OVERTOURISM: WHEN POPULAR PLACES BECOME TOO POPULAR

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the largest industries in the world, but in a few well-known places it has begun to harm the people who live there. This article examines how three European destinations, Venice, Dubrovnik and Barcelona, have responded to overtourism and considers what their experience means for Uzbekistan, where the number of visitors is rising quickly. A desk-based comparative case study was carried out using 15 published sources, including reports of international organisations, a university paper, news agency reports and official tourism statistics, and the findings are discussed against the academic literature. The three cities faced different pressures (day-trippers, cruise ships and tourist flats) and chose different tools (an entry fee, daily quotas and a ban on tourist apartments), and none of the measures is free of criticism. Uzbekistan received 11.7 million foreign visitors in 2025, nearly 47 percent more than a year earlier, and about 81.5 percent of them came from neighbouring countries. The evidence suggests that the problem lies less in the number of visitors than in how their flow is managed, and that Uzbekistan can still act before pressure builds up.

Keywords: overtourism; tourism management; Venice; Dubrovnik; Barcelona; Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

A few years ago, almost nobody would have said that a city could have too many visitors. Tourists bring money, jobs and a bit of life to quiet streets, so cities competed to attract them. Then, in July 2024, thousands of people marched through Barcelona under the slogan "Enough! Let's put limits on tourism" [11]. Similar protests had already taken place in Malaga, Palma de Mallorca and the Canary Islands [11]. Residents were not angry at travellers as people. They were angry about rents, crowded streets and shops that stopped serving the neighbourhood. This is what is now called overtourism.

Uzbekistan is in the middle of its own tourism boom, and it is much cheaper to learn from other places' mistakes than to repeat them. In the sources consulted for this study, most of the writing on overtourism concerns European and Asian hot spots, and little of it connects those lessons to Central Asia. This article tries to fill a small part of that gap. It asks two questions: how have three well-known destinations tried to manage overtourism, and what does the comparison suggest for Uzbekistan?

2. Literature Review

The word overtourism is recent. It came into wide use around 2016, and Goodwin [16] gave one of its early definitions: the situation in which the impact of tourism, at certain times and in certain places, exceeds the physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological or political capacity of a destination. The definition quoted most often today comes from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which describes overtourism as the effect of tourism on a destination that lowers the quality of life of residents, the quality of the visitors' experience, or both [1].

Academic writers have been careful with the term. There is no single universal definition [15], and Koens, Postma and Papp [17] argue that it is applied to very different situations and is easily overused. A review of the early literature [18] links the topic to carrying capacity, residents' attitudes and sustainability,

and the later conceptual work of Mihalic [22] treats overtourism as a sustainability problem and not simply as a matter of counting visitors.

The definitions above are about perception. Whether a place is "too crowded" depends on who is asking, and a visitor from a very large city may judge crowds differently from someone who grew up in a small town. Research on residents' attitudes is much older than the word itself. Doxey's "irridex" [19] described how local feelings can move from welcome to irritation and open antagonism as visitor numbers grow, and the more recent idea of tourismphobia describes the same kind of reaction in cities such as Barcelona [20]. The marches of July 2024 [11] can be read in this light.

A second strand of the literature concerns limits. Butler's tourist area life cycle [21] suggests that destinations pass through stages of growth and that, without management, they may exceed what their resources and communities can bear. Researchers at Bocconi University add that the limits of carrying capacity are not only physical. They can also be political or administrative, for example when the local government cannot manage the number of people arriving [3]. A city with millions of visitors may therefore cope well, while a small town with far fewer may not.

The background to this debate is steady growth. International tourism rose from about 200 million trips in the 1960s to 1.4 billion in 2018 [4] (Figure 1), and UNWTO expected 1.8 billion by 2030 [2]. Some analysts now think that 2 billion is possible by then [3]. Much of the growth comes from Asia and from countries that made travel easier, such as Japan, which dropped visa requirements for many visitors [2].

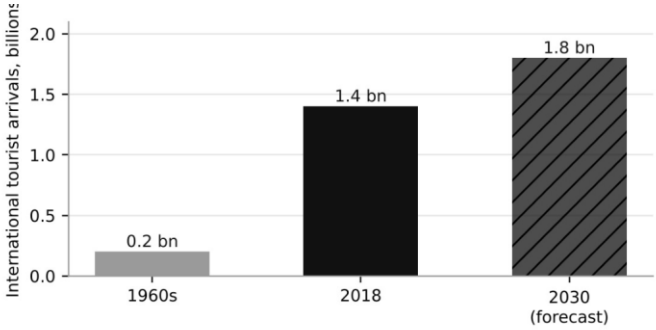


Figure 1. Growth of international tourist arrivals. Sources: Bolton [4]; EHL Insights [2].

A third strand is about responses. A study prepared for the European Parliament [23] reviewed the policy options open to European cities, and the edited volume of Dodds and Butler [24] collects cases and proposed solutions from many countries. Measures that appear repeatedly include caps on visitor numbers, pedestrian-only zones, limits on cruise arrivals and fewer flights [15]. Some places, such as Bhutan, Boracay and the Galapagos, have gone further and restricted the number of arrivals directly [2]. Venice has drawn particular attention: Seraphin, Sheeran and Pilato [25] discuss how overtourism has damaged its position as a destination.

Three gaps remain in the sources consulted. Most of the writing concerns European and Asian hot spots. Many contributions describe a single city and do not compare the tools used in different places. And little of it connects these lessons to Central Asia, where visitor numbers are growing fast. This article addresses the gaps in a small way, by comparing three cities with different pressures and different tools and by reading the recent visitor figures of Uzbekistan against them.

3. Methods

The study is a desk-based comparative case study. No survey or interviews were carried out. The questions need facts from several places, and most of those facts are already public, so the work consisted of collecting them, checking them against each other and comparing them.

Venice, Dubrovnik and Barcelona were selected for three reasons. All three are well documented, all three have introduced concrete rules, and each faces a different kind of pressure: day-trippers, cruise ships and housing. This difference makes it possible to compare tools and not only cities. Uzbekistan is the case to which the findings are applied.

The case evidence draws on 15 published sources, listed as [1]–[15] in the References; the academic works used in the literature review are listed as [16]–[25]. The 15 sources fall into four groups: definitions and background work (UNWTO, Bocconi University, the University of Oslo and a conference paper by Bolton); reports by news agencies and newspapers on the three cities (AP, AFP, Al Jazeera, Euronews); travel and local news outlets (Responsible Travel, Travel Tomorrow, InTrieste); and Uzbek official or media reports of tourism statistics (the Tourism Committee, the National Statistics Committee as reported by Kun.uz, and UN Tourism data as reported by Bangladesh Monitor). The searches were done in October 2026, in English, with keywords such as overtourism, Venice day-tripper fee, Dubrovnik cruise limit, Barcelona tourist apartments and Uzbekistan tourist arrivals. A source was kept only if it gave a date, a number or a rule that could be named. Travel and trade websites were used for descriptions of measures and not for statistics.

For each city four things were recorded: the main pressure, the main measure, what was reported about the results, and what was still disputed. The cities were then compared side by side (Table 1). For Uzbekistan, the numbers of foreign visitors in 2024 and 2025 and the share coming from neighbouring countries were collected and charted. The 2024 total is not given directly in the sources, so it was calculated by subtracting the reported increase of about 3.7 million from the 2025 figure of 11.7 million, which gives roughly 8 million. All other numbers are used as reported, and the source is named each time.

4. Results

The results are presented in three parts: what happened in each city, what the cases have in common, and what the figures show for Uzbekistan.

Venice. In April 2024 Venice began charging day-trippers a fee of 5 euros on selected busy days, the first scheme of its kind in a major historic city [5]. City officials said that Venice struggles once day visitors reach 30,000 to 40,000 on a single day [5]. In 2025 the price rose to 10 euros for people who booked late, and visitors without a booking could be fined [6]. Critics say that the fee changes little, and residents argue that the real fixes are housing and limits on short-term rentals, so that families can return to live in the city [5][6]. The 2026 season produced the first encouraging numbers: more than 650,000 paid vouchers over 60 days, over 5 million euros in revenue, and early signs of less crowding on the busiest days, although officials called the data preliminary [7]. The new mayor has floated a fee of up to 50 euros at peak times [7].

Dubrovnik. The Croatian walled city faced a different problem, cruise ships. Before 2017 it was normal to see four to six ships arrive at once, and passengers often had only about four hours on shore [8]. After UNESCO warned that the city's World Heritage status was at risk, the "Respect the City" programme was launched [9]. No more than two cruise ships may now dock at the same time, which caps arrivals at around 4,000 people, and a similar rule applies to coaches [9]. The city also banned wheeled suitcases on the old cobblestones and set a limit of 55 decibels for outdoor noise [9]. Critics point out that large ships keep coming and that cruise passengers spend little in local shops [8].

Barcelona. The central issue here is housing. Local authorities say that housing costs rose by 68 percent in a decade [11]. In June 2024 the mayor announced that more than 10,000 tourist apartments would be banned by 2028, so that the flats return to the ordinary rental market [10][11]. The decision may

be challenged in court, and the tourist-apartment association says that it will only push the business into the black market [11].

City	Main pressure	Main measure	Open question
Venice	Day-trippers	Entry fee on peak days [5][6][7]	Does a price really change behaviour?
Dubrovnik	Cruise ships and coaches	Daily caps on ships and visitors [8][9]	Low spending per visitor [8]
Barcelona	Tourist flats and housing costs	Ban on 10,000+ tourist flats by 2028 [10][11]	Legal challenges; black market [11]

Table 1. Comparison of the three cases.

Three patterns appear across the cases. First, the pressure came from a different place in each city, and so the tools differed: Venice used a price, Dubrovnik used quotas and Barcelona used housing law. Second, every measure is disputed. Venice's fee is described both as a success and as a failure depending on the source [6][7], Dubrovnik's large ships keep coming [8], and Barcelona's ban may be challenged in court [11]. Third, measuring was part of the response. Venice's fee was meant partly to give the city more reliable visitor counts [5], and Dubrovnik's limits followed talks with the cruise industry and UNESCO [8].

Uzbekistan. According to the National Statistics Committee, 11.7 million foreign citizens travelled to the country for tourism in 2025, nearly 47 percent more than the year before [12]. UN Tourism data show that in January–September 2025 arrivals were 73 percent above the 2019 level, which placed Uzbekistan among the seven fastest-growing destinations in the world [13]. In the first eleven months of 2025 tourism export revenue passed 4.4 billion US dollars, and the government aims at 15 million visitors a year by 2030 [13] (Figure 2).

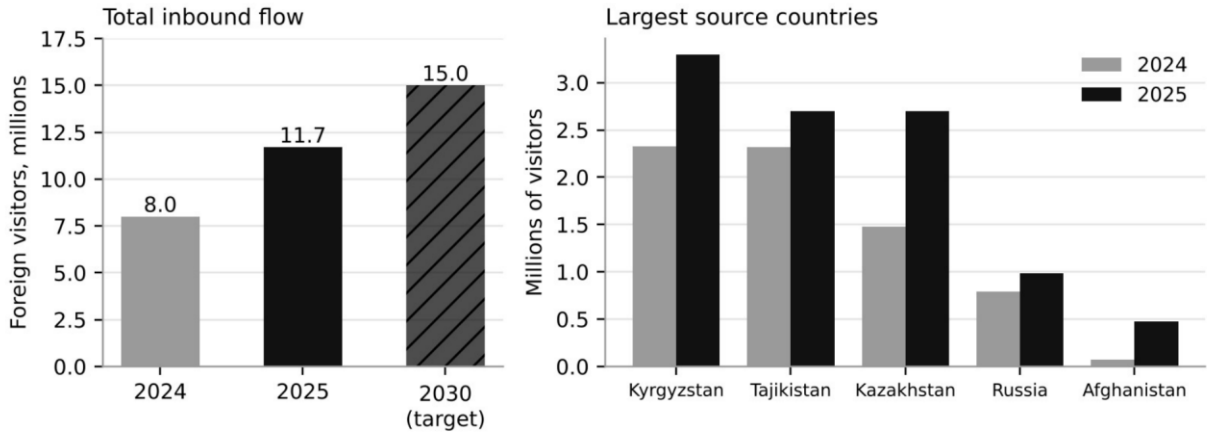


Figure 2. Foreign visitors to Uzbekistan (the 2024 total is derived from the reported 2025 increase of about 3.7 million). Sources: Kun.uz [12]; Bangladesh Monitor / UN Tourism [13].

About 81.5 percent of the visitors, roughly 9.5 million people, came from neighbouring countries [12], with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan the largest sources (Figure 2). The classic heritage cities still attract the most travellers: Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva remain the most visited places, even though interest in eco-tourism and food tourism is growing [14]. Growth has been helped by simpler visa rules and new flights [14].

5. Discussion

Does Uzbekistan already have overtourism? On the present evidence, not yet, and the word should be used with care, since the term is easily overused [17]. As the Bocconi researchers stress, the issue is not numbers alone but the management of flows [3]. At the same time, no published daily capacity figures

were found for places such as the Registan or the inner town of Khiva, and this gap is exactly what Venice and Dubrovnik had to close after problems had already appeared. Visitors tend to gather in the same few places and in the same few months, and this is how pressure builds up even when the national average looks fine.

Bocconi's researchers suggest working on three fronts together: prevention, management and promotion of sustainable practices [3]. The measures reviewed earlier, from visitor caps to pedestrian-only zones, all depend on knowing where and when visitors gather, and this is the part that is still missing for Uzbekistan's main monuments.

For Uzbekistan three measures appear the most realistic. The first is to measure before problems start, by counting visitors at the main monuments by day and by season, as Venice began to do with its fee system, which gave the city more reliable data [5]. The second is to spread the visitors. The country has other things to offer, such as the Fergana Valley, the south, gastronomy and nature [14], and good promotion of these can take weight off the three famous cities. The third is to listen to residents early: in Barcelona the protests came after frustration had been building for years, and Dubrovnik changed course only after an international warning [9][10].

The study has clear limits. Everything comes from secondary sources, so it is only as reliable as they are, and much of the evidence on the three cities is journalism and not peer-reviewed research. Some figures are preliminary, for instance the 2026 results from Venice, which officials themselves called early data [7]. The Uzbek statistics count foreign visitors entering the country, not people at a particular monument, so they cannot show crowding at one site. The 2024 visitor total was calculated and not reported. Finally, no searches were made in Italian, Croatian, Spanish, Uzbek or Russian, and sources in those languages would probably add detail.

What the study adds is a side-by-side view of three different answers to overtourism and a first reading of the Uzbek numbers against them. It cannot measure crowding. To do that, future work would need daily visitor counts at the Registan, in Bukhara and in the inner town of Khiva, together with the views of local residents collected by survey or interview. It would also help to follow the Venice fee over several seasons, since the first results are still preliminary [7].

6. Conclusion

Overtourism is not a reason to stop travelling, and it is not only a European problem. It is what happens when a place becomes popular faster than it learns how to host people. Venice, Dubrovnik and Barcelona show that there is no single tool, because the pressure came from different sources each time, and that no answer is perfect. Even so, all three cities did something that many destinations still avoid: they measured the problem and then acted on it. Because overtourism is partly about perception, residents also belong in planning from the start and not only in the protests that follow.

For Uzbekistan, with its fast growth and its 2030 target, the sensible time to plan is now. Counting visitors at the main monuments, spreading them towards less known regions and listening to local people are cheap steps compared with repairing damage later. If they are taken early, the old cities can remain welcoming to guests and residents alike.

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