Could nanotourism be the answer to sustainable travel?

Small, local, site-specific: a new movement is here to tackle overtourism head on, says Emily Manthei

Nanotourism is all about a cultural exchange (Getty Images)
ven before we were fighting a global pandemic, we knew that global tourism accounts for 8 per cent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. We knew that between overtourism and climate change, we were literally sinking Venice, driving up rental prices in Barcelona, and drinking Santorini out of fresh water.

And, if we’re honest, we knew that showing up to Amsterdam or Madrid or Berlin for a weekend to stay in an Airbnb, take a beer bike crawl, and throw up on public transportation, all without learning a word of the local language, were not particularly worthy pursuits.

“The term tourist is increasingly used pejoratively, to imply a shallow interest in cultures or environments. No one wants to be a tourist any more, but prefers to be a traveller, passenger, guest”, wrote Ljubljana-based architects Aljoša Dekleva and Tina Gregorič, who coined the term “nanotourism” in 2014.

They define it on nanotourism.org as “a constructed term describing a creative critique to the current environmental, social and economic downsides of conventional tourism, as a participatory, locally oriented, bottom-up alternative”.

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Along with Gregorič, who chairs the Department of Architecture Typology and Design at the Technical University Vienna, PhD candidate Jakob Travnik organises courses on nanotourism and co-organises the Nanotourism Visiting School, to identify and create small, site-specific, participatory nanotourism projects.

“Nanotourism existed before and we do not claim to have invented it – naming it nanotourism is simply a useful way of making certain existing activities more visible and subject to discussion and debate,” Travnik says.

The prefix nano comes from the Greek word for dwarf, and has been commandeered by science to indicate a microscopic measurement. Travnik says, “A nanotourist examines the invisible aspects of places which we visit and makes them visible or more comprehensible.”
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A nanotourist becomes part of the local community rather than using a
destination as the setting of a generic vacation. He cites agro-tourism as
an existing example. Visitors can participate in a harvest as workers,
while the farmers learn different perspectives on their trade. Other
projects include taking a lesser-travelled route to reach the Incan ruins
of Moray in Cusco, Peru, to combat overtourism, and working with
locals to study traditional methods of salt production and find innovative
new ways of producing this “white gold” in Honolulu, Hawaii.

“Ultimately,” Travnik says, “the key characteristic of nanotourism is that
of an exchange between the visitors and the host, which is different to
that of simple observation and mere consumption within the model of
mass tourism.”

You don’t need to travel a long distance to achieve this exchange either.
Some of the most effective ways to be a nanotourist are by engaging in
your street, on your block, and in your city – a travel environment which
the pandemic has reintroduced many of us to. In London alone, there
are various projects tapping into the nanotourism spirit.
The story of the capital can be told through the architecture of public housing, infrastructure projects, neighbourhood development, public gardens, and even pubs. That’s why Open City hosts panels, events, and socially distanced walking and biking tours that educate citizens (and visitors) about urban planning and design. Open City’s annual Open House architecture festival encourages participants to conceive of a different relationship between holiday and travel.

“Open House Weekend is the kind of event that can change our state of mind as individuals, connect us to people we don’t normally meet, alter the composition of our community for a temporary period of time, and transport us with festivity, costume, location, and special food, rather than resorting to a growth-based model of carbon-intensive trips abroad,” said Open City’s director, Phinaeus Harper, in a lecture at the third Rethinking Tourism symposium this year, hosted on Zoom.
11 cities at risk of overtourism in the next decade

Open City events involve learning and participation, and retain the small-scale, personal experience that engages travellers with the city, and teaches them to see themselves as part of it.
Meanwhile, the Every One Every Day Project in Barking and Dagenham is a participatory platform that encourages people to dream up projects and connects them with other local residents who can trade skills, pool resources, and make them happen. The open platform allows anyone to participate, but it’s organised bottom-up at the local level, for neighborhood residents.

There are five “shops” in the neighborhood, where people can meet to share ideas and learn what’s going on. Currently, the programmes are being offered online. But this participatory strategy is made to be replicated, so once you participate, you can take the idea back to your own community.

And elsewhere, David Pearl founded Street Wisdom in London as a way to bring the tools of mindfulness into everyday life and community. Local volunteer guides take participants down a few streets in the capital, asking them to attune their senses to the world around them and ask a question about their life. Then, they spend an hour wandering the streets with the question in mind, and share insights with the group.
afterwards. Instead of flying across the world to an ashram, it’s a way to connect with the wisdom that lives everywhere. In his TED Talk, Pearl calls it enlightenment urban tourism.

“A nanotourist examines the invisible aspects of places which we visit and makes them visible”

He said: “I think three things are happening when we do this. First, we shift our attention. Most of the time, it’s focused inward, but this takes our attention and turns it outward. Next, we set an intention. By putting that question into your mind, it makes the world around you meaningful, and synchronicity improves. Then, we make a connection. It’s amazing when you discover that not only is wisdom all around you, but teachers are also everywhere.”

It may be a while before we can explore the possibilities of nanotourism on an international break. But, until then, we can hone our skills as responsible travellers right here in the UK, finding opportunities on our doorstep to seek out local, meaningful experiences and discover a whole new perspective on the familiar.
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