

12 **IN** AMSTERDAM

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**PRO**

**SPREAD AND  
OVERTOURISM**

**GRESS**

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# Amsterdam in Progress

Amsterdam in Progress (AiP) is an independent think tank that develops concrete plans to stimulate balance in the city. The challenges in relation to balance and overcrowding are complex because Amsterdam has large economic interests in tourism that increasingly cause friction with the daily lives of residents in the city.

Amsterdam in Progress is a group of concerned people that offer constructive solutions – for now and the future. This publication deviates slightly from other AiP publications in the sense that it is less solution-orientated. It serves as a warning not to focus on spread as a solution to overtourism, overcrowding and imbalance. Only when we realise this will we be able to create sufficient space to look for real solutions.

The guiding principles of AiP are:

- 1+1+1 – balance between residents, businesses and visitors, that fits with human scale of Amsterdam.
- Flexible – the city changes rapidly and that requires solutions that are fluid.
- Freedom & Diversity – core values of the city, including the pros and cons that come with it.

# 3 What is the problem?

It's on everyone's lips and in all the newspapers: overtourism. While tourism as we know it has been around for over a century, mass tourism and overtourism are more recent phenomena. Overtourism does not function in isolation but is the result of the explosive growth of tourism worldwide. In 1950 there were only 25 million international travellers, in 2015 there were 1.2 billion and the prognosis for 2030. For decades the main drivers have been a growing population, increased prosperity and more recently the rise of the middle classes in emerging economies, but also technological and political developments that have turned the world into a *global village* and, of course, the cheap tickets for flights.



DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISM 1950-2030 SOURCE: UNWTO

# 4 Europe tops the bucket list

Due to the increased popularity of city trips, the growth in the number of tourists causes an imbalance between local residents and visitors. This is particularly true for cities with small and attractive historic centres. Consider cities such as Venice, Barcelona, Prague and Dubrovnik but also Amsterdam which, with 854.000 residents and a city centre of only 90.000, currently drawing 7 million international visitors per year. The expectation is that by 2030 the number of Amsterdam residents will have grown to 940.000, while the number of foreign visitors will at least have doubled. The current imbalance between residents and visitors will therefore increase substantially.



DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISM ACROSS THE CONTINENTS (2017) SOURCE: UNWTO

Unlike large global cities such as London, Paris, New York and Tokyo, Amsterdam only has one small centre where almost all the major sights and top attractions are concentrated. It is therefore logical to presume that the bulk of the growing number of tourists will visit the city centre. Especially the historic city centre will see a substantial influx of foreign tourists.

## Tourism pressure highest in Amsterdam

‘Amsterdam has the highest tourism pressure by far with 232 hotel bed nights per square kilometer in 2016’, according to researchers in the *Trendrapport toerisme, recreatie en vrije tijd 2017*. They calculated tourism pressure by looking at the average number of bed nights per square kilometre in a certain area alongside the average number of bed nights per day per 100 residents in a certain area. The pressure is 27 times higher than the Dutch average. The tourism pressure is even higher if you do not look at the total land surface of the entire city of Amsterdam, but only at the city centre where most tourists visit and stay. The researchers point out that most of the tourism pressure in Amsterdam is caused by international visitors.

## Where does the Amsterdam city council stand?

In the coalition agreement drawn up in May 2018, the city council writes under the topic ‘Balance in the city’: ‘Tourism is part and parcel of the international character of Amsterdam and we need to cherish this. At the same time the positive impacts of tourism, such as employment and income for the city, are increasingly being overshadowed by the negative impacts. Overcrowding, congestion and waste are putting pressure on the liveability of some neighbourhoods. The monoculture of shops also does not

make the city a better place to live. A new balance is required. One which puts residents at its core and still welcomes visitors. Amsterdam is a city to live, work and do business in. It is secondly a tourist destination. We want to better spread the advantages and disadvantages of tourism. We aim at spreading in both the city and the region.’

We strongly question the validity of the last sentence. How realistic and workable is this? Will this solve the problem?

# SIX REASONS WHY SPREADING TOURISTS WILL NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF OVERCROWDING IN AMSTERDAM

## 1. Spreading requires certain conditions

In Amsterdam, a city where attractions are located close together, only a limited percentage of the foreign visitors can be tempted to venture outside of the tourism centre. In order to

compete with the attractive city centre an attraction needs to meet certain conditions:

- It needs to offer an experience that the city centre cannot.
- It needs to be well-known to a broad audience.
- It needs to offer value for money.
- It needs to be within a reasonable distance from the city.
- It needs to be easy to get to.

For a tourist to leave an attractive city such as Amsterdam for a few hours or for a day, it needs to be worthwhile. This has long been the case for iconic attractions such as the Keukenhof (tulips), Zaanse Schans (windmills), Marken and Volendam (folklore) and Alkmaar (cheese). A tourist needs a solid reason to go off the beaten track - there needs to be a clear reason to travel. Tourists are not easily spread.

## 2. The concept of spreading clashes with human behaviour

Most tourists visiting Amsterdam, visit because of the offerings that are typical for the city – art, culture, architecture, shops, restaurants and bars, and also the vibe – and the city centre offers these in abundance. On top of that foreign tourists stay on average for only two nights. The majority of first-time visitors therefore do not have enough time to deviate from the traditional list of *highlights*.

Tourists want to see what others have seen before them. Their search for authentic experiences goes hand-in-hand with the desire to visit the major attractions during their visit – the Anne Frank House, the Van Gogh Museum, the canals and the Red Light District are must-see sights if you want to ‘do’ Amsterdam properly. The masses follow the masses.

## 3. Spreading tourists is as effective as whistling in the wind

It seems so logical: every tourist we tempt to go elsewhere is one tourist less in the city centre. That is exactly why spreading is so often seen as the solution for overcrowding. This unfortunately does not work when the influx of foreign tourists is much larger than the limited ability to spread them around.

Although tourism statistics for Amsterdam are ambiguous, the projections for the near future are not: the next decade will have us see many more tourists coming our way. Amsterdam expects 7 million foreign overnight visitors in 2018. With a conservative growth projection of 5% per year, we can expect a total of 13 million overnight visitors in 2030. And these numbers do not include cruise tourists and tourists staying in holiday rentals such as Airbnb. We can expect more than 6 million foreign overnight visitors on top of the current 7 million, and it will probably be considerably more.

There is only one possible conclusion: the attempts to spread tourists in the next decades is completely disproportionate to the enormous growth of foreign tourists.

## 4. Spreading does not provide a solution to the perceived pressure

Since the 80's and especially over the past five years, tourism in Amsterdam has grown considerably. The red carpet was rolled out for mass tourism for the sake of the anticipated income and job growth. Unfortunately, it also resulted in a dilution of the restaurant and retail supply and has severely put pressure on the liveability in the city centre. And although not all Amsterdam residents share the same experiences, it is safe to assume that



a strong growth in and spreading of tourism will lead to more Amsterdam residents becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the liveability of their own neighbourhood.

The ladder of irritation distinguishes four stages with regard to tourism pressure:

1. *The stage of euphoria.* Tourists are a new source of income and are welcomed as guests. Interaction between tourists and residents are appreciated.
2. *The stage of apathy.* Tourism is no longer only seen as positive, but is taken for granted. After all, it is a good source of income. The interactions between tourists and residents become more formal. Guests become customers.
3. *The stage of (budding) irritation.* The local population feel they are losing control of the developments. The number of visitors is larger than the local facilities can handle. As a result, tourism businesses increasingly determine the look and feel of the area.
4. *The stage of protest.* Tourists are being blamed for anything that causes irritation (higher taxes, overcrowding, higher prices, lack of affordable housing, etc.). Signs with messages such as 'tourist go home' start appearing in public. Some residents move out.

The question remains if, and when, the stage of irritation reaches a tipping point. In which stage are areas such as De Pijp and Westerpark currently in Amsterdam? Do the advantages still outweigh the disadvantages and are residents and councillors still content with increasing visitor pressure? The ability to absorb tourism growth is not unlimited and every neighbourhood has its own tipping point, after which the advantages become grievances and euphoria becomes protest.

# 10

## 5. Spreading will quickly disrupt the balance outside the city centre

Alongside the negative effects in the city centre of Amsterdam other neighbourhoods and areas in the region might soon start to suffer from overtourism. It is surprising that so few local and regional politicians are not wondering whether they should be attracting mass tourism from Amsterdam to their areas. If you can tempt 500 tourists from the centre of Amsterdam to visit a square in De Pijp then that does very little to relieve the pressure in the city centre. For the square in De Pijp, however, receiving 500 tourists might directly result in a feeling of overcrowding.

As in any global city, the city centre of Amsterdam has always been busy and lively. In such a historic, attractive city centre, tourists enhance the quality of the city – with the pros and cons that come with it. For a village, residential neighbourhood or suburb this is a different affair. People live there, not expecting touring cars, tourist groups and beer bikes in their streets and on their squares.

Several areas in the region surrounding Amsterdam are already concerned about overtourism. On the island of Marken and in the villages such as Edam and Volendam and towns such as Muiden and Zaandam, the alarm bells are cautiously being sounded. The balance in the areas surrounding the city is much more fragile than it appears.

## 6. Spreading will probably aggravate the problem

New attractions and accommodation are being developed outside of Amsterdam. The idea is that, from an Amsterdam perspective, such attractions will alleviate the pressure in the centre and that,

from a regional perspective, one can benefit from Amsterdam's attractiveness. It seems like a win-win situation.

But what are the consequences? If really interesting attractions are developed near Amsterdam, the city will as a result only become more attractive. It seems logical to assume that the effect will be even more visitors wanting to come to Amsterdam.

On top of that, new hotels are being developed outside of Amsterdam which will provide more capacity for even more tourists. In the greater metropolitan area outside of Amsterdam a further 14.000 hotels rooms will be added. Capacity in and around Amsterdam will increase significantly and hotel rates therefore will remain relatively low. Providing the tourists can easily access the *highlights* in the city centre, this will lead to even more pressure. The city centre will then carry most of the burden, but less of the advantages such as the tourism spending related to the accommodation.

## Conclusion: spreading is an excuse for more growth

Spreading tourists over a larger geographical area may appear to only have winners: more areas benefit from tourism while the inner city is relieved of some of the overcrowding. We hope, however, to have highlighted a few critical and crucial remarks that the belief that spreading tourists will relieve the city centre and solve the problem of overtourism is fundamentally flawed.

We are, however, not done yet. Spreading tourists is also simply an excuse to keep focusing on more, more, more. The tourism industry and the city government can continue working towards more growth, whilst maintaining that they are addressing the problem of overtourism.

**12** When spreading tourists is seen as the solution, there is no room for addressing the fundamental choices that need to be made. As a result, we will once and for all lose the balance in the city. Spreading may sound logical and intelligent but is in fact an obstacle to finding and implementing real solutions.

Any questions or suggestions?

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**The City in History, Lewis Mumford**