May 3, 2024 / The tourist tax

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): You hear that one about the Chicago rat hole?

*<CLIP> “SNL”, BOBBY MOYNIHAN: You hear about this thing now?  
 COLIN JOST: No, what thing? <laughs>*

SCORING <Strega Nona>   
  
SEAN: It was there in Roscoe Village for decades. Some rat or maybe a squirrel had clearly fallen into wet cement and its imprint was sitting there in the sidewalk for everyone to see.   
  
But then early this year, a comedian tweeted a photo of the rat hole and it became a sensation. It became a tourist destination – a Mecca!

*<CLIP> NOWTHIS: Now, dozens are paying their respects to the rat, dubbed Chimley, with coins, alcohol, flowers, and of course, cheese.*

*<CLIP> ABC7: There’s been a proposal and an actual wedding there in the last week.*

SEAN: The rat hole became such a nuisance that the city had to get rid of it.   
  
But don’t worry – there are Chicago Rat Holes all over the world. Venice is one of ‘em!  
  
But you can’t just lift Venice out of Italy because too many people are showing up to see it. So instead, Venice has introduced a tax.

We’re gonna hear about it on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> DEAN MARTIN, “THAT’S AMORE”: When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s –*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Rameswaram.

*<CLIP> “THAT’S AMORE”: When the world seems to shine like you’ve had too much wine, that’s –*

SEAN: Colleen Barry, correspondent for the *Associated Press* in Italy.

SCORING <Giro in Gondola>

COLLEEN BARRY (*Associated Press* correspondent): Venice is a very beautiful city. It's set among canals.

VENICE AMBI

COLLEEN: And you have gorgeous architecture reflecting the Middle East and the West. It's this meeting place of east and west, and there's been a lot of art that's come out of Venice. And so people are just drawn to the place. There are great tourism reasons to go, obviously, besides just seeing the city, the Biennale is on now, which is a great art fair that's every two years. But people just go to walk the narrow alleyways and cross the bridges and go to Piazza San Marco. And the Rialto Bridge is the famous bridge that arches over the Grand Canal. Go down the Grand Canal on a, on a boat. Get in a gondola. I mean, there are just endless things to do and it's just gorgeous and romantic and just a nice place to hang out.

SEAN: And the problem here is that everyone seems to know that?

COLLEEN: Yeah. I mean, the dawn of low-cost tourism has certainly brought a lot of people to Venice.

CROWD NOISE AMBI

COLLEEN: On very crowded days, and I've seen this myself, particularly during Carnivale, they have to set the pedestrian traffic through these narrow alleyways going one way only.

SEAN: Hm!

COLLEEN: It's just – it's too crowded to have people going in both directions. And you get to a place like Piazza San Marco on the first day of Carnivale and it's just packed.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Attenzione pickpocket!*

COLLEEN: And I went there seven, eight years ago with friends of mine, maybe ten years ago, and they had just landed from the United States, [I] had picked them up at the airport. We parked nearby. We went into the city. Within ten minutes, we couldn't find each other.

SEAN: Hm!

COLLEEN: We were on phones. We were – knew we were close to each other, but we just couldn't see each other. It was so packed and we were very close to each other.

AMBI OUT

COLLEEN: I will never go back on that day.

SCORING OUT

COLLEEN: I was reading in the local paper today that even over this weekend, the busses have been so packed with tourists coming in and taking the water bus through the Giudecca Canal – which is the big canal that you would take to avoid going through the Grand Canal, which is a more scenic canal. It's the quicker way around –  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
COLLEEN: – that residents who live on the Giudecca could not get on the water bus to go about their business. They couldn't take their kids to soccer practice. They couldn't make appointments that they had. They had to let 2 or 3 water buses go by until there was room for them on there.

*<CLIP> “CROWDED OUT”, RESIDENT: There's no indication of, of tour operators educating the visitors to respect the locals, respect the signs and, and the layout of this town, which is very, very unique.*

COLLEEN: The tourism official for the city told me between 30,000 to 40,000 day trippers starts to put the city into overdrive, where it's difficult to manage. Remember, everything's difficult in Venice if you are moving around. Trash removal is difficult. Doing deliveries in Venice is difficult. Bringing things around the alleyways, bringing things on the boats. It's just much more difficult than in a regular city. The other big problem that Venice faces is that it's losing residents.

*<CLIP> “CROWDED OUT”, VENICE RESIDENT: We don't have enough flats for inhabitants. So people [are] moving away because you cannot find a place to live here.  
ANOTHER RESIDENT: Losing people – los[ing] inhabitants – means losing the character of the city, you know. Now this is becoming Disneyland.*

COLLEEN: I spoke to one woman. She said she has lived in Venice for 30 years. She married a Venetian. She moved into a building near the Rialto [Bridge]. While she was raising her family, the whole building was filled with families. Now everyone's moved away. Three of the apartments in her building are now short-term rentals, and there's no butcher down the street anymore.

SEAN: Hmm.

COLLEEN: So it's just a much more difficult place to live. You have people coming and going in your building, and sort of the unbridled spread of short-term rentals is another problem that residents talk about. Last year Venice passed this very telling, um, moment where the number of tourist beds now outnumbers the number of permanent residents in the city. So we're down to fewer than 50,000 permanent residents. If you don't have permanent residents, you don't have doctors. You don't have activities for kids, you don't have grocery stores, hardware stores, the kind of things that people need in their lives.

*<CLIP> “CROWDED OUT”, RESIDENT: The butchers, the bakers, the pharmacies, the, you know, the dressmakers are all going and being replaced by souvenir shops.*

*ANOTHER RESIDENT: We are losing the meaning of the city.*

SEAN: So everyone wants to go to Venice. This has become a problem for Venice. And Venice has a plan to deal with this. Tell me what it is.

COLLEEN: So they are charging day trippers €5 to access the city on 29 days this year. They started on April 25th, which was a holiday in Italy. And they're going through toward the end of July. Mostly weekends. I've looked at the numbers. And in the first seven days, they've had 129,568 people pay that fee.

SEAN: Hm!

COLLEEN: So they've cashed in nearly €650,000.

SEAN: Wow. What's the goal of the fee? Is it, is it to make money or is it to deter people from coming? Or neither? Both? What?

COLLEEN: The city administration say they want to create a better balance for residents so they can access the water buses. And so they don't have people crowding under people's houses.

*<CLIP> VENICE DEPUTY MAYOR FOR TOURISM SIMONE VENTURINI: Day trippers can be, during some days of the year, overwhelming, and we are trying to keep the number lower. <duck>*

COLLEEN: This year the city administration said they're not going to make that much money. If it does become something that they do permanently, the money will be used for maintenance and upkeep of the city.

*<CLIP> VENTURINI: <duck up> So our goal is not to collect money but to discourage the choice of some particular days from day-trippers. I think that humanity has one duty to preserve and safeguard Venice. If this system help us to do that, I think the system is good.*

SEAN: How are Venetians responding? How do the locals feel about it?

COLLEEN: Well, there's a very vocal group who is against it.

SEAN: Vocal locals!

COLLEEN: Vocal locals. <chortles>

PROTEST AMBI

SCORING <Italy History>

COLLEEN: There were hundreds of people protesting against it on the first day last week, and they were sort of kept over in this area along a canal. And then they marched over to one of the access points where they were met by riot police. There's one woman I spoke to who has been living there for 30 years, was carrying this mock passport, and in it she had a citation from the Italian Constitution, which guarantees citizens freedom of movement in the country.

*<CLIP> AFP, RESIDENT: <translation> We are in the European Union. And Italy, in its Constitution, guarantees free passage, like the Schengen Treaty, in all the territories of the Union and of Italy. So it’s not clear why Venice should be any different.*

COLLEEN: I will just say that the residents don't feel that this is really addressing the issues …  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
COLLEEN: … that need to be addressed to bring people back to Venice.

*<CLIP> AP, RESIDENT: <translation> This is not Pompeii. This is a city where we have to fight to have the houses lived in by families*. *And we have to reopen local shops. This would also limit wild tourism.*

COLLEEN: Venice has several universities. They've talked for years about, kind of, using the Boston model to keep young people in Venice. And, you know, people who come to the city, go to school there, you fall in love with the place and you want to stay. But you have to have industries.  
  
SEAN: Mm!  
  
COLLEEN: You have to have jobs. You have to have things that people can look forward to doing. And right now, tourism is the main industry, and a lot of people who go to university aren't going to want to then become waiters.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: You were just there. Does it feel like this is working? Does it feel less crowded? Does it feel more functional, or is it still a big mess? This is a brand new system.

COLLEEN: So, we took the train in. The train was packed, and I kind of expected to run into a lot of people checking, but we didn't go straight out of the main train station. We went out toward Piazzale Roma, which is where the buses come in, and there were the cluster of checkers, and they were just clustered talking to each other and not checking people when we went by.

SEAN: <laughs as if this was the funniest thing he’s ever heard>

*<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH: So behind me is one of the main bridge entry points into Venice, and as you can see, there’s many hundreds of people crossing over it right now. There’s a couple of people in orange or yellow bibs who are supposed to be checking people’s tickets, but clearly there’s far too many people crossing into Venice to check even a fraction of their QR codes.*

COLLEEN: And that's what residents predicted. It's not going to discourage one person from coming. If Venice is on your bucket list and you really want to see it, you're going to pay those €5. Even if you're deciding to stay in Treviso to save a little bit of money. You're going to pay those €5. Maybe a family, maybe an Italian family – they might be the people who are harder hit by it, because getting on a train and adding €20, if you're a family of four, that does sort of up what you're spending.

SEAN: You know, it feels like Venice is in a bit of a catch 22 situation because tourism is clearly their biggest industry and yet it's threatening to make them uninhabitable. And now they've got this plan. But you're saying early looks makes it seem like it ain't going to do the trick? Where do we go?

COLLEEN: Yeah. Um. <laughs> When I talk to activists in the city, they would like to have more dialogue with the city about what can be done to, to bring it back. And they say that dialog isn't happening.

SCORING <Addio a Venezia>

COLLEEN: Something like this can't really be top-down. You have to have initiatives that kind of, you know, build off of each other and you create your own ecosystem. And there was a lot of talk about that after the pandemic. I did one story talking to a lot of people with a lot of great ideas about how to bring the city back. Drawing people away from the usual sites and getting them to see other parts of Venice or places on the mainland that may be similar, to kind of take the pressure off.

SEAN: Colleen Barry, it was, it was a pleasure speaking with you. Ciao.

COLLEEN: <laughs> Ciao.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Colleen Barry. *AP.* When we’re back on *T,E,* we’ve got a lot more ideas on, on how to deal with overtourism, just in time for ya summah travel planning.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> PIO PATULLO: Ciao. Stai ascoltando a Oggi, Explicado. Today, Explained.*

JUSTIN FRANCIS (Chairman, Responsible Travel): So I want to tell you the story about a brilliant writer and poet called William Wordsworth, who is English. And he lived in a beautiful part of England called the Lake District, and he wrote a guidebook about it, and he wrote in his guidebook that he wanted to object to a railway that was going to be planned to the Lake District, because he felt it would bring too many tourists.  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
JUSTIN: And the date that he wrote this guidebook: 1810.  
  
SEAN: Hm! <giggles>   
  
JUSTIN: So this is not a new phenomenon we're talking about.

SEAN: Much like the brilliant writer and poet William Wordsworth, Justin Francis has been thinking about places getting played out for a while. In 2000 he founded a company called Responsible Travel. Their whole thing is …

JUSTIN: Overtourism. It's a word that entered, kind of, the popular vocabulary around 2017. What is it? It's when we have uncontrolled and unmanaged tourism that goes so far that the quality of life of the people who live in the destination becomes degraded, and the quality of the experience of the visitors becomes degraded. Often cruise destinations are a hotspot. Venice is one of those.

SEAN: Mm.

JUSTIN: Dubrovnik.

*<CLIP> FRANCE24: It’s become a sort of theme park – either that, or you have to get here really early, like at 5am so you can take good photos.*

JUSTIN: Some of the national parks in the US in peak periods are suffering from overtourism.

*<CLIP> CNBC: Officials there say hikers had to wait up to four hours just to enter certain trails.*

JUSTIN: Little villages which have been film sets in movies, suddenly finding the local people cannot get into their town, the place they call home. The roads are just gridlocked by people taking photos.

*<CLIP> TODAY: When Joaquin Phoenix danced down these Bronx steps in “The Joker”, fans quickly followed in his footsteps, turning a steep staircase into a social media sensation.*

JUSTIN: The beach, you know, in Southeast Asia, made famously (sic) by DiCaprio's movie, *The Beach*. Let's go back a few years.

*<CLIP> “THE BEACH”: It was a beach. You understand? Beach?*

JUSTIN: Precious natural environment destroyed by sheer volume of tourists. So it's a truly global phenomenon. And not just in big cities, but in small, local areas as well.

SEAN: What are the drivers of overtourism? You mentioned movies. If a place was used in a, you know, movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio, chances are people are going to show up some time to see it. But what else is going on here?

JUSTIN: I mean, let's call it what it is, Sean, it's exploitation of a place by an industry.

SEAN: Mm.

SCORING <Ladybug>

JUSTIN: You know, it is out and out an industry going in, taking what it can and running off with it. Local authorities, many local authorities are not set up, have not been set up to manage that – or even to realize that tourism needed managing. They haven't realized the hidden cost in chasing the number of tourists. 1 million. They want 2 million. They want 3 million.

*<CLIP> TAIKA WAITITI, VISIT NEW ZEALAND: New Zealand – there’s no place like it on Earth.*

JUSTIN: In chasing that, they haven't recognized the hidden cost. One of the other big drivers has been the growth of holiday rentals.

SEAN: Mmm.

*<CLIP> CNBC INTERNATIONAL: In a 2018 study, researchers said that Airbnb’s presence in a market shrinks the supply and results in an increase in prices.*

JUSTIN: Holiday rentals essentially take somewhere that could have been a place for young person to rent or get their first home out of the housing market. And that, of course, causes massive inflation, a cost of finding somewhere to live and somewhere to rent. So it's lack of awareness, lack of management, growth of holiday rentals and social media, which has rapidly drawn us to a smaller and smaller number of places – sometimes in search of a photo of ourselves to build our personal brand …   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
JUSTIN: … more than the experience.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: The perfect Eiffel Tower photo op does exist. The internet told me where to go, and I’m goin’.*

JUSTIN: You know, I've traveled a lot and I always took photos, but it was to remember the experience I had. But for some people now, the purpose for going is the photo itself. So I feel there's a bit of a battle for the soul of travel.

SEAN: Yeah.

JUSTIN: For me, it's about experiences, but I feel there's a bit of a battle for the soul of travel there.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Do we risk sounding elitist or that we're judgmental if we're saying, you know, you should be taking a photo to remember a moment, not to build your personal brand, not to, you know, look glamorous in front of the Colosseum, whatever it might be?

JUSTIN: Definitely there’s the risk of sounding elitist. But I'm going to stick with it a little bit. <laughs> And I'm going to say that what I cherish about travel is: fulfillment, rejuvenation, adventure, learning, learning about places and people that are very different to me. Sometimes realizing that actually we're more similar than we are different. And I do prize that and if, if that sounds a little bit elitist, then then I recognize the criticism. But I'm going to stand by what I think the real beauty of travel is. And by all means, take a photo, too.

*<CLIP> “EIGHTH GRADE”: Gucciiii!*

SEAN: <laughs> Okay, so it doesn't sound like you're saying stop traveling. It sounds like you're saying travel differently. How does one travel differently, responsibly, ethically, whatever it might be?

SCORING <Simple innovation>

JUSTIN: So, I would encourage you to stay in a local hotel, or accommodation that's locally- owned rather than a holiday rental.   
  
SEAN: Mm!  
  
JUSTIN: I know they're very popular. I know they're very affordable. But a hotel is not going to take away a room from somebody who could have been renting it or buying it. So I'm going to encourage you to stay in a hotel or locally-owned accommodation, and then encourage you to hire a local guide, somebody from the community who will know how to avoid the crowds, who will know where to take you for a more enjoyable time. will be able to advise you on any local sensitivities that you might not be aware of, you know, religious or cultural. So I think you'll get a better experience that way as a job for them. And I think it will help reduce, um, tourism impacts, if you can, I'm going to encourage you to travel away from the peak season. Not always possible if you've got a family. But it'll take the pressure off the destination a little bit. I think you'll enjoy it more as well. And I'm also going to encourage you to to spend a day or two of your trip away from the famous hotspot …  
  
SEAN: Aha.

JUSTIN: … and go and visit somewhere else, perhaps less visited. Perhaps they would welcome more tourists, but you might see a bit more of real local life.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: You know, it's interesting, we spoke to Colleen about the Venice tourist tax. What more can governments do as travel becomes cheaper, social media recommendations become more pervasive, and, you know, more and more people show up to the same spots?

JUSTIN: There are other things that tourism destinations can do. The most important thing is, is that tourism is planned in consultation with residents and people who live there, who are given a voice in the decision making about how tourism is run and managed, that they can say, ‘We welcome tourists up until this point.’ And they could define a number of things which if they were to see them and they would happen, they would say, this has gone too far.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
JUSTIN: There are also places that have done that and decided they want less tourists. And they run what's effectively anti-marketing programs or de-marketing programs.

SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> CNN: Miami Beach releasing a new ad campaign, they are trying to break up with spring breakers.*

*<CLIP> MIAMI BEACH CAMPAIGN: We need to talk. This… isn’t working anymore... <fade under>*

JUSTIN: They start to control access in some ways.

*<CLIP> MIAMI CAMPAIGN: And just so you know we’re serious, this March, you can expect things like: curfews, bag checks, and restricted beach access, DUI checkpoints, $100 parking… <fade down>*

JUSTIN: Reduce the number of the transport that's arriving, cut down on the number of holiday rentals. So they've made an active decision to limit the number of tourists and to attract the type of tourist that they feel is most beneficial for them. Now, I can hear your elitist question coming back.

SEAN: <laughs>

JUSTIN: Strongly. <laughs> But, we need to balance the needs of tourists and local people.

SEAN: For all the people at home right now. It's, you know, early May making their travel plans for the summer. Maybe they're late, who are thinking Venice, who are thinking Rome, who are thinking, whatever it is, Barcelona, Amsterdam, all these places that might be too crowded. Where would you tell them to go instead? Let's blow up a different spot.

JUSTIN: Well, I'm going to blow up a completely different spot because, overtourism: Big issue. Thank you for helping strengthen awareness of it. Other big issues: climate change. Other big issues: poverty. Other big issues: loss of nature. So there are places that you can travel to, that can contribute to jobs and education in places of real poverty and real need. And you have a fantastic time. I mean, it could be parts of the Caribbean, it could be Costa Rica, it could be parts of it could be parts of East Africa where you can make a huge difference to your trip. And if you're going into wild places, the fact you are there and paying money to be there can help create the funding and the incentive to protect those forests and those wild areas. And that's important because those trees absorb and sequester carbon. So if you've decided no more big cities, you want to have a fabulous time and do some good. Then I want to encourage you to go to those wild places. Stay in locally owned accommodation. Put your money into the hands of people who desperately need it to send their kids to school, and I'm pretty sure you'll have an amazing time.

SCORING <Jazz Bug>

SEAN: Justin Francis. Responsible Travel dot com.

Amanda Lewellyn produced our show. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard fact checked. Mr. Rob Byers mixed.

But wait, there’s more: Avishay Artsy. Victoria Chamberlin. Hady Mawajdeh. Haleema Shah. Patrick Boyd. Miles Bryan. Supervising editor Amina Al-Sadi. The big boss, Miranda Kennedy. And the King.

We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder, who’s really lovin’ the robots right now.

Today, Explained is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox, which is totally free thanks in part to contributions from our listeners. Join us at vox.com/give.

*<CLIP> “EIGHTH GRADE”: Gucciii.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]