The dangers of success

The Business of Tourism
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One of the most beautiful beaches I ever saw was Cane Garden Bay in the British Virgin Islands.

I have not been there for many years, but when I visited it was virtually untouched. A pristine crescent shape, its palm fringed, white sand beach, was small enough to feel intimate, yet open enough to have views across stretches of turquoise sea to islands dreaming in the distance.

It was the image of paradise that tourism brochures for the Caribbean sell. At that time there was only one small very local beach bar, and apart one anchored yacht, it was deserted and then virtually undiscovered by visitors.

While I am sure that it is still exceptional, I was fascinated to read recently, on the travel website of US News and World Report, a gentle caution. It noted that while visitors say that for most of the time, even with lots of activity, the beach is pristine, quiet and relaxing, ‘when the cruise crowds roll in (usually between 10 am and noon on certain days) travellers warn that the beach can get crowded.’ The publication then went on to advise: ‘Either try to avoid visiting when a cruise ship is in port (check the BVI Ports Authority website for details) or plan to arrive early in the day to stake out a prime spot on the sand.’

I note this not as criticism, but as indicative of how popularity and success can change the nature of a location anywhere.

So much so, that there are tourism related developments occurring in some parts of the world that, at the extreme, are now either leading to the complete closure of the sites that originally brought visitors to a destination, or restrictions being placed on access, meaning in some cases they are open only to the very wealthy.

In recent weeks there have been two stories indicating the problems that can arise when a destination or site simply becomes too popular, and where unintentionally, visitors have changed or unintentionally have even begun to destroy the reason why they wanted to visit in the first place.

In the last few weeks in the Indian ocean, the Maldives government has said that it is considering closing the coral reefs that fringe the islands. The problem is that the reefs are susceptible to coral bleaching and visitor damage and the island’s government has said that if a scientific study it is undertaking shows extensive damage it will have to take action, effectively shutting down access and ending one of the reasons why many visitors chose to vacation there.

In a separate development, Thailand has closed a whole island in the Andaman Sea to visitors in an attempt to mitigate the damaging effect of tourism on its beaches and coral reefs. The island, Koh Tachai, a popular place for visitors and Thais alike, is located in a national park and is now closed for an indefinite period.

Local reports said that the beauty of the island, its reefs and beaches had contributed to overcrowding and the degradation of natural resources and the environment, and will remain closed to visitors to enable the natural rehabilitation of its environment.
A more well known example of overcrowding is the problem facing the historic European City of Venice. A medieval city of great beauty and fragility, it is one of the most visited tourism destinations in the world. Despite having a resident population of just 60,000 people the tiny island commune received 48.6m tourists in 2014.

Perhaps uniquely for a tourist destination, it has no roads. Instead access from the mainland is via the water, a single bridge or a railway line requiring all visitors once there to walk its narrow alleys and small squares or to travel by water on its many canals.

The consequences are obvious. Sudden influxes of cruise passengers combined with an increasing number of organised tour groups who also visit for the day are resulting in the clogging of narrow streets, queues and, outside of winter or very early morning, historic sites that have lost all sense of place.

As a consequence, tensions are running high in a city where hoteliers and restaurants for the most part continue to depend on traditional visitors who, as in the Caribbean, stay longer and spend much more money, and are seeking to grow the number of longer stay visitors from China and other emerging tourism markets.

Thankfully, as far as I am aware, there is nowhere in the Caribbean that is suffering to the same extent as the Maldives, or Thailand and having to halt victor arrivals to protect the environment, or that has similar to the concerns of Venice where the fabric of the city is quite literally being worn away.

Instead, in much of the region the focus remains on increasing visitor arrivals, airlift and yield so as to sustain economic growth.

Despite this, it is an issue that the industry could usefully better understand. There is a case for inviting speakers from other destinations to industry events to share both their experience of overcrowding and its impact, and for developing an understanding of the possible solutions.