Tourism and capacity:

Over-tourism -
What We Actually Know

In July 2024, several thousand people in Barcelona sprayed tourists sitting on restaurant terraces with water pistols. The photographs travelled around the world and became the symbol of a “revolt against tourism”. A year later the same march drew 600 people by police estimate. Over the same period a local survey found that only 9.8% of Barcelonans named tourism as the city’s main problem - and that share had fallen from the year before. This report is about precisely those questions: what we see in the headlines, what the numbers show, and which kinds of measures actually work on the problems tourism creates.

01 What over-tourism is

The term is new. The tourism trade publication Skift coined the word “overtourism” in 2016, and within roughly eight years it had settled into the political vocabulary of European cities. The phenomenon itself is of course older - Venice has been arguing about visitor numbers since the 1980s. What is new is that the problem was given a specific name, and that political decisions began to be taken in that name.

Over-tourism is not a single phenomenon but a shared name for three different problems, each with a different cause.

The first is crowding. This is what visitors and residents feel directly: a full street, a queue, noise, overloaded transport. What matters is that this problem is extremely local - it exists on a particular street, in particular months, often at particular hours. At the level of a whole country, or even a whole city, it is almost never visible.

The second is pressure on housing costs. When flats move from long-term letting into short-term rental, rents rise for residents. This is the one channel where the link between tourism and a resident’s everyday costs has been firmly established.

The third is infrastructure overload: water, sewerage, waste, roads. This is essentially a question of investment and planning rather than of visitor numbers. A city that did not build the infrastructure will be overwhelmed by numbers that another city absorbs without noticing.

The academic literature had a single concept for measuring all three - “tourist carrying capacity”, the threshold beyond which a place is damaged. The idea appeared in the 1960s and never became a practical policy instrument.

02 Venice

Venice is the symbol of this debate and probably its most useful example. In April 2024 the city became the first in the world to introduce an entry fee for day visitors to the historic centre - €5, on peak days.

The first year looked like this: 29 days, 485,000 payments, roughly €2.43 million in revenue. The city judged the measure a success and extended it in 2025 to 54 days with a double tariff - €5 with advance booking, €10 without. Revenue in 2025 reached €5.42 million.

There is one problem: visitor numbers did not fall. According to an analysis by Jan van der Borg, professor of tourism economics at Ca' Foscari University, roughly 7,000 more visitors entered Venice on the charged days of 2024 than on the same days in 2023.

> **"The fee has had no effect - it is absolutely useless in terms of any possible reduction of the flow."**
>
> *Jan van der Borg, Ca' Foscari University, Venice*

Why? First, the sum is far too small. Five euros is invisible against the cost of a trip for someone who has already decided to come to Venice. Second, the fee is not a limit. Whoever pays, enters. The more people arrive, the more people pay. The system raises revenue; it does not restrict the flow.

The result of the past three years is that Venice's fee was announced as a flow-management instrument, yet it has settled into being an instrument of budget and data collection. Of the 2025 revenue, at least €1.5 million went towards reducing the waste tax paid by residents. That is of course an entirely legitimate purpose — it is simply a different one.

03 Barcelona

Barcelona is the media portrait of this subject. It was here that the water-pistol protest took place in July 2024 and travelled through the world's press. It was here that Mayor Jaume Collboni announced the same summer that every tourist-flat licence in the city would be cancelled by 2028.

The scale of the protest needs clarifying. The July 2024 march drew roughly 3,000 people - 0.18% of a city of 1.66 million. The same march in June 2025 drew 600 by police estimate. This does not mean discontent does not exist. It means a photograph and a scale are not the same thing.

The city's own survey is more interesting.

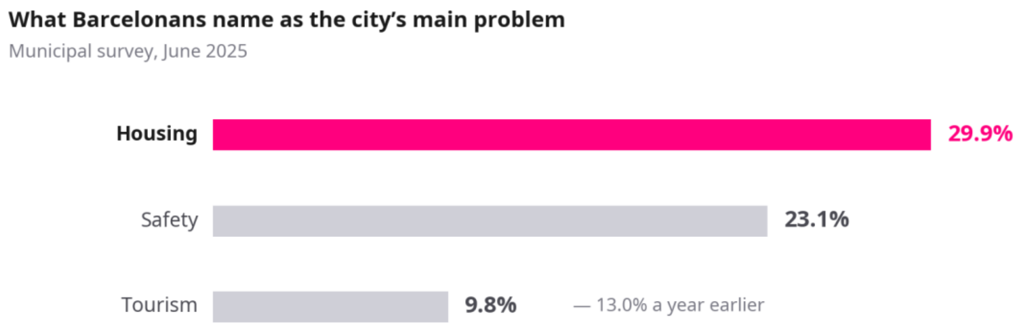

Figure 1. Barcelona municipal survey, June 2025.

Tourism ranks third among the city's problems and its share is falling - from 13.0% the previous year to 9.8%. Housing ranks first, and its share is rising. At the same time, 73.4% of the population of the Barcelona region view tourism positively, while 75% support legal limits on tourist accommodation.

Taken together, those two figures mean one thing: the Barcelona position is not anti-tourist. People are not troubled by the fact that a tourist arrives; they are troubled by the fact that a flat they could have lived in is being rented to one.

The measure itself is the most radical any large city has adopted: the complete cancellation of 10,101 tourist-flat licences. Spain's Constitutional Court upheld it in March 2025.

Barcelona has other measures too, and some of them are more effective than they are loud: a reduction in cruise terminals agreed with the port and - the most ingenious - the removal of bus route 116 from digital maps, so that tourists heading for Park Güell would stop filling up the locals' bus.

04 Amsterdam

Amsterdam is most often cited as the city that set a "ceiling" on visitors. A decision taken in 2021 held that the city should have no more than 20 million overnight stays a year. That figure appeared in hundreds of articles as the first case of a major European city placing a quantitative limit on tourism.

In February 2026, in the course of a court dispute, the city administration stated that this limit had never been legally enforceable. It was a political objective, not a rule. In 2025 Amsterdam recorded 23.7 million overnight stays.

Amsterdam has the highest tourist tax in Europe - 12.5%. Visitor numbers are rising anyway. This is one more confirmation of the same observation: price does not restrict the flow.

And yet Amsterdam does have one measure that worked. The city cut the number of cruise-ship calls from 190 a year to a maximum of 100.

The ban on building new hotels works on the same logic, though its effect will appear only years from now and is weakened by the 26 permits already issued.

05 Japan and Mount Fuji

Mount Fuji is the most important example in this report, because it is the only one where the effect of a measure was recorded by independent instruments and the result is unambiguous.

The problem was specific. Climbing the mountain was free and unrestricted, and the practice the Japanese call "bullet climbing" - climbing through the night without resting in a hut - put a burden on the rescue service every season.

From the 2024 season Yamanashi Prefecture introduced three things at once on the Yoshida trail: a daily limit of 4,000 people, compulsory advance booking with a fee, and closure of the gate after a certain evening hour for anyone without a hut reservation.

The results: the number of climbers fell from roughly 200,000 to 178,000, a drop of 14%. Rescue operations fell from 64 to 36. Deaths fell from six to zero. "Bullet climbing" was practically eliminated.

Why did it work here when it did not work in Venice? Three differences. First, this is a quantitative limit and not a price: the 4,001st person does not climb, however much they are willing to pay. Second, there is a physical control point: the trail has one gate. Third, the alternative is costly: switching to another trail is longer and harder.

Japan's other measures do not repeat that clarity. From March 2026 Kyoto introduced the highest accommodation tax in the world, but it is openly intended to cover costs rather than to reduce the flow.

06 The Canaries, the Balearics and the gap between announced and adopted

The Spanish islands saw the largest anti-tourism mobilisation ever recorded. On 20 April 2024 simultaneous marches were held across the Canary Islands under the slogan "The Canaries have a limit".

Estimates of the size of these protests often disagree: organisers spoke of 200,000 participants on the 20 April march, while in the Balearics organisers put the July march in Palma at 50,000 and the island government at 12,000. The same event, entirely different numbers.

For wider context: a YouGov survey in August 2024, at the peak of the protests, found that 32% of Spaniards, 16% of Italians and 7% of Britons thought the number of tourists was "far too high".

As for the outcome - both archipelagos went on setting arrival records throughout 2025.

The Balearic story is particularly instructive. In March 2025 the government announced a package: a higher eco-tax, a tax on rental cars, and a freeze on accommodation places. Two months later, in May 2025, parliament removed the tax increases. Only the freeze on places remained.

This is one of the most durable regularities in the field: the gap between the measure announced and the measure adopted is large, and what survives to the end is usually the softest measure of the set.

07 Bhutan and the price experiment

In 2022 Bhutan raised its “Sustainable Development Fee” from $65 to $200 per night. Arrivals fell to roughly 26% of the 2019 level. This is the only case in this report where a price unambiguously reduced the flow.

A year later the government halved the fee.

Those two sentences together describe the central constraint of this field: a price high enough to work is also high enough to be politically unsustainable.

The 2021 study by Heffer-Flaata and co-authors, based on 13,071 observations, measures the price elasticity of tourism demand - that is, how far visitor numbers fall for a one-per-cent increase in price.

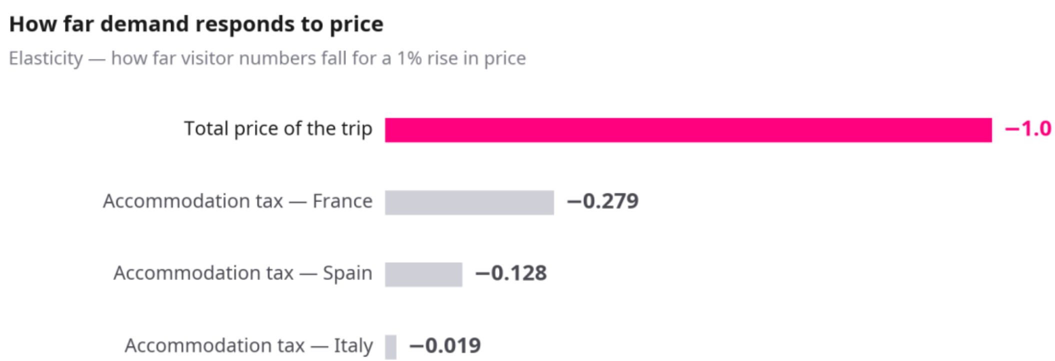

Figure 2. The total price of a trip and an accommodation tax — two entirely different orders of magnitude.

Elasticity with respect to the total price of a trip is roughly one: if a trip becomes 10% more expensive, demand falls by about 10%. But an accommodation tax is a small part of the total price of a trip, and its elasticity is correspondingly small: −0.019 in Italy, −0.128 in Spain, −0.279 in France.

The Italian figure translates into practical language like this: cutting visitor numbers by 20% would require raising the tax roughly tenfold. That is exactly why Venice’s five euros did not work, and exactly why Bhutan’s $200 did.

08 Short-term rentals and housing

This is the one channel where the link between tourism and a resident’s costs has been established by rigorous research. The numbers here are smaller than the debate suggests - but more real than the sceptics allow.

A study covering the 100 largest US metropolitan areas found that a 1% rise in Airbnb listings raises rents by roughly 0.018% - enough to explain about a fifth of American rent growth over that period. In Barcelona the effect is considerably larger - rents +1.9%, and +7% in the busiest neighbourhoods - not because the mechanism is different, but because the number of listings there grew far more.

The clearest case is New York, where short-term rentals were sharply restricted from September 2023.

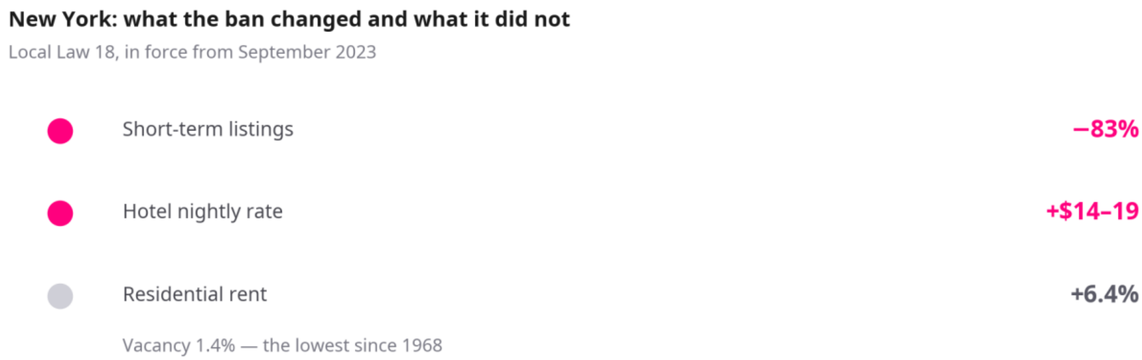

Figure 3. The measured results of New York's short-term rental ban.

The number of listings fell by 83%. But rents did not fall - vacancy is at its lowest level since 1968, and median Manhattan rent rose by 6.4%. What did rise was the price of hotels, by an additional $2.1–2.9 billion over eighteen months.

Santa Monica and San Francisco show much the same picture: listings fall, the effect on rents is minimal. The reason is scale - short-term rentals were less than one per cent of New York's housing stock, and in the same year the city completed almost twice as many new flats as the entire banned sector amounted to.

This does not mean the problem does not exist - 68% of Barcelona's tourist flats are in central neighbourhoods. And there is one under-appreciated consequence: the restriction falls hardest on cheap and independent hotels, because rising hotel prices make them the most expensive in relative terms.

Berlin, Amsterdam and Portugal have since partially reversed some of their restrictions - often because they were introduced without studying the consequences first.

09 What works and what does not

If we sort every measure discussed here by a single question — did it actually reduce the load — the picture becomes unexpectedly clear.

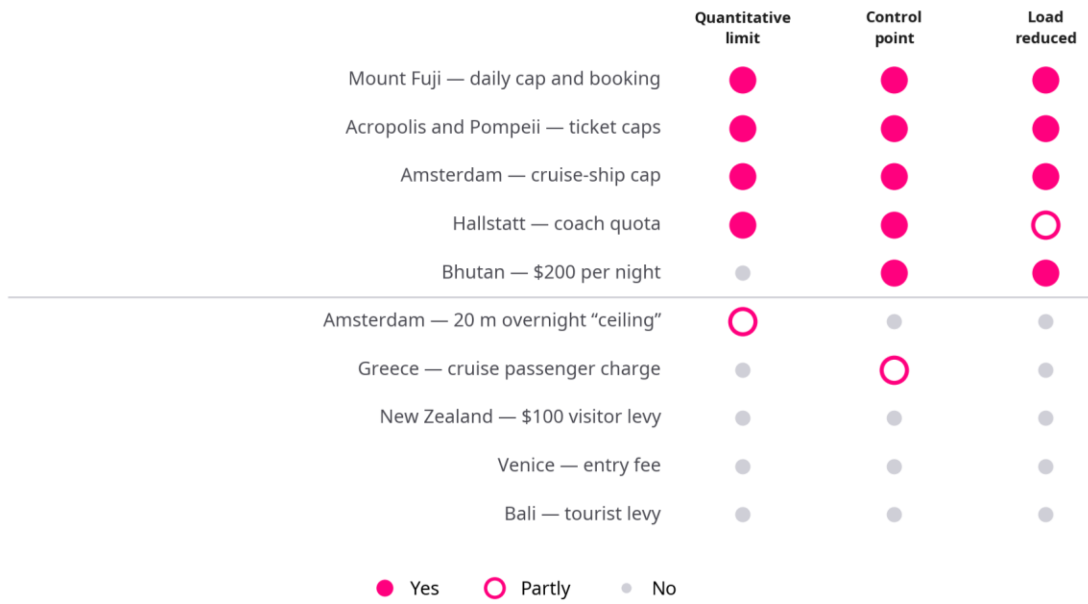

Figure 4. Measures sorted by whether each has a quantitative limit, a control point and a measured result.

Every measure above the line contains a quantitative limit. Almost every measure below it is a price alone. That is not a coincidence.

A limit and a price are different instruments. A limit says "no more will come in"; a price says "whoever pays comes in". The figures in chapter 07 show that any price below about $100 practically does not change the flow. And even a limit works only where there is physical control of entry - a trail gate, a turnstile, a port. Venice has no such perimeter; in Bali, payment is not linked to crossing a border at all.

An unevenly applied charge does not reduce the flow either - it redistributes it. In Greece the expensive tariff on Santorini and Mykonos simply moved visitors to other islands. And the most uncomfortable point: the more effective a measure is, the harder it is to sustain politically - Bhutan is the clearest example.

Almost every measure exempts residents and workers - politically necessary, but precisely what weakens the effect. And the greatest potential lies not in a charge at all, but in limiting the number of beds - cancelling licences, banning construction - although its results will only appear in the 2030s.

Finally, a point of terminological clarity: most tourist taxes are instruments for covering costs rather than for managing demand, as Kyoto, New Zealand, Norway and Iceland openly acknowledge. Presenting such a tax as over-tourism policy is simply wrong.

10 Georgia

Georgia differs from every previous chapter of this report in one important respect: none of the instruments of over-tourism policy exists here. No tourist tax, no accommodation charge, no entry fee, no quantitative limit, no registration, licensing or night-cap for short-term rentals, and no data-sharing obligation for platforms.

Begin with the fact that the very figure the discussion rests on is a double one.

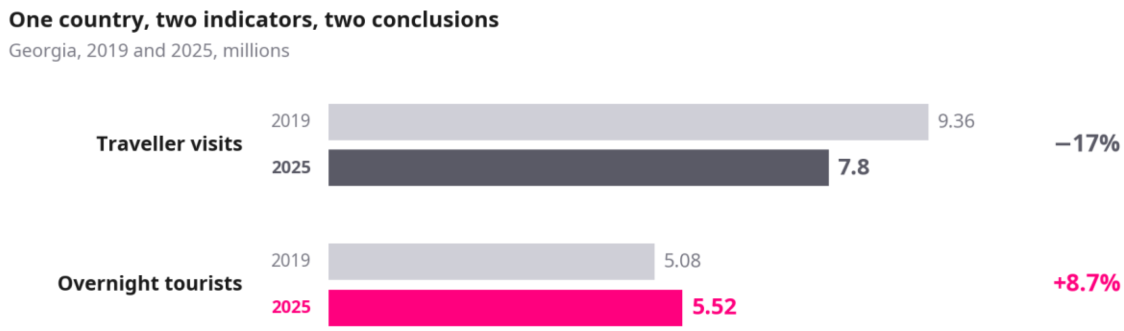

Figure 5. Two official indicators for the same years. Source: Georgian National Tourism Administration and Geostat.

Counting border crossings, Georgia in 2025 was roughly 17% below its 2019 peak. Counting overnight tourists, it was 8.7% above that peak. Both figures are official. Announcements of a "record year" always use the second.

And here is what almost no one is discussing yet: in the first half of 2026, traveller visits fell by 3.3% and revenue by 2%. In the second quarter visits fell by 4.9%, and visitor spending in lari, according to Geostat, by 13.3%. This is the first decline since 2020, and it began before the summer.

The second significant change is geographical. In 2019, 54.6% of visits went to Tbilisi; in 2025 the figure was 33%. The mountain periphery, by contrast, is growing fast. And it is here that the indicator appears which shows Georgia's real over-tourism pressure point - and it is not Tbilisi.

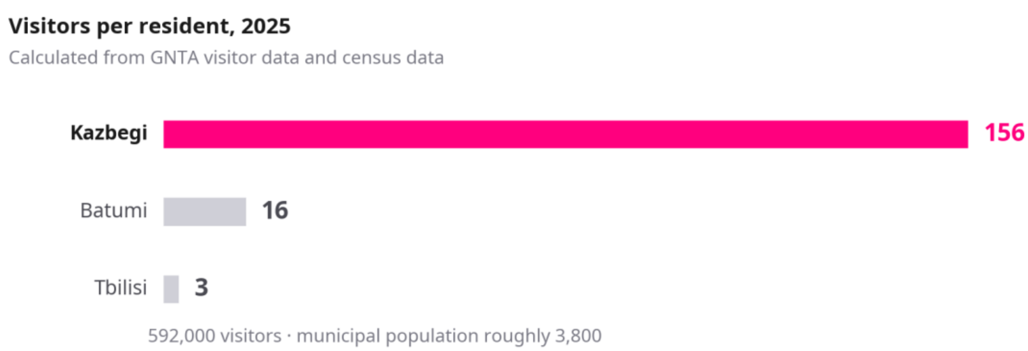

Figure 6. Visitors per resident. Calculated from visitor and census data.

Kazbegi municipality received roughly 592,000 visitors in 2025, and its population is about 3,800. That is roughly 156 visitors per resident - in the same range as the historic centre of Venice and Hallstatt. The population of Stepantsminda is meanwhile falling: from 1,783 people in 2002 to 1,326 in 2014. Since the calculation rests on the 2014 census, the real ratio is probably higher. Kazbegi grew by a further 16% in 2025, and the Kvesheti–Kobi tunnel and the Kobi–Gudauri cable car will increase that flow further.

At the same time the indicator the 2015 strategy was written to improve is getting worse. Spending per visit was 2,187 lari in 2025 - 1.1% less than the year before; in the second quarter of 2026 it was 1,922 lari, 9.2% less than the same period a year earlier. Occupancy in Tbilisi hotels is rising while the average rate is falling. The "value instead of volume" strategy has produced exactly the opposite result: more visitors, each of them worth less.

One further detail explains the whole picture: roughly 80% of 2025 visits were repeat visits, and only 6.4% involved a tour operator. This is not the profile of a leisure destination. It is the profile of regional cross-border movement with a tourism marketing budget attached to it.

The labour side is weak too. In 2024 the accommodation and food sector paid an average of 1,554 lari against a national average of 2,218 - that is, 70%. Batumi's seasonal workforce is largely informal, without contracts or social insurance. Some 65.5% of hotels are registered as individual entrepreneurs.

Batumi is a case of its own. The city is building micro-flats of 26–50 square metres on a mass scale, designed precisely for short-term rental income; 60–70% of sales go to investors. Batumi's short-term stock earns roughly 80% of its annual revenue in two months. This is a housing stock fitted to a two-month season in a city of 160,000.

> **The state measures tourist satisfaction - 93% and has never once measured the satisfaction of residents.**

This is not a rhetorical remark. There is no survey at all of public attitudes towards tourism in Georgia. The only solid data concern Russian citizens, and they are stark: a 2023 CRRC survey found 81% of respondents opposed to selling real estate to Russian citizens. Importantly, that position follows the housing channel rather than the tourism one: in April 2022 rents rose 71.6% year on year, then fell by 10–12% a year in 2025–2026. Prices normalised; the political residue remained.

Finally, one observation about heritage that explains this subject particularly well. In Ushguli a traditional Svan roof costs 10,000–15,000 lari, a sheet-metal one about 1,000. It is that ten- to fifteen-fold difference, and not ignorance, that is changing the appearance of a World Heritage site. The 2017 moratorium did not stop the process.

11 Conclusions

One, the most practical: what works is a limit, not a price. Every measure with a measured reduction in load contains a quantitative limit at a physical control point.

Two: a tourist tax is not over-tourism policy. It is an instrument of municipal finance, and most cities say so openly.

Three: public discontent is predominantly about housing, not about visitors. A measure that reduces visitors without touching housing cannot solve the problem.

Four: restricting short-term rentals rarely resolves a housing crisis. The effect is real but small.

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