

PRAGUE'S TOURISM - A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD



Czechia joined the European Union in 2004, simultaneously with several other central and eastern European countries. The year before, 5 million international tourists passed through its border points to explore the wonders of Prague and other cities in the country. This generated around \$2 billion in revenue for the country.

The year Czechia joined the EU, revenue jumped to nearly \$3 billion, with an additional 1 billion international visitors arriving. This was seen as a positive for the country, with additional tourist income helping to develop the economy and bring prosperity to more Prague residents.

Then, in 2012, something changed. After sitting steady between 6 and 7 million visitors per year, the figures jumped by more than 1 million. The number of tourists grew every year after that, breaking through the 10 million mark in 2017.

On the one hand, this has meant that the Czech economy generated more than \$6 billion in 2018, up from \$2.7 billion in 2004. But on the other, it has meant more and more people have crammed into the tourist hotspots of Prague, creating problems for some of the local residents. When you account for domestic tourists, this figure more than doubles to 21.2 million.

Prague - A Tourist Hotspot

These tourists were not evenly distributed around the country, either. Almost 8 million tourists travelled to the Czech capital in 2018, outnumbering local residents 6:1. According to Euromonitor, this has made Prague the fifth most visited city in Europe, behind Istanbul, Paris, Rome, and London.

This sparked a series of news articles, all published in the latter half of 2019, discussing the city's tourist problems. One article, published in the Observer, called it "the fall of Prague".

This "over-tourism" is not a problem unique to Prague though. It's experienced by many other European cities, including Barcelona, Venice, London and Amsterdam. In all of these cities, the increase in tourist numbers leads to more homes being converted into short-term holiday rentals, which are often listed on sites like Airbnb. This drives up the cost of living for locals and can mean local authorities miss out on vital tax revenues.

Taxi drivers, too, are complaining about competition from services like Uber and Taxify, which they argue are underregulated.

While some benefit from the increased revenues from tourists, many don't. Instead, their quality of life is lowered by rowdy tourists shouting and singing in the streets at night and desecrating beautiful landmarks.

That's not to say the majority citizens of Prague look at tourism negatively, the issue is more concentrated on a few tourist hotspots, namely the Old Town.

The Solution?

The problem for Prague is not that it can't accommodate the tourists, it's more than they don't stay long enough in the city, don't spend enough money per head, and congregate in just a handful of places.

Instead of attracting more stag and hen parties and short-stay city breakers, Prague needs to focus on different kinds of visitor.

The city is trying to attract more congress tourism, which would see more people heading to the city to attend particular events, meaning they're less likely to saturate the streets of the Old Town with even more bodies. This is something that the city already does, with events like the PokerStars European Poker Tour and the International Conference on Economics and Finance Research.

The local government has been working to pass laws that will begin addressing some of the issues. Airbnb rentals are now required to also charge city tax like hotels do. Additionally, a mobile app that offers discounts to tourist attractions is being used to track and monitor the movements of tourists to find solutions to the problem of overcrowding.

Local residents are also being asked to generate ideas to improve their city both for themselves and to create attractions that will direct tourists to other parts of the city.

It's clear that the city benefits from the tourist industry and the popularity of Prague is a testament to its beauty and history. However, without further actions being taken by those in power, the city may become a victim of its own success.

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