

Matkailututkimus 1, 86–97 (2005)

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Katsauksia

The Heyday of Urban Tourism? Socio-cultural Perspectives on the Conditions of the International Tourism Development in Prague

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The cities have always played and still play a very important role in the development of tourism. It can be claimed that urban tourism as a social practice has not really fundamentally changed since the 18th century Grand Tour, or Thomas Cook's packages and other innovations in the 19th century, but that its underlying cultural structures and 'collective' imaginaries have in some sense simply transformed into new contexts and recreated systems of meaning by adopting new themes and aesthetic references (Ahtola 1997; Kostiainen et al. 2004).

Over the past decade there have been significant changes in the nature of tourism (specially) in the West. Tourists are increasingly rejecting so called mass tourism and the package holiday in favour of more individual forms of holiday that offer the possibility for self-development, learning, and discovery. City holidays or breaks have become increasingly popular alternatives to mass market 3S (sun-sand-sea) holidays in the European Community (e.g. Law 2002, 176–198; Kostiainen et al. 2004; Selby 2004; Ahtola 2005; see also Douglas et al. 2002).

According to van den Berg et al. (2005) in European tourism there is a shift towards more active, cultural holidays. The attractiveness of urban culture and most other aspects of city life receive growing attention from tourists. E.g. in Germany and in many other European countries city and cultural tourism showed growth rates above average (Paesler 2005, 44–49).

This trend is illustrated by the city of Prague, which is a magnet for travellers drawn by its extraordinary history, culture and architecture. Prague may be considered as a uniquely haunting European city. Prague's heritage gives

the city a comparative advantage over many other former socialist capitals, as key attractions (e.g. monuments or events) play a central role in the creation of consumers' image of a city (e.g. Law 2002, 73–155; Selby 2004, 64–86).

According to Sauer and Vystoupil (2005, 130) 46% of the total 16,5 million foreigners overnight stays in 2003 was in Prague and the rate of foreigners from total lodging in Prague reaches, in long-term horizons, about 90%! Tourism has certainly brought prosperity to Prague, but irrevocably, it has also destroyed conventional livelihoods in the old city centre. Managing urban tourism without any difficulties is probably impossible. Even so, Prague should avoid the worst of the impacts that mass tourism can bring by every means, but how might that be possible?

This presentation focuses on the development of tourism in Prague, particularly that of leisure vacation travel in the 1990s and 2000s, the present state and the potential development perspectives. The aim is to discuss the key questions within a historical and socio-cultural context. Such an approach provides a way to explore the roots of urban tourism and to highlight its effects and social implications. The outlook for tourism in Prague, as well as tourism promotional strategies and marketing are also discussed. The research material was taken from travel brochures, magazines, newspapers, journals, guidebooks, studies, surveys, statistics, as well as Internet pages.

The Golden age of tourism?

Situated on the edge of the Slavic and Germanic worlds, the Czech Republic touches four EU-countries: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, and Poland. Almost every country in the world is now engaged in tourism, and the Czech Republic is not an exception. In recent decades cultural tourism has emerged globally, and is being recognized as an activity with significant potential for income as well as employment generation. (Ahtola 2002.) E.g. Douglas et al. (2002) have examined one of the supposedly fastest growing area of tourism: interest/special destination sectors. Among these are: urban tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, regional tourism, educational tourism, cycle tourism, health tourism and senior tourism (See also Honkanen 2004, 5–6, 211–220).

There are cities being well-known world-wide or at least in their national context, because they are equipped such a unique selling proposition, “USP”, like Paris, London, Rome, Athens, Vienna, or Prague (Paesler 2005, 48–49). Urban tourism has been rising worldwide and is at present one of the largest segments of tourism. For tourists, cities are sold like consumer products. History may be considered one of the corner stones of cultural tourism and heritage is a major component of inter-place competition. The Prague City Cultural Reserve is included in the UNESCO World Heritage list, and Prague's status

as a whole is fairly cultural. (Ahtola 1999; Ahtola 2000.) Prague's unusual concentration of cultural and historical values is an excellent example of the urban multicultural heritage (Bajcar 2000, 29).

New lifestyle trends require tourism services to develop new approaches to customers (Parmova 2003, 11–14). Among tourism marketers and organizations, as well as tourism researchers, one of the most frequently discussed factors behind expectations of tourism growth is the development of senior tourism, or 'silver market' travel (see Toivonen 2004, 404).

Tourism has the potential to be the lynch-pin for economic prosperity. The expansion of tourism, which generates more expenditure in the economy, is likely to have implications for other industries. Undeniably, as an economic driver, tourism became one of the major industries contributing to the Czech Republic's economic recovery in the 1990s (Cooper & Morpeth 1998, 2254).

The impact of political events such as the enlargement of the European Union has been seen in Prague. The economic impacts, as well as the importance of tourism in the Czech Republic have risen rapidly compared to the situation some 15 years ago. The 'Golden City' has a unique cultural heritage, which continues to attract millions of travellers to this cultural town over the years. In 2002 some 4.6 million foreign tourists stayed in Prague (14.6 million overnights) excluding day trippers. The average stay was 4.2 days (Germans 30.5% of foreign guests, 37.4% of total nights). (CSÚ 2003.) According to WTO, repeat visitors represent almost 80 per cent of the total visitors in the Czech Republic (Tourism..., WTO 1998, 81, WTO 2002).

In 2003 many destinations outside the Euro Zone, the Czech Republic among these, reinforced their price competitiveness as receipts showed an overall positive trend (Kester 2004, 107). The final meaningful information on tourist economical significance could be determined by estimation from the tourism satellite account (TSA) on regional level, especially in the sphere of revenues from tourism, but the Czech statistics is not able to provide such reliable information by now (Sauer & Vystoupil 2005, 130).

Tourists encounter cities through their senses (Urry 1999). In Prague the sense of history is a major attractive factor as Prague's tourism is deeply cultural in its nature. History has also been widely used as one of the basic elements of tourism. In travel guides and brochures Prague is considered a historic culture city. "Cultural" and "historic" are recognized as effective marketing attributes (Holcomb 1999; see also Grabler, Mazanec & Wöber 1996). Prague's heritage gives the city a comparative advantage over the other former socialist capitals. Architecture and historic monuments make Prague an attractive destination for visitors. Also, the social status of travelling has proved to be significant when trying to solve the background factors and the principal motives of travelling to highly cultural sites (Ahtola 2000; Ahtola 2002).

After the Velvet Revolution, many Czech and foreign entrepreneurs noticed that there were tremendous possibilities for creating new kinds of travel services, as the appeal of Prague was very high, and there was also inexpensive labour available. Postcommunist Prague became in a short time the most frequently visited city among the former socialist capitals. Mass tourism began in 1991, and as early as in 1994 Prague had some 14.3 million overnight visitors, which had a strong socio-cultural and economic impact in a city of 1.2 million residents (Hoffman & Musil 1999, 181–82).

Recent years have seen enormous stress on tourism development from an economic perspective. Because of its stimulating effects on the economy, rapid development of tourism has been “the engine” of economy in Prague. Tourism has become Prague’s most important and profitable service industry (Ahtola 2002). In general, expansion of tourism may lead to an appreciation of the exchange rate, together with an increase in domestic prices and wage rates.

Nowadays the Czech Government regards tourism as one of the main sources of foreign currency and a major job generating industry characterised by its multiplier effects on the various economic sectors, even if rural tourism still remains a marginal phenomenon in the Czech Republic (Hajek 2002, 559–562). However, “while the economic aspects of tourism are regularly assessed, the socio-cultural and community-related consequences have been largely neglected” (Lovel & Fauerstein 1992, 335–336). Major changes have occurred in the tourism industry of Prague (e.g. Cooper & Morpeth 1998, 2254; Williams & Balaz 2000, 77–78, 154, 170–171, 188–189).

The targeting of information to specific groups of tourists is crucial to ensuring an efficient tourism information policy. Particularly, city tourism managers face this problem because they are confronted with an ongoing renewal of visitors. (Bauernfeind & Zins 2003.)

Tourism has often been at the forefront of economic changes in Prague, but the role of tourism has been largely neglected by the authority (e.g. Williams & Balaz 2000). Stojarova and Vajcnerova have analysed the need for legal changes in the Czech tourism industry. It is argued that Act No. 159/1999 on Certain Conditions of Business Activities in the Field of Tourism does not work. The tourism industry needs to be developed and managed systematically in order to ensure economic growth and benefits. Marketing research focused on tourism has revealed problems in the insurance condition of travel agencies. (Stojarova & Vajcnerova 2002, 123–130.)

Golden Prague: Rising tourism – foreign influence

The post 1989 transition in Central Eastern Europe has had a major impact on tourism in the region (e.g. Williams & Baláz 2002, 37; Mechkovskaya 2005).

According to Johnson, in the mid-90s, “policies were needed to improve infrastructure, promote the integration of tourist services, maintain visitor numbers and encourage guests to stay longer, visit additional locations and increase their spending” (1995, 21). It seems that the re-drawing of the political map needs to be accompanied by a re-assessment of the cultural map not only for contemporary times but also for history (Howard 1991, 62–63).

In the Czech Republic, like in any other popular tourist destination, the tourism industry and the supporters of tourism highlight the positive impacts of tourism to stress its importance. However, the changes presented due to the economic impacts of tourism do not generally include the benefits and costs of physical and socio-cultural impacts affecting the given destination. (Rátz & Puczko 2002, 52.)

Prague, the social and cultural centre of the Czech Republic has been and will be a magnet for millions of visitors drawn by its unique architecture, history, and culture. Prague has also become a popular international conference site (e.g. Law 2002, 106), as e.g. the IMF/WB meetings in 2000 and the NATO meeting in 2002 proved. Prague’s tourism industry has proved to be a very valuable factor in the economic transformation that started in 1989. Among other effects, its dynamic development has reduced unemployment significantly. At the same time unemployment is expected to rise in many other fields, especially in agriculture and heavy industry. The loss of industrial jobs and especially the economic benefit which Prague is enjoying from tourism, have forced the city authorities to think about the current situation more than twice.

Tourism has given a great welcome revenue boost, even if the euphoria caused by the Velvet Revolution is over. Evidence of stability can be seen all around. During the last decade, Czech travel has been witnessing a major change due to the change in the political atmosphere, better traffic connections, quality travel services, and tourist trends. At the time, no one actually needed to promote Prague as a “modern” tourist destination, as the ‘romantic golden city’ was so attractive in itself, and had so many pull factors, as, for example, its formidable architecture. (About the impacts of the creation of the Czech and Slovak republics for tourism in transition, economic change, and capital function, see Williams and Balaz, 2000.)

“History” and “historic” are recognized as effective marketing words in urban tourism and emphasized for tourism purposes (e.g. Kostianen et al. 2004). Prague’s heritage provides entrepreneurs increased possibilities to gain advantage, as there is a capacity to turn historical information into popular forms of historical presentation following the trends of tourism development in many other destinations. Another, more original trend has been to present the past as a peculiar kind of mental historical experience: tourists can follow the footsteps of famous personalities like, W.A. Mozart or Franz Kafka. In addition,

the combination of ambience and cut-rate costs have made Prague a top location for international film-making. (E.g. Bedford, Rawson and Warren 2004, 84, 105.)

As Hoffman and Musil have commented: "For Prague, tourism has been an integral part of post-1989 democratization, marketization, and privatization." (Hoffman & Musil 1999, 179.) Williams and Balaz (2000) have analysed the changing role of tourism in Czech and Slovak Republics which emerged in 1993 from the 'velvet divorce'. According to the Czech statistical office (2003), more than 98 million visitors arrived in the Czech Republic in 2002, a more than 300% increase on 1989, even if several million arrivals less than in 1996 (Ministry for Regional Development, Czech Tourism - Basic Figures). Only 2% of the visitors arrived by air (CSÚ 2003), and we must keep in mind that a large number of the visitors were day-trippers from the neighbouring Germany, Austria and Poland, the largest group being shoppers from the easternmost parts of Germany, which was the leading market, as more than 40 million visitors arrived from there. (WTO 2002; CSÚ 2003.)

The Czech Republic is the most common tourist destination for German tourists. Prague is understandably the most popular city destination, with East Bohemia and South Moravia also being significant destinations. Germans spent an average \$58 US dollars a day, while in the Czech Republic. Daily expenses by nationality range from the high-spending Canadians to the Poles, who spend only an average of US\$13 dollars. (Trpkošová & Reiferová 2001, 32–33; see also CTA, Results of Border Crossings survey... 2002, 10).

Despite their positive economic impact, visitors cause a range of negative impacts. Although some experts claim that issues of poor quality of services, insufficient infrastructure, and limited offer of regional tourism products, which occurred in the late 1990s, may have been due to wider factors and the overall situation within the Czech tourism industry rather than the impacts of tourism per se. (Ministry for Regional Development, Czech Tourism - Basic Figures).

However, what is important from an economic perspective, is that in 1998 foreign currency revenues from tourism were more than seven times higher than in 1989. With the exception of 1997–1998, annual revenues grew more rapidly than the number of visitors. This can be seen as a sign of a gradual improvement in the structure of incoming visitors, which changed from shopping trips to sightseeing and other types of tourism. The length of stay has increased as a result of this change. Between 1990 and 2002, the average period a foreign tourist stayed in the Czech Republic increased by almost twenty-five percent from 3.4 days to 4.2 days (CSÚ statistics, 2003).

In Prague there are heavily trodden tourist routes where the whole corridor may be lined with shops for tourism purposes. A good example of this is Royal Mile which links the Old Market Square to the Prague Castle via Charles Bridge.

(Law 2002, 168.) Various services have been developed to enable large numbers of short-term visitors to consume some of the many pleasurable goods and services on sale. The tourism industry has certainly created new kind of jobs and brought prosperity to Prague, but irrevocably, it has also destroyed conventional livelihoods in the old city centre. In critical sense, mass tourism is one major factor that has taken away some traditional values from local people or changed them. Charter reveals (2000) that there is a strong spatial relationship between the provision of tourism services and the provision of commercialized sexual services.

Deichmann has investigated the perceptions of Prague residents towards visitors. His study (2002) is based on first hand intercultural encounters. The exploratory findings call for heightened regulation of the tourism industry and the provision of improved tourist facilities. Following Hall and Page (1999), the framework of analysis is structured into economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions. The findings indicate that perceived economic impacts are overwhelmingly positive, while social impacts are moderately positive, and environmental impacts are slightly negative. Within these dimensions, the investigation pays close attention to Czech stereotypes of visitors from the leading tourist origins. It is important to notice that in many cases, the perception of visitors is governed both by antecedent cultural biases harbored by the residents of Central Prague and origin-specific behavioural tendencies experienced first-hand by the hosts.

The impacts of tourism will be judged positive or negative depending on the characteristics of the host society and the level of tourism development (Dogan 1989). Williams's model (1998) identifies impacts based on the relationship between the host and visitor culture. The closer the cultures the less the impact on the destination.

Despite the negative effects, tourism has been for the most part welcomed in Prague with the future appearing quite promising. According to the WTO News, "European tourism is set to nearly double in the next 20 years, with Central and Eastern European countries replacing Western European nations as the world's favourite destinations." Strong growth in tourism to the Czech Republic and other countries of Central/Eastern Europe will make it the top tourism region of Europe. In addition, the transport charges are low in comparison with those of other European countries (Tourism... WTO 1998, 82; WTO 2002. See also Richards 1996).

Trends in supply and demand in international health tourism should be considered seriously in Prague, as health tourism is suggested to be one of the most dynamic segments of the tourism market at the beginning of the 21st century. What is important, the health tourism sector is also benefiting from the increased willingness to travel of the over-fifties age group, the main target

market for health tourism. Younger age groups are also showing interest in the new types of health tourism activities based on well-being: wellness, fitness and beauty treatments. According to Kiss and Török, the characteristics of this sector include a relatively long duration of stay at health tourism facilities, together with a high level of spending. Seasonality has a special impact on tourism, but the health tourism segment is notably less seasonal than other types of tourism. (Kiss & Török 2001, 7–14.)

A smaller number of high income middle-class visitors may spend as much as a larger number of average income tourists (Law 2002, 155). The development of tourism can undoubtedly contribute to the social and economic welfare of cities (Sancho & Ruiz 1999, 7) It is becoming increasingly important for city destinations to control the effects of tourism. It should be ensured that tourism has positive impacts on the local communities, but this is not always done as sustainable management of cultural resources and environmental protection can become a threat to the development in the tourist industry. The preservation and protection of the heritage is evident, as socio-culturally sustainable tourism remains the future path for the tourism industry.

Conclusion

Prague's reputation as a cultural destination is nowadays worldwide (e.g. Williams & Balaz 2000 & 2002), as the Golden city has a distinct historical identity and spirit of its own. After the Velvet Revolution, Prague became again a fashionable travel destination, which it actually was as early as in the 1930s. In the 1930s Prague was introduced as "the Pearl" of the Central European tour by the greatest travel organization of the time. Throughout the 20th century, Prague had many strengths and pull factors as a favourite tourist destination. The advantageous geographical position is one of them. Prague's eventful cultural history obscured by legends, like Golem (the giant monster, who was intended to protect the Jewish community, made by Rabbi Löw), is even more important, as according to Selby "urban tourism works through dreams and myths, and these play a vital role in differentiating space into places" (2004, 3). How to deal with these opportunities is surely a challenge to the tourist industry as well as to local and regional governments.

Even before 1989 a highly-organized tourism industry existed in Czechoslovakia. However, through the 1990s a rapid change transpired within Prague. The economic, political, and social forces drive and shape tourism. The aim of Prague's tourism industry is to attract welltodo cultural and other special interest tourists, but there should be more activity on promotion, as the further development of tourism, however, will more or less depend on the effective application of key marketing principles. These include the market research,

primacy of the client, choice of clientele, innovation, marketing mix, provision of variety, and monitoring of effectiveness of promotional strategies.

The international tourism market is very competitive, especially if the city is seeking to attract the high spending quality tourists, like demanding pleasure travellers, carefree wellness tourists, cultural interactionists, and sightseeing individuals. Marketing strategies require that places like city destinations not only understand the needs of the customers, but also be deeply aware of their customers' decision-making processes. Brochures should be informative, but honest. Using multi-media systems to show potential visitors images of the city is even better. To encourage a longer stay than four nights, it is still necessary to develop different activities for tourists.

Prague's weaknesses are plenty, too. The demand for skilled personnel is still quite high, even if there has been a lot of progress since the Velvet Revolution, and the workforce has become more flexible. The tourism industry infrastructure also seems insufficient. The quality of basic and supplementary tourist services is not always at international level, and lack of capital necessary for the development of the tourism industry business can bring a halt to the growth in the tourism market.

The visit to the city of a hundred spires is particularly for the visitors from the Central European countries a very easy matter. In some sense, Prague must - or should - already know that somehow it has to avoid the worst of the impacts that mass tourism can bring. Urban tourism is still seen as a valuable income generator for the destination region and as such, most stakeholders are interested in profit rather than social or environmental consequences. By its own nature socio-cultural effects and environmental consequences are essentially qualitative rather than quantitative and that much harder to research and analyse objectively.

One of the greatest dilemmas for Prague is how to manage tourism, as now the tourism industry seems quite unmanaged. The cooperation between the public sector organizations (the central government, local self-government, regional development agencies and tourism associations) and the professional tourism industry associations should occupy a more essential role in the development of city tourism. A wider-ranging discussion between the authorities and the private sector managers would probably help to recognize the ample opportunities for future (urban) tourism market operation. The city will remain pleasant and cosy to locals and attractive to tourists if the authorities succeed in minimising the harmful consequences that result from the tourist activity.

Acknowledgements

I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to many people for collecting the research material. I would like to thank information specialist Mari Niemi for her valuable help and patience.

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