

Africa at a Crossroads: Preventing Overtourism Through Sustainable Practices

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Africa's tourism is surging past pre-pandemic levels, with strong growth and rising investor interest. Yet risks of overtourism, seen in Europe, are emerging in hotspots like Serengeti, Cape Town, and Botswana. A sustainable path requires balancing people, planet, and profit to safeguard heritage, communities, and long-term economic gains.

Introduction: The Looming Threat of Overtourism

Africa's post-COVID tourism resurgence is undeniable. In 2024, the continent welcomed approximately 74 million international arrivals—7.4% above 2019 and a notable 13.5% higher than in 2023.

Looking ahead, growth prospects are strong. International arrivals are projected to increase by 3% to 5% annually through 2040—presenting immense opportunity. Investor interest in the continent is increasing with foreign direct investment into Africa increasing by 12% (\$62 billion, net of a mega urban deal in Egypt) in 2024.

As corporates explore tourism-related investments—from hotel chains and eco-lodges to infrastructure and convention venues—the stakes are higher. Without strategic, triple-bottom-line planning, there's a real risk of replicating the ecological degradation, housing pressures, and reputational damage seen in Venice or Barcelona.

Lessons from Europe: A Cautionary Tale

Both Venice and Barcelona illustrate how unchecked tourism can damage local quality of life, heritage, housing affordability, and urban infrastructure. They serve as cautionary case studies for Africa's emerging tourism growth. Local resentment against tourists is being fuelled by infrastructure strain, population decline and a loss of local identity in Venice, whilst a housing crisis, cultural dilution and tourist volumes are negatively impacting Barcelona. These issues underscore the importance of proactive measures to manage tourism sustainably.





Africa's Emerging Challenges

There is significant room for growth across the African continent, however pressure points in key destinations are emerging. The Serengeti recently witnessed alarming scenes of overcrowding, with numerous safari vehicles converging at wildlife crossings, disrupting animal behaviors and endangering both wildlife and tourists. Cape Town faces mounting pressures from increased tourism and migration, leading to a significant rise in property prices. Areas like the Bo-Kaap are also battling gentrification and visitor overflow. Finally, Botswana's tourism sector contributes significantly to its GDP, concerns have been raised about the equitable distribution of benefits, with foreign-owned companies often dominating the industry.

People, Planet, Profit

An industry travel expert recently noted "the urgent need for tourism to reconcile consumption with capacity, and commerce with conscience." The concept of people, planet, profit terminology must be at the forefront of decision-making.

People:

- Empower - local communities through community-based tourism initiatives, ensuring they have a stake in and benefit from tourism activities
- Educate - the clients demanding instagrammable moments at any cost, sales agents making unrealistic promises to clients to maximise profit, and the custodians of our resources who don't say no

Planet:

- Implement strict environmental regulations to protect cultural and natural resources
- Limit the number of tourists in sensitive natural and urban areas
- Enforce sustainable practices among tour operators

Profit:

- ROI with social and environmental consciousness

- Interrogate deals made, investor plans and new developments to ensure accountability
- Financial and promotional incentives for stakeholders/investors maximising economic impact through their sustainable operations

Charting a Sustainable Path Forward

Africa stands at a pivotal moment in its tourism development. By learning from the challenges faced by European destinations and emerging pressure points, policy makers can harness tourism as a force for positive change, benefiting its people, preserving its natural heritage, and ensuring economic prosperity.