



## Overtourism and the climate crisis

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# 'It has had no impact': Venice's effort to curb overtourism fails to thin crowds

Gondolas jostle for space and tourists still crowd St Mark's Square, as critics argue piecemeal approach is fruitless

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**Angela Giuffrida** *in Venice*

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Carrying a pole with the Mexican flag clipped on top, this is Alejandro's first visit to Venice.

But the tour guide is unimpressed with the city's latest endeavour to counter excessive tourism by limiting group sizes and outlawing the use of loudspeakers. His contingent, just shy of the new maximum limit of 25, is trudging over a bridge towards St Mark's Square, seemingly more interested in taking selfies than absorbing the history lesson being delivered through their audio devices.

"I don't think it was a very smart move. For example, I have 24 people with me, the other 25 are over there," he said, pointing to a tour group a few metres in front. "It would be nicer to all be together - instead, the guide in the first group is doing the talking and I'm just making sure we don't lose each other."



■ 'It will change nothing': Venice residents protest against tourism entrance fee - video

The new restrictions, which took effect [on 1 August](#) and apply to Venice's main island as well as Murano, Burano and Torcello, are aimed at unclogging the city's narrow alleys and bringing the dwindling number of residents a smidgen of peace. Those who break the rules risk fines of between €25 and €500 (£21-£422).

Giulia, a guide from Venice, is standing in the baking sun by St Mark's Square, ushering people towards a boat which will take them on a tour of Murano and Burano. She is equally exasperated with the new restrictions.

"It's not easy to find guides to take care of more than one group - we have a busload of 50 tourists but only one guide," she said. "It's early days but, much like the entrance fee, I doubt it will change a thing."





📷 A small tourist group walks through St Mark's Square on 1 August, after the city limited the size of tours. Photograph: Stefano Mazzola/Getty Images

Venice, once the heart of a powerful maritime republic, has become the symbol of overtourism over the past decade, attracting roughly 30 million visitors a year, the vast majority coming just for the day. As it tries to reverse the trend, the city is now also seen by other global hotspots as a testing ground for measures designed to ease the pressure.

But critics argue the piecemeal approach adopted so far has been fruitless.

In April, Venice became the first major tourist hub in the world to charge people to enter, as part of an experiment aimed at dissuading day trippers. The €5 levy, which applied on 29 peak days and ended in July, was also an emergency response by local authorities to avoid the Unesco-heritage site being blacklisted.

According to data provided by the city's council, the fee was paid 485,000 times, raking in €2.4m (£1.89m) for the coffers, much more than expected. However, it was less successful at curbing the numbers. Still, officials are convinced the scheme, which they've described as a revolutionary tool for collating more precise data on visitor presence, could be the cure for their tourism problems, and so have hinted at doubling the fee when the initiative is renewed in 2025.



📷 The tourist tax helped prevent this crowded Unesco world heritage site being blacklisted. Photograph: Stefano Mazzola/Getty Images

Giovanni Andrea Martini, a Venice councillor for the opposition, is among its most prominent critics.

“It has had absolutely no impact,” he said. “In fact, we have data showing that, on certain days when the fee was in place, visitor numbers were 5,000 higher than on the same days in 2023. We knew it wouldn’t work – they were just desperate to appease Unesco.”

A fleet of 70 stewards were hired to police the measure, although authorities said very few fines were issued, if any. “There were no fines because they didn’t want to be taken to court,” claimed Martini, adding that many people came to the city without booking a ticket because they knew the risk of getting caught was low. “It just needed one court case to derail the whole scheme.”

While the fee was mostly embraced by tourists, it was bitterly contested by residents, many of whom believe the only real way to achieve more sustainable tourism would be to target the people who stay overnight by clamping down on short-term holiday lets and improving services for the year-round population, which in 2022 fell below 50,000 for the first time.

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“There is no control over things like Airbnb,” said Stefano Croce, vice-president of the tour guide association for Venice. “So many of my friends have left and our offspring are leaving, too.”



Protesters hold a banner reading 'No to tickets! Yes to houses and services for all' as they take part in a demonstration against the new Venice access fee. Photograph: Marco Bertorello/AFP/Getty Images

Meanwhile, scepticism over their leaders' capacity to tackle overtourism has deepened after the mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, was investigated last month over a corruption scandal that landed the city's transport chief in jail. Brugnaro has denied any wrongdoing.

There have been calls for the entire administration to resign. Martini said: “People are asking themselves: what are they doing with the money made from the entrance fee? And, if the council collapses, it is unlikely that the fee will be renewed next year.”

Despite the cynicism over the tour group regulations, Croce, whose association has about 100 members, said the measure has mostly been supported by local guides. “We actually proposed this measure in 2018,” he added. “Tour guides are often seen by Venetians as factors contributing to the problem, but we actually want tourism to be controlled and, if there are rules, we also work better.”

But, again, this is another measure that is difficult to police in a city packed with guides who come from all over the world, many of whom are unauthorised or just carry out tours in exchange for tips.

“They’re using Venice as a cash machine but, even worse than that, they know nothing about the city,” said Matteo Secchi, who leads Venessia.com, a residents’ activist group. “The other day, in Campo Sant’Angelo, I overheard one saying it was a mafia area, and the visitors were fascinated by this crap.”

Secchi welcomed the measure. “It might seem a bit illogical but we needed to do something to decongest the alleys - there were days when I couldn’t get to the supermarket as 100 people were blocking the way.”

But whether it makes a difference remains to be seen. “Venice is always like a guinea pig,” said Secchi. “Things get tested and then others watch to see if it works or not. But we need a global collaboration on these things and tourists need to be better educated and understand that they are also coming to a place where people live - there needs to be a reciprocal respect between the two.”

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