

Opinion **Life & Arts**

Europe's real tourist trap

The continent gets too much attention from the world to recognise its irrelevance

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A busy café terrace in Piazza San Marco, Venice © Bloomberg

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This is the first century in several that Europe won't shape. Even the 20th one, the "American" one, played out on the continent's world war battlefields and cold war frontline. The largest ideas, Einstein's and Keynes's, were conceived by Europeans in Europe. So were those experiments — Picasso's in painting, Joyce's in literature, Le Corbusier's in architecture — that we bunch under the name Modernism. European states had colonies well into the second half of the century, which brought discredit, but also clout.

All of which makes our present impotence sting a bit. Europe has a lack of major tech companies, a reduced share of world output and, as protectionism spreads, no hope of matching American or Chinese largesse on domestic industries. In a trading world, Europe had one superpower, the "Brussels effect", by which EU regulations became the de facto global standard. The fragmentation of trade could deprive Europe of even that vote on the shape of the future.

Now, at the risk of bathos: tell me about your summer break. It involves Europe, doesn't it?

I suggest these two things — the irrelevance of the continent, and the popularity of it — are linked. Because Europe commands the interest of the world without trying, it struggles to understand how marginal it has become, and to respond. It can count on levels of attention that other places must fight for. It can reap a level of income from visitors that is near-unique in the rich world. In 2019, the last pre-Covid year, tourism was 12 per cent of GDP in Spain, 8 in Portugal and 7 in Greece. No western nation outside Europe, save New Zealand, got to 3 per cent. Nor did Japan or (despite an airport that could be a destination itself) Singapore.

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Europe is forever sweet-talked — “You matter” — and not by tourists alone. Think of the wider cultural patronage it receives as the glamour continent. If a regime wants to sportswash itself, it acquires Paris Saint-Germain, not the Lakers. If a Chinese rural-dweller wants to advertise their ascent into urban affluence, LVMH products, not the US equivalents, are *de rigueur*. Europe should never shrink from these strengths. It would be crackers not to monetise its own prestige. But such mastery of the “soft” stuff might blind it to what is afoot in tech and other harder realms. The danger is that Europe becomes the geostrategic equivalent of a person too beautiful to ever need do or say anything interesting. It can be flattered into not noticing that the century is being authored elsewhere.

And so the phrase “tourist trap” acquires a new meaning. The entrapped aren’t the visitors. Yeah, smirk all you like when they order a “cross-ont” at the *pâtisserie* and overpay to boot. The locals are the ones with the problem, and the problem is a sort of lucrative stagnation.

Tourism is said to despoil places. But that can be managed. Venice has banned tour groups larger than 25. Barcelona has put up its tourist tax again. Europe could charge more without losing custom because, in the end, nowhere else can match it for sheer geographic compression of what we can only call good stuff. (I did Zurich to London in 75 minutes on a flight this year. I can’t do waking to exiting the bed in 75 minutes.)

No, the “blight” of tourism isn’t, or isn’t just, environmental. It is mental. It saps a place’s incentive to modernise. It rewards ossification. For a long time, theories have circulated as to why market reforms are so difficult to enact in Mediterranean Europe in particular. These include: some collectivist ethos in Catholicism (but then how to explain businesslike Bavaria?), weather so good as to induce a taste for leisure (what about Australia?) and high expectations of the welfare state (unlike Scandinavia?).

None of these explanations check out, quite. Doubtless, no single one ever could. But it matters that southern Europe can get a lot wrong in policy terms and still expect to be patronised, in at least one sense of that word, by outsiders bearing not just hard currency but ego-boosting attention. What an exorbitant privilege. And what a nice way to decline.

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Letters in response to this column:

How Europe avoids a 'Colonial Williamsburg' / From Ira Sohn, Emeritus Professor of Economics and Finance, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ, US

Europe's appeal beyond tourism needs a reboot / From Bijan Khezri, Unterägeri, Switzerland

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