

Sustainable Urban Tourism: A Decalogue

Who hasn't been — or at least longed to be — a tourist at some point in their life? In our hyperconnected world, immersed in images and stimuli, discovering new places, cultures and landscapes is a universal aspiration. Recognizing this impulse to explore diverse environments and human ecosystems, some cities in the latter half of the 20th century embraced tourism strategically, leveraging identity and heritage to revitalize neglected areas and stimulate economic development.

Since then, tourism — actively nurtured by cities, regions and nations — has grown and evolved in myriad ways across the globe. Despite criticisms regarding its impact on landscapes, particularly in coastal destinations, tourism remains highly sought after. Consider this: in 1950, there were 25 million international arrivals worldwide; by 2030, that number is projected to reach 1.8 billion — an increase of more than 7,000% (UN Tourism). With shifting lifestyles, the rise of digital nomads and the simple fact that people travel at some point in their lives, this phenomenon shows no signs of slowing.

Yet tourism is not without challenges. When it places pressure on cities — altering local identity, daily life, straining the balance of public space and access to housing and the foundations of local economies — it becomes evident that urban management and tourism development must advance hand in hand. Tourism is no longer merely an economic opportunity; it is a social and cultural force that must be thoughtfully integrated into the urban agenda if we want to safeguard past achievements and future wellbeing.

Guided by this understanding, we share ten principles that shape our vision and projects in what urban tourism should be. For us, urban tourism should not only be sustainable and resilient, but regenerative: fostering cultural understanding, safeguarding local identity and opportunities, supporting research and biodiversity and enabling economies to flourish and adapt over time. These ten points can help cities move toward that horizon, ultimately benefiting everyone — whether as visitors or as residents.

1 Tourism as a catalyst, not an end

It may seem obvious, but it is fundamental, which is why we place it first: tourism should serve as a catalyst for local wellbeing, social cohesion and sustainable urban development — not as a goal in itself.

Its success must be measured by its contribution to these broader objectives, not solely by economic gain.



Park Güell, one of Barcelona's most overcrowded areas, now has a plan to preserve neighborhood life.



Venice, with 51,000 residents in its historic center, received 6.3 million visitors in 2024.

2

Host communities at the heart

Urban sustainable tourism must generate tangible, positive benefits for local communities. In other words, if it fails to preserve residents' quality of life — environmentally, socially, culturally and economically — and obstructs their access to essentials such as housing, public services or public space, it cannot be considered legitimate or sustainable.

While this can be observed at the macro scale of major cities, it becomes most striking at the hyperlocal level: think of the crowds around the Trevi Fountain in Rome, the Gothic Quarter in Barcelona or the Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre, Paris — places where visitors outnumber residents at nearly every hour of the day. The contrast is even sharper in smaller, heavily visited towns, whose infrastructure is far from that of a capital: the picturesque Alpine village of Hallstatt in Austria, or Oia in Santorini, where throngs gather nightly to watch the sunset. And then there is Venice: 6.3 million tourists in 2024 (Osservatorio del Turismo Regionale Veneto Federato), packed into a historic center of just 51,000 residents. In other words, each resident was effectively 'hosting' over 100 visitors in their daily life.

As complex as it is, in all these places —and in any city — tourism can only develop in a truly sustainable, resilient and enriching way by putting communities at the center of decision-making and considering all the interconnected dimensions of urban life and the heterogeneity within cities.

To achieve this, many cities complement broad tourism management strategies with targeted measures for areas where visitor flows create overcrowding and make it difficult to maintain everyday life and community activities. Barcelona, for example, is already doing this: it has identified eight particularly critical High-Visitor Areas around landmarks such as the Sagrada Família and Park Güell, and has developed specific management plans in collaboration with all stakeholders—most importantly, the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Shape a clear, shared vision

Even though growing tourism adds an extra layer of complexity that no city can escape, one truth remains: cities have both the capacity and the responsibility to decide what they want from it. They **can define the type of tourism they wish to cultivate, the visitors and operators they aim to attract, and the value they seek to create**. Achieving this requires a **coherent, guiding framework** that maximizes benefits while avoiding unintended consequences — and it must be shaped collaboratively among all stakeholders, especially residents. **It may seem obvious, but it bears repeating: a shared vision starts with those who live in the city.**

Copenhagen provides a striking example of a city that aligns its tourism strategy with a broader, **crosscutting commitment to sustainability**. Strategic consistency informs the experiences offered, the audiences targeted and the behaviors and attitudes promoted among visitors. Sustainability is not just a policy goal — it is embedded in the very fabric of the city, extending into the tourism experience itself. **Initiatives such as CopenPay make this tangible:** visitors are rewarded with discounts or free drinks for choosing eco-friendly transport or participating in recycling programs, turning responsible choices into an engaging part of the city's culture.



Think long-term, act strategically

Short-term fixes may deliver quick wins, but they can erode a city's resilience over time. Tourism must be managed with foresight, **prioritizing long-term sustainability over reactive, piecemeal decisions**. By 2034, the sector is projected to generate \$16 trillion globally (World Travel & Tourism Council) — 11.4% of the world economy — highlighting just how **crucial careful, forward-looking planning is**.

In this era of rapid growth, cities must act decisively. They need a **clear vision** of what tourism should mean for them (as we just covered in point 3) and, even more importantly, must keep everyone aligned — from local communities to public and private actors — when planning the next steps. **Prioritizing actions, setting measurable goals, and learning from global best practices are essential**. Every decision should strengthen the city, support its residents, and safeguard its future — ensuring that the gains of today do not come at the expense of tomorrow.

Collaboration breaks barriers — and creates win-wins



Urban tourism does not exist in isolation; it intersects with numerous aspects of city life — housing, urban planning, public space management, local culture, infrastructure, mobility... **Consequently, it requires a holistic, coordinated approach.** Can cities plan mobility without understanding that high-traffic areas will need specific measures? Can housing affordability be addressed without considering the impact that the diversity of tourist accommodation — from traditional hotels to short-term rentals — has on the market? Can a city promote sustainable habits among its residents without accounting for the behavior of its visitors? In every case, **tourism presents complex challenges that demand integrated solutions.** Here, **breaking down traditional silos in governance allows public institutions, private stakeholders and local communities to share both ownership and responsibility.**

Sometimes, **solutions can be surprisingly simple.** In the Catalan top-beach destination of Lloret de Mar, for example, **we supported the development of a data-sharing framework**, making municipal data accessible to all stakeholders involved in tourism management and public services. This shift enabled the city — which receives 1 million visitors annually while having only 42,000 residents — to implement **sustainable solutions that benefit visitors, residents, and the local economy.** Ultimately, it is about creating win-win outcomes, isn't it?

6 Innovation grounded in evidence

We firmly believe that **tourism innovation**—as in any field—**must be guided by data, analysis and real-world insights.** Today, tools such as City Digital Twins or AI-driven platforms can support impact forecasting, informed decision-making and adaptability. But **before implementing innovative, disruptive solutions, cities must first understand the realities of tourism in their specific context.**

It all begins with careful, ongoing observation. Cities like Barcelona, Lisbon and Paris have long-established **tourism observatories that collect and analyze visitor flows and impacts**, providing the critical insights needed to guide sustainable urban planning and foster continuous improvement. It's simple: if you want to make things better, you have to be able to measure progress.

Protect local specificity — your city’s uniqueness

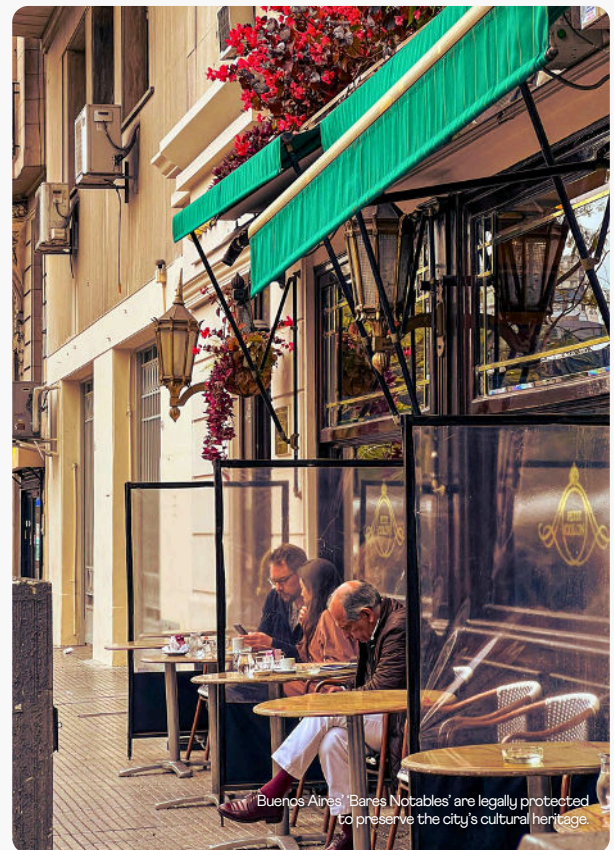
What happens when traditional shops and artisan workshops give way to a monoculture of souvenir stalls, local eateries are replaced by fast-food chains and entire apartment buildings are converted into short-term rentals? The answer is clear: **what was once unique and vibrant becomes utterly generic.**

A city’s character—its living heritage, traditions, and everyday rhythms—is at the heart of its appeal. After all, this is why we travel—and why we love living in or being from cities. **Tourism should, therefore, aim to protect and enhance that uniqueness and the dynamic mixed-use that define great neighborhoods,** rather than erode or commodify it.

A key challenge lies in the tension between short-term tourist rentals and access to affordable housing. According to a [European Commission study](#), livability is reshaped in complex, heterogeneous ways. In cities like Paris, Milan and Rome, neighborhoods with high shares of tourist rentals see **property values rise, local services shift toward visitors and affordable housing for residents shrink,** alongside concerns about various forms of displacement.

While solutions are context-dependent, sustainable urban tourism requires striking a balance: leveraging the economic benefits of visitors without compromising residents’ access to housing, services and everyday life.

Beyond housing, **even small measures can make a lasting difference in protecting a city’s identity.** Preserving traditional shop signs in Santiago de Compostela’s historic center, or legally safeguarding Buenos Aires’ ‘Bares Notables’—historic cafés that have nurtured the city’s bohemian spirit for over a century—illustrate how thoughtful action helps maintain the qualities that make cities distinctive, vibrant, and cherished by both residents and visitors.



Buenos Aires' 'Bares Notables' are legally protected to preserve the city's cultural heritage.

A genuine environmental commitment

Let’s be clear: **there is no sustainability without ecological integrity.** Tourism must respect local ecosystems, reduce its environmental footprint—from water use to waste management—and actively contribute to biodiversity and natural resource preservation.

Again, measuring impacts is crucial for implementing **effective solutions.** Valencia has pioneered this approach, developing a carbon footprint system that tracks emissions from hotels, transport hubs, and attractions, **becoming the first city in the world to certify the carbon footprint of its entire tourism sector.** Without such commitment, tourism cannot be genuinely sustainable.

Act at a metropolitan scale, spread the positive impacts



As with many urban activities, **decentralizing and de-seasonalizing tourism** helps minimize negative impacts. Planning at the metropolitan scale, with coordinated efforts to **redistribute demand across time and space**—from accommodations to sightseeing attractions, from cultural icons to leisure and conference venues—relieves pressure on city centers and ensures that benefits are shared more broadly.

The cultural festival **Manifesta 15 in Barcelona (2024)** exemplifies this approach. By **expanding the festival to 11 additional cities in the metropolitan area**, congestion in central Barcelona was reduced, surrounding municipalities benefited economically, and visitors discovered lesser-known towns. The result: a richer experience for all participants and communities involved.

Build a strong city brand that tells a story everyone owns

Finally, beyond what a city is, consider what it communicates and projects. A **thoughtfully crafted city brand** can transform a destination, making it **compelling and resonant for target audiences while attracting the type of tourism it seeks**. At its core, city branding is an ecosystem of communication tools rooted in identity, designed to create lasting impressions and shape how people experience and remember the place.

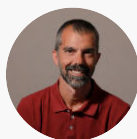
A **compelling, authentic narrative** does more than attract visitors—it **positions the destination strategically, drawing tourism aligned with its character and values**. When co-created with local communities, it **fosters pride and belonging**.

The **'I Love NY' brand exemplifies this**: a bold, shared story that defines identity while aligning stakeholders around a common vision, ensuring coherence, purpose and lasting impact. ●

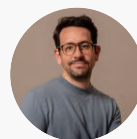
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