

The impact of COVID-19 on digitization in destination management

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Topics:

- Impact of the pandemic on digitalization of tourism
- The pandemic in tourism – a threat or a new opportunity?
- The role of digitalization in times of COVID-19
- 2020 – The year of acceleration of digitalization of tourism
- The pandemic and new emerging formats of digital tourism

The year 2020 will be known as the year in which the mobility of the world has been put into a pause. The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus has placed the world in an exceptional situation, transforming politics, trade, and many industries, including tourism, in ways that are still taking shape. New tourism policy responses related to COVID-10 have already been put into action¹. For destination management organizations, in survival mode, new ways of thinking and managing touristic practices have emerged and digitization played a fundamental role in this.

There are many experimentations involving digital tourism right now and some of them are bringing about changes that could possibly be sustained once the pandemic has passed. Initial indications are that the current crisis is accelerating the digital transformation of the tourism and destination management sector.

The focus this year has shifted from implementing digital devices for touristic experiences in a destination to using such devices to connect on a distance with potential visitors.

In this COVID-19 year, there was a considerable increase of experiments transforming a destination into a digital/virtual experience. One example is the Faroe Islands, which managed to reinvent themselves digitally by creating a new remote tourism tool. Different stakeholders came together and designed digital tours for the islands. Equipped with digital technologies, tour guides are taking tourists from their own house into the beautiful spots of the island. Furthermore, tourists can also explore the island using a joypad (i.e., a type of game controller held in the hand) to turn, walk, run or even jump, from their own house anywhere in the islands².

Destination management organizations are also supporting the sector, as is the case in Finland, where Visit Finland has launched free online training material on the digitalization of tourism businesses. In the same country, the biggest online event to date was organized: a live VR performance by a rap duo which was virtually attended by 700,000 viewers³.

Also, patterns of change are visible in museums who are opening their virtual doors to tourists worldwide in an effort to support those experiencing extended periods of social distancing.

¹ See e.g., OECD (2020), Tourism Policy Responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19), OECD Publishing, Paris, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=124_124984-7uf8nm95se&title=Covid-19_Tourism_Policy_Responses

² See <https://www.remote-tourism.com/about-the-project>

³ See <https://www.hel.fi/uutiset/en/kaupunginkanslia/first-vappu-at-home>

Other examples are destinations creating 3D videos to share their best places to a digital audience and some even going live on Instagram, which became quite trendy in 2020. Activities, which normally would have taken place within a “live” setting, are now transformed into digital events and experiences, encouraging the audience to participate actively. Despite the non-physical presence, the participation and engagement of the audience is still taking place, proving that meaningful interactions remain a key for successful touristic activities.

Those activities seem to address the controversies of tourism such as overtourism and mass tourism, bringing the discussion to the front end. While some concerns are about how to get the tourism industry “up and running again” there are also some organizations trying to take advantage of this crisis to re-create something new, to deconstruct the dominant discourse of “the more, the better” and giving digitalization a fundamental role in it. While for many travel companies and destination management organizations turning to virtual offerings during the pandemic was a bit of a compelled measure, online platforms for sharing and viewing 360-degree videos from great places in all corners of the world (such as VirtualTraveller.com) have always been a strong advocate of virtual travel and its ecological benefits.

While digital actions don’t always bring direct financial revenue, they stimulate creating a strong relationship between the visitor and the destination, which is known as the pre-visit phase of the customer journey of a destination, where potential customers are attracted digitally to pay a physical visit in the future. Once travelling is possible again, the visitor has learned about the appeal and the offer of a destination. Through this pre-visit, an emotional bond can be built with the culture and the destination, also increasing the motivation to preserve and take care of the place when visiting. Consequently, a more sustainable stay might be created. The digital experience of a destination can thus be a powerful tool to promote a place prior to the actual visit.

Although the COVID-19 disruption hits tourism badly, it also appears to be a good time to revisit tourism’s meaning, to reflect upon what are other forms of destination management and what are the possible innovative formats to be created connecting destinations to visitors. The pandemic then can also be framed as a positive time for experimentation and innovation, where new business models may emerge, especially in the realm of digital tourism.