

DEATH BY TOURISM

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Byron Bay is not the only place having a popularity problem. Other tourist destinations have a similar predicament where demand is out pacing the capacity to cope. Increasing density,

cheap afares, and people's desire for an aspirational social media profile, are just some of the reasons you get stuck in traffic on Ewingsdale Road.

Many high-profile locations are doing it tough and, as yet, none have found a silver bullet solution. Short of 'doing a Trump' and building a wall, or blocking the highway exits, there are not that many things you can do. It could be timely to look at other places with problems, and also consider a few options that may help.

Venice: Venice is well known as the city with the most excessive tourism problem. Not only is it literally sinking in the mud, it also suffers under the weight of 28 million annual visitors. Byron gets around 2.2 million as a comparison. Permanent resident numbers have dropped from 175,000 to close to only 55,000, due to home conversions into the short-term holiday let market. It is attempting to limit cruise ships out of the Grand Canal and disembarking passengers at a less imposing entry. Parts of Venice to the north remain staunchly local and try to stay tourist free.

Barcelona: Like Venice, Barcelona is a must-see destination with a vibrant culture and nightlife. In 2018, 32 million tourists visited Barcelona, far outnumbering its 1.6 million population. Similar to Byron, the Catalans are a bolshie and opinionated people and have not taken it lying down. There are now a lot fewer beds to lie down on as well, since around 40% of housing has been converted to tourist accommodation. Streets are littered with anti tourism graffiti and the city is now employing inspectors who track and fine unlicensed AirBNB operators.

Bar Harbor: Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and Bar Harbor are small islands off the north east

coast of the USA. Traditionally holiday retreats for the wealthy with summer holiday homes, they now suffer under the fast food of tourism – the ballooning cruise ship industry. The 4,500 residents of Bar Harbor, Maine, are often overwhelmed by up to 5,500 tourists a day, only some of which are disgorged from the massive floating hotels. The town recently appointed a committee to consult stakeholders and provide an option paper. They advised buying and improving the marina, prioritising private boats, light rail and buses for better people movement. The cruise ship industry opposes this and wants the marina to be big enough to land passengers direct to shore, something the anti tourist residents are strongly resisting.

San Francisco: SF has two locations that have a similarity to Byron Bay. Marin County is over the Golden Gate Bridge to the north of the city. Towns like Fairfax, San Anselmo and Mill Valley have the same feel and sensibility to our own Bangalow, Federal or Mullumbimby. Health food stores advertise yoga classes and colonic irrigations. It has since been "discovered" and these days no one tries to go anywhere between 3 and 7 as all the roads are completely clogged with late model, expensive SUVs. Palo Alto and Mountain View are suburbs to the south of the city, more commonly known as Silicon Valley. It still looks like suburbia, with three or four bedroom family homes, but these average houses now have a median price of \$US2.5 million. Workers in teaching, nursing, hospitality and cleaning, or anyone not participating in a recent IT share float, have to commute for hours to get to work.

What to do? Byron Bay is on the international hit list and it cannot get off, unless we destroy most of the things we love about it. What we have in common with the places listed above is that we are all relatively powerless to completely stop the onslaught of modern tourism. A Local Government Authority is not sufficiently armed with enough buttons and levers. However, there are some



*Live not for the battles won,
live not for the end-of-the-song.
Live in the along.*

GWENDOLYN BROOKS.
WINNER PULITZER PRIZE

things that can be done to remediate or temper the worst outcomes.

1. De car De-emphasising the priority of cars in the centre of our towns and villages is something that is known to work. Yes, it is inconvenient to have to park and walk to shops and facilities – especially for the elderly or mums with young kids – I'm sorry. The resistance to paid parking, bypasses and other elements in the current town master plans is understandable and valid. But they are necessary parts on the long process to keeping our towns and villages people friendly instead of clogged by cars.

2. Quality over quantity We cannot stop people from coming here, but we can have an influence over who WANTS to come here. Many of us are not happy that our sleepy little beach town is going up market and trendy, but there are advantages. Eco tourism is more than narrow niche. It is a growing market and being inherently clean and green, we can play to our strength. A family on holiday may be preferable to a house full of backpackers or a car full of day-trippers. If that family enjoys nature walks, yoga and spas, buys locally produced organic food at the farmers market, stays longer and spends more with less impact, then we have an overall win/win.

3. Manage holiday letting This is a contentious and combative area and obviously there are residents who have been adversely affected by holiday letting. AirBNB, UBER and other disrupters in the sharing economy have faults and problems, but they are popular and are here to stay. Killing STHL (Short Term Holiday Letting) will only create worse problems. There is a middle way as long as

the proportion of HL properties do not overpower permanent residents. New regulations soon to be introduced like limiting letting time to 180 days a year, will be interesting to watch.

4. Discourage HNWI property speculation Holiday letting was this past decade's problem, land banking and property speculation will be the next decade's problem. I was once walking along a beach in Florida. My friend listed the owners of the mega mansions lined up beyond the dunes: Pro golfer V.J. Singh, Madonna, a hedge fund manager, etc. Every one of these houses was empty and shuttered. HNWIs (High Net Worth Individuals) buy expensive properties to park money in safe assets and only spend a few weeks a year living there. Now that Byron has \$20 million plus properties and is a safe investment, this will become an issue. Some places have introduced a Vacancy Tax to avoid this and we may need to do the same.

5. Maintain the vibe The "vibe" is more important than the built space. People, lifestyle, culture and community are more important than trying to stop change. Byron is always changing but still remains quirky, interesting, different, beautiful and green. Diversity is key, especially in finding the right mix between visitor, tourist and resident. We will certainly suffer if we become a monoculture playground for the rich, famous, and "Instagram-influencers". Gentrification is a problem when it economically isolates us from the very people who can keep reinventing Byron to be the place where so many people want to be.

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