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Europe Made Billions from Tourists. Now It's Turning Them Away

By Lisa Abend/Venice

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Bonazzon [….] an artist who paints and sells watercolors from an easel set up near San Marco Square […] readily agrees that tourism is killing his hometown.

Yet when he heard that Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro had, in the run-up to a busy weekend at the beginning of May, installed checkpoints intended to block arriving visitors from especially crowded thoroughfares (while allowing locals through), Bonazzon was dismayed. "Yes, they should control the tourists," he says. "But they shouldn't close Venice. We're a city, not a theme park."

That's a refrain echoing in a growing number of European cities. The neoclassical gems that once made up the grand tour have been stops on package tours since the 19th century. But it's only over the past decade or so that the number of travelers to these and other must-see destinations risks subsuming the places. Around 87 million tourists visited France in 2017, breaking records; 58.3 million went to Italy; and even the tiny Netherlands received 17.9 million visitors. […]

With tourism in 2018 expected to surpass previous records, frustration in Europe is growing. This past spring witnessed antitourism demonstrations in many cities throughout Europe. On July 14, demonstrators in Mallorca, Spain, conducting a "summer of action" greeted passengers at the airport with signs reading tourism kills Mallorca.

Now, local governments are trying to curb or at least channel the surges that clog streets, diminish housing supplies, pollute waters, turn markets and monuments into no-go zones, and generally make life miserable for residents. Yet almost all of them are learning that it can be far more difficult to stem the tourist hordes than it was to attract them in the first place.

The reasons for this modern explosion in tourism are nearly as numerous as the guys selling selfie sticks in Piazza Navona. Low-cost airlines like easyJet, Ryanair and Vueling expanded dramatically in the 2000s, with competitive ticket prices driving up passenger numbers. From 2008 to 2016, the cruise-ship industry in Europe exploded, growing by 49%. Airbnb, which launched in 2008, made accommodations less expensive. Rising prosperity in countries like China and India has turned their burgeoning middle classes into avid travelers. Even climate change plays a role, as warmer temperatures extend summer seasons and open up previously inaccessible areas.