian tourism development by briefly analysing some of its prominent features bringing to the forefront the issue of the over-dependence on tourism.

3 KEY FEATURES OF THE CROATIAN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

One of the significant characteristics of Croatian tourism is the marked concentration of tourist facilities along the Adriatic coast, which indicates that the tourism industry is more developed along the coast than in the continental parts of the country. Another prominent feature of Croatian tourism is its seasonal nature [17]. Additionally, excessive increase of tourism capacities especially private accommodation at the expense of living space and the normal way of life of the local population has been the dominant feature of Croatian tourism development for the whole decade and without a wise approach to the solution of these issues, the real price could be paid in the years to come.

For decades, these have been the key features of Croatian tourism, which has been growing in size year by year with breaking records in the number of tourist arrivals, overnight stays, revenues generated and direct and indirect earnings from tourism. Tourism has been Croatia's *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*, the main response to all economic and existential problems. Croatia, known as a safe country (last year out of 128 countries worldwide, Croatia was ranked 22nd [18]), became one of the most desirable destinations for numerous tourists from around the world. Numerous world media reported on Croatia, its cities, coastline, sea, and natural beauty. In such conditions, little thought was given to the future and how to further improve Croatian tourism.

According to the Croatian Tourist Board data, in the last two pre-pandemic years, the number of beds in family accommodation increased by 14.8%, and the number of overnight stays increased by 9.3%, indicating that capacity growth is nowhere near matching demand growth. In those two years, commercial accommodation capacities in Croatia increased by 10.5%, while the number of overnight stays in them was only half of that, a mere 5.7% [19]. Year after year, we witnessed other, mostly negative and very concerning phenomena such as unreal price increases of goods and services alongside a decline in their quality, rising prices for parking and beach lounge rentals, a lack of qualified workforce, discrepancies



between infrastructure and the intensity of tourist traffic (problems with waste, increasing release of sewage in the sea, etc.), and similar problems that have been swept under the rug for years and have increasingly tarnished the reputation of Croatian tourism. This was largely and still is a consequence of the imperative of quick and easy earnings from tourism, which accounts for one-sixth of Croatia's gross domestic product and is the only crucial and almost only relevant industry in Croatia [20]. Renting out accommodation has become the main weapon in tackling the existential problems of the local community, ignoring the fact that tourism is a highly unstable product subject to seasonality, unpredictable external influences, heterogeneity of tourist motives and expectations, and very elastic in terms of price and earnings.

Before the final part of the article the nature of a large-scale tourism development is debated in the next two sections in order to reveal the inadequate quality of the Croatian tourism offer.

4 THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE CROATIAN TOURISM

The year 2020 was one of the worst tourism seasons ever in Croatia, as was in the rest of the world. The colonisation of the coast by hordes of mostly foreign tourists during the summer months suddenly came to an end, at least for a while, as did the dependence of Croatian tourism on developed countries that were the main generators of tourism revenue and tourists coming from those countries. In early 2020, almost all countries introduced epidemiological measures, and travel bans and border closures were among the first measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic. According to the Croatian Tourist Board, 2019 was a record year for Croatian tourism with almost 21 million arrivals and 108.6 million overnight stays. According to all predictions from January 2020, the revenue in 2020 was expected to exceed that of 2019. However, only 53% of arrivals and 61% of overnight stays were recorded in July 2020 in comparison to the same period the previous year [21].

Krešić and Mikulić [22] concluded that the pandemic threatened the very foundations of the tourism economy. Part of the income spent on tourism and travel was decreasing due to the global economic crisis and the decline in GDP of most developed countries. Due to protectionist measures and border closures, traffic connections between emitting and receptive tourist regions were on a decline. Additionally, the virus posed the greatest threat to older age groups, which had been one of the most important market segments for extending the tourism season.

2021 showed the first signs of recovery in tourism traffic. In Croatia, during 2021, there were 13.8 million arrivals and 84.1 million overnight stays, which represented 77% more arrivals and 55% more overnight stays compared to the same period in 2020. Foreign tourists accounted for 71.9 million overnight stays, while domestic tourists accounted for 12.3 million overnight stays. In 2021 67% of arrivals and 77% of overnight stays were achieved in comparison to 2019 [23].

Measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic affected tourist behaviour in terms of fewer arrivals but more overnight stays, i.e., prolonging their stay in the destination and their higher average spending [24]. Among other trends tourists' desire for higher levels of safety and more sustainable travel offer became evident. More and more tourists were looking for value for money, and there was an increasing demand for promotional offers and savings with such behavioural patterns expected to last for years [24], [25]. Due to maintaining physical distance, traveling by car or camper and staying in private accommodation with the popularisation of accommodation with a refund option and flexibility for booking changes without additional fees continued for many to be a safer option than staying in large hotels [26]. In addition to sun and sea, there was a significant

increase in the number of visitors to national parks, rural areas and visitors spending time with family outdoors, indicating a shift in priorities when it comes to travel and the desire of tourists to enjoy the natural resources available to them.

It is a fact that the tourism sector in Croatia suffered greatly compared to other sectors and activities in Croatia during the pandemic. Therefore, much has been written about how the pandemic has revealed the need to find ways to stimulate and develop domestic agriculture and other forms of production and generally stimulate the development of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and producers of all kinds as drivers of future development and that the state should establish a legislative framework, devise a strategy, and encourage reforms and changes [27]. It was believed that the crisis should be used to find ways to emerge from it in the best possible way and to leave it to the relevant and capable people of this country to devise a new economic model and a new model of tourism development [21].

Contrary to all expectations, the year 2022 was significantly marked by a trend of recovery in tourist traffic and approaching tourism figures from 2019. In Croatia, during 2022, there were 18.9 million arrivals and 104.8 million overnight stays, i.e., 37% more arrivals and 25% more overnight stays compared to 2021. Foreign tourists accounted for 92.3 million overnight stays, while domestic tourists accounted for 12.5 million overnight stays. 91% of arrivals and 96% of overnight stays were achieved in comparison to 2019. Revenues from foreign tourists amounted to €11.6 billion, higher by 23% compared to the same period in the record-breaking 2019 [28].

In a relatively short time, there was a return to the old ways, as if the pandemic had never happened. Contrary to suggestions and desires, the pandemic period was not used to redefine tourism or modernise its development, which would have been necessary to redefine or assign a new development role to every part of Croatia. The present and future of Croatian tourism were again certain, and no one was interested in further improving Croatian tourism. Instead of apocalyptic predictions about the political and economic impact of the pandemic usual topics such as prices of services and products in tourism and occupancy rates of accommodation dominated again the media space.

The year 2022 and especially 2023, were also marked by a much more intense media campaign against private renters, which was only partially justified. It might have been justified in the part where it said that the tax revenue per bed in collective accommodation was about 10 times higher compared to private accommodation, i.e., tax payments for private accommodation did not exceed 800 Croatian kunas per bed annually, while research conducted with companies with mixed accommodation portfolios (hotels and campsites) showed that the total burden of taxes and other levies amounted to 8,200 kunas per bed [29]. It was certainly justified in the part where it talked and wrote about the uncontrolled growth of accommodation capacities at the expense of space, infrastructure, and the normal life of the local population. And in this context, what is still worrying is the fact that the growth of supply does not cease although it is clear that the offer has already exceeded the demand and it is certain that it will be increasingly difficult to fill accommodation capacities in the coming years.

However, this media frenzy was not justified in the part where the hotel industry advocated for the construction of new hotel capacities. In that context, a key part of the story of the coastal devastation and overtourism in Croatia have been large hotel consortia and investors backed up by major banks and reputable architects who act only in favour of maximising their market monopoly and profit protecting their own interests, that is the interests of large foreign-owned capital and hotel companies. Nevertheless, the fact is that in the total tourist accommodation in Croatia, apartments account for a huge 61%, while the number of beds in hotel accommodation is almost the same (13%). In tourist countries like

Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal, between 19% and 35% of tourist accommodation is accounted for by apartments [30]. Therefore, it is clear that it is necessary to stop the growth of private accommodation and limit it, primarily for the sake of private renters themselves. Otherwise, due to the large number of accommodation capacities, prices will drop to the point where it will no longer be profitable for anyone.

For this purpose, a new tourism legislation has also been announced [31] in order to extend the power of the local government to restrict the construction and building of new accommodation units, restaurants and catering facilities. However, it is unlikely that this measure will solve the problem of overtourism created by the state itself by discouraging the manufacturing industry and encouraging overtourism primarily through small rental taxes. In addition, it should be emphasised that foreign investors, speculators, builders, real estate agencies, etc., still have the main say in the tourism industry, and all of them operate in cooperation with members of local authorities which enables individuals and groups to enrich themselves by selling land or building new accommodation capacities and thus further ruining and disfiguring space, which is considerably losing its value and attractiveness.

The fact is that no laws without adequate alteration of the existing tax system will stop excessive construction. If private accommodation is part of Croatian tradition and its key distinguishing feature compared to our competitors, then family accommodation should be tax-protected (small renters whose income represents additional earnings for patching household budgets in comparison to owners of a large number of accommodation units who have distributed their ownership among family members and relatives to avoid higher tax payments). In doing so, the state should find tools for much more efficient control of the so-called non-commercial accommodation, which is becoming a sore spot of Croatian tourism and which is currently growing rapidly. Such accommodation is mostly in the hands of foreigners, non-residents who rent out their uncategorised property and usually charge in cash. Such accommodation represents unfair competition to everyone working legally and investing in their properties. It has become a big issue that has exploded especially since 2016. Croatia will hardly restore the space to its original state, but we need to do everything to prevent the space from permanently losing its attractiveness and atmosphere and to avoid the situation where we are selling something that we ourselves would often not buy.

5 CONSEQUENCES OF A LARGE-SCALE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CROATIA

The Sustainable Travel Index 2020 shows that countries that are more committed to sustainable tourism development have a better chance of attracting new tourists [32].

In Croatia, 2022 was also marked by the adoption of the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy. The most important feature of this strategic document is the absolute determination to permanently abandon haphazard, mass tourism and position Croatia as an authentic destination, with historic city centres protected against tourist devastation, knowing how to manage its space and hordes of tourists, with people at quality, safe, and well-paying jobs in the tourism industry [33].

Although spectacularly presented, the new Development Strategy does not present anything new. Namely, creators of development strategies and policies seize every opportunity to emphasise the importance of fighting against mass tourism and advocate for the development of sustainable tourism, while simultaneously battling for every inch of free space at the local level. Beaches continue to be overcrowded, roads and parking spaces are still inadequate to meet the demands of numerous visitors, the electricity and water supply systems are problematic, and there is a shortage of tourism labour [29]. According to spatial plans, additional 210 tourist zones shall be built on top of the existing 206 covering an area



of nearly five thousand hectares or fifty million square meters along the Croatian Adriatic coast. Furthermore, 38 new marinas with 6,861 moorings are planned alongside the existing 16 marinas with a total of 3,049 moorings. Seven hundred kilometres of Croatian coastline has been filled, paved, and covered with concrete with plans for concreting almost one thousand six hundred kilometres more (or one quarter of the coastline) [34]. In such circumstances, the logical question to ask is whether such a tourism development strategy makes any sense and what is the limit to the growth of accommodation capacities and tourism infrastructure in Croatia. Excessive and uncontrolled construction creates the basis for mass arrivals and leads to exceeding the threshold of destination carrying capacities (physical, economic, and social) and the development of the so-called overtourism. Is there any sense in investing in the construction of new hotel capacities, regardless of the fact that according to data from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, hotels account for only 13% of the total structure of accommodation capacities, while over 60% of capacities are in private accommodation and are steadily increasing [35].

6 DISCUSSION AND REMARKS

At the beginning of 2023, optimistic forecasts for the upcoming tourist season due to the introduction of the euro and the entry into the Schengen area predicted a record tourist season and based on such predictions and largely due to inflation raging in Europe since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, landlords, hoteliers, restaurateurs, and merchants raised prices. All of them blamed high food prices and the increase in energy prices as justification for raising prices. However, despite numerous complaints about high prices crowds continued to pour into Croatian coastal destinations.

According to recently published e-visitor data, in Croatia during the first 8 months, there were 16.2 million arrivals and 88.5 million overnight stays, which compared to the same period last year represents an 8% increase in arrivals and 2% increase in overnight stays, and compared to 2019, it equals the results. Why are prices the main topic? The problem partly lies in the fact that Croatia is still perceived as a cheap destination, and partly in the fact that on account of its offer, it attracts tourists with medium or lower purchasing power who generally do not want to spend a large amount during their stay in our country. All previous research has shown that the average daily spending of tourists in Croatia amounts to €98. Even half of that amount is related to accommodation services, and less than 20% to food and beverages outside the accommodation facility [28].

However, what is really worrying is the fact that Croatian tourism has become too expensive for a large number of Croatian citizens, for whom a stay at the sea during the peak season has become simply impossible. When it comes to supply, it should be noted that apart from some exceptions, Croatian tourism, besides sea and sun, has not offered anything new. Croatian tourism has been saved, as always, by circumstances that favour it, such as the fact that it is still a safe country relatively close to the emitting markets, and last year's statistics were good not because Croatian tourism has progressed, but because guests arrive out of inertia.

In this context, the story about sustainable tourism seems out of place, and the purpose of developing modern tourism should be to make mass tourism destinations attractive to all types of consumers, both deep-pocketed and shallow-pocketed ones. This is the formula for success of the world's largest tourist destinations, so why not Croatia's. The most popular destinations such as Paris, Barcelona, Venice, and even Dubrovnik, by combining various cultural, gastronomic, commercial, natural, and other attractions, attract a large number of tourists. Such destinations, while respecting the principles of sustainability of their urban structure and infrastructure capacities, offer the widest range of accommodation to their



guests, restaurants, cultural attractions, and shops in all price categories with the best accommodation and restaurants playing a distinguishing role in the destination's overall portfolio.

Instead of counting overnight stays and arrivals, the focus should be on tourists' consumption, in which process Croatian tourism industry should be creating content, services, and experiences that will coerce tourists into spending based on the value for money principle. It is necessary to create conditions for high-quality and content-rich holidays during which guests will feel comfortable and satisfied without feeling cheated for the money they spent. Therefore, the answer lies in the development of quality tourism with quality service for all guests. Only in this way discussions about how expensive Croatia is as a destination should give way to discussions about Croatia as a quality tourist destination.

7 CONCLUSION

Over the past 50 years of intensive global tourism growth, tourism has often faced various types of crises. The reaction has usually been tumultuous, with almost immediate and dramatic declines in demand. This time was no exception. Undoubtedly, tourism worldwide was one of the hardest-hit economic activities by the pandemic, which, given its importance in the global economy, left no country immune, especially not those, like Croatia, that are highly dependent on international tourism flows. After the discovery of the vaccine against the coronavirus, with sufficient levels of vaccination and population immunity, the safety of travel was guaranteed, and tourism began to recover very quickly. It seems that, apart from a short-term recession and the halt of several years of growth, the experience with the pandemic did not significantly impact our values and bring about significant changes in aspects of our lives. It seems that tourism after the era of COVID-19 is not much different and better than before, and it seems that we eagerly awaited a return to the status quo.

Croatia is a country of exceptional natural beauty, and tourism emerges as a logical, but not the only choice and a natural source of socio-cultural and economic growth and development. However, we must use this period ahead of us to make a certain leap in tourism offer and work on creating new products and services instead of building accommodation capacities and apartments whose surplus significantly contributes to the monotony of the tourist offer. In this way, we would preserve space and its atmosphere and prevent its further devastation. Tourism needs to be freed from commercial shackles and protected from the imperatives of consumer society and it should be tailored to human and humane needs. Just as COVID-19 forced us to slow down our lives, we should also consider a more balanced and thoughtful approach to tourism. No one in this country would object to tourism numbers decreasing while the quality of tourism improves. Croatia needs tourism on a smaller scale that valorises spaces and resources rather than consumes them and contributes to a meaningful understanding of local residents, local culture, and natural beauties.

If we want to develop sustainable tourism that fully considers the economic, social, and environmental impacts and meets the needs of visitors, industry, the environment, and the local community, then we want the development which involves the growth of quality tourist services and offer in order to attract fewer tourists with higher purchasing power which would put a stop to the devastation of space and resources and achieve the preservation of the quality of life of local communities. Achieving all of the above requires primarily political will, followed by a general social consensus about the need to reinvent the existing model of tourism development. In sustainable tourism that considers the specifics of the destination and the interests of the local community and preserves the economic, social, and spatial resources of the destination, and which we all strive for at least declaratively, there is no easy profit. It is important to emphasise that sustainable tourism does not mean the development



of selective forms of tourism, such as nautical or cultural tourism; the essence lies in the fact that every form of tourism should strive for sustainable development. The fundamental question of sustainability in tourism is to establish a balance between visitor demand, consumption and the destination and system's ability to provide tourism experiences without diminishing the destination's natural and social capital.

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