



## **Our view: Destinations that were overcrowded have a choice to make**

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20 April 2020 by Mark Williams

When travel resumes, will economic needs always outweigh environmental gains, asks C&IT's associate editor Mark Williams.



*A boat makes its way along the empty canals of Venice*

If there is any silver lining at all to the disruption and economic chaos caused by coronavirus, it might be an environmental one.

Less than two weeks into Italy's lockdown and pictures were starting to appear of wildlife returning to Venice. Fish were returning to the canals which are no longer churned up by an endless procession of motorboats and gondolas. Cormorants had returned to try and catch those fish.

Many parts of India are breathing the cleanest air they've experienced in more than 30 years, making blue skies visible during the day and stars visible at night.

Global nitrogen dioxide levels have dropped dramatically, as fewer fossil fuels are being burned by factories, airplanes and cars. In the UK, air pollution levels have dropped by 60% in some places compared to the same time last year

But will a destination like Venice, with an economy that depends on overseas visitors coming for business and leisure, really be that concerned about the environmental benefits? I tend to think the bigger concern will be the empty pavements, hotels and convention centres.

It's all very well saying that certain destinations could use this enforced visitor freeze as an opportunity to sort out their overcrowding problems but that would ignore the horrendous economic impact that COVID-19 is having. Tourism-based economies must be crying out for lockdowns and travel restrictions to end as soon as is safely possible.

However, some destinations had already started tackling their overcrowding problems, long before coronavirus brought travel to a shuddering halt.

"Machu Picchu in Peru has already limited tourists because of the damage that they were causing. And Maya Bay in Thailand or Boracay in the Philippines were closed completely," says Abena Poku-Awuah, CEO of sustainable event specialists Legacy.

"Destinations will need a unique marketing proposition to encourage their visitors to return and I think some will use the return of nature as a selling point. Japan and Thailand already offer incentives to MICE planners who meet their sustainability criteria," adds Poku-Awuah.





### *Machu Pichu in Peru*

In September last year I spoke to Professor Dimitrios Buhalis at the World Tourism Conference in Kuala Lumpur. At the time, the word 'overtourism' was being thrown around a lot but it was his belief that there is no such thing. "Overcrowding is a result of bad planning and bad management," he said.

He argued that national and local authorities could do more to manage the flow of people to their destinations. Methods of achieving that included charging more to visit certain hotspots or clever use of marketing to get people to visit the lesser-known places.

Copenhagen is one place I can think of that's already doing this – encouraging people to explore all corners of the city and not just the colourful harbour Nyhavn and the statue of the Little Mermaid.

After coronavirus subsides and the world gets back to something approaching 'normal' (whatever that will look like), destinations such as Venice have a choice to make. Get

back to business as usual and welcome as many visitors as possible or take a more measured approach, retaining some of the environmental gains of this current situation.

On one side, you have the idealist, environmentalist argument for limiting visitors and on the other side you have the more pragmatic, economic view that destinations are full of businesses with employees who need to work, earn money and put food on the table.

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