CITY LIMITS

THE DESTINATION CITIES ISSUE

WAKEY-WAKEY CITIES OF THE WORLD

TOURISM REFASHIONED

FINDING CALIFORNIA IN CHINA

TIKTOK TRAVEL

HOME STAYS & THE CULTURE OF SHARING

CROWD DNA
We’re careful right now not to label everything as post-pandemic. After all, for many the hardship goes on. But, in a way barely entertained for the last two years, actually travelling to another city is back in consideration.

Meaning this felt the right time to turn the attention of City Limits - our ongoing exploration of the ever-changing urban experience - less to the places we live in and more to those we visit.

And so the Crowd DNA team have been busy making sense of the new-found appreciation of tourists that some cities are cultivating (distance makes the heart grow fonder). The refreshingly different types of relationship now forming between visitor and destination, often with sustainability as the guiding principle. Elsewhere, we follow the digital nomads to Dali, and pause to consider what Instagram and TikTok are doing to the way we explore. The home share trend gets a look over as well, as do some of the lamest places in Texas. And we send you postcards loaded with stories of traffic, pizza, cannabis, risking it all in 4x4s, and miscellaneous chocolate spreads.

While we start planning for volume nine of City Limits, we hope you enjoy everything we’ve packed into this one. And if you’d like to hear more about our own work in areas such as tourism, travel, hospitality and placemaking, we’d love to hear from you.

Andy Crysell, Crowd DNA Founder
The Big Hitters

Despite the tectonic shakeups of late, things are staying relatively steady at the top among the tourist destination big hitters. Paris has been the best performer over the course of the pandemic. The city of love maintained a reduced yet steady flow of tourism from East Asia and the Americas, while travel from Britain, a major source of tourism, was significantly reduced.

The theme park capital of the world, Orlando, Florida, saw a significant jump up eight places, with the likes of Walt Disney World and Legoland attracting millions, perhaps aided by the state’s reluctance to enforce full lockdowns.

But it is in China that we see the most radical change, where a wholesale reversal has taken place. While the cultural city of Shanghai saw a respectable (all things considered) 6.1 million international arrivals in 2021, this is compared to an astounding 155.2 million domestic tourists. Out of necessity, staycations have grown into big business all over the world. But in China it’s off the charts, with the already surging sense of domestic pride in the country accelerated by international travel restrictions. The Covid epicentre city of Wuhan is, strangely enough, the latest on the list of top urban spots for Chinese domestic travellers. Once a no-go city, now the hero city, is Covid-tourism a trend we’re going to see more of in the coming years?

Top 10 Cities For Tourism Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Rank 2021</th>
<th>Rank Change 2020-2021</th>
<th>International Arrivals (millions)</th>
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Source: Euromonitor International Note: F=Forecast
The Greener Destination

Sustainability concerns were big before the pandemic and have only been accelerated by it. In this respect, European cities dominate; with only Melbourne from outside Europe creeping in at number ten. The Green New Deal is the likely cause: a pan-European incentive for cities to invest in green transformation, emission reduction and CO2 removal. The aim is for the entire region to become carbon neutral by 2050. As we will see later in this issue, ecotourism is on the rise as people use their holidays to experience and learn how to create a more sustainable future.

Top 10 Cities For Sustainability

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<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Tallinn</td>
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<td>Prague</td>
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Source: Euromonitor International

Top 10 Cities For Health and Safety

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<tr>
<td>Vienna</td>
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Source: Euromonitor International

So Who’s Keeping It ‘Health And Safety’?

Following the pandemic, health and safety is gaining sway in travel planning choices. European destinations (with relatively low vaccine uptake) score in the lower levels of the top ten. By comparison, Singapore, with one of the world’s highest levels of vaccination - 96% of its population - takes the top spot.

Due to the varying degrees of enthusiasm country to country for inoculations, the Health & Safety table has seen a big reshuffle. Every destination city on the list has made significant gains to make the top ten - particularly in the case of Vienna, which has shifted a whopping 38 places! The Middle East, UAE and Saudi have also undertaken a thorough vaccination program, which is paying off in terms of its attractiveness to visitors. In China, it’s being widely reported that Chinese nationals now consider European and American cities unsafe to visit due to vaccination rates and comparatively lax lockdown policies. Health and safety concerns look to remain a deciding factor in destination cities for visitors in the upcoming years.
For a brief window in the summer of 2021, when museums were open but international travel was not, city dwellers found themselves ambling through the empty rooms of world-class galleries that normally pack in thousands of tourists a day.

Without the crowds, the visitor experience improved dramatically. But now those days are gone (hopefully for good), what are the lasting effects of this eerie interlude?
THE GREAT LOCALISATION

2021 saw New Yorkers find themselves alone in one of the world’s most famous destination cities. Journalist Adam Sandbergh for the New York Times described a ‘glorious’ time where locals felt the city’s museums belonged to them. It was a summer when locals could rediscover a city they had learnt to love long ago and feared they’d lost. Visiting The Bronx Zoo felt, Sandbergh described, like ‘perambulating your own private nature reserve’. But, while many New Yorkers enjoyed this eerie interlude, they acknowledged its unsustainability.

This period of downtime awakened a newfound appreciation for tourists, the madness of their crowds, not to mention the revenue. At its peak in 2019, tourism brought in $80 billion dollars to the city’s economy. Covid has reminded residents that their destination cities were built to be seen by the world.

Visitor numbers aren’t expected to be back to 2019 levels until 2024, but for those who do go, they’ll find a Big Apple that’s changed. Alfresco dining has grown meteorically in New York, as it has in other cities, with over 10,000 new open air venues opening up.

The Association Of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) in London described 2021 as a ‘phenomenal’ year for culture, despite - but also because of - dramatic declines in the number of visitors. Londoners strengthened their bond to the cultural institutions of their city. This is predicted to boost local pride with an increased sense of ownership that will not only make the tourism industry more resilient in the future, but also more attractive to outsiders.

But this is all part, paradoxically, of a drive to improve the experience of Barcelona for the tourists. A campaign was launched (in Catalan, Spanish and English), ‘Barcelona like never before’, that emphasised the city’s cleanliness and serenity, free from choking, midsummer crowds; essentials in the post-Covid appetite for space and ventilation. The council say this campaign is targeting ‘high quality tourists’, who are there to immerse themselves in local culture, rather than just drink and sunbathe.

Where before, tourism in Barcelona felt like an uncontrollable beast, an unstoppable cycle that saw rents soar and quality of life plummet, it is now seen as something that can be channelled and strategised.

THE FLIP SIDE

But will this tourism rebuild come at a cost for the average consumer? Potentially it will lead to destination cities like Barcelona becoming only accessible to wealthy tourists, as part of a wholesale premiumisation drive. Barcelona’s mayor admitted they’re after a different ‘class’ of tourist, wealthy visitors, whose spend is 30% higher than the average.

A similar strategy is in effect elsewhere. In an attempt to boost post-Covid recovery, the Japanese ministry of tourism has simplified legislation governing super yachts and private jets, with the hope of attracting some of the globe’s high-net-worth visitors. Iceland has made comparable steps. Indeed, some predict that wealthy millennials looking for luxury retreats to be the main driver of the tourism recovery in 2022 and beyond. The trend is heading away from ‘the more tourists the better’ to ‘deeper pockets, less tourists’.

AN EMERGENT MUTUAL RESPECT

The important thing for brands to know is that, while Covid was disastrous for the tourism industry, there is also a sense that what came before had been too much. Covid has been a chance to rebuild the industry with a greater sense of mutual respect between visitors and residents.

We’re seeing this being put into action most concretely in the wonderful destination city of Barcelona. In 2021, in an attempt to reduce the mass of tourists that asphyxiate the city centre, mayor Ada Colau effectively banned homeowners from renting out individual rooms on Airbnb. This was accompanied by a €21 million state grant for the transformation of commercial spaces into businesses catering for local needs. It’s not the policy you’d expect during the latter days of a pandemic that has shattered the economy...
Is Sustainable Travel A Myth?

‘Sustainable travel’ is increasingly seen for what it most often is: a contradiction in terms. As Responsible Travel, a UK-based operator states, ‘the minute you switch on any engine, to get to the airport, ferry port or railway station, your sustainability metre starts ticking’. So what’s the solution? Stay put? Wait for the day we can WhatsApp our holograms to Rio and back?

While sustainable travel may be a 21st Century oxymoron, innovative destination cities can be powerful role models for green urban innovation, educating visitors in new modes of sustainable city living. Experiments in design, architecture, materials and infrastructure act as emissaries of a new era of responsibility, informing both our ways of travelling and living.

As a result, destination cities are attractive locations for corporations and governments to showcase their commitment to sustainability, while being supported by revenue brought in by tourism

So yes, it may be that sustainable travel should be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism, but let’s not consign it to the pile of green-washing fads just yet. Instead we should recognise its benefits as ecotourism - travel that will inevitably start the metre ticking, but will also expand our understanding of what a green future looks like. Travel brands and businesses must steer well clear of the greenwashing trap and avoid making insubstantial claims that consumers see through. Ecotourism should be promoted as a kind of travel that, on an individual level, may result in emission, but on a structural level, can widen horizons and support a sustainable future for the planet.
Gothenburg

Sweden’s second city by population, Gothenburg is the winner of the European Capital Of Smart Tourism Award in 2021 and has been placed top of the world’s most sustainable cities according to the Global Destination Sustainability Index for the last four years. Not surprisingly, to win this accolade the city is a hotbed of initiatives to make it a world-leading destination city for sustainable practice. Travelling and eating in the city is already a responsible endeavour, given that over half of the city’s public transport energy comes from renewable sources; and all meat served in the city must be organically raised. For those looking for a truly Swedish past-time, the sauna experience in the reclaimed industrial land of Frihamnen is a must-visit. Made from recycled sheets of steel and locally grown larch wood on the interior, the three-level sauna on stilts looks over Gothenburg Harbour and the gender-neutral changing rooms and shower are made from 12,000 recycled bottles.

Reykjavik

Placed fifth on the global destination sustainability index, Iceland’s capital is home to almost 40% of Icelanders and has several ambitious initiatives for its sustainability goals. Included in this is a design for Iceland’s ‘largest wooden building’, which will be a mixed use space on the site of an old landfill site. Where once the land was polluted and mistreated, the newly designed structure will be multipurpose, providing accommodation for students and young people alongside workspaces and local shops. To help navigate your trip in a responsible way, look out for the Vakinn certification, launched by the Icelandic Tourism Board. It recognises hotels and tour operators practicing in a safe, ethical and environmentally sustainable way.

Bali

If getting on a plane to escape-it-all is more your thing, look for certified carbon off-set programmes like the Verified Carbon Standard or Gold Standard to compensate for the emissions of flying. Touching down in the upmarket venue of Dasa Potato Head in Bali is an impressive showcase for how responsible practices don’t have to mean compromising on style and experience. Guests at the beach club and hotel are provided a zero-waste kit, including a reusable cup and bag to encourage refills and discourage plastic use. Around the resort, upcycled materials make up the building’s flooring and furniture; and the restaurant works with local residents and artisans to create a positive impact on the immediate communities.

What Is Ecotourism?

The term ‘ecotourism’ is not new. It originated in the ‘80s as a reaction to a globalisation of the tourism industry that saw large resort-style developments bulldoze their way across Europe, the Americas and other popular holiday destinations. Fast-forward a few decades and ecotourism is now defined, according to the International Ecotourism Society, as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education’.

What’s notable about this definition is the absence of any claims to carbon neutrality. It is about much more than energy. Ecotourism is a type of travel that looks to preserve local cultures, in a way that is, importantly, educational for both the tourists and hosts. Ecotourism of destination cities involves weighing up the gains and losses across a number of different factors, which include: culture, well-being, education, energy and nature.

Here we spotlight three different destination cities, unpacking their ecotourism credentials. Not only are they fantastically enjoyable, sometimes luxurious, cities to visit, they contain inspiring ways of life that prioritise responsibility above all else.
Why we chose Dali? It’s the best place for digital nomads in China,” says Daniel Ng smiling from behind his desk. “Every big city is the same: you have the same streets, the same subways. But Dali is unique.”

In 2019, Ng and a group of friends rented a car and drove around southern China to find the perfect base. They moved from city to city, staying in each place for two or three weeks at a time. “We tried Quanzhou, Xiamen, Hainan, Guanlin, Chongqing and Chengdu. But the weather isn’t perfect there.”

Digital nomads are defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as people ‘who earn a living working online in various locations of their choosing’. Building a base for digital nomads seems somewhat conflicting, but that is exactly what Ng and his friends decided to do.

The project is called Dali Hub, a co-working and meeting space dedicated to the small, but growing community of digital nomads that have made Dali their (temporary) home. It comes complete with an attractive water feature, ping-pong table, drum kit, movie area and even a ballroom for parties. Its crisp white walls and minimalist kitchen decor would not be amiss in London’s Silicon Roundabout.

There were lots of factors that Ng and his friends had to consider. Good weather and scenery were an obvious must, as was the cost of living. But size and reputation were also important to them. “If the place is too small, there are not many choices for entertainment. You don’t have enough of the things that you want to enjoy,” he says. “And it also has to be well-known, so people will come.”

Dali is in Yunnan, a southwestern province in China that borders Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. Much like its neighbours to the east, it is blessed with temperate weather all year round. It’s a place of natural abundance; flanked by a wall of evergreen mountains to the west, and, to the east, Erhai Lake, one of China’s largest freshwater lakes that winds along the villages nestled on its shores.

The ancient walled town is a major tourist destination. Its cobbled streets, temples and ancient city walls are relics of bygone times; kingdoms, invasions and trade routes stretching all the way to Peshawar. Dali is home to the Bai and Yi ethnic minorities who settled around 1,300 years ago. Much of their language, tradition and religion continue to thrive, making Dali all the more distinct - and popular - as a destination. During the May 2021 holidays, 90,000 visitors came every day, doubling the town’s population of 40,000 residents.

Some of those visitors decided to stay. By 2019, around 40,000 newcomers were living in Dali city. The ‘new Dali people’ are largely middle-income earners who were tired of urban life. Some of them arrived as young families, others were artists or musicians who could no longer afford studio spaces. “The changes they brought were beautiful,” says Mei Zhang, founder of travel service, Wild China. “They appreciate the local architecture and bring out the beauty of Dali even more.”

Crowd DNA’s Judy Lei Boyd investigates the small Chinese destination city that digital nomads love to call home (for a bit…)
Zhang lived in Dali until the age of ten, but back then she didn’t care much for her hometown. “I never saw an opportunity there, even though there was the beauty of the lake and mountains. I used to look at those mountains and wanted to know what was beyond the clouds.”

Zhang’s journey led her all the way to Harvard, Hong Kong and Silicon Valley. When she returned to Dali in 2011, she had a new appreciation for the mountains she once wished to leave behind. “It was one of the most stunning places scenic-wise. Its way of life is simply alluring. And I wasn’t alone in being seduced.”

The new Dali people opened hostels, bars and bookshops, and slowly transformed the face and feel of Dali. A crumbling bedsheet factory was turned into artist studios, dilapidated Bai houses have been refurbished and turned into cafes, and there are co-working spaces dotted around town. There’s a range of local craft beers and ‘a flat white that makes you swear you’re in Melbourne, or at least Sydney’, according to the Lonely Planet.

Zhang laughs when I ask her about Dali’s new nickname, ‘Dalifornia’. She was one of the first to draw the comparison. “It reminded me of California. The way of living with the land is very close,” says Zhang. “Berkeley weather is actually very similar. You get the same flowers, the same vegetation. It’s a new frontier land of opportunity. People are more conscious of sustainable lifestyles and have a passion for pursuing the artisanal way of living. The similarities are endless.”

This mix of local aesthetics and city comforts is ideal for digital nomads who want to escape the city but crave its creature comforts. New Dali people also make for a rich community for digital nomads to tap into, one with distinct urban sensibilities. “There were flea markets, organic-themed events, and so much more. And there is little judgement. It doesn’t matter if you’re a businessman or a hippy. There is an open vibe, which is pretty rare in China,” says Fu Ye, co-founder of Dali Hub and an online English tutor.

Covid’s disruptive impact on people’s lives, and a normalisation of remote work, have helped to popularise the nomad lifestyle. Chinese language entries for ‘digital nomad’, ‘shuzi youmin’ in Pinyin, have nearly doubled online since 2019.

“At a digital nomad in China takes balls,” says Dora Sun, a vlogger and former Dali Hub member. “You need courage because you’re going against the grain of so many things. In Shenzhen and everywhere you get the sense that the economy is pushed by real estate. To live comfortably is nearly inconceivable in that kind of environment.”

There is a strong pressure to earn well, especially on men. Sun found there was a gender imbalance of 3:1 between female and male Chinese nomads in her circles: “It’s definitely easier to become a digital nomad as a woman, as it’s not as important to have a property.” You also need a certain access to affluence. Frankly, if you can’t afford to put food on the table you won’t be thinking about freedom, so you need to be super focused.” Most nomads return to city life after two or three months.

As the bars in Dali are emptying and the stores are closing down for the winter months, Daniel Ng and his group of digital nomads are also moving on. Their next destination is Hainan, the smallest and southernmost province of China. It’s an island famed for its sandy beaches and tropical climate. December temperatures hover around 28 degrees. Ng plans to return to Dali in spring. “We digital nomads are like wild birds - we just fly to where it’s warmer.”
The degree that social media has affected the world around us can’t be overstated. It shapes our aspirations and our social circles. This monumental shift is also changing cities and why we visit them.

**THE PLACE-MAKING POWER OF THE ‘GRAM**

‘Doing it for the gram’ has grown for many to be an acceptable motivation for doing anything, even visiting a city. And where people used to travel to see the sights, now, with Instagram, many are travelling to be seen at them.

The trend gained notoriety in 2016, when an innocuous pool in one of Marrakech’s Riads started making headlines for the amount of selfies taken at it. The pool in question had gone viral after it being snapped endlessly on Instagram by holiday makers and influencers, prompting headlines in the press like: ‘It’s That Damn Pool Again!’ And consequently even more photos. Through the power of sharing, the hotel pool in Morocco became one of the city’s must-see attractions, visited by thousands, an essential destination.

The news bubble highlighted a shift in culture. For some travellers, the necessity of a city’s Instagrammability ruled above all else. Before, cities had been Instagrammable by virtue of their significance in guide books. Now it was the social media influencers that made places.

Some cities have capitalised on this human desire. Walking tours with prefabbed photo opps sprung up. Airbnb offers a dropdown menu of photogenic options, including: ‘Windmills’, ‘Ryokans’ and ‘Campervans’. The Museum Of Ice Cream (New York) and The Colour Experience (Bradford, England) are famed for providing the perfect poppy backdrop. And exhibitions like the Tate’s Van Gogh were designed with shareability in mind.

Not all citizens are happy about their homes developing Instagram fame. Residents of some of the most naturally picturesque cities are frustrated by tourists flocking to their neighbourhoods for a photoshoot. Yet, with economies that rest heavily on tourism revenue, residents remain begrudgingly dependent on them. It is a sensitive tension to negotiate, one that might require unlikely solutions; could famous backdrops be created away from residents’ homes; maybe the next cultural destination is a venue that collects the city’s famous locations all in one place?
ACCESSING THE UNDERGROUND

But while Instagramable trips have been the dominant trend within travel, an appetite to engage more personally with a city has started to unfold. In a trend that develops on travelling for ‘the gram’, TikTok’s #virtualtours bring visitors closer to the inhabitants that make the city what it is.

TikTok’s virtual tours give virtual visitors an opportunity to gauge the character of a city through direct personal encounters with its residents. In Chicago, educator Sherman ‘Dilla’ Thomas, takes you on tours of his hometown, explaining the history of the city’s famous deep-dish pizza, local architecture and figures from his neighbourhood. Enocha Edenfield from the state of Georgia runs quirky, fact-packed virtual ghost tours of her hometown, Savannah. She intersperses ghost tales with updates on her rescue dog and husband. Both these local characters run IRL tours, too, if you were to visit their neighbourhoods.

These TikTok virtual tours bring the lives of local inhabitants within reach of visitors. In the future, a city’s inhabitants could become one of its main draws; maybe it will be normal to travel to Chicago to have a tour with local area historians, or travel to Georgia just to meet some of the charming and strange people you’ve watched on TikTok.

People are often quick to overlook the benefits of social media. While guidebooks once dictated to prospective visitors what a city’s character can be, social media allows for a broader, democratised set of characteristics to inform potential travellers to destination choices.

TRAVEL NORMCORE: LAME IS AUTHENTIC

Through social media a more irreverent and perverse criteria for visiting a city can develop. In this case - its lameness. Recently the lamest cities in Texas, published on TikTok, went viral, gaining popularity around the net, propelled by a curiosity for whether Roundtree is really lamer than Turtle Bay.

In countries such as the US, where they have a huge amount of domestic travel, it is not inconceivable to stop off at one of the country’s lamest cities to see if the rumours are true. It wouldn’t be the first time that negative reviews attracted customers. A list of uncompromisingly negative Yelp reviews put some restaurants on the map in New York, with curious visitors keen to go ‘see if it was as bad as people said’. In London, Nova Victoria, the building known as the ugliest building in London, uses its infamous ‘preening cockerel’ exterior to tempt visitors. The search for something that is the worst, lamest or ugliest is an attempt to find an authentic experience.
While Airbnb has hugely expanded the homestay and experiential possibilities of destination cities, it has also come under criticism - residents complain it is pricing out locals and swamping local culture. Alongside homestays, home sharing is a niche industry on the rise. As the name suggests, it’s a reciprocal system where sharing your home will open up opportunities to share globally. And, unlike Airbnb, it encourages travel while protecting the unique, local feel of a city.

So, is the bartering economy the way to save cities from the problems of ‘overtourism’? Crowd DNA’s Freddie Mason caught up with CEO of Home Exchange, Emmanuel Arnaud, to find out…

Freddie: So Emmanuel, tell us, how did you get started in the home sharing business?

Emmanuel: In 2010, my wife and I decided to take a weekend away from Paris to Florence using a website called Homeexchange.com. But, we weren’t able to do so because the people who owned the house we were going to in Florence weren’t interested in coming to Paris. So while the concept of the exchange was amazing, the system had this fundamental flaw: it had to be a direct swap. Which is when I came up with the idea of remaking the same service, but with a points system instead. This system would mean that when you hosted people, you could either go to your place, or gain points that you can use to stay in other homestays featured on the site. Needless to say: it opened things up a lot.

Freddie: Is that the idea that became Guest-To-Guest?

Emmanuel: Exactly. In April 2011, I launched Guest-To-Guest, based on this points based system of home exchange. We grew and grew, and in 2017 we were able to buy Home Exchange, the leader in a niche but growing part of the travel category. We’re working hard to make it an even bigger niche!

Freddie: How has the pandemic affected home swaps? What does the future hold?

Emmanuel: In terms of the future, we expect the post-pandemic world to be good for us. I think that the pandemic is making it clear to many people that the world can’t take the way we’re consuming any longer. We need to change. The idea that you might be able to barter and share rather than rent or buy is an idea that’s going to gain more and more traction as a result.

Freddie: How does what you do compare to Airbnb or other holiday rental businesses?

Emmanuel: If you think about what Airbnb does to cities, what you have is tourists competing for real estate with the people who actually live there. Property owners can make a lot more money from their place in central New York or Paris renting it out to tourists who come and go, than you can from people who live in the city. Even if it means the place is empty half the time! But with home sharing, because there’s no money changing hands, there’s none of that competition going on. Nobody’s going to invest in a unit to transform it into a quasi-hotel. We don’t want to compete with the locals, we want to give the locals a chance to use their place to travel elsewhere. A kind reciprocity, a way to share our cities. We promote tourism that helps protect the cultures of cities. Airbnb can be very damaging to the culture of destination cities. Not all the time, of course. But it can be.

Freddie: That’s so interesting. And I’m sure the culture of sharing is different, too.

Emmanuel: Yeah, right. With us, the transactional relationship is more like the guest framework you were taught when you were a little kid, when you were told, you know, to share your toys. People are more straightforward as well about the reality of their home. I’d be more like: ‘you know, it’s not a palace, but I hope you have a nice stay’. And you’d be grateful, maybe you’d leave me a bottle of wine or a thank-you note. The whole framework of the relationship changes.

Freddie: I see. Basically you’re saying that your model not only nurtures the cultures of destination cities, it also produces a more empathetic culture between the users.

Emmanuel: That’s the idea, yeah. There’s this idea of overtourism - have you heard about that?

Freddie: A little…

Emmanuel: Overtourism refers to cities where the number of tourists goes beyond what that place is able to manage in a sustainable way. For instance, now there are 50,000 people who live in Venice, when 200 years ago there were something like 200,000. And millions of tourists visit Venice every year. Eventually, the balance between the people coming to the place, and the people living there reaches a point where there aren’t enough locals to make it real, authentic and vibrant anymore. That’s a risk we have. It’s not helped by Instagram telling us we all have to take this specific selfie in this specific spot.

Freddie: How do you compete with the likes of Airbnb? What’s the future for Home Exchange?

Emmanuel: We don’t compete with Airbnb. There’s just such an imbalance of scale, you can’t really talk about competition. But at some point, I hope, there’s going to be a tipping point where people, thanks to Airbnb, will be comfortable enough with a sharing economy, and used to sleeping in other peoples’ beds etc, that they’ll be willing to take that step and join Home Exchange instead. Which is a real sharing economy. While things are looking good, there’s also a lot of uncertainty. But the most important thing I have to say is this: the future of tourism is one that doesn’t compete with locals, finding ways to avoid that competition. This is what we’re trying to do.
Dearest Sóller,

You are beautiful but your lack of taxis is your downfall. I understand that you want to encourage people to take your vintage tram, and we did, and it was epic, but I hope in the future you have solved this problem. Your flat landscape is perfect for the sorts of e-scooters for hire that Paris has, or the electric bikes you find in Brussels, London and Tel Aviv. Better yet, the private WhatsApp groups in Ibiza allow you to DM a taxi driver for immediate pick-up. Genius!

I’ll be coming again in the future, but perhaps next time we’ll hire a car?

Peace and love,
Amy
(Senior Consultant)

Hey there, Palermo,

You petrol-guzzling Mediterranean beauty! I must say, I enjoyed your streets, and your promenade and your mountains, and I wish to come back for more! But next time, can we please dial-down on cars and huge traffic arteries that keep cutting you into chunks? I had to stand by a road for 10 mins just to cross it, and when I did, it felt like a life-or-death scenario. Your cars are tiny, they don’t need so much SPACE!

Loved the pizza, though. Kisses!
Edgar
(Creative Executive)
Dear Beijing,

I miss spending summer nights with you. Lamb, smoke and cumin, with the heavy scent of Zhongnanhai 0.8 on your lips and on mine. We used to sit on small plastic chairs outside the xiaomaibu, three Kuai for a large bottle of warm beer, but we didn’t mind. There was always karaoke. We’d sing songs about heartbreak and watch the night go by. I wonder if that patch of cannabis still grows in Houhai, round the corner from where we lived. The Bob Dylan’ of China planted it there years ago, a practical joke that still makes me smile now as I sit in London, thinking of you forever ago. I know you have changed; we both grew up. But I hope that I’ll recognise you in your back alleys, your open squares and the morning sunrise by the lake. I can’t wait for us to meet again.

Forever yours,
Judy
(Director)

My dear cities of Europe,

Oh the thrill and punctuality of central European trains! Falling asleep in Geneva and waking up in Amsterdam. And then hostel breakfasts: boiled eggs, overly-pink ham, miscellaneous chocolate spreads on soft brown bread.

And then you board a tram, a bus, a train, a boat, and then suddenly there’s a volcano you remember from primary school. It’s nice to take a ferry now and then. Casual hopping, noticing slight deviations of banalities. Coffee shops and small beers outside are always better in a European market square.

I’m longing to truly appreciate, again, sometime soon: a white plastic chair, a bottle of Estrella, lightly salted crisps. It’s just not the same back home. I want to be repeatedly shocked at “how good the olives are over here,” again.

Yours -
Ciaran
(Senior Videographer)

Hey Funchal,

You and your surrounding landscape are dramatic, warm, wild and varied. The rugged terrain and interconnecting highways and tunnels makes it difficult to travel around you in anything but a rented 4x4. I was careful to toe the line between a safe, overly structured, hand-holding tour and a riskier one driven by my own curiosity and independent spirit. However, most of the experiences available to me in Madeira were the best of both worlds. Your friendly and charismatic tour guides allowed the trip to take on whatever form I liked, while giving engaging local insight to the natural and cultural quirks of the island. I didn’t struggle to carve out my own journey, but I was saved from feeling infantilised. Keep it up! Thank you, Funchal, for indulging me.

Forever yours,
Dougie
(Creative Executive)
Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney and Stockholm.

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