THE BRIDGE

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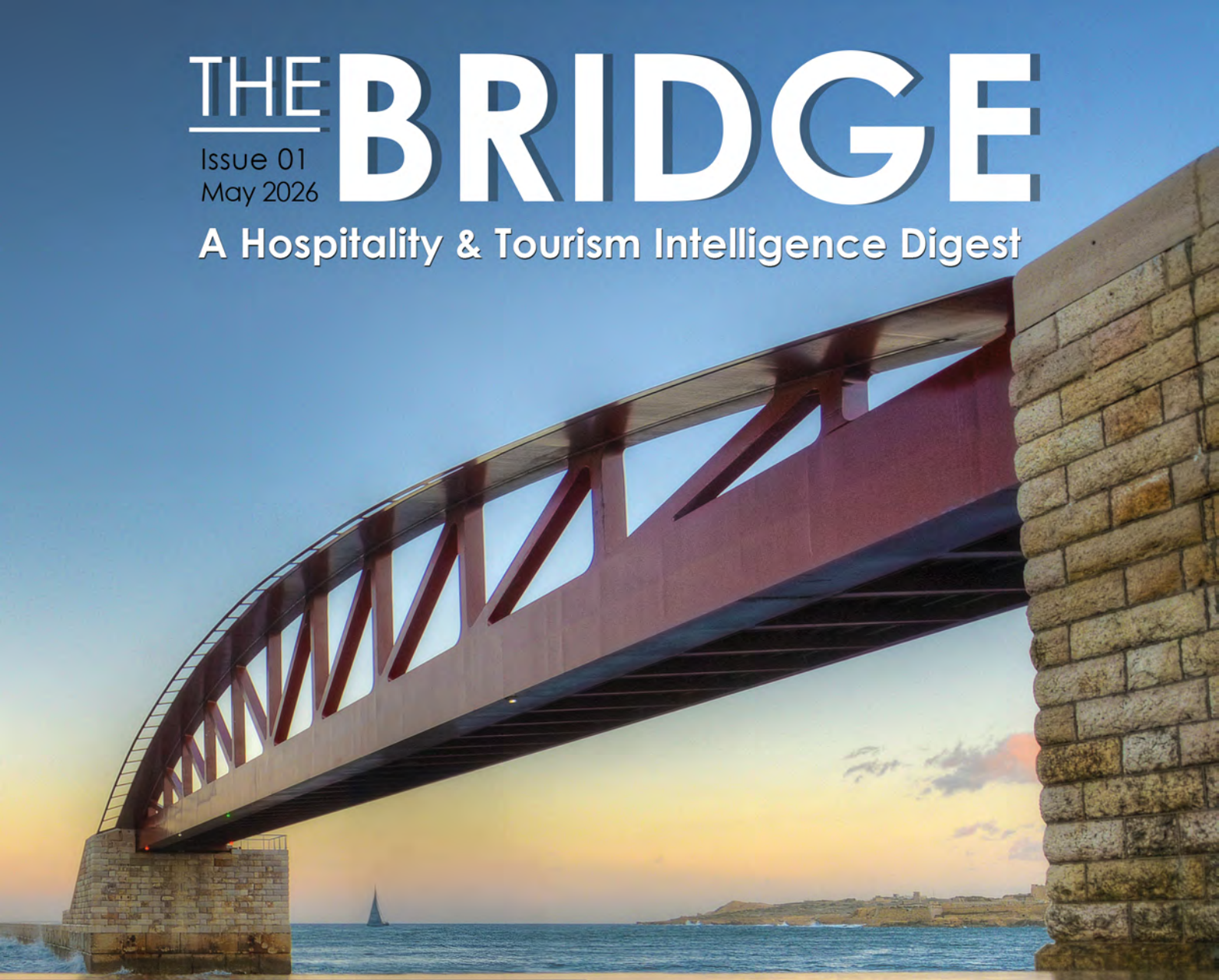
A Hospitality & Tourism Intelligence Digest



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t-FORUM
THE TOURISM INTELLIGENCE FORUM - MALTA

Malta Tourism Observatory

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Cover Photo

Breakwater Bridge in Grand Harbour Valletta - Malta

Photo Credit: Rene Rossignaud

About *THE BRIDGE*

THE BRIDGE: Hospitality & Tourism Intelligence Digest is the official organ of the Tourism Intelligence Forum (t-Forum)

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The Start of a New Journey

Dr Ian Borg
Deputy Prime Minister and
Minister for Foreign Affairs
and Tourism - Malta

A Bright and Successful Future

Last year, I had the honour of endorsing the establishment of the t-Forum Malta. The event also coincided with the setting up of the Jafar Jafari Library within the Malta Tourism Observatory.

This publication is the first tangible outcome of that partnership and cements Malta's role as a primary tourism destination capable of contributing knowledge and leadership to the global tourism community.

I wish The BRIDGE a bright and successful future.

Where Research and Practice Converge

The t-Forum was created with a singular mission: to bridge knowledge across the global tourism landscape. Unlike fields such as medicine or engineering, tourism still suffers from a deep divide between theory and practice. Valuable academic knowledge often fails to reach practitioners, while real-world challenges remain underexplored by research.

Founded in 2015 andnow headquartered in Malta, the t-Forum addresses this gap through initiatives such as global conferences, our magazine The Bridge, and pioneering sabbatical programmes that enable a true exchange between academia and industry. We envision a future where research and practice converge to foster smarter, more sustainable, and inclusive tourism. The t-Forum serves as a global catalyst to make this vision a reality.

Prof. Jafar Jafari
President
The t-Forum Malta

Concise, Practical and Timely Insights

It is with great satisfaction that we present this first edition of The Bridge on behalf of the t-Forum, hosted within the Malta Tourism Observatory. This milestone reflects the ambition of a trailblazing organisation with a clear and vital purpose.

The t-Forum Malta was established to act as an interface between academic and practitioner knowledge, enabling both communities to access each other's insights in a concise, practical, and timely manner.

Conceived by Professor Jafar Jafari, a world-renowned tourism scholar, the t-Forum finds a natural home in Malta.

We trust this publication will prove valuable and look forward to your continued support as this initiative grows.

Leslie Vella
Chief Officer Strategic
Development/Deputy CEO
Malta Tourism Authority

The Tourism Capacity Building

The Situation

Despite decades of warnings, the tourism capacity problem (known as overtourism) is still treated by some as an "economic advantage" rather than a societal or environmental issue. Governments lack coordination between national promotion and local controls. Destination marketing organizations often act as promoters rather than managers.

Anti-tourism sentiment stems from overcapacity operations, the seasonal nature of the industry, dissatisfied employees, frustrated residents, and untailored policies. Still, few destinations are willing to limit their tourism industry. Unless tourist numbers are controlled and sustainability is politically enforced, overtourism will continue to erode its acclaimed socioeconomic benefits and further ignite conflicts both near and far.

The Resolution

To bring overtourism under control, a destination-wide committee should be appointed. Its membership should minimally include representatives from the tourism industry, government, and academia to examine the situation and to design and implement tailored action plans. Foremost, the sentiments of residents, tourists, and the workforce should be surveyed. This process should be repeated a year later (preferably annually), with shifts in attitudes analyzed and appropriate controls introduced. The strategy of "less is more" should be gradually adopted. Addressing overtourism through capacity-building is an overhaul strategy. Importantly, it is not a one-time solution; local priorities must be regularly integrated into higher and broader levels of government.

Abridged by Marco A. Robledo marco.robledo@uib.es
Adapted from "Overcoming Overtourism: A Review of Failure",
by R. Butler and R. Dodds, *Tourism Review* 77(1):35-53, 2022

The Digest

- Establish Collaborative Governance
- Implement Sentiment Monitoring
- Transition to a "Less is More" Strategy

Appeal of Environmentally-Friendly Hotels

The Situation

Hotels are increasingly under pressure to prove — not merely claim — that their operations are environmentally sustainable. Fortunately, tourists are becoming more aware of the negative environmental impacts of their vacations and are increasingly willing to take steps to reduce their footprint. Currently, the primary way hotels communicate their sustainability efforts to consumers is through certification schemes. However, certification badges are not always visible, trusted, or meaningful to tourists.

The Lower Emissions Hotel Room offers a more transparent and accessible alternative. Just as hotels offer room variations with or without certain amenities — such as breakfast — they can introduce a Lower Emissions Room option on their website or online booking platforms. Hotels can design their own version of the Lower Emissions Room and explicitly communicate to guests what the offering entails.

The Resolution

Hotels have numerous options for developing a Lower Emissions Room package. Many hotel service components are not essential to all guests and can therefore be selectively adjusted without diminishing the core experience. For example, rooms can be cleaned every three days; large refillable bottles and glass carafes can be provided; eco-friendly toothbrushes and slippers can be offered; and guests can be given greater control over cooling and heating options. Guests who book the Lower Emissions Room can also enjoy a daily discount that reinforces the value exchange.

Together, these measures create a win-win-win scenario: guests are satisfied, the environment is respected, and hotels can reduce operational costs while strengthening their sustainability credentials. The authors provide actionable strategies in this brief video:

https://news.uq.edu.au/2025-05-14-lower-emissions-hotel-room.

Adapted from "The Lower Emissions Hotel Room: A Consumer-Driven and Greenwashing-alert Approach to Making Tourism more Environmentally Sustainable", by D. Briel and S. Dolnicar, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 111, 103925, 2025 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2025.103925

The Digest

- **Introduce "Lower Emissions" Room Options**
- **Adjust Service Components for Sustainability**
- **Implement a Value-Exchange Discount**

Turning Tourism Knowledge into Action

The Situation

The primary recipients of scholarly research are other scholars and students, with the goal of advancing the frontiers of knowledge. In tourism, this is reflected in the strength of approximately 350 journals that publish some 14,000 papers each year. Another key aim is to support tourism policymakers and practitioners in becoming more effective in their work. Part of this raison d'être is to ensure relevance beyond the walls of academia. However, relatively little knowledge is being transmitted from leading journals to industry practitioners.

As a result, studies have limited impact on the tourism industry, a gap reinforced by the perception among practitioners and government actors that research is overly complex and inaccessible. Questions about whom tourism research serve and how, should remain central to ongoing deliberations in the field.

The Resolution

The Tourism Knowledge Translation framework is positioned as a solution to the critical disconnect that has long plagued tourism theory and practice. Adapted from state-of-the-art thinking in healthcare, it serves as a roadmap for "engineering" knowledge from academic studies and transforming this intelligence into formats that policymakers and practitioners can readily understand. This includes developing specific methods housed in a knowledge repository, selecting the most relevant studies for inclusion, and ensuring that the resulting insights reach industry stakeholders in a timely manner.

Knowledge translation is defined as a process involving synthesis, dissemination, exchange, and application of knowledge to support better decision-making. To be effective, knowledge must be refined and prioritized into usable forms for policymakers and practitioners.

The knowledge translation framework is organized into two interconnected domains: knowledge creation and the action cycle. The former involves generating a broad base of research, synthesizing high-quality evidence, and transforming it into practical tools such as guidelines. This process addresses a key barrier in research—the overwhelming volume and complexity of academic knowledge—which often prevents tourism stakeholders from engaging with it effectively. By translating research into accessible formats, knowledge becomes more usable beyond academia.

The second domain, the action cycle, applies this knowledge through a series of steps, including identifying problems, adapting knowledge to local contexts, assessing barriers, implementing solutions, and evaluating outcomes. This cyclical process ensures that knowledge is not only applied but also refined based on real-world conditions. It highlights the importance of context-specific application, recognizing that policy and industry decisions must account for local economic, political, and environmental factors.

As a response to the weak connections among academia, government, and industry, knowledge translation provides a vital bridge. It facilitates collaboration by aligning research outputs with practical needs, encouraging stakeholder engagement throughout the process, and promoting shared understanding through clearer communication. Ultimately, it shifts the role of research from passive knowledge production to active problem-solving, fostering a more integrated and cooperative relationship among academic research, policy development, and industry practice.

Abridged by the author dfennell@brocku.ca
Adapted from "The Tourism Knowledge Translation Framework: Bridging the Canyon between Theory and Practice", by D. A. Fennell, Current Issues in Tourism, 25(5), 674-691, DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2021.1887099, 2022

The Digest

- **Adopt the Tourism Knowledge Translation Framework**
- **Establish a Centralized Knowledge Repository**
- **Implement the "Action Cycle"**

Boosting Tourism's Impacts

The Situation

Tourism is widely seen as a source of job creation, support for local businesses, improvement of public spaces, and investment in transportation, recreation, and cultural facilities. It can also strengthen appreciation of local heritage, promote cultural exchange, and create meaningful interactions between residents and tourists. Significantly, these benefits can enhance quality of life and contribute to stronger, more vibrant communities.

Notwithstanding, tourism also creates pressures for host communities. Higher tourist demand may increase housing costs and the prices of everyday goods and services, while benefits are not always distributed equally. Tourism can also lead to overcrowding, traffic, noise, and strain on infrastructure and public services. It may commercialize traditions, disrupt daily life, and create tensions between residents and tourists. Environmental impacts, including pollution, resource overuse, and damage to natural areas, can further reduce quality of life.

The problem is that tourism success is still judged mainly by tourist numbers, spending, and economic growth, while residents' quality of life and wellbeing receive less attention. Therefore, a comprehensive framework for tourism impacts should account for economic, sociocultural, environmental, and other dimensions to better plan, measure, and manage the industry.

The Resolution

A sustainable tourism model should place resident wellbeing at the center of planning and management. This approach can guide governments, destination management organizations, practitioners, international organizations, and local communities seeking tourism that supports long-term prosperity and quality of life.

First, tourism success should be reframed. Instead of relying mainly on economic indicators, destinations should treat resident wellbeing as a core measure of success. The industry is successful when it improves quality of life, strengthens social cohesion, protects local identity, and supports long-term resilience.

Second, destinations should systematically measure tourism's impact on resident wellbeing and use these data to guide decisions. This includes both objective indicators, such as income, infrastructure, and environmental conditions, and subjective measures, such as residents' perceptions.

Third, tourism development should balance benefits and costs. Economic gains should not come at the expense of rising inequality, higher living costs, or greater stress for residents. Benefits should be shared fairly across the community.

Fourth, residents should be embedded in governance through planning, co-creation, and ongoing feedback systems so that tourism reflects local needs and values.

Finally, tourism impacts should be managed proactively. Destinations should anticipate overcrowding, environmental degradation, and pressure on infrastructure through integrated planning, effective tourism management, and sustainable investment.

By following these principles, tourism can move beyond narrow economic growth and become a formidable force for community wellbeing, improved quality of life, and more sustainable development for current and future generations.

Abridged by the authors
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Adapted from "Exploring the Impacts of Tourism on the Well-being of Local Communities", by M. Godovykh, A. Fyall, and A. Pizam, *Sustainability*, 2025
https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/13/5849

The Digest

- **Reframe Success Indicators**
- **Systematically Measure Resident Impact**
- **Embed Residents in Governance**

The Hidden Cost of AI Labeling on Tourism Demand

The Situation

The integration of AI creates a strategic dilemma for firms. While it enhances efficiency, personalization, and predictive power, explicitly labeling products as "AI-driven" can reduce consumer willingness to buy. This occurs because AI remains abstract and poorly understood, leading consumers to rely on emotional reactions — such as distrust, fear, or privacy concerns — rather than rational evaluation. As a result, trust declines, even though it is essential for adoption in technology-mediated environments.

This effect is rooted in uncertainty and limited transparency, as many consumers feel unable to assess how AI systems function or make decisions. The negative impact is amplified in high-risk contexts, where potential errors carry serious consequences and heighten perceived vulnerability. Even in low-risk categories, subtle hesitation can emerge. Consequently, firms face an "AI disclosure paradox": highlighting AI signals innovation, yet can simultaneously undermine trust, dampen demand, and complicate communication strategies.

The Resolution

Addressing this challenge requires a shift from technology-centric communication to a trust-centric strategy. Rather than foregrounding AI as a feature, firms should emphasize customer-relevant outcomes such as convenience, accuracy, or personalization. Reframing AI as "advanced technology" or "smart functionality" allows companies to retain perceived benefits while avoiding the negative emotional triggers associated with the term. This subtle repositioning can improve consumer receptivity without sacrificing differentiation.

Equally important is the deliberate cultivation of emotional trust. Because consumers rely heavily on affective judgments when evaluating AI-powered offerings, firms must actively reduce uncertainty. This is achieved through transparency (explaining how the system works in simple terms), reliability (consistent performance), and reassurance (clear data privacy and security practices). Trust signals — such as endorsements, certifications, or partnerships with reputable brands — can further strengthen consumer confidence.

Practitioners should also adopt a risk-sensitive communication strategy. In high-risk categories, minimizing emphasis on AI terminology while prioritizing human oversight, accountability, and safety assurances is essential. In lower-risk contexts, firms have more flexibility to experiment with AI branding, particularly when targeting early adopters or technologically confident segments. This differentiated approach ensures that messaging aligns with consumer risk perceptions rather than applying a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Furthermore, firms should invest in long-term consumer education. The current trust deficit is partly driven by limited understanding and widespread misconceptions about AI. By demystifying the technology through intuitive interfaces, guided onboarding, and clear explanations, companies can gradually shift consumer perceptions from fear to familiarity. Over time, this will allow AI to transition from a source of uncertainty to a normalized and trusted component of the customer experience. Thus, the resolution lies in recognizing that AI is not just a technological innovation but also a psychological signal. Firms that manage this signal effectively — balancing innovation with reassurance — will be better positioned to capture value from AI while maintaining consumer trust and demand.

Abridged by the authors
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"Adverse Impacts of Revealing the Presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology in Product and Service Descriptions on Purchase Intentions", by M. Cicek, D Gursoy, and L. Lu, *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 34 (1), 1-23, 2025 DOI: 10.1080/19368623.2024.2368040

The Digest

- **The AI Disclosure Paradox**
- **Perceived Risk and Vulnerability**
- **Erosion of Emotional Trust**

AI

Loving Tourists without Losing the Urban Soul

The Situation

Urban destinations are becoming increasingly important for economic development. Cities attract large numbers of tourists while serving as homes to growing populations. Tourism can generate employment, stimulate business growth, and support cultural exchange. However, if not carefully managed, it can strain infrastructure, raise living costs, and contribute to environmental degradation. This is why sustainability has become a central priority in urban tourism planning and management.

Sustainable urban tourism involves balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social wellbeing. This requires ensuring that tourism benefits local communities, protects cultural and natural assets, and operates in ways that minimise negative impacts. Tourism affects a wide range of groups, including residents, tourists, businesses, and government authorities, each experiencing the industry differently. Understanding these diverse perspectives is essential for developing effective policies and strategies that support the long-term sustainability of urban destinations.

The Resolution

There are practical frameworks to assess the sustainability of urban tourism from the perspectives of four key stakeholders: residents, tourists, tourism businesses, and governments. These analyses provide tools that support both practitioners and policymakers in evaluating impacts and identifying areas for improvement.

One, from the resident perspective, the tool focuses on evaluating issues such as employment opportunities, environmental quality, cultural preservation, and the effectiveness of government policies in supporting community engagement in tourism development.

Two, for tourists, the tool captures aspects such as their satisfaction, safety, environmental quality, price fairness, and the availability of digital services that support travel planning and destination experiences.

Three, for tourism businesses, the framework emphasises responsible operational practices, collaboration with local communities, the use of environmentally friendly suppliers, and the adoption of technological innovations that improve efficiency. It encourages businesses to consider not only financial performance but also their environmental and social contributions to the destination.

Finally, for government, the tool focuses on evaluating policy support, infrastructure development, heritage protection, sustainability regulations, and digital transformation initiatives that support tourism management. By using this approach, governments can monitor impacts, evaluate policy effectiveness, and ensure that development aligns with broader sustainability objectives, including global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The framework highlights the importance of collaboration among stakeholders to achieve sustainability in cities, as no single group can accomplish this alone. Governments, businesses, residents, and tourists all play critical roles in shaping tourism outcomes. Incorporating their perspectives into a unified monitoring system helps ensure that strategies are balanced, inclusive, and aligned with long-term destination sustainability. This approach provides industry leaders and policymakers with a practical tool for monitoring tourism impacts, improving management strategies, and supporting sustainable development in urban destinations.

Abridged by S. Mostafa Rasoolimanesh
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Adapted from "Scale Development for Measuring Sustainability of Urban Destinations from Perspectives of Residents, Tourists, Businesses and Government", by S. M. Rasoolimanesh, S. Y. Chee, and A. Salee, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, pp. 290–317, 2025

The Digest

- **Prioritize Wellbeing over Growth**
- **Utilize Dual-Layer Data**
- **Formalize Resident Participation**

Climate Actions to Benefit Tourism

The Situation

Climate change is affecting tourism destinations worldwide. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, water shortages, and environmental degradation are influencing how destinations operate and how tourists travel. Many tourism businesses and governments are adapting to climate risks, but issues of fairness are often overlooked.

Some destinations, communities, and workers face greater risks while having fewer resources. For example, tourism employees, residents, and small island destinations are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts, including heatwaves, flooding, and sea-level rise. Yet these groups are rarely involved in decisions that affect their livelihoods.

Many destinations depend on tourism growth, but the industry itself contributes to the problem. Air travel and other tourism activities generate significant emissions, creating a difficult balance between economic development and climate responsibility. Policies designed to address climate change may unintentionally create new inequalities. For instance, environmental improvements can increase property prices and displace residents.

Overall, the costs and benefits associated with climate action are not shared equally. Some destinations contribute very little to global emissions but experience the greatest climate impacts. Investments in climate solutions often prioritize financially attractive projects rather than those supporting the most vulnerable groups. Without careful planning, climate policies in tourism can deepen existing inequalities. The game plan is to reduce emissions while ensuring that climate actions are fair, inclusive, and socially responsible.

The Resolution

Building a sustainable tourism future requires climate actions guided by principles of justice. Tourism policies should consider who is affected by climate change, who participates in decision-making, and how the benefits and costs of climate action are distributed.

First, tourism planning should recognize the diversity of people and communities involved. Residents, Indigenous groups, tourism workers, and small businesses all bring valuable knowledge and perspectives.

Second, climate decisions should be more inclusive and participatory. When stakeholders—from local communities to tourism businesses—are involved in planning, solutions are more likely to be effective and widely supported. Transparent communication and accessible information are essential for meaningful participation.

Third, tourism policies should ensure a fair distribution of benefits and responsibilities. Climate investments should not only focus on reducing emissions but also support communities facing the greatest climate risks. This includes improving infrastructure, supporting workers, and strengthening destination resilience.

Finally, climate strategies must address responsibility for repair. Countries, companies, and industries with higher emissions have a greater obligation to support adaptation and recovery efforts in vulnerable destinations. In tourism, this may include financial support, technology sharing, and policies that reduce environmental pressures while protecting livelihoods.

By embedding fairness into climate policies and tourism management, the industry can move toward a just and sustainable future. The mission is to protect host communities, ecosystems, and future generations while enhancing the benefits that tourism provides.

Abridged by the authors r.rastegar@griffith.edu.au
Adapted from "Embedding Justice into Climate Policy and Practice Relevant to Tourism" by R. Rastegar and S. Becken, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 33(10), pp. 2011–2028, 2025

The Digest

- **Implement Inclusive Decision-Making**
- **Equitable Resource Distribution**
- **Address Responsibility for Repair**

Accessibility to Profit Soul and Business

The Situation

For many tourists with disabilities, the main obstacle to taking a holiday is not physical infrastructure or a lack of motivation to travel. Rather, it is uncertainty and a lack of confidence related to access. This crisis of confidence is disproportionately influenced by informational barriers.

Tourists with access support needs rely on the availability of clear, accurate, and up-to-date information to evaluate options and plan their holidays. Incomplete or inconsistent accessibility information dramatically increases the cognitive and logistical effort required to plan a trip, often necessitating that tourists verify details directly with providers. This additional burden can lead to either abandoning holiday planning altogether or making repeat visits to reliable destinations and trusted tourism businesses.

This is especially striking given the scale of demand. UN Tourism finds that one in five tourists and nearly half of people over 60 have access needs. Across Europe and the United States, tourists with disabilities represent a $70 billion market. They are also more likely to be accompanied by family, friends, and carers, further expanding the market potential and making accessibility an influential factor in destination choice for intergenerational families and mixed-ability groups.

The Digest

- **Provide Clear, Standardized Information**
- **Involve Users in Digital Design**
- **Communicate Accessibility Investments**

The Resolution

First, tourism businesses must recognise that information itself is a form of accessibility. Clear, standardised, and up-to-date descriptions of facilities, including both text and images, reduce planning anxiety and enable those with access needs to make informed decisions. This can be achieved by employing toolkits for self-managed websites and online resources or by working with an accessibility consultant, such as AccessAble, to ensure independently verified information is included within their Access Guides.

Second, involving tourists with disabilities in the design and testing of websites, booking platforms, and apps is crucial and supports e-accessibility. This approach encourages transparency rather than perfection, as reporting limitations is just as important as highlighting accessible features when it comes to managing customer expectations and enhancing the quality of experience.

As populations age, tourism businesses that prioritise inclusive design are strategically positioned to meet rising demand. Evidence consistently shows that tourists with access needs are more likely to spend more per trip due to longer stays and the need for reliable, high-quality services.

A return on accessibility investments depends on closing the loop: the work done behind the scenes must be made visible through effective communication. Tourists can only choose accessible holidays when they know they exist.

Abridged by Jillian Rickly
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Adapted from "Inherent Complexity: Disability, Accessible Tourism and Accommodation Information Preferences", by S. Darcy, *Tourism Management* 31: 816-826, 2010.
And "Disability e-inclusion for Accessible Tourism Websites", by K. Park, H. Jeon, and S. Park. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 3571-3578, 2022

karma
KARMA

Tourism Under Sanctions

The Situation

Tourism in sanctioned destinations does not stop — it adapts. Constraints on markets, payments, and investment reshape how the tourism industry operates on the ground.

Years or decades of sanctions have produced persistent uncertainty, weaker international demand, and restricted financial flows. For tourism businesses, this is a long-term condition, not a temporary disruption.

Within this environment, women play a central but often overlooked role. They work across guesthouses, guiding, handicrafts, food services, and micro-enterprises. When conditions tighten, they are often the first to lose formal jobs.

Many move into informal activities — home-based accommodation, craft production, food services, and sales through personal networks or social media. These efforts sustain income and keep services running, but typically lack contracts, insurance, and access to finance. As a result, incomes are unstable and working hours longer, with many relying on multiple small revenue streams. Much of this work goes unrecorded. The gap between official tourism data and on-the-ground activity widens, weakening the basis for effective planning.

The Digest

- **Reflect Local and Home-based Work**
- **Balance Productivity with Protection**
- **Consider dispersed Networks - especially Women**

The Resolution

Sanctions do more than reduce tourist numbers — they reshape tourism systems. The industry becomes more informal, fragmented, and reliant on small-scale, low-visibility work.

For practitioners and policymakers, this means standard indicators — arrivals, occupancy, revenues — capture only part of the picture. A significant share of activity sits outside formal reporting.

This "hidden layer" includes home-based stays, informal guiding, micro-scale production, and digitally mediated services. Overlooking it leads to misreading both resilience and risk.

A more practical response starts with recognition. Tourism strategies should explicitly account for informal and home-based work through targeted surveys, local engagement, and partnerships with community networks.

Support measures also need to fit the context. Micro-finance, flexible training, and low-barrier business support can strengthen livelihoods without forcing premature formalization.

Policy should balance productivity with protection. Basic insurance access, workable digital payment options, and legal recognition of home-based enterprises can improve stability without disrupting existing coping systems.

Ultimately, tourism under sanctions runs on dispersed networks rather than formal firms. Women make up a large share of this system, linking local resources to tourist experiences in ways that are often invisible but essential.

Factoring this reality into policy leads to better decisions—shifting focus from headline metrics to the labor systems that quietly sustain tourism under pressure.

Abridged by Siamak Seyfi
Adapted from "Unpacking Women's Tourism Work in a Sanctioned Destination," S. Seyfi, A. N. Kimbu, S. Hosseini, T. Vo-Thanh, and M. Zaman, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 118, 104152, 2026. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2026.104152

Art-Based Experience Uplifts

The Situation

Poor governance and fragmented destination management have allowed tourism development to prioritize volume, consumption, and short-term economic returns over sociocultural values. Overtourism erodes residents' quality of life, strains infrastructure, and weakens local trust. Tourism experiences are often designed as standardized commodities, encouraging superficial encounters, extractive consumption, and performative "authenticity" rather than genuine connection.

Tourism is increasingly detached from place. Tourists move through destinations as consumers rather than participants, engaging in emotionally shallow experiences. As a result, they are often dissatisfied, and the quality of life and tourism benefits for host communities deteriorate. Without new approaches to experience design, tourism continues to reproduce inequality, disconnection, and unsustainable growth models.

The Resolution

Art offers pathways to redesign tourism experiences for meaning, wellbeing, and transformation. It can shift tourism from passive consumption to active engagement, turning travel into a purpose-driven activity—connecting tourists with local people, place, and culture to enrich both host and guest experiences.

By moving beyond treating art as mere decoration or entertainment, tourism companies, destination managers, policymakers, and placemaking professionals can use art to design experiences that generate meaningful, transformative, and regenerative outcomes.

Art communicates local stories and identities, allowing destinations to express themselves beyond branding slogans. Community-led exhibitions, performances, and storytelling initiatives help tourists see a place through local eyes, fostering empathy, reflection, and respect.

Art can also support co-creation, inviting tourists to participate alongside residents in creative practices such as workshops, craft-making, performances, residencies, community-based projects, or festivals. These experiences transform tourists from spectators into collaborators, encouraging learning, deepening sociocultural interaction, enriching place attachment, and generating pride and economic opportunities for local communities.

Furthermore, art can act as a catalyst for personal and collective transformation. Immersive, participatory, and reflective art-based experiences can challenge tourists' assumptions, inspire new ways of thinking, motivate behavioral and value changes, and support emotional and social wellbeing. Art-led placemaking and activism revive local voices, reclaim contested spaces, and foster community bonds, ensuring tourism contributes positively rather than undermines quality of life.

Tourism stakeholders can redesign experiences to move away from extractive, high-volume models toward purpose-driven tourism that creates shared value. Art-based experiences shift the focus from "more tourism" to better tourism, generating benefits for both tourists and host communities.

For destination managers, staging art-based experiences with deliberately sequenced opportunities for consumption, co-creation, and transformation means:

• Creating aesthetic appeal and a strong sense of place by embedding locally grounded visual and performing arts (murals, sculpture, light installations, architecture, land art) into public spaces and experiencescapes.

• Designing co-creative encounters — such as artist-led workshops, open studios, community festivals, poetry walks, creative writing retreats, or participatory storytelling — that invite tourists to actively participate alongside residents, deepening learning, emotional attachment, and cultural understanding.

• Using art as a transformative catalyst by curating provocative exhibitions, protest art, or participatory installations that encourage reflection and meaning-making on sustainability, identity, or over tourism, thereby supporting longer-lasting cognitive and behavioral change.

Abridged by the author
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Adapted from "The Power of Art in Tourism Experience Design: From Beauty to Transformation and Social Impact" by M. Sigala. In *Research Agenda in Tourism Experience Design: Atmospherics, Storytelling and Technology* (C.S. Chan, G. Moscardo, and D. Agapito, eds). Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026

The Digest

- **Prioritize Wellbeing over Growth**
- **Utilize Dual-Layer Data**
- **Formalize Resident Participation**

Inspiring Hotel Service Excellence

The Situation

Working in the hospitality sector is a tough sell. Many frontline positions suffer from a low wage, low skill, and high turnover problems which exacerbate the acute staffing shortages operators face worldwide. Compounding these challenges, frontline employees increasingly face customer incivility and even outright hostility. Indeed, negative service encounters have become commonplace on social media, many becoming viral, and amplify the increasing emotional demands placed on hospitality staff.

For many managers, operators, and owners responding effectively to emotions at work has emerged as a central challenge. It is unrealistic to expect people to maintain a consistently positive emotional outlook given the frontline realities. But if workplace emotions are not managed effectively, hospitality companies face a multitude of undesirable operational, reputational and even legal consequences.

The Resolution

To address this vexing challenge, hospitality leaders must place a priority on cultivating supportive, inspired work environments. This begins with building a strong administrative infrastructure to ensure predictability in core policies and practices, such as competitive wages, predictable scheduling, and health and welfare benefits. Additionally, leaders should formalize workplace policies and practices that define fair treatment and standards of excellence. People need to know that the employment fundamentals are taken care of so they can be their best at work.

Developing and maintaining a strong commitment to employee wellbeing necessitates that managers are trained to be empathetic problem solvers who promote a psychologically supportive workplace and can quickly diffuse difficult situations. Frontline teams also benefit from training, as they must be equipped with skills to be resilient and develop behavioral repertoires to respond to a wide range of typical and unexpected guest-related challenges. They should also have easy access to resources — intelligent systems and the like — that are central to effective customer service delivery.

Hospitality leaders must also reconsider policies and practices that may inadvertently impose excessive emotional labor on employees. Rigid display rules that require employees to remain unfailingly friendly and polite — even in hostile situations — can be emotionally taxing and lead to burnout, withdrawal, and exit. Frontline staff should have access to immediate supervisory support when conflicts arise and not bear the full brunt of negative customer interactions.

Finally, strong communication and reinforcement systems are essential. Hospitality leaders should regularly solicit employee input regarding morale and emotional wellbeing — pulse surveys are an easy and inexpensive option — and respond to that feedback directly. Employees need to know that their views and concerns are a priority for managerial decision-making and problem-solving, and their behaviors which exemplify service excellence will be noticed and rewarded.

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Adapted from "Hospitality Front-line Employees: A Meta-Analysis of Emotion Management at Work", by L. V. Shulga, J. A. Busser, and D.H.R. Molintas, Cornell Hospitality Quarterly 66(2), 172-195, 2025

The Digest

- **Secure Employment Fundamentals**
- **Invest in Resilience & Empathy Training**
- **Revise Rigid Emotional Labor Policies**

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Destination Networks for Community Resilience

The Situation

For Tourism to be resilient in the long-term, destinations balance three things: the needs of residents, the tourist experience, and the health of the natural environment. The Covid 19 pandemic showed that many destinations — especially rural and remote ones — need a different approach to how tourism is developed and managed.

Destinations where tourism businesses are small, spread out, and often with very few employees, a coordinated destination-wide approach can make the industry stronger and more sustainable. Community based destination networks offer a way to bring these businesses together, share resources, and support local development.

The challenge is that every rural destination is different. Businesses vary in size, capacity, and goals, and communities have different expectations of tourism. Community based tourism can help ensure that growth aligns with local priorities, not just tourist numbers or revenue targets. It encourages a broader view of success, which includes the quality of life of residents, environmental preservation, and long term sustainability.

A rebalancing of tourism demand is a part of this approach. That means creating experiences that draw tourists beyond the usual hotspots, spreading activity across the year, and ensuring the industry benefits the community and environment. Destination networks can help by promoting local products and businesses, building themed itineraries, and encouraging tourists to stay longer and explore more widely.

The Resolution

Community based tourism networks face several common challenges:

- Long-term Financial viability
- Power imbalances between stakeholders
- Uneven distribution of benefits and costs
- Limited community influence over decisions
- Lack of clear leadership

These issues can be addressed by building a network that is inclusive, transparent, and fair in how roles and opportunities are shared. Local ownership is essential, but long term success also requires strategic support from policymakers and tourism authorities.

A practical funding model is annual membership fees, with participation tied to a shared code of practice. This helps maintain consistent standards and ensures members are aligned with the network's values and goals.

For small tourism businesses, the network also provides something they often need: relationships and connection. Many operate in isolation, unaware of available supports or opportunities. A strong network offers:

- Knowledge sharing and learning from each other
- Joint marketing
- Training and capacity building
- Promotion of local businesses and experiences

Finally, community support is crucial. Tourism affects residents' daily lives, so clear communication and involvement help build trust, reduce concerns, and strengthen the region's long term resilience.

Adapted from "Tourism Networks as a Mechanism for Degrowth: The Case of the Burren Ecotourism Network in Ireland", by A. Ward and S. Millar, *Journal of Ecotourism*, pp. 1–23. 2025. https://doi-org.mtu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14724049.2025.2514500

The Digest

- **Establish Inclusive and Transparent Networks**
- **Formalize a Strategic Support System**
- **Implement a "Code of Practice" Funding Model**

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