

Do Your Part to Fight Overtourism

It's time to stop burying our heads in the sand and reconcile our passion for travel with the damage too many visitors can cause. **BY SOPHY ROBERTS**

WHEN I STARTED as a travel writer 22 years ago, I didn't question articles like "50 Places to See Before You Die" or "How to Do Paris in a Day." Readers were traveling hard and often, as was I. Budget airlines were booming. Then Instagram took the concept of "fast travel" to another level—powered by ephemeral selfies that replaced meaningful experiences.

For the past eight years, travel and tourism's contribution to global GDP has increased annually by an average of 4.4 percent, according to Rochelle Turner, vice president of research for the World Travel & Tourism Council. While that revenue can be hugely beneficial to a nation's economy, there is a flip side: "Too much tourism at a certain time in a certain place in a certain context can damage the ecological, social, economic, psychological—even political—well-being of the destination," Turner told

me. Even hard-core expedition meccas like Mount Everest, where Sherpas removed 24,200 pounds of trash during a cleanup last year, are suffering. By 2017, more than double the UNESCO-recommended number of daily visitors were descending on Machu Picchu, prompting a rule that tourists need to arrive within 60 minutes of their ticketed time and limit their visit to four hours.

Like many travelers, I struggle with my role in the problem. When I took my youngest son to Venice in 2015, instead of getting lost in the city's mysteries as I had at age 17, we watched a cruise ship block out the sun. Venice now attracts around 70,000 visitors a day—on top of its population of roughly 261,000—according to estimates. Researchers at the city's Ca' Foscari University say that is some 24,000 more people than the infrastructure can cope with.

That experience convinced me to steer clear of the crowds, to write about places where there was more fear than footfall. Siberia, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea—I took my kids to all of them, and started to find the strength of my convictions. If it made a "where to go" column (Dubrovnik, Croatia), I thought twice about taking the trip.

Is the next era of travel one in which popular experiences become more

costly, as a means to regulate visits? In July, Venice will introduce an "entrance fee" of up to \$11 for day-trippers. I'm not sure that's enough to put people off, given that it's roughly the same price as a negroni in St. Mark's Square.

The issue starts to feel irresolvable: as one solution emerges (promoting second-tier cities or briefly closing an at-risk site), the next wave of travelers comes in. China's outgoing tourism market alone is more than 14 times the size it was 20 years ago, and it's poised to grow exponentially as 417 million Chinese millennials come of age.

If the industry is asking more questions than it is giving answers, that's because one size doesn't fit all: stakeholders have to think specifically about the causes and effects of each problem. Bangkok's answer can't be Barcelona's. It's also a question of impact. Four hundred visitors who play by the rules can be less burdensome than the 40 who don't.

For now, how can industry pros help us be more responsible? Travel advisors can suss out less-frequented regions and provide singular access. "We suggest off-the-beaten-path destinations and arrange visits to sites otherwise closed to the public," says **Matteo Della Grazia** (matteo@discoveryouritaly.com; 347-441-3907), a Perugia-based Italy specialist on T+L's A-List. But we also shouldn't conflate privilege with a solution: long-term fixes need to go beyond paying more to beat the system.

Tyler Dillon, a specialist at Toronto trip planner Trufflepig, encourages viewing travel as an act of personal accountability. "It's about applying the same consciousness that society is finally giving to single-use plastics," he says. "If we're traveling just to get a break, most of us can get it closer to home than we think."

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Crowds line up with phones in hand to take pictures of the sunset on Santorini, Greece.

