

The end of global travel as we know it: An opportunity for sustainable tourism

Saturday, March 14 2020, is "The Day the World Stopped Travelling", in the words of [Rifat Ali](#), head of travel analytics company Skift.



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That's a little dramatic, perhaps, but every day since has brought us closer to it being reality.

The Covid-19 crisis has the global travel industry – “the most consequential industry in the world”, says Ali in uncharted territory. Nations are shutting their borders. Airlines face bankruptcy. Ports are refusing entry to cruise ships, threatening the very basis of the cruise business model.

Associated hospitality, arts and cultural industries are threatened. Major events are being cancelled. Tourist seasons in many tourist destinations are collapsing. Vulnerable workers on casual, seasonal or gig contracts are suffering. It seems an epic disaster.

But is it?

Considering [human activities need to change](#) if we are to avoid the worst effects of human-induced climate change, the coronavirus crisis might offer us an unexpected opportunity.

Ali, like many others, wants recovery, “even if it takes a while to get back up and return to pre-coronavirus traveller numbers”.

But rather than try to return to business as usual as soon as possible, Covid-19 challenges us to think about the type of consumption that underpins the unsustainable ways of the travel and tourism industries.

Tourism dependency

Air travel features prominently in discussions about reducing carbon emissions. Even if commercial aviation accounts “only” for about 2.4% of all emissions from fossil-fuel use, flying is still how many of us in the industrialised world blow out our carbon footprints.

Read more: [Flight shame won't fix airline emissions. We need a smarter solution](#)

But sustainability concerns in the travel and tourism sectors extend far beyond carbon emissions.

In many places, tourism has grown beyond its sustainable bounds, to the detriment of local communities.

The [overtourism](#) of places like Venice, Barcelona and Reykjavik is one result. Cruise ships disgorge thousands of people for half-day visits that overwhelm the destination but leave little economic benefit.



Graffiti in Barcelona: 'Tourists go home. Refugees welcome.' [Dunk/flickr](#), [CCBY-SA](#)

Cheap airline fares encourage weekend breaks in Europe that have inundated old cities such as Prague and Dubrovnik. The need for growth becomes self-perpetuating as tourism dependency locks communities into the system.

In a 2010 paper [I argued](#) the problem was tourism underpinned by what sociologist Leslie Sklair called the “[culture-ideology of consumerism](#)” – by which consumption patterns that were once the preserve of the rich became endemic.

Read more: [Tourists behaving badly are a threat to global tourism, and the industry is partly to blame](#)

Tourism is embedded in that culture-ideology as an essential pillar to achieve endless economic growth. For instance, [the Australian government](#) prioritises tourism as a “supergrowth industry”, accounting for almost 10% of “exports” in 2017-18.

Out of crisis comes creativity

Many are desperate to ensure business continues as usual. “If people will not travel,” said Ariel Cohen of California-based business travel agency [TripActions](#), “the economy will grind to a halt.”

Covid-19 is a radical wake-up call to this way of thinking. Even if Cohen is right, that economic reality now

needs to change to accommodate the more pressing public health reality.

It is a big economic hit, but crisis invites creativity. Grounded business travellers are realising virtual business meetings work satisfactorily. Conferences are reorganising for virtual sessions. Arts and cultural events and institutions are turning to [live streaming](#) to connect with audiences.

In Italian cities under lockdown, residents have come out on their balconies to create music as a communi

Local cafes and food co-ops, including my local, are reaching out with support for the community's marginalised and elderly to ensure they are not forgotten.

These responses challenge the atomised individualism that has gone hand in hand with the consumerism travel and tourism. This public health crisis reminds us our well-being depends not on being consumers but on being part of a community.

Read more: [Rethinking tourism so the locals actually benefit from hosting visitors](#)

Staying closer to home could be a catalyst awakening us to the value of eating locally, travelling less and just slowing down and connecting to our community.

After this crisis passes, we might find the old business, as usual, less compelling. We might learn that not travelling long distances didn't stop us travelling; it just enlivened us to the richness of local travel.

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