

# ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF CROATIAN TOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

An excessive increase of tourism capacities 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 last decade. Croatian tourism is all about income generated from tourism development and it is impossible to find any information related to expenses generated by tourism. Without a clever approach to these issues the real price could be paid in the years to come. The construction of newer and newer rooms, apartments and holiday houses disfigures our settlements and environments and contributes to the inflow of tourists, which in turn leads to less interest, less attractiveness and, consequently, a fall in prices of goods and services. Under such circumstances, tourists and the tourism industry exploit the local culture, resources, attractions and the whole way of life of the local community. Croatia is in desperate need of a smaller scale of tourism which will not consume but instead preserve the environment and resources and improve the quality of life of the local population and which will not endanger local traditions and the demographic structure of the territory. The main point is that tourism alone is not enough and that the country's competitiveness should not be grounded only in tourism and traditional industries. The country's sustainable development should be based on new technologies, software production, creative industries with high added value, energetics and knowledge and a creative economy in general and Croatia should adapt to new trends and the new age as soon as possible.

*Keywords:* tourism, tourists, commercialised hospitality, neo-colonialism, consumerism, leisure, authentic, tourism development, local community.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the largest contemporary economic phenomenon. According to the UNWTO [1] tourism is the third biggest export industry after oil and chemical industries and it accounts for 7% of the overall world export and 30% of all export services. Tourism is 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.

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 [2]. The first idea crossing everyone's mind when they hear the word tourism is profit, private accommodation providers, big hotels and tourism companies they all count money generated from tourism related services and products and overnight stays. In Croatia everybody talks only about the income from tourism and nobody has ever measured the costs generated by a tourist season. Additionally, excessive increase of tourism capacities 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. According to all available indicators so far Croatia has definitely entered into a period of tourism stagnation and due to a whole array of factors (already widely discussed in Croatian media like the return of Turkey and North African rivals to the tourism market, economic recession in the countries which are the generators of the tourism arrivals etc.) the times of hyper-demand have gone by. The last tourist season has



also accentuated the continuation of the trend in the growth of private accommodation at the Croatian coast. What is problematic within this context is that there is no reversal of this trend, although it has become clear that the offer has outgrown the demand and it will certainly be more and more difficult to rent out all existing and newly built accommodation facilities in the years to come.

The fact that Croatia has already succumbed to the consequences of the excessive growth of tourism is best illustrated by the following figures related to occupancy rates during the last tourist season when all accommodation capacities were less occupied than a year or two before. During the first eleven months of 2019 hotels' average occupancy rate was 42.6% (0.6% less than the year before) and the same is valid for camps and agritourism and farm households and private accommodation in Croatia. In the last two years the number of beds in private accommodation has increased by 14.8% and the number of overnight stays by 9.3%, which indicates that the rise of capacities is not matched by the rise of demand. In the same period commercial accommodation capacities in Croatia have increased by 10.5% and the number of overnights amounts to a half, that is only 5.7%. The biggest number of overnight stays has been recorded in Dubrovnik, Rovinj, Poreč and Split, where local inhabitants have expressed their dissatisfaction with the poor quality of life during the peak season. In the cities packed with apartments, like Split, only 5% of local inhabitants rent out their accommodation, so the rest of 95% of citizens righteously ask themselves: "what do we have of it?" Late bookings and cancelled reservations were a dominant feature of the last spring and made all those depending on tourism really nervous in addition to wet May and a part of June with 50 rainy days, which just pointed to the extent to which the Croatian tourism is dependent on weather and climate [3].

We bear witness to some other, mainly negative and very troubling occurrences like the street fights between local merchants and innkeepers all over the Croatian coast, the increase of physical violence, racial and gender discrimination of tourists, unreal increase of prices of goods and services and the deterioration of their quality, the increase in parking fees, the expensive umbrella and deckchair rental at the beaches and numerous cases of insults and threats directed towards visitors, the lack of skilled labour, considerable incompatibility between the local infrastructure and the intensity of the tourist arrivals (waste disposal problems, sewage and faecal pollution, etc.) on account of which Croatian tourism has gained a bad reputation. This is not good in long-term. The provision of accommodation has become the local community's way of life, neglecting the fact that tourism is highly unstable product susceptible to seasonality and unpredictable exterior impacts, suffering from heterogeneity of tourism motivations and expectations and very elastic in terms of price and revenue.

What is true beyond any doubt is that tourism includes people, tourists who enter into interactions with other tourists, destinations, cultures and lifestyles. Today one out of every seven people in the world is a tourist, which makes tourism primarily a social and a cultural phenomenon giving rise to many changes in the destinations where it evolves. Tourism is a socially structured activity and the mere nature of tourism expenditure depends upon the socio-cultural determinants (the amount of personal income, age, educational level, personal lifestyle, class membership etc.), which significantly influence motivations, frequency, duration, selection of a destination and a type of travel. It is evident that tourism does not only include the number of achieved arrivals and overnight stays in a destination, which is particularly pronounced in Croatia because of the excessive imperative to accumulate money from tourism, which accounts to one-sixth of the Croatian gross domestic product [3] and because it is the only remaining relevant industry in the Republic of Croatia. Tourism should be studied and researched as an integral social and economic phenomenon owing its



popularity to modern way of life and intensive technological advancement resulting in positive as well as negative consequences for the destinations in which it takes place.

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. The next section describes the relation between tourism and consumerism in order to show that tourism has betrayed its social and cultural goals. Instead of being a vehicle for the promotion of international peace and greater intercultural understanding it has been turned into commercialised activity diluting local culture and transforming it from a process into a product offered and sold in the tourism market.

## 2 TOURISM AND CONSUMERISM

Since the beginning, tourism has been exploiting people's need, that is, wish for travelling. This exploitation of human curiosity and urge to see and experience something new and different in comparison to everyday life represents the crucial moment when it comes to the development of tourism as a commercial activity [4]. Today tourism has been transformed into the holiday industry and it has been focused on the production and fulfilment of people's wishes and as such it has become a very important and inevitable part of contemporary consumer behaviour [5]. At a symbolic level tourism has become a very important field for the creation of individual identities and by participating in various types of tourism and by travelling to different parts of the world people create their own identities and in this way they send certain messages about themselves to the society [6]. Within this framework tourism functions as a positional good and a proof of someone's prestige and status within the society and it has become a subject of social differentiation and distinction among people [7]–[9].

On the other hand consumer capitalism has brought to the situation in which it has become possible to set price for almost everything that can be produced and consumed (the so called mercantilization of reality). When it comes to tourism it is evident that spaces, history and attractions as aspects of culture have been transformed into goods and placed on the tourism market. Tourism commodifies cultural values and assets of receptive communities and places them on the market as products to be sold and consumed. In this process of packaging and creating a recognisable tourism products and services local culture is trivialised and modified in order to meet tourists' tastes [10]. Culture commodified in such a way becomes devoid of its original character, meaning and authenticity and transformed into commodified attractions, spaces, gatherings and souvenirs provided only for tourists' consumption [11]. Commodification turns tourism destinations into the so called consumeristically structured spaces and tourists accept the role assigned to them by the tourism industry [6]. Such a commodification of space often results in the increased living costs and ghettoised forms of life, which in turn leads to the transformation of destinations into thematic parks and open-air museums (Venice, Barcelona, Dubrovnik...) devoid of authentic forms of social life and abandoned by residents. Tourism is the extension of the consumer society and it is impossible to escape it. In Venice it has become impossible to buy an authentic souvenir because it has become cheaper to manufacture it and import it from China. In Croatia for example once upon a time children used to sell shells from the Adriatic sea as souvenirs and today these shells have been imported from some other seas and oceans.



The notion that it is necessary to alter the awareness about the importance of the authenticity of local souvenirs has been present in the public discourse for the last twenty years. The same is also true for the local gastronomy but it is still very hard to come across authentic, original souvenirs or restaurants offering authentic meals. There is a mushrooming of fast-food facilities, pizzerias, fast and easy digestible food, seasonal restaurants with Patagonian squid on the menu all over Croatian coast. If you go for a walk along a waterfront, you will not experience the real life of a destination because the majority of tourist attractions and the offer of excursions, daily trips and tours is usually packed in the so called front regions [11]. Those who would like to experience and have a taste of a destination's real life should get off the beaten path and move away from main tourist streets into the so called back regions in order to see how domestic population really lives and runs after their daily duties and obligations. Unfortunately, authentic life, local culture and traditions have been removed from the front regions dominated by economic imperatives.

Next section elaborates the complex notion of the changing nature of tourism by briefly analysing some prominent features of the contemporary Croatian tourism offer bringing to the forefront the issue of authenticity.

### 3 TOURISM AS COMMERCIALIZED HOSPITALITY

In destinations dependable upon tourism the imperative to earn a living from tourism is the strongest motivation. Different cultural forms (carnivals, arts, crafts, religious events and historical re-enactments) have been altered as a consequence of commodification and very often trivialised and mass produced for the needs of the tourism market. In such a process, destinations tend to neglect all traditional aspects of their own culture and ways of life in order to obtain as much money as possible from tourists and that is why cultural events have been transformed into staged spectacles devoid of any cultural meaning [12]. It is a part of the so called commercialized hospitality which has been turned into servility because the guest–host relationship is dominated by the urge of the hosts to attain as much profit as possible and in this way the potential friendship has been turned into a business venture [13].

The race for profit is ruthless and it is the main motivation behind contemporary tourism development. However, everything does not have to look that bleak and commodification does not necessarily have to dilute local culture. There are many theorists [14], [15] who think that the commodification of material culture for the purposes of tourism consumption, that is, the trivialisation of cultural events, festivals, artisan fairs, gastronomy, thematic parks and staging of local traditional culture, etc. does not necessarily have to be a negative phenomenon and that it may contribute to the raise of awareness of the local population about the value and importance of their own culture and its preservation. Obviously, this phenomenon may have positive effects, however, the issue of authenticity has to be taken into account at this point as well. When it comes to Croatian coast it could be said that besides the dominant existential impacts, tourism has definitely contributed to the raise of awareness of the local population about the importance of their own culture and heritage in the sense that the inherited property should not be sold but renovated and this is a positive trend. However, the way in which this property is renovated is problematic. Modern architecture dominates and there is a proliferation of swimming pools in order to meet tourists' tastes and preferences and the villages have been turned into thematic parks lacking permanent residents during winter months and during the off season. The host and his way of life have been excluded from that kind of offer and in long term this leads to depopulation of rural areas and the extinction of authentic life on account of tourism development. In Croatia this kind of offer has already outgrown the demand and to be honest a swimming pool does not prolong the tourist season beyond summer months. A vineyard or a garden could represent an



additional value in Croatian tourism as well. Instead of a swimming pool guests could be offered home grown food, preserved nature, the scent of freshly mowed grass, the sound of silence, authentic and organic food, they could taste local cuisine and become familiar with domestic animals. Emotions should be delivered to tourists and they should indulge in local traditions and local specialities and that is why it has become indispensable to work on the raise of awareness and change of local people's mentality. It could be the right path to a more efficient tourism valorisation of the continental part of Croatia and in this way the development of tourism could contribute to diminishing the differences between underdeveloped interior of the country and developed coastline.

Croatian tourism today has been suffering from low levels of loyalty with fewer tourists coming back to a destination already visited sometime before. People do not come because of accommodation facilities but because of natural beauties and the quality of tourism offer. Croatia is and will certainly continue to be sun and sea holiday destination and it should not be ashamed of it. However, beyond economic, tourism must be more versatile and richer in content in order to provide visitors with productive, useful, cultural and creative holidays and enable them to fulfil their creative skills and interests and enhance their personality [16]. Therefore, it is necessary to develop special interest tourism in order to improve and enrich mass tourism, to extend its structure and offer. Despite of all its obstacles and difficulties tourism has a chance to contribute to a balanced regional development and has a huge potential to bridge regional economic inequalities. It is certainly very difficult and time consuming to achieve this goal, however, without more active inclusion of state and local authorities its achievement may even become unattainable.

Before the concluding remarks the nature of large-scale tourism development is debated in the next two sections in order to reveal the most common changes in a destination's economic and social structure as a consequence of over-dependence on tourism.

#### 4 TOURISM AS NEO-COLONIALISM

In spite of all the above mentioned, from the developmental point of view it could be concluded that the massive character, mobility and geographical diffusion are the most valuable features of contemporary tourism, whilst its seasonality, that is, its concentration in space and time are its main negative features and the main cause of massivity and uniformity of tourist traffic [16]. Mass tourism has become the dominant form of development after 1950s everywhere in the world. In the context of such a development and owing to the already mentioned mercantilization of reality (everything is on sale in the tourism market) everything is planned in advance, there is no spontaneity and everything is subjected to the economic viability of tourism [15].

Economically developed countries are the main generators of tourist arrivals accounting for the biggest number of tourists. In such circumstances the development of tourism is under the control and influence of foreign investors and foreign capital draining out almost all income generated from tourism (money leakage). In the accommodation sector, for example, French Accor group manages and owns more than half a million hotel rooms worldwide whilst Marriot International over 1.1 million rooms [17]. Such a development does not meet the interests of the local community and it is totally adapted to suit tourists' needs. This is particularly marked in developing countries but even Mediterranean destinations similar to Croatia, such as Spain and Greece have, in a sense, become colonised by their northern European neighbours during the summer months with their economies greatly dependent on tourism income [18]. In any case, there is always some sort of economic dependency present at all levels of the development of tourism always resulting in a certain degree of inequality between local people and tourists.



Within the framework of tourist-host relationship the incoming culture is superior in every possible aspect in which process the economic aspect is mostly pronounced. The quantity of this superiority is dependable upon the so called cultural distance, that is, the similarities or differences between the tourist and the host [19]. These differences are most obvious in smaller destinations giving rise to huge differences in the standard of living and lifestyles between the tourist and the host and are less obvious in big, metropolitan centres where the similarities between the tourist and the host are bigger. The feeling of inferiority present in the members of the local community is maybe most obvious when it comes to people employed in low wage jobs in tourism industry. Their job is to be always at tourists' disposal resulting in feelings of antagonism, intolerance and envy towards tourists as a consequence of the so called demonstration effect, a process in which the members of the local community try to imitate the lifestyle and purchasing power of incoming tourists [20]. Local people become aware of tourists' affluence usually beyond their reach and they want to achieve a similar level of affluence for themselves. Although, at a basic level, this demonstration effect results in the introduction of alien values and Western ways of life into relatively traditional societies and may lead to increasing polarisation between the older and younger generations, its wider social implications should not be underestimated. Tourism changes the economic and social structure not only of underdeveloped or developing countries but of developed countries as well. The demonstration effect contributes to the abandonment of agricultural production and local arts and traditional crafts because people think that tourism is the easiest way to make money and earn a living. In such circumstances the tourist is not interested in the interaction with local people and local culture and this sort of tourism development inevitably leads to the violation of social balance and does not promote international peace and understanding as a basis for reaching a greater level of respect and confidence among all the peoples of the world [21].

In the last fifty years the development of mass tourism has brought to the changes in the social structure of host societies and instead of the reasonable small-scale tourism development, we bear witness to tourism development beyond any control, which represents a threat to a destination's economic, physical and social carrying capacity [22]. As soon as the threshold of local people's tolerance is exceeded, which has become the case in Croatia in the last few years, the attitude of the local community towards tourism development becomes antagonistic. According to a recent survey the town of Split, at the Croatian south coast, has become infamous regarding the degree of intolerance towards tourists and tourism. 20% of its citizens have expressed their wish to be able to live in a real town as it once was, not in a tourist destination into which it has been turned today [23]. When local people believe and feel that their everyday life has become difficult to conduct on account of overtourism, tourism becomes a problem. Local people should be involved in the tourism development and the creation of the tourism offer as well as in destination branding. The members of the local community must benefit from tourism development and it should be directed towards the improvement of the quality of life of the local population. No wonder that a negative attitude towards tourists has been evoked in local population, especially in those people who have no direct economic benefit from such a tourism development. Popular destinations like Barcelona or Venice are no exception to his rule. Venice has announced the introduction of the sale of entrance tickets, citizens have established their own associations, they have been throwing stones at buses, demonstrating during the arrival of cruisers into the port, etc. All these problems are linked with the endangerment of the carrying capacity of space, that is, the maximum number of person who may dwell in an area without ruining the quality of life in that particular area. Naturally, tourists feel uncomfortable in such circumstances as well. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a balance between the tourism infrastructure and a



growing number of tourist arrivals. It is the only path to a balanced tourism development. Reasonable and balanced contact between tourists and hosts is possible only in cases when the local community retains the control over tourism development, in which process all the members of local community, not only those who directly benefit from tourism, should be involved in tourism planning, management and development [19].

Unfortunately, the problems have been swept under the mat or randomly dealt with not only in Croatia but elsewhere as well. Under such circumstances, balanced and harmonious tourist-host relationships are likely to occur only when the tourism product is small scale, locally owned and controlled, and not the major source of revenue and employment for the local community. When hosts become dependent on tourists and outside organisations their way of life and local culture are turned into a commodity. The profits of tour operators and other organisations acquired in receptive destinations represent a form of exploitation and tourists and tourism industry are turned into the exploiters of local culture, resources, attractions and the whole way of life of the local community [22]. Croatia is in desperate need of small-scale tourism, which does not consume but properly valorises its space and resources and brings better quality of life to the local people without endangering traditions, customs and a demographic structure of the territory.

## 5 TOURISM AS THE ONLY FORM OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Tourism is a low profit industry because it takes long to obtain a return from an investment into tourism industry and it brings less added value, especially when it comes to tourism development in underdeveloped and developing countries. In these destinations, and primarily because of their underdevelopment, tourism represents an ideal type of economic development and in most cases tourism is a relatively new activity which in short time has acquired big proportions resulting in high pressure on local infrastructure and resources. In such circumstances local producers and suppliers, agricultural and food industry cannot cope with the increase in demand for their products and services, which have to be imported. Another issue is that it is more lucrative to import than to manufacture because imported goods are cheaper on account of the emergence of the global market and the processes of liberalisation and deregulation, especially in countries like Croatia, where the government fails to protect local production and distribution. Besides, interest and influential lobby and political groups make considerable amounts of money out of food import. Such anomalies are likely to happen anywhere if the intensity of tourism growth reaches high levels. It is unbelievable that we have failed to realise the fatality of nation's economic dependence on tourism. Even popular Mediterranean tourist countries like Spain, Greece and Italy are faced with different problems on account of this dependency, namely, erosion of the social fabric, higher crime rates, waste disposal problems, water supply problems, electric power supply problems, chaos and traffic jams, uncontrolled exploitation of natural and other resources, import of foreign labour as well as economic crises of bigger or lesser intensity. According to the Croatian Tourist Board 92,000 people are currently employed in tourism industry in Croatia [3]. Although this figure is rather low, Croatia is one of rare tourist countries with 116,000 unemployed people suffering from a dramatic lack of domestic labour.

The main point is that tourism is not enough and Croatia must not build its competitiveness solely on tourism. According to the UNWTO [1] tourism industry accounted for 19.6% of the Croatian gross domestic product in 2018, making Croatia vulnerable to every anomaly in the market, which can result in fatal consequences for the state budget. At the same time this is a proof that Croatia has ruined its own industry and food production, so that tourists visiting Croatia consume imported goods and agricultural products. Tourism, for example, accounts for 1.1% of the German gross domestic product, 1.6% of the Great Britain's gross domestic



product, 1.9% of the French gross domestic product, 2.2% of the Italian gross domestic product, 4.7% of the Spanish gross domestic product, 4.9% of the Austrian gross domestic product and 5.9% of the Slovenian gross domestic product. Besides Croatia, Malta with 14% and Cyprus with 12.8% have the biggest share of tourism in the national gross domestic product. It means that other sectors of economy should be developed as well. Croatia shall become an economically developed country when the share of tourism in GDP falls below 5%. In economically developed countries tourism is a secondary activity, the cherry on top of the cake. Obviously, Croatia has not learned anything from the process of postindustrialisation. Traditional industry was ruined and new industries and economic activities have not been developed so far.

Tourism alone is not enough and that the country's competitiveness may not be grounded only in tourism and traditional industries. Country's sustainable development should be based on new technologies, software production, creative industries with high added value, energetics and knowledge and creative economy in general and Croatia should adapt to new trends and new age as soon as possible.

## 6 CONCLUSION

On account of more intensive technological development, improvement of the means of transport and the establishment of the global travelling infrastructure, the development of new media and information and communication technologies, the rise in the standard of living and the increase of free time, tourism has been rapidly expanding today. Technological advancement and access to information has accelerated the globalisation of the tourism industry and enabled greater flexibility for individual consumers, which has contributed to the creation of new needs and the growth of personalised and customised products and services and brought to the development of new types of tourism, which in most cases may not substitute, but may enrich the already existing forms of tourism [16].

Paradoxically, at the same time this type of tourism development has also lead to a further expansion of mass tourism and it has strengthen the effects of deregulation of the air transport, package arrangements and massive production of services. In other words, regardless of the greater liberalisation of the air transport, the increase and development of new travel services (on-line reservations, on-line financial transactions etc.) the majority of tourists are still conventional or mass tourists visiting popular destinations and staying in conventional accommodation facilities and participating in usual activities during leisure time. Majority of them are still buying their holidays from tourist agencies, tour operators and through package arrangements. Therefore, tourism, to the greater part, is still conventional, massive and it will remain so in future as well, although the trends in conducting leisure and the choice of destinations constantly change.

Tourism should be liberated from commercial chains and it should be protected against the imperatives of the consumer society and tailored to fit men and human measure as soon as possible. Tourism should include those entrepreneurs, citizens, families who have a long-term interest and who plan to be inherited by the children of their children. Croatia has many capable and educated people, however, we bear witness to the brain-drain and people leave the country in search of better life and also because of pessimism, depression, hopelessness, and because our society does not offer a vision of better future. Croatia is in urgent need of the change in mentality and greater responsibility of the state and its institutions. The government must establish a legislative framework, create a strategy and encourage reforms and changes. The main point is that tourism alone is not enough and that the country's competitiveness may not be grounded only in tourism and traditional industries. The country's sustainable development should be based on new technologies, software





production, creative industries with high added value, energetics and knowledge and creative economy in general and Croatia should adapt to new trends and new age as soon as possible. If not Croatia will face an almost dystopian vision of future in which tourism will continue to be the main branch of economy and Croatia will become a country of underpaid seasonal labour force performing precarious work.

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