

# The World and the tourism after Covid-19



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Humanity, as a whole, is experiencing probably the most extraordinary moment of its entire existence. If any historian wants to refute this statement, he/she will certainly not find any other moment in the history of mankind when, on a global level, all over the world at the same time, the daily lives of people of all nations have been suddenly interrupted, discontinued, broken, put in brackets and without a definite date for a return to normality. In fact, the very concept of normality is seriously shaken, challenged, since even before Covid-19 came on the scene, there was already almost a consensus in the world that the dominant way of life of societies in the 21st century will have to change radically if we are to ensure that our children and grandchildren can continue to live on this planet.

The search for a "new normal", the definition of new references for everyday life in the post-Covid-19 era is on the agenda, and this text intends to make a humble contribution to this reflection, being a specific contribution from someone who is used to look at the World from the perspective of Tourism. It is curious to note that the very essence of tourism is rooted in the desire to change life, to get out of normality, being the tourist trip in its essence – even if corrupted by market relations – the expression of an existential search for a different world.

As the late Rachid Amirou, an eminent French sociologist of tourism who died prematurely from cancer in 2010, taught, we must understand tourism from its very essence before describing its multiple practices, types and forms. If

we really consider its essence, we are led to conclude that tourism, in whatever form, is an essential part of the broader process of searching for meaning: a search for oneself, with others and elsewhere. And in terms of procedures this search for meaning is embodied in a triple simultaneous change: geographical change (spatial mobility, change of scenery or place), societal change (new sociabilities and other social roles) and existential change (escape from alienation, search for extraordinary, more genuine and regenerating experiences). And let us not be deceived by appearances: it is not in spatial mobility (the journey itself) that the central knot of the process is found, on the contrary: both the journey and the sociabilities during the journey are only propitiating or facilitating elements of such an extraordinary experience that the tourist aspires to live and that he does not always obtain, due to the system of alienated consumption that characterizes much of the tourist industry.

In short, tourism – like any other human activity – is a victim of the same trap: it progresses and modernizes under the implicit (and explicit) promise of providing a better level of well-being to citizens, promising and selling them the dream of happiness, and inexorably involving them in the diaphanous and illusory cloak of market relations, supremely managed by an omniscient neoliberal mind, and plunging them into a system of consumption where only the most alienated cannot discern fraud and deception.

And to deal with the unease caused by the use of this great trap, a “vaccine” has been invented that goes by the name of “sustainable development”. Just as priests bring spiritual comfort to those condemned to death, so heralds of sustainable development render a similar service of spiritual comfort to less corrupt consciences, placating feelings of guilt and hiding demons.

Don't get me wrong: far be it from me to question the importance of scientific production and the excellent work it has done by countless institutions that spare no effort to ensure that companies and states adopt good practices and models of sustainable development! On the contrary, what I am critical of is the unwise and often dishonest use of the concept of sustainability, which has become a panacea and justification for everything. In the case of tourism, for example, even the most harmful practices tend to be introduced under the quasihypnotic argument of sustainability. And since

there is no serious monitoring of the impacts of tourism (no country, city or region actually monitors tourism effectively, efficiently and continuously), anyone can claim that their harmful practices contribute to sustainability, because they know that they will be convincing by using the techniques of demagoguery with mastery. In the absence of objective criteria and an efficient monitoring system with appropriate indicators, the logic of anything goes, "blessed is the one-eyed person in the land of the blind".

Curiously, in the French language, the choice of the terms "durabilité" and "développement durable" predominated, rather than options similar to those of other European languages: "soutenabilité" and "développement soutenable". And it makes perfect sense, development can only be sustainable if it is based on long-term planning and if it is anchored in practices that will last for the benefit of future generations. The neo-liberal economy is vampiric and predatory, because it is interested in short-term profit, which generates the impoverishment of communities that participate in wealth production. And when profitability ratios reach a certain minimum threshold, they transfer business to other, more attractive areas of the world. Therefore, from the development point of view, the short term is harmful, and this is why sustainability has to integrate in itself the concern for the well-being of future generations, that is, the long term.

Returning to the subject of this reflection, it is clear that even before the sudden emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, we all knew that the world as a whole – that is, the whole of human society at a global level – was not evolving according to a logic of sustainability. Nevertheless, the international agreements in the light of which many governments have made demanding commitments to reduce CO2 emissions in an attempt to stop climate change and the depletion of the ozone layer, the truth is that the balance is still clearly tipped in the opposite direction: the weapons race is rampant, the risk of nuclear war is no less than it was during the Cold War; the Amazon is at the mercy of the large forestry and agricultural corporations, and with its devastation it is the largest lung on the planet that could collapse; the ecological footprint of human action is constantly increasing, no matter how many experts warn of the consequences of an unsustainable way of life, biodiversity has been drastically reduced in many ecosystems of the world. In short, the human development model has proved to be unsustainable and

weird, and the current Covid-19 pandemic is only a corollary of this insane model.

The same kind of contradictory trends can be found in the field of tourism. On the one hand, in the last 20 – 30 years, the number of organisations, companies and managing bodies of tourist destinations interested in implementing new practices, more in line with the need to reduce the ecological footprint of tourism, focusing on more efficient and sustainable solutions, has increased exponentially. Examples of this are the growing investment in the valorisation of endogenous resources, the training of craftsmen and other local producers, the promotion of new models of creative tourism, the investment in nature tourism, geoparks, community-based tourism that offers genuine experiences, as well as the development of new smartphone applications for niche tourism products. In Portugal, as certainly in many other countries, there are countless success stories that could be mentioned. And this great wave of innovation tends to pulverize territories, making them more creative, offering a denser and more diversified network of experiences. And all this profusion of niche and small-scale offers is well suited to the motivations of the new tourist profile, which has a high digital skills, is autonomous, avoids the traditional travel agency, reserves local accommodation via Airbnb or similar, and likes to get involved in small localities not very touristy.

At the same time, the logic of mass tourism continues to thrive. Cruise ships have grown in size, and tens of thousands of cruise tourists are launched every morning in the ports of Barcelona, Dubrovnik, Venice, Lisbon or Funchal. In many European cities the effects of accelerated tourism and so-called overtourism are easily detectable. The Balearic-Barcelona-Paris axis concentrates more than 30% of all tourism in Europe. For an overview of the harmful effects of mass tourism, I recommend watching the documentary "Overbooking" on tourism in Mallorca, whose synopsis is quite clear: *"What was once the "Island of Calm" is now on the verge of collapse. Multiple alarm bells are starting to ring. Is this model of tourism sustainable? Could Mallorca become a reference for so many other places suffering from the same problem?"*

Whether they are ships full of tourists like tinned sardines, megapolis by the sea, or the gentrified historic districts of large cities, this is a tourism model that works in a vicious cycle and without any possibility of regeneration. Therefore, the only thing that the big tourism corporations are able to do is to reproduce this same model in still virgin places, whenever the destinations they have helped to degenerate have already reached high levels of saturation, to the point of losing their attractiveness to the less wealthy tourists.

And these two trends (small-scale or “human-scale” tourism versus large-scale “industrial” tourism) have evolved in parallel. And I want to believe that the first trend may become even stronger when world societies return to the (almost) ordinary life of post-Covid-19. I think that the swan song of global tourism is already beginning to be heard. One of the signs of this decline happened on September 22, 2019, when the world was surprised by the bankruptcy of tour operator Thomas Cook... I dare say that this was a historic moment in the evolution of tourism, which marks the end of a colossus of the golden days of mass tourism that was unable to evolve and adapt to the digital age. The digitalisation of the tourist economy has opened up multiple possibilities for small entrepreneurs who risk innovating and, on the other hand, it has made it possible for customers to have greater autonomy. On the same day that the world heard about Thomas Cook’s bankruptcy, I met a couple of New Zealanders who traveled from their country to Castro Verde (a small village in Alentejo, Portugal) with the exclusive purpose of dedicating themselves to the activity of birdwatching. I found this coincidence curious, which clearly shows that just like the world, tourism also advances at different speeds. And speaking of speed, one of the consequences of the current pandemic will probably be a significant slowdown in travel to long distance areas and a greater attachment to tourist destinations in greater proximity. After all, it will not be in vain that tourism enters human history as the main diffuser of a pandemic...

**The day-after and the new S-S-S trilogy of tourism: Slow, Smart, Small**

From the day the WHO declared the state of a pandemic (March 11) until today only one month has passed. And in this short period there have been two distinct moments in the communication strategies of tourist destination management organizations and large private corporations.

In the first moment, there was a massive diffusion of "crisis messages", with the organizations assuming a sober and responsible attitude. At this first moment, which we designate as a phase of "social responsibility", the communications of the tourism industry corroborated the appeals of national health organizations. The slogan "Stay at home" was the call that was repeatedly heard in that short but surprising period.

However, from the last week of March and up to the present, we have moved on to the "phase of proselytism". It's time to heal the wounds and prepare a new onslaught, in a relentless struggle to restore the lost tourist flows, in the expectation that Day-After will return to the way it was before... And it is understandable that very biased news is spreading, like the one I will summarize here and which has the following title: "Cruise ship bookings for 2021 are already on the rise despite multiple COVID-19 outbreaks" (Business Inside Australia, April 13). This is clearly a sponsored news item that aims to impress the fools by surprise, and which is summarized in 4 clear ideas (literal quote):

1. "Despite multiple outbreaks of COVID-19 on cruise ships in 2020, bookings for cruises are already on the rise of 2021, according to multiple reports."
2. "In the past 45 days – as multiple cruise ships had serious COVID-19 outbreaks onboard – the cruise booking site CruiseCompete.com saw a 40% increase in its bookings for 2021 over its 2019 bookings."
3. "A recent report from UBS also found that 76% of the people who had a cancelled cruise in 2020 have chosen to accept credit towards a future cruise in 2021 as opposed to 24% who accepted a refund."
4. "The loyalty of many cruise lines' customer base and the rise in bookings even in the midst of a pandemic show a sliver of hope for an embattled industry"

The last topic of the news is a lament or an echo of the swan song ("consumer loyalty... shows a glimmer of hope for an industry in crisis"), which reminds me of the Titanic orchestra that did not stop playing until the ship sank completely. The show must go on, until the game will over by crash...

But let's not be naive: cruise companies will do everything to fill the ships as soon as possible, and they will not lack customers (it all depends, of course, on price and other elements of the marketing-mix). However, we cannot ignore the other side of the coin: even before the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the residents of Europe's major port cities were already organising themselves under the anti-tourism flag, and hostile attitudes towards cruise tourism were increasingly common. And these demonstrations have made the following unsophisticated reality clear: tourism is now one of the themes of the "ideological basket", becoming inseparable from environmental issues, climate change, the gentrification of historic centres... and to which the theme of health is now added.

Traditionally, tourism was not part of the party political agenda, and the anti-tourism ideology in Europe was purely marginal. But the scenario has changed in recent years. Before the pandemic, social movements against so-called "overtourism" were already making their voices heard. What will it be like in the future?... If the "new normal" is merely a repetition of the "old normal", I have no doubt that the less sustainable forms of tourism will face fierce opposition from a growing number of residents of historic neighbourhoods, supported by many organisations and interest groups of various ideological hues.

In this context, the number of apologists for less intrusive, more environmentally friendly and less wasteful tourism in terms of energy consumption will increase. And there will be no need to invent new concepts, as so-called slow tourism has been advocated for over a decade.

The concept of slow tourism is often considered as a more sustainable form of tourism, since it consists of travelling shorter distances, with less energy expenditure and less pollution (Oh, Assaf & Baloglu, 2014). And, as Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) state, it is not just about exchanging distant

destinations for nearby ones, as it encompasses a series of space-time practices, more immersive experiences ethically based on the desire for more genuine relationships with others (Fullagar, Markwell and Wilson 2012). Consequently, more than a mere environmental attitude, beneficial in terms of environmental sustainability, slow tourism consists of a new practice of time and space that provides more personal satisfaction and more well-being (Parkins and Craig 2009), implying a more harmonious and deeper relationship with local communities. Therefore, as Honore (2004) states, slow tourism can be defined as the type of tourism that allows to create real and meaningful relationships with people, places, culture, gastronomy, heritage and the environment.

## Small scale tourism for more meaningful experiences

It is very likely that on the day-after the Covid-19 crisis, tourism organizations that know how to create the right conditions for more significant experiences will benefit from this new trend, instead of the other ones which try get tourists to visit all the "must-see" tourist spots in a short period of time.

A good atmosphere instead of a good itinerary. Genuine sociability and simplicity instead of searching for status and sophistication. From this point of view, destinations that provide more variety and quality in the same place will be rewarded, as this option will be more beneficial both to the environment, to the local community and to the visitor himself.

The consequences will be longer stays in more familiar places, shorter and less frequent trips, a more widespread use of eco-efficient transport and more immersive experiences, where the small details are more important. However, contrary to what the most purist heralds believed a decade ago, the new slow tourist will not dispense with the use of technologies, since smartphone applications are today indispensable allies of both the supply and the demand for quality in destinations.

In addition to the new "3 s" formula (Slow, Smart & Small) which symbolizes the three pillars of the new tourism, we must add what, in my opinion, constitutes the essence of tourism, to which we referred at the beginning of



this essay: the search for meaning. The search for meaning corresponds to an intimate drive that translates into a predilection for more authentic, more genuine experiences, more relaxed sociability, a preference for creative activities and a search for contexts that foster the manifestation of spirituality.

## The emptiness of the tourist experience as the antipode of the search for meaning

All this reflection does not imply an apology for so-called "staycation". No! Tourism will remain essential. What we are advocating is the emergence of a new collective consciousness that frees citizens from a certain tourist compulsion that forces them to comply, during their holidays, with the dictates of the productivist imaginary: "*We have already done Thailand and Laos, now we are going to Vietnam before passing through Hong Kong, back to Europe?*" This compulsiveness to perform tourist obligations tends to empty the sense of experience, reducing it to the minimal dimension of collectionism: collecting tourist destinations, collecting stamps in the passport... I recall in this respect a situation I witnessed during Expo98 in Lisbon, which eloquently describes the emptiness of tourist experiences based on productivist compulsiveness. An Expo is a kind of miniature world in which each country is represented with its national pavilion. That is why the Expo98 administration made available to visitors a passport, which could be stamped on all the national pavilions. Obtaining stamps in the passport quickly became the main pastime for visitors to the Expo, so that people queued outside each pavilion to be able to stamp their passport. As a result, most visitors to the Expo simply entered the pavilions to get one more stamp. In other words, filling the passport with stamps from the numerous countries became the main (perhaps the only) reason to visit the pavilions. I had the opportunity to ask a neighbor who showed me the passport of Expo98 full of stamps: "*Which were the national exhibitions that you liked the most?*" And the answer was great: "*None... I only went there for the weekend, and I only entered the pavilions to stamp my passport!*"

This case of stamps is a kind of metaphor that perfectly describes to what extent the tourist experience can be devoid of meaning, making the tourist an automaton concerned only with being able to show that "he/she was there

too". In fact, it is precisely this emptiness of the experience that is typically observed in tourists that are only focused on being photographed in front of as many monuments as possible. And in the age of the selfies, the spiral of alienation has reached even higher levels.

What is the alternative to this vicious cycle of the productivist imaginary that compulsively forces us to perform the tasks of the "what do do" series? The answer is quite simple: any human being needs, even if only for reasons of mental health, to perform a detox of the mind, and this is only achieved through the path of existential authenticity, where the deep sense does not depend on the "where", but only on the "how".

Based on my personal experience, as tourism professor, researcher and tourism film festival organizer, I believe that, on the day-after of Covid-19, the number of those who have managed to free themselves from the alienating emptiness of tourist collecionism will be much higher.

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