

Tourism as a driver of cultural vibrancy in lesser known destinations: a link yet to be explored?

In recent years, culture and creativity have captured the attention of city-focused policymakers, managers, and academics due to their (still much argued) capacity to contribute to local economic prosperity.

“Cultural vibrancy” (or “cultural vitality”, here used as synonyms) is a term that we often come across when looking at the abundant literature on the topic. The reason why scholars and practitioners care about such vibrancy is clear: if culture embraces the distinctive traits that characterise a society (UNESCO, 2001) and can take either tangible or intangible forms (Throsby, 2001), cultural vitality is an all-encompassing term that tries to capture the ways through which culture and creativity are actually expressed, every day and everywhere. More concretely, I would argue that cultural vibrancy relates to all those activities through which culture is actually “animated”, “promoted” and “participated”, and its cultural, economic and social value therefore enhanced.

Urban cultural tourism is probably one of the most likely outcomes of cultural vibrancy.

Take a city like Nantes.

Twenty years ago, the city did basically not exist on tourism maps. Nowadays, the department of Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) is the 7th most visited destination by French visitors. To obtain this result, the city embarked into a very much experimental development process that re-combined elements of the city’s history (e.g. slave trade) and heritage (archaeological, architectural, industrial, maritime and river, landscape, knowledge, traditions), the artistic imagination embedded into the city’s DNA (Jules Verne was born in Nantes, and the poet Julien Gracq and the screenwriter Jacques Demy both studied in Nantes) as well as the imagination of contemporary artists (e.g. Compagnie Royale de Luxe) and local creative companies (most notably La Machine), which have actively contributed to the revitalisation of the city’s urban design, artistic offer and overall image.

Tourism development was thus not the sole and main objective of the city. It rather became one of the development axes of an overall strategy that put culture at its core as a lever of cultural, economic and social change.

The Nantes example, rather than representing an isolated case, should lead us to a much broader reflection on cultural tourism, at national, European if not global level. It is not just a matter of re-stating how important culture is to attract tourists, but of understanding how to make the most of a controversial phenomenon like tourism to revive and not simply preserve our culture.

There are at least four main reasons why the “tourism-cultural vibrancy link” could work fruitfully: the increasing competition between cities in a globalised world and the need to develop a differential cultural offer to attract visitors’ attention, that cannot certainly be reduced to beautifully preserved but “voiceless”

monuments; the need to find creative solutions to bring tourists to lesser known destinations, trying to counteract over-tourism; the increasing importance of the cultural and creative industries that, thanks to their ability to combine collective culture(s) and individual creativity, can contribute to developing an authentic and engaging cultural offer, sometimes even in competition with traditional service providers (think of new start-ups proposing “living like a local” experiences); last but not least, the need to preserve our culture, as a capital that, once animated and promoted, is able not only to survive but also to deliver cultural, social and economic value to the surrounding communities.

Nevertheless, while the impact of tourism on local cultures has somehow been examined in the literature (especially in developing countries), the more specific links between tourism and cultural vibrancy remain to be explored. If tourism is a likely outcome of cultural vibrancy, what does tourism do to cultural vibrancy? Can tourism be a “positive” driver of cultural vitality? Or will tourism inevitably undermine both the tangible and intangible heritage of a destination, therefore “killing” the raw material of cultural tourism? Otherwise, under which conditions can tourism enhance a high quality and sustainable cultural vibrancy? Which (old and new) actors can contribute to such vibrancy, and through which assets, management and governance models, and marketing plans? What role can the cultural and creative industries play in new tourism strategies, in a context that increasingly value cognitive capital and emotional experiences? And what could be the role of local and international artists and creative professionals? How can the local communities of inhabitants and the tourists themselves become responsible co-creators of cultural experiences? And what is the role of new technologies to make culture more lively but also cultural tourism more manageable? Last but not least, how can cultural, tourism, economic and urban policies ultimately cooperate to enhance the cultural vibrancy of a place?

These are certainly not easy questions, but open an interesting and very much policy-relevant area of research that could help shape the tourism policies of the future. With the European Year of Cultural Heritage coming to an end, this is a timely moment to build sound bridges between Europe’s rich heritage and the need to make it attractive but sustainable to both present and future generations.

References

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