

Tourism's Cultural Impacts in Dubrovnik, Croatia
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Introduction

Located in the southernmost corner of Croatia, Dubrovnik is no stranger to tourists due to its coastal location and grand history, but like many destinations, has had to adapt to new challenges and pressures in the 21st century (Pappas, 2020). Despite the city's population of a little over 42,000 inhabitants, Dubrovnik received nearly two million tourists annually, which was dampened throughout the COVID—19 lockdowns, but is predicted to near 2019 levels in 2022 (Loades, 2022; Thomas, 2022). Inscribed to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, Dubrovnik's rich culture has attracted rapid growth in visitor numbers bringing along many challenges to the same local culture that attracts these tourists (Loades, 2022). In a broader sense, MacLeod and Carrier define culture as the attributes we get from where we grow up, distinguishing us from others (2010). When making tourism management decisions, it is imperative to remember that culture is the "framework within which tourism takes place" (MacLeod and Carrier, 2010 p. 3) including the local history or the aesthetic experience, while narrowly, culture may be an attraction or determinate of tourist behaviour.

The region's history of war has only recently been reconciled in Dubrovnik and the divisions and damage are still fresh in the memories of many local residents who were alive at the end of the war in 1995 (Lipovac, 2021). Loades (2022) argues that though tourism has stimulated the post-war recovery in Dubrovnik, its growth has also created tensions among residents due to unequal economic benefits and an increasing negative perception of tourists (Pappas, 2020). The consistent growth in tourism numbers could explain this discontent as 2011 saw 606,000 visitors, which more than doubled to 1,440,000 in 2019 (Loades, 2022). These large numbers of people constrained to a small space alongside the extreme seasonality of the tourist season – usually viewed as May through September – has resulted in the city becoming an international posterchild of the negative impacts of *overtourism* (Responsible Tourism, 2018; Abbasian, 2020). To minimize the negative effects of mass tourism, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined overtourism as, "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experience in a negative way" (2018 p. 6).

Several reasons can explain the exponential rise in visitors to Dubrovnik, but the largest issue identified by all stakeholders has been the cruise ships (Ljubica, 2012; Abbasian, 2020). Before stricter limitations were imposed, cruise visitors reached 732,000 from 414 ships in 2018 and Dubrovnik still expects 345 cruise ships to arrive in 2022 (Kordej-De Villa, 2021; Simmonds, 2022). The local municipality has recently taken efforts to establish sustainability measures to control the demand (GSTC, 2021), but many local residents see these efforts as only a first step toward regaining control over their city (Loades, 2022). Cruise tourists are still only a minority compared to the annual visitors arriving by air from over forty European destinations, not to mention the several thousand visitors who come solely inspired by the fantasy television series, *Game of Thrones* (Pappas, 2020; Contu, 2022).

These factors have had major impacts on multiple aspects of *cultural change* within Dubrovnikian culture, detailed by Reisinger (2009) as the changes occurring within society that include examples of cultural adaptations, erosion, and residents' changing attitudes towards tourism (Pappas, 2020). Furthermore, *commodification*, or referred to by many locals as the *museumification* of both public space and their private lives, is evident within the Old City of Dubrovnik (Li, 2021; Loades, 2022) due primarily to mass tourism. Furthermore, tourism pressure due to the media's use of Dubrovnik as a filming location has led to problems with staged authenticity and a need to delicately balance tourist motivations and the local historical context (Li, 2021) of a living destination that cannot be "isolated from contemporary global processes and spatial relations" (Loades, 2022 p. 27).

Pressure to manage these impacts were urged not by local discontent, but instead by a 2017 warning from UNESCO of the Old City's World Heritage listing being revoked if the overwhelming number of tourists was not managed properly (GSTC, 2021). This began with municipal measures passed in 2017 aimed at controlling the urban space and the ambitious 2019 adoption of a carrying capacity of 4,000 cruise visitors at a time within the walls of the Old City – half of the UNWTOs suggest limit (Pappas, 2020). Further sustainability efforts led by the 2019 Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) destination assessment and the municipal 'Respect the City' project have been taken, though locals are warily welcoming the return of a regular tourist season after low tourist numbers in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Puljić, 2019; GSTC, 2021). With 2021 booking rates reported at 70% of 2019 (Thomas, 2022), the 2022 season will be the first chance to showcase the effectiveness of steps taken to manage the impacts of overtourism in Dubrovnik.

Impacts on Culture

Tourists visiting Dubrovnik bring their own cultural constructs and preconceptions along as baggage, leading to erosion and transformation of the local way of life (Reisinger, 2009). A clear example of these changes is the population decline of the Old City, which lost a quarter of its population in 5 years due to overcrowding and the increasing cost of living (Puljić, 2019). Tourism development in Dubrovnik has benefitted property owners and those who work in the sector, but has also dramatically increased living costs, creating a visible disparity between those employed in the tourism sector and, for instance, those employed in the public sector (Loades, 2022). Pavlić's research shows that residents connected directly to the tourism industry do not perceive negative impacts while the perspectives of those not connected to tourism changed negatively (2017), though not as drastic as similarly effected cities like Venice or Barcelona, likely due to Dubrovnik's near dependence on tourism (Loades, 2022).

Dubrovnik also suffers from extremely unbalanced seasonality. For example, in 2012, 89.9% of overnight visits to the city occurred between June and September (Loades, 2022). This contributes to the city's population decline, particularly among young people looking for steady year-round employment (Pappas, 2020). Known to locals as the *tourist season*, the summer crowds affect the daily lives of all residents both in the walled Old City and the surrounding buffer zone. Oftentimes, many residents proclaim that they are only able to 'breathe again' when the main season is over (Sharpley, 2012; Loades, 2022). Due to this misbalance, locals rush to sort out practical matters like home renovations within a short period, displaying clear examples of cultural adaptation, or adapting some elements of culture in order to meet tourists' needs (Reisinger, 2009). Furthermore, throughout the *tourist season*, the private realms of local life become increasingly restricted as restaurants, cafes, and bars that were once public spaces are increasingly blurring into tourist-orientated spaces (Loades, 2022).

Commodification, or the treatment of culture as a commodity, is pervasive in the public spaces of Dubrovnik as they "slowly stop being places of living and working and become open-air museums" (Reisinger, 2009; Kordej-De Villa, 2021 p. 352). Souvenir shops are a clear example, which have slowly replaced local stores, creating a lack of goods and services that serve locals (Pappas, 2020). This is also the case for residents who live in homes overlooked by the city wall where crowds of tourists walking on the wall constantly pass by their kitchen or bedroom windows (Kordej-De Villa, 2021). Most pervasive, however, are the effects of large cruise groups flowing through the crowded streets adding extreme pressure while providing very little economic benefit for the city or its residents (Kordej-De Villa, 2021). For local residents, this reduces their connection to the city and many Dubrovnikans even feel divorced from their culture (Loades, 2022). Unfortunately this is not evident among local governance, as politicians of all political affiliations continue to be engaged in marketing a cultural commercialization of the city (Loades, 2022).

Media and marketing efforts have further led to cultural arrogance, or the staging of experiences by locals, and has spurred the development of inauthentic tourist products in Dubrovnik (Reisinger, 2009; Pappas, 2020). *Game of Thrones* tourism alone has resulted in a 38% increase in tourist arrivals (Pappas, 2020) and research suggests that the television show influenced Dubrovnik's offer of tourist products alongside the presentation of authentic historic attractions (Depken, 2020). Staged attractions like the display of the "iron throne" from the TV show and guided tours of filming locations alter the authenticity of tourist experiences offered (Loades, 2022), even as further visitor research like that by Li et. al. shows that authentic attributes like history and architecture are most associated with destination loyalty (2021). The erosion of Dubrovnik's local culture in order to encourage tourist spending further simplifies the cultural and historical depictions of the destination and deepens cross-cultural divisions between the hosts and their guests.

Nature of Host-Guest Interaction

As established by Krippendorf in his seminal work, *The Holiday Makers*, "the brief contact [between tourists and locals, ha[s]... seldom produce[d] real understanding and communication" (1987 p. 58), which is certainly the case in Dubrovnik. Within this century, the city of Dubrovnik has seen exponential growth in visitors and rapid tourist development which is tied to the extreme population loss that the city is also currently experiencing (Pappas, 2020). What must be reached is a balance in host-guest interactions where the tourism stakeholders are finding solutions that allow for both happier tourists and locals (Gursoy, 2004).

Of course, the perspective of each resident is varied based on their own social standing, investments, and place within the tourism sphere (Abbasian, 2020). As the income of tourism is not distributed evenly, locals have an intimate knowledge of who benefits and acknowledge that power is skewed toward those with larger investments. Most of the income from tourism has been consistently consolidated by ten companies who managed 60% of the accommodation supply in 2015 (Loades, 2022). Disparities in those who are property owners and those who earn a good income from tourism are clear within Dubrovnikian society and also show a evident division in the various stakeholders' opinions of tourism (Pavlič, 2017; Abbasian, 2020), which vary even further due to the many extrinsic variables in resident perceptions discussed by Sharpley (2014). For instance, with around 80% of local economy supported by tourism, the local stakeholder's financial dependence prevents them from making any drastic or risky restrictions, as was clear in Croatia's lax COVID-19 policies (Pavlič et al., 2019; Mikac and Kravaršćan, 2021).

Overtourism in Dubrovnik is a result of several *mass tourism* trends, with cruising and short-term group trips leaving the largest negative impacts on the city (Pappas, 2020). According to Kordej-De Villa and Šulc (2021), most cruise visitors only have a few hours to see the city, and their ability to have a meaningful experience is further reduced by the traffic congestions within and transferring to the Old City. Mass tourists' main objectives are leisure and pleasure, and they are likely to experience less meaningful interactions in the destinations they visit due to being more passive and absorptive tourists (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). This may be why several of the municipalities' recent initiatives have emphasized diversification in tourism offerings and why the Digital Nomad Association Croatia was founded alongside the country's new digital nomad visa to attract longer-term visitors, especially during mid or low seasons (Lipovac, 2021; Banovic, 2022).

Dubrovnik's ability to absorb the dense crowds and traffic access to the Old City is limited because it is a medieval walled city with extremely rigid space, thus making an agreed carrying capacity pivotal to positive resident perceptions of tourism (Sharpley, 2014; Loades, 2020). Proposed management plans must ensure tourist use of public space and local facilities does not escalate further in order to

avoid reaching a critical point of tolerance by any stakeholder (Doxey, 1976; Deery, 2012). In order to support the responsible tourism goal set forth in the *The Cape Town Declaration* to “provide enjoyable experiences for tourists through meaningful connections with local people”, Dubrovnik must further manage package tours to allow the locals to share deeper meanings of their city to visitors. (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002 p. 1; Loades, 2020).

This brings fourth the question of who is involved and who has access to tourism opportunities? In recent years, academic research has showcased the lack of community participation in tourism decisions that could affect them (Kordej-De Villa, 2021), but the UNESCO 2021-2026 Management Plan has included the community throughout its development and clearly prioritizes community concerns and perspectives through multiple strategic actions (Lipovac, 2021). The UNESCO Plan also aims to address the economic inflation affecting costs of housing and food in line with expected sensitivity to the host culture prescribed by *The Cape Town Declaration* (International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002; Lipovac, 2021) yet time will be required before these actions can be determined to be successful.

Practical Recommendations

In response to the growing impacts of overtourism globally, the UNWTO and various other organisations such as Responsible Travel have developed management solutions in order to provide crowd mitigation techniques in destinations impacted by mass tourism (Francis, 2017; UNWTO, 2018). These recommendations, along with suggestions for the management of tourist-host interactions from within tourism academia, have been drawn from in order to recommend practical responsible management strategies that best support the needs and desires of all Dubrovnik residents, as emphasized in UNWTO Strategy 6. It is expected that the government and those in power acknowledge this necessity to prioritize local needs for cultural survival over economic or other short-sighted desires by involving the host community in decision-making as emphasized in previous research by Peric et al. (2014; Lipovac, 2021).

Demarketing implies lowering tourist numbers, which is exactly what the organisation, Responsible Travel, suggests doing to mitigate overtourism (Francis, 2017). While Dubrovnik has already established a carrying capacity for inside the walled city, further efforts must be made by spreading tourists over time and space (Lipovac, 2021). This can be done by advertising other destinations that tourists may be equally interested in due to cultural interest or because it happens to also have been a filming location, thus stimulating new visitor itineraries as highlighted in UNWTO Strategy 3 (UNWTO, 2018). Demarketing can be further utilized through publicising the highlights Croatia offers during low-season in effort to spread out the impacts of summers' *tourist season*, as UNWTO Strategy 5 suggests to do through visitor segmentation (Francis, 2017).

Managing visitors requires many strategies, but the communication of the destinations challenges directly with them tends to be a forgotten opportunity. Following UNWTO Strategies 9 and 10, the municipality of Dubrovnik should query local residents in order to establish a tourist Code of Conduct that can be distributed to all tourists prior to arrival (UNWTO, 2018). Much like the eco-pledge signed by visitors to Palau, the transparent education and awareness of visitor impacts will remind them of their responsibilities when visiting Dubrovnik and allow local residents to have more control over their city (Sanders, 2020).

Local researchers have determined that large groups making short visits bring little-to-no benefit to the local culture. Thus, Dubrovnik should look into further limiting group sizes to support community trust and cohesion as has been enacted in Amsterdam (Feinberg, 2021). This solution to visitor management and crowd reduction can align with other solutions, such as implementing mobility

plans to manage visitor flow as seen in Barcelona (Goodwin, 2019) or instigating longer-term stays like Venice is attempting through its tickets for day-trippers (Bertocchi, 2022). So, additional strategies like the warning signs implemented along Dubrovnik's ancient city wall are recommended to assist in protecting tourists and in preventing further impact to local infrastructure (Bijelić, 2022).

As Dubrovnik's tourist monitoring infrastructure develops beyond a few cameras across the city, municipal tourism practitioners should consider a possible digital response system that can be implemented to ease various tourist pressures (Camatti, 2020). The Du Visitor card project provides a platform that can be utilized to disperse visitors by influencing their behaviour (Camatti, 2020). As suggested by Mohanty et al., additional tactics can take advantage of big data and AI technologies to further personalize and drive positive behaviours at scale (2021). Having the ability to influence mass tourism through technologies which allow for personalization is supported by UNWTO's 11th strategy of advancing the use of data and technologies to monitor and evaluate tourists (UNWTO, 2018) and should be taken advantage of as new technologies are developed and become available.

Dubrovnik's tourist planners acknowledge the restrictions they face, and have already begun to show support for the development of diverse tourist offerings through the Respect the City project which has built capacity for innovative solutions through private-public partnerships (Puljić, 2019; Lipovac, 2021). By continuing to expand the diversity of offerings and include locals in the development and decision-making process along the way, Dubrovnik can reduce the likelihood of future resident backlash (Peric, 2014). Responsible product development of excursions for cruise tourists in rural destinations can potentially encourage a segment of these visitors to travel elsewhere than the overcrowded Old City as suggested by Grgić's research of tourism business model opportunities for beekeepers (2017). Kelić also suggests further developing connections between Coastal and Inland Croatia to increase tourism competitiveness between different markets (2020). Thus product development in collaboration with a broad range of local stakeholders can aid in diversifying both supply and demand of tourist offers and should be prioritized in order to reduce tourism's impacts on the culture within the city of Dubrovnik.

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