Layering Overtourism in Multi-value destinations- The Case of Vicetourism in Amsterdam and pointers for India

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Abstract: Tourism is a welcome phenomenon worldwide as it paves the way for economic benefits, people-to-people cultural interaction and harmony and widens people's mental horizons. However, when the tourist influx reaches an unmanageable proportion, it affects the lifestyle of the local residents and the quality standards of living. At times, it also affects the traveler's tourist experiences, and results in overtourism. The case documents the issue of Overtourism and the inherent conflicts through the lens of Public administration and marketing in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. It layers the vicetourism issues in Overtourism-affected destinations like Amsterdam. It meanders through the balancing acts between destination branding-focused marketing efforts vs sustainability-focused constraints, economic benefits of tourism vs resident quality of life, and gain points of stakeholders within an industry vs pain points of stakeholders outside that industry. A value-based, layering approach will help to manage and promote the destination brand better. This case study is based on in-depth interviews with some stakeholders, personal visits to the destination and publicly available information. It does not illustrate the effective or ineffective handling of a business or policy-making situation.

Keywords: Overtourism, Tourism, Destination Marketing, Alcotourism, Vicetourism, Public Policy, Sex Tourism, Medical Tourism, Sustainable tourism

"Het is Genoeg" - "Het is Genoeg"
"Enough is Enough" - "Enough is Enough"
Het is Genoeg (Meaning Enough is Enough in Dutch) is a popular Dutch song sung by singer Wende. These lines also became a clarion call concerning the issue of Overtourism in the Netherlands' capital, Amsterdam. Dingeman Coumou, the Chairman of this movement and a member of the Vrienden van de Amsterdamse Binnenstad Association[1]'s board narrated the troubling issue of Overtourism in Amsterdam in an interview with DW travel[1]. Coumou was critical of the social-media craze and the behaviour of the selfie-obsessed tourists in the city. He lamented the noise due to the crowd and the loss of the charm of having a quiet walk around the streets.

This is not just an Amsterdam phenomenon; from India to Europe and Japan, unsustainable tourist influx and activities have created a considerable debate on handling the same. An enjoyable leisure pursuit of tourists worldwide has created a ripple in tourist destinations due to the phenomenal numbers and varied behaviours.

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[1] Friends of the Amsterdam City Centre Association

Netherlands and Amsterdam

The Netherlands is located in Europe, and has a population of nearly 18.0 million and is expected to reach 19.0 million in 2037 (Refer to Exhibit 6). Amsterdam is the capital of the country. The population density of the Netherlands is 518 people/ sq. km. The population of Amsterdam in 2023 is nearly 0.919 Mn.[2]. The GDP of the Dutch economy crossed Euro 1 trillion in 2023[3]. As a tourist destination, The Netherlands is one of the popular choices for international travellers, and the country offers a diverse mix of tourism experiences such as rich heritage, art, nature, and adventure. The clean and vast network of canals around the country is a vital part of the destination brand identity of the Netherlands.

In 2023, 20.3 million international tourists visited the Netherlands, and the country ranked 9th in Europe on that parameter. In the leading city tourism destinations ranking in Europe (2023), Amsterdam is ranked 6 with 23.9 million.[4] bed nights[2]. In 2024, travel and tourism is projected to contribute Euro 104.6 billion to the country's gross domestic product. Amsterdam accounted for Euro 4.43 billion in GDP in 2021 (Exhibit 7 & 9). In 2023, Amsterdam municipality netted Euro 165 million (Exhibit 10) as tax revenue from tourism activities, which was highest in the country. Tourism contributed 3.8% to the GDP of the Netherlands in 2023. In 2022, 5.4% of the jobs were generated in the tourism sector[5]. Most of these numbers have bounced back to the pre-covid19 levels. Tourists spent close to Euro 105 billion in 2023. These data indicate the critical role played by the tourism industry in the economy of the Netherlands.

The phenomenon of Overtourism

Tourism is a welcome phenomenon worldwide as it paves the way for economic benefits, cultural interaction and harmony and widens people's mental horizons. Tourism has also been an important leisure activity for a long time, and with the advent of technologies enabling better mobility, it has grown in leaps and bounds.

In 2018, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation released a report that formally defined the phenomenon of Overtourism in tourist destination in terms of negative impact in the tourism experience of the visitors and residents' quality of living[6]. In most of these cases, when the influx of tourist numbers in a destination far exceed the local population or the tourist carrying capacity, it puts enormous strain on the resources and the environment, thereby creating discomfort for several stakeholders like the residents, civic bodies, utilities and transport networks, public administrators, law enforcers and the policymakers.

Several tourist destinations like Amsterdam (Netherlands), Venice (Italy), Dubrovnik (Croatia), and Paris (France) are reeling under pressure to come up with a quick and effective solution.

There are several reasons for the growth of Overtourism. Some of them are:

- Better transport connectivity and affordability
- Several information sources like TV programmes, documentaries and films create a curiosity to visit places
- Technology development in information search, ease of booking and visa processing
- Sharing economy and platform availability
- New hospitality rental models like Airbnb[3]
- Changing attitude and generational shift
- Changing priorities concerning living experience
- The consumer culture of social media sharing
- Video blogging as a hobby and profession

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[2] Bed night is metric used in the hospitality industry to measure the occupancy of beds as a performance indicator

[3] A tech platform connecting travellers and homeowners for short-stay rentals.

There is also an imbalance created by frenetic social-media-driven tourists favouring a particular destination when it trends on social channels. A classic example is Japan. While places like Tokyo and Kyoto faced a heavy rush of tourists with 4.3 and 1.2 crores of overnight stays in 2023, prefectures like Akita and Yamaguchi saw overnight stays numbering less than a lakh.[7] There is also a debate on whether Overtourism should be viewed through absolute numbers or based on the impact on the local community. At this point, different stakeholders have a different take on the issue.

Destination Marketing at Crossroads

In the tourism spectrum, aggressive destination marketing is done on one end to promote tourist visits. Conversely, specific destinations are bursting at the seams in handling Overtourism issues. Frameworks like the Anholt Ipsos City Brands Index (CBI)[8] measure the tourist perception of cities worldwide. Destinations like Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi are promoting tourism as a hedging move in the oil-dependent economy[9]. Well-crafted promotional campaigns like Spectacular Saudi and Experience Abu Dhabi attempt to charm global travellers to visit these destinations. Apart from the natural, heritage and cultural elements, destinations like Abu Dhabi create new experiences like the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, Al Qana Marina, Sea World, Ferrari World Yas Island[10] and so on.

In crowded places, destination marketing is at odds with civic management. While the local economy benefits from a vibrant tourism action, it also affects some stakeholders. Finding a balance is increasingly becoming a puzzle that needs to be urgently solved. Negative word of mouth and bad reviews about the experience could affect the long-term economic benefits of the tourist destinations[11].

Issues in Amsterdam

The primary concern for the residents is the heavy influx of tourists (Exhibits 1 & 2). While the Amsterdam community is open to welcoming tourists, some incidents have created friction and negative perceptions. For all its tourist attractions on art, heritage and scenic nature, Amsterdam is also famous for vice-tourism, attracting travellers to enjoy the pleasures of alcohol (also called alcotourism)[12], Cannabis in the coffee shops or the sex workers in the red-light district (See Exhibit-12 for the map).

Vice Tourism (or Vicetourism) is an umbrella term (Moll et al., 2013)[13] to define tourism offerings related to services that are considered taboo in most societies (alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex-oriented services such as strip clubs, prostitution, etc.)

There is an erotic museum, sex museum, prostitution museum, cannabis museum and so on in the town. Since the Netherlands was relatively liberal in this, it had a segment of tourists who came seeking this tourist value, and some refer to it as the sin city of Europe. However, unruly incidents of overdrunk tourists creating ruckus in public places were reported. Since 2019, groups like "Stop de Gekte[4]" have been pressurising the city administrators to act on these unbridled tourist actions.

According to 'The Netherlands in Numbers' 2024 statistics, around 8% of people aged above 12 years have used Cannabis in 2023, and people aged between 20 and 30 have more propensity to use it. People aged between 20 and 50 have reportedly used Cannabis sometime in the past[14]. This unbridled usage could become a public health issue in the long run.

There are also pleas to relocate the red-light district from the central area, and house it outside to repurpose the central district for art and heritage tourism.

A severe housing crisis is prevalent in Amsterdam, and tourism is also a pressure source. Both the cost of new homes and the rentals have soared. The waiting time to avail of social housing in Amsterdam is reportedly touching 18 years[15]. Growth in short-term rentals for tourists through platforms like Airbnb has impacted the available housing stock[16].

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[4] "Stop the Madness" in English

There were also calls to close down the cruise terminal in Amsterdam's heart, near the Amsterdam Central Station (Exhibit 11). Cruise ships are considered to be big polluters, and a 2023 study stated that Europe's cruise ships have Sulphur dioxide emissions more than the combined emissions of a billion cars[17]. Amsterdam ranked 49 in the 50 most polluted European port cities in 2022[18]. Since cruise ships are floating cities with leisure passengers numbering in thousands, when they dock, they also add to the tourist crowd in bulk numbers in the cities.

Public administration measures
While the Overtourism debates were raging, the public administration authorities of the Netherlands were also in the huddle to come up with solutions.

• Through the "Amsterdam Bezoeken, Holland Zien" – ABHZ initiative[5], tourism administrators tried over a decade to spread the movement of tourists to places outside Amsterdam. Holland used to be another name for The Netherlands, and all interchangeably used both names. In order to avoid any confusion, in 2019-20, the Dutch policymakers decided to drop the name Holland and decided to stick only to "The Netherlands" as the official name of the country[19].

• The sign "I Amsterdam" kept in the city's heart used to be a vital element of identity. On average, six thousand selfies were reportedly taken there every day. Due to the heavy crowding, the city authorities removed the sign in 2018[20].

• Amsterdam has also stopped issuing permits to build any new hotel property development[21] The canal cruises are also rationalised.

• In order to reign over tourists who do not behave, a new digital advertising campaign was launched by the city council in 2023. The new campaign with a theme "Stay Away", with online warning advertisements aimed to discourage unruly groups of vice-tourism travellers from the UK. Based on the negative search terms (such as stag party at Amsterdam), targeted warning advertisements were displayed to the user about the legal and penal consequences of being unruly[22]. After six months of implementation, based on internal data, the city council has reported that the campaign has worked, and the numbers have fallen by 22%[23].

• To put a restraint on unruly behaviour in public places, drinking alcohol and smoking Cannabis in public places is now prohibited with a fine of Euro 100. (Exhibit 5). The prostitution windows of the red light district are asked to close by 3 am instead of 6 am[24].

• In responding to the calls to close down the cruise terminal, the city council decided to limit the port calls from the current level of 190 per annum to 100 per annum by 2026. The council has also proposed to move the cruise terminal from the city centre by 2035[25]. But environmental activists have called for protests demanding the immediate closure of cruise ships[26].

Help from Artificial Intelligence
Artificial intelligence is also tapped to develop innovative solutions to tackle Overtourism in Amsterdam. In a 2021 experiment at the province of Overijssel by Breda University, two sets of tourists were given apps that presented the "places to visit" differently. One group had the app presenting the regularly popular places, and for the other group, an AI-driven app (travel with Zoey) presented the rarely-visited places. The result was that both groups perceived the same level of value and satisfaction. If this study finds similar results in other places and at scale, it could provide another exciting avenue to disperse the crowd to rarely-visited places and bring a balance[27].

Carrot-and-Stick measures elsewhere
Public administrators handling the tourism issue are trying to develop innovative measures to promote responsible and sustainable tourism in various destinations. Both carrot and the stick methods are

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[5] "Visit Amsterdam, See Holland" in English

being deployed. While destinations like Venice and Barcelona are coming up with penalties and restrictions, places like Copenhagen are trying to provide a positive nudge towards responsible tourist behaviour. Wonderful Copenhagen, the official tourism management arm in Denmark's capital, recently introduced the CopenPay initiative to incentivise responsible and sustainability-aware tourists who patronise climate-friendly actions like cycling. Some incentives are free museum tickets, kayak rentals and so on.[28]

Stakeholder perspectives

While the measures to contain overtourism are done at different levels, they also have ramifications for some sections of society. Cruise ships reportedly create economic opportunities to the tune of Euro 105 million, and the idea to cap the numbers and relocation of the port terminal will potentially affect the income and livelihood of people dependent on museums, restaurants and retail outlets[29].

The proposal to shift the red-light district to a suburb has also faced opposition from sex workers who prefer to stay back in the current place. The residents of the newly proposed place have also joined hands with them and have opposed the move[30]. Some sex workers even oppose campaigns like "Stay Away" as it disturb the demand for their business.

The ban on new hotel construction and the reduction in riverboats will also impact the livelihood and employment of those dependent on these services.

Destinations offering multiple values

Bain Capital Research (Almquist, 2016) came up with a model of 30 different values grouped under 4 major categories of needs - functional, emotional, life-changing, and social impact[31].
A mapping of destination values shall help analyze the phenomenon of Overtourism based on the combination of layers. An analysis of the nature of the value in popular perception shall enable us to categorize them in a continuum of positive, neutral and negative values. Such a categorization will help the destination marketers and administrators to prioritize the values to promote or control the same. Most of the Vice-related values like alcohol, sex, weed and gambling fall on the negative side, as seen in this case, and hence, there is a good reason to control those aspects in an Overtourism-affected destination.

India debate

As an economic activity, tourism in India greatly contributes in creating gainful employment for many. The government of India is also aggressively promoting destination marketing, such as the Incredible India campaign. Every state government in India also promotes unique destination highlights of their geography and culture to attract domestic and foreign travellers. Meanwhile, some of the destinations in India also face the issue of overcrowding beyond the carrying capacity. Kodaikanal, the famous hill station in Tamilnadu, witnessed a sudden surge in the tourist influx during March 2024, which led to severe traffic snarls and air pollution on the ghat roads[32]. The government introduced a mandatory e-pass registration system in the peak summer months of May and June to study the tourist inflow.[33] Like vice-tourism for sex and weed in Amsterdam, alcotourism[6] is prevalent in popular Indian tourist destinations like Goa[34] and Pondicherry (also known as Puducherry)[35] (Exhibit 13). There are debates on the wellness and public health impact of the same[36]. While the problem of overtourism may be familiar, the context, economic environment, and issues are different, and a different approach is needed for a solution and destination readiness.

[6] Tourist trips to a destination for consuming alcohol

Conclusion

The key learning here is the acknowledgement of the issues caused by Overtourism. However, the absolute number of tourist movements exceeding the local population being a single yardstick in acknowledging the issue could be a problem in over-populated countries. The issue needs a categorization based on multiple-value criteria for better sustainable solutions by destination marketers and the administrators. Balancing stakeholder benefits is paramount in any such overarching initiatives, and prioritization of value management is critical. Suppose a tourist destination offering multiple tourist values such as art, medical and wellness, and also vice-focused values such as sex, alcohol and weed is reeling under the pressures of the Overtourism phenomenon; it makes sense to control the vice aspects and promote the humanitarian aspects such as medical and wellness travel purpose.

Overtourism-affected destinations like Amsterdam offer multi-values to tourists ranging from art, vice (cannabis, alcohol, sex), canal cruises, and heritage. Classifying the values on a positive-neutral-negative perception continuum shall help layer the values to prioritize promoting positive aspects and regulating the negative aspects. Such a value-based restriction is precisely what the tourist administrators in Amsterdam are doing by restricting vicetourism activities, as discussed in this case, which has valuable pointers to managing such destinations in India.

Exhibit -1 Dam Square in Amsterdam
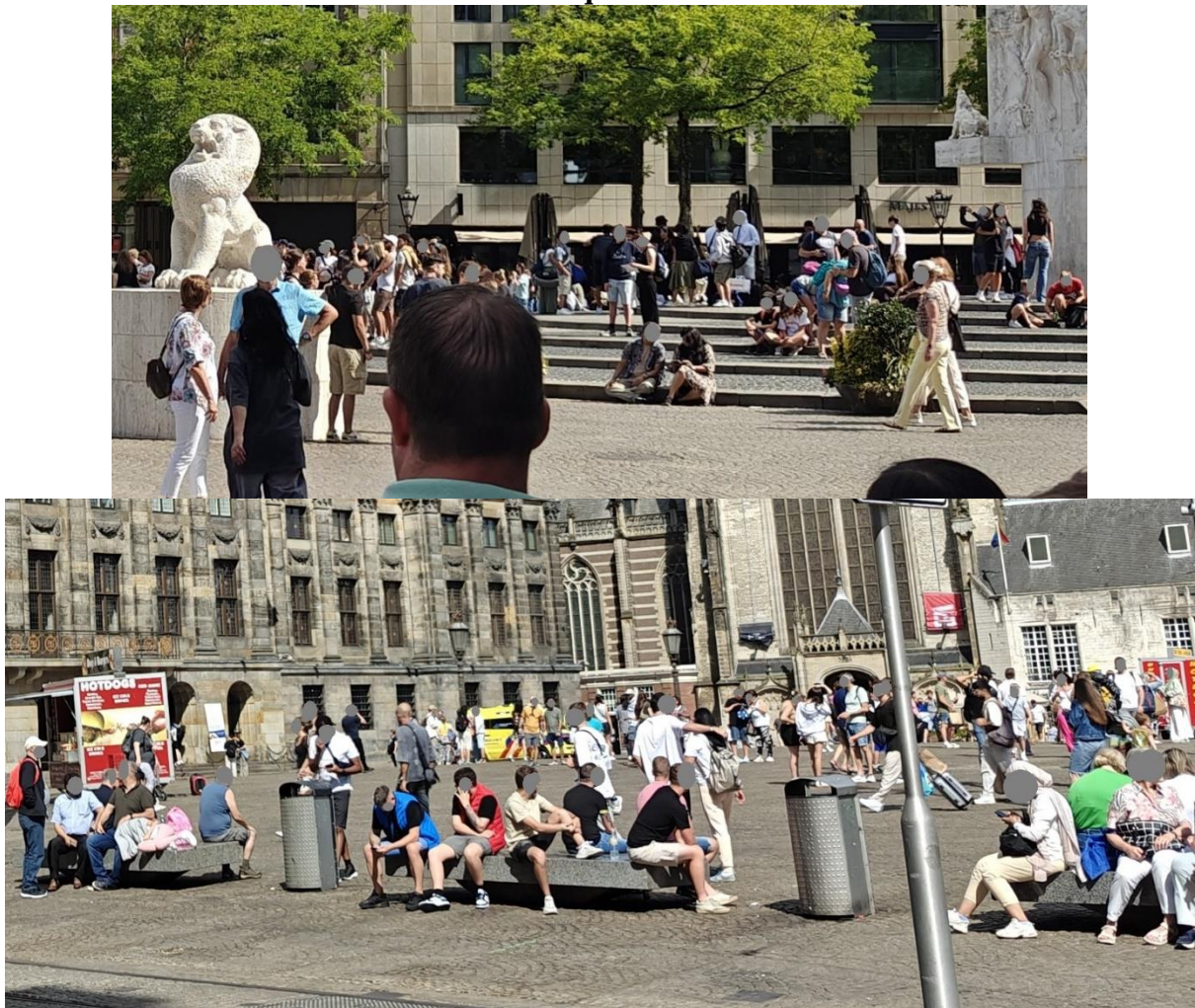
(Photos taken by the Case Author- Faces masked to respect privacy)

Exhibit 2 Madame Tussaud's Amsterdam

(Photos taken by the Case Author- Faces masked to respect privacy)

Exhibit -3 Outside the Cannabis Museum Amsterdam

(Photos taken by the Case Author- Faces masked to respect privacy)

Exhibit – 4 Canal cruises in Amsterdam

Exhibit – 5 Fine for Public Drinking

(Photos taken by the Case Author- Faces masked to respect privacy)

Exhibit - 6[37]

Netherlands: Total population from 2019 to 2029 (in millions)
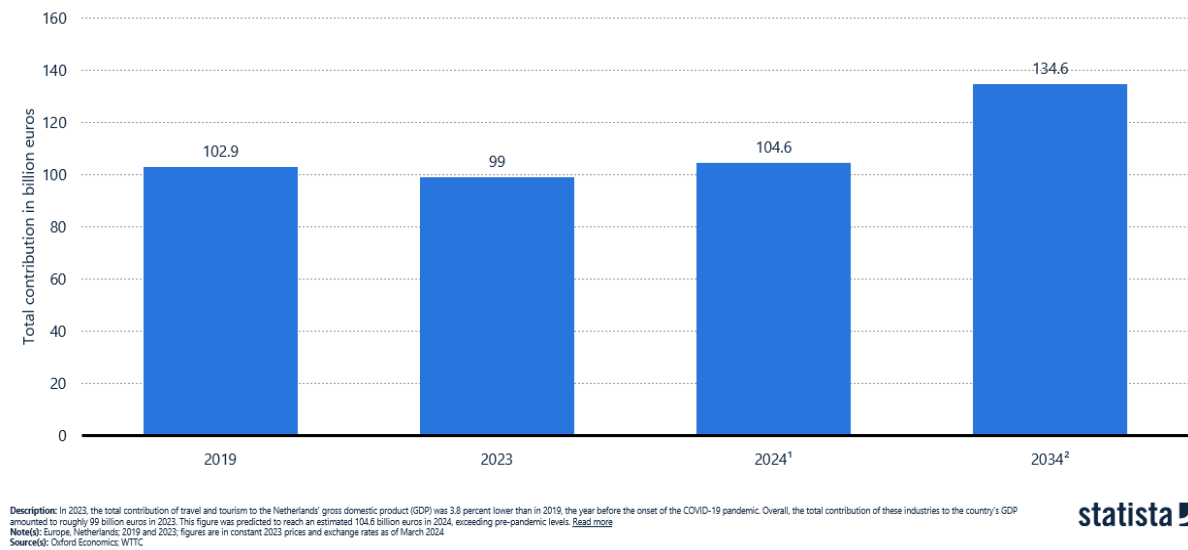
Total population of the Netherlands 2029

Description: This statistic shows the total population of the Netherlands from 2019 to 2023, with projections up until 2029. In 2023, the total population of the Netherlands was around 17.81 million people. Read more
Note(s): Netherlands; * Estimate. Values have been rounded to provide a better understanding of the statistic. Read more
Source(s): IMF

statista
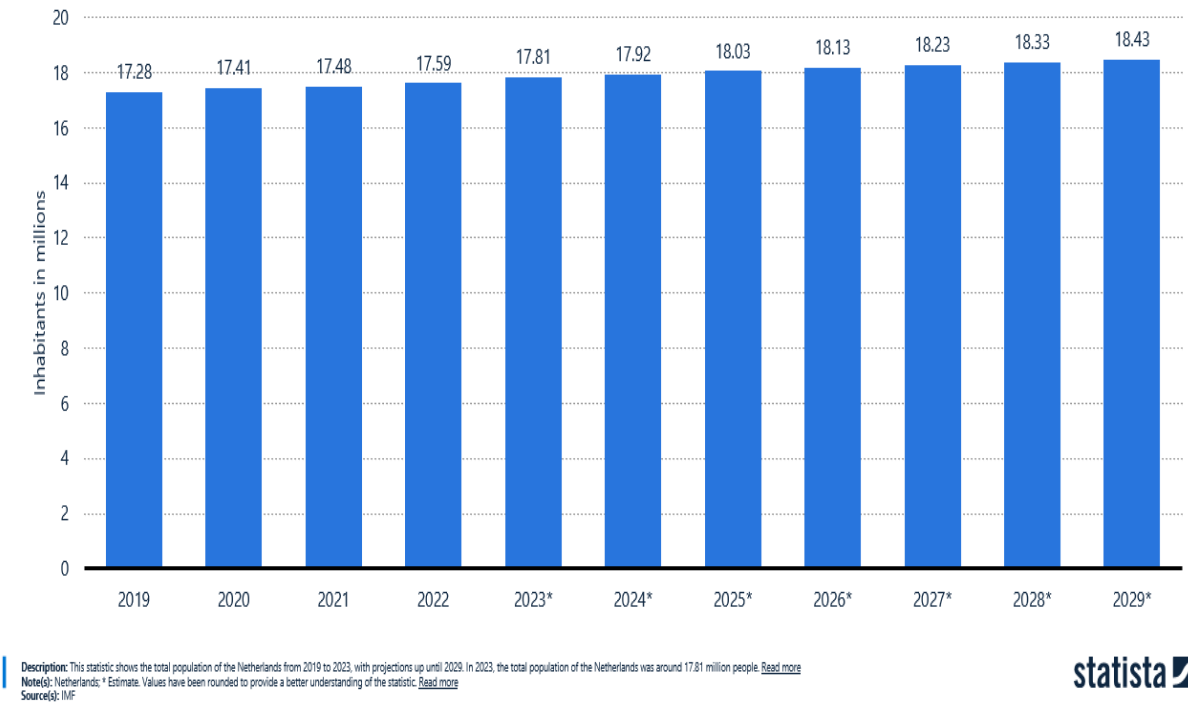
Exhibit - 7[38]

Total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in the Netherlands in 2019 and 2023, with a forecast for 2024 and 2034 (in billion euros)

Travel and tourism's total contribution to GDP in the Netherlands 2019-2034

Description: In 2023, the total contribution of travel and tourism to the Netherlands' gross domestic product (GDP) was 3.8 percent lower than in 2019, the year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the total contribution of these industries to the country's GDP amounted to roughly 99 billion euros in 2023. This figure was predicted to reach an estimated 104.6 billion euros in 2024, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Read more
Note(s): Europe, Netherlands; 2019 and 2023; figures are in constant 2023 prices and exchange rates as of March 2024
Source(s): Oxford Economics; WTTC

statista

Exhibit - 8[39]

Number of international tourist arrivals in the Netherlands from 2012 to 2023 (in 1,000s)

Number of inbound tourist arrivals in the Netherlands 2012-2023
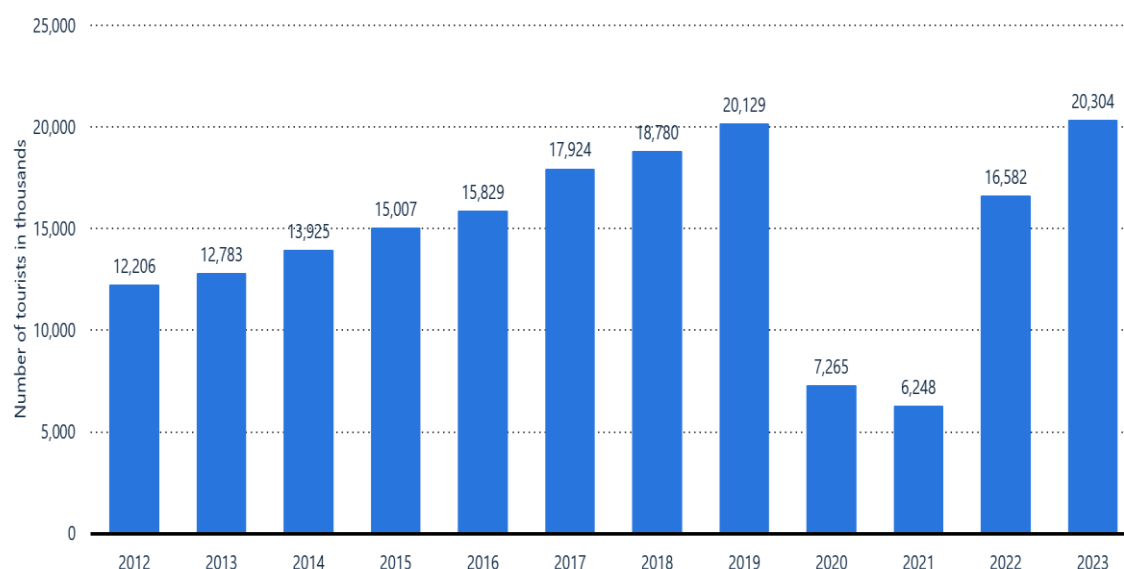
Description: The number of international tourist arrivals in travel accommodation establishments in the Netherlands increased significantly in 2023 over the previous year, recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. After declining to around 6.2 million in 2021 due to the health crisis, inbound tourist arrivals bounced back in 2022, then grew further in 2023, peaking at roughly 20.3 million. Read more
Note(s): Netherlands; 2012 to 2023; figures refer to guests of travel accommodation establishments
Source(s): Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek

Exhibit – 9[40]

Direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in Amsterdam, the Netherlands from 2019 to 2021, with a forecast to 2022 (in billion euros)

Travel and tourism's contribution to GDP in Amsterdam, the Netherlands 2019-2022
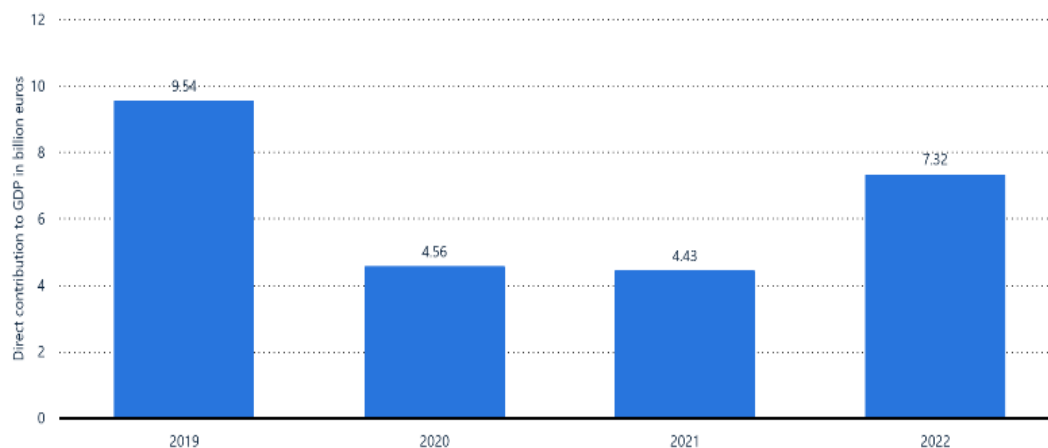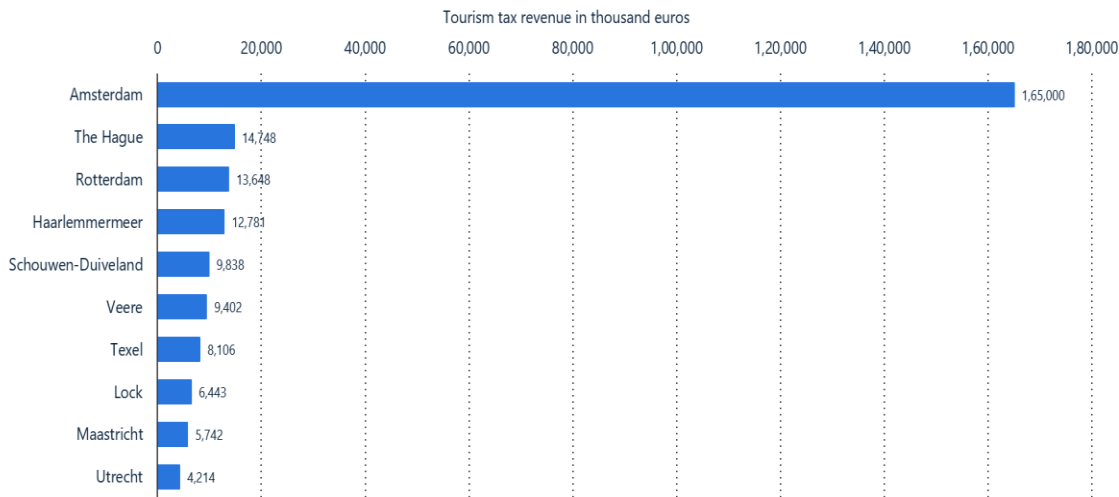

Description: The direct contribution of travel and tourism to Amsterdam's gross domestic product (GDP) was significantly lower in the first two years of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic compared to 2019. While the direct contribution of travel and tourism to the city's GDP surpassed 9.5 billion euros in 2019, it declined to around 4.4 billion euros in 2021. As forecast, this figure was expected to reach an estimated 7.3 billion euros in 2022, remaining below pre-pandemic levels. Read more
Note(s): Netherlands; 2019 to 2021; figures are in constant 2021 prices and exchange rates as of November 2022
Source(s): Oxford Economics; WTTC

Exhibit – 10[41]

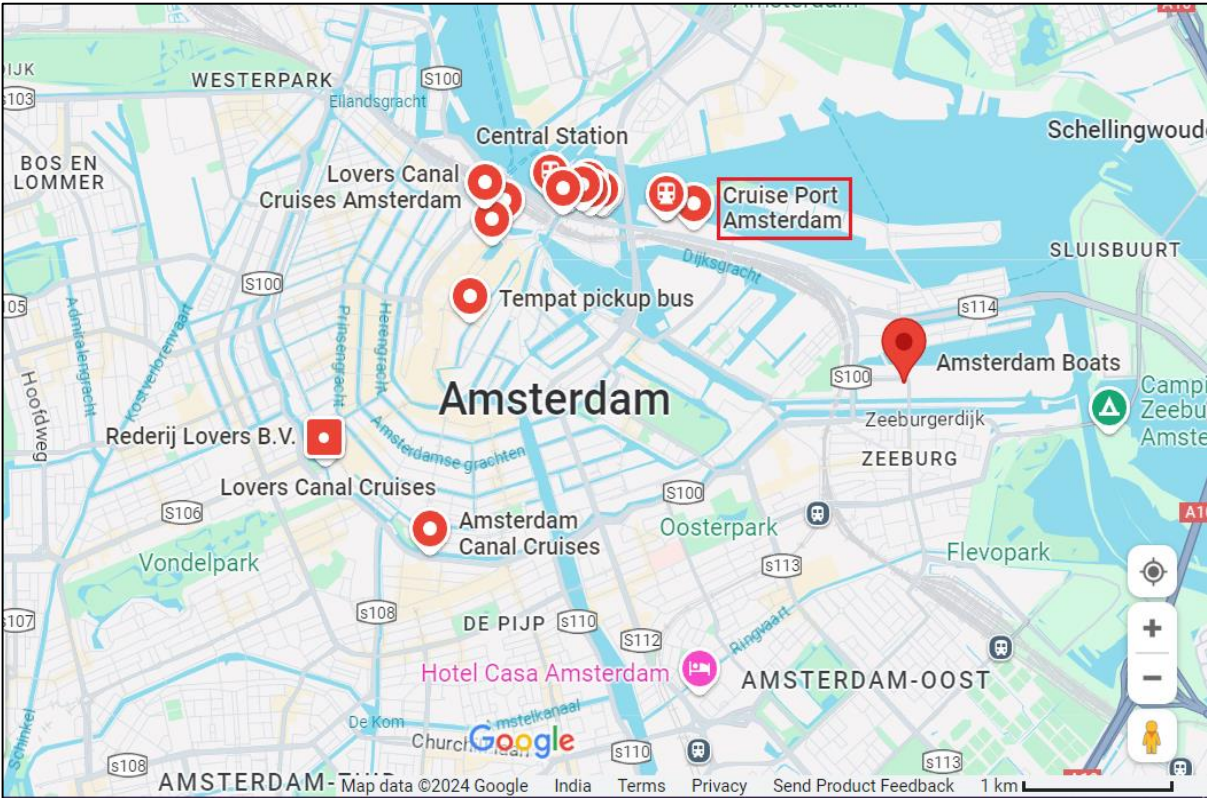Municipalities with the highest tourist tax revenue in the Netherlands in 2023 (in 1,000 euros)

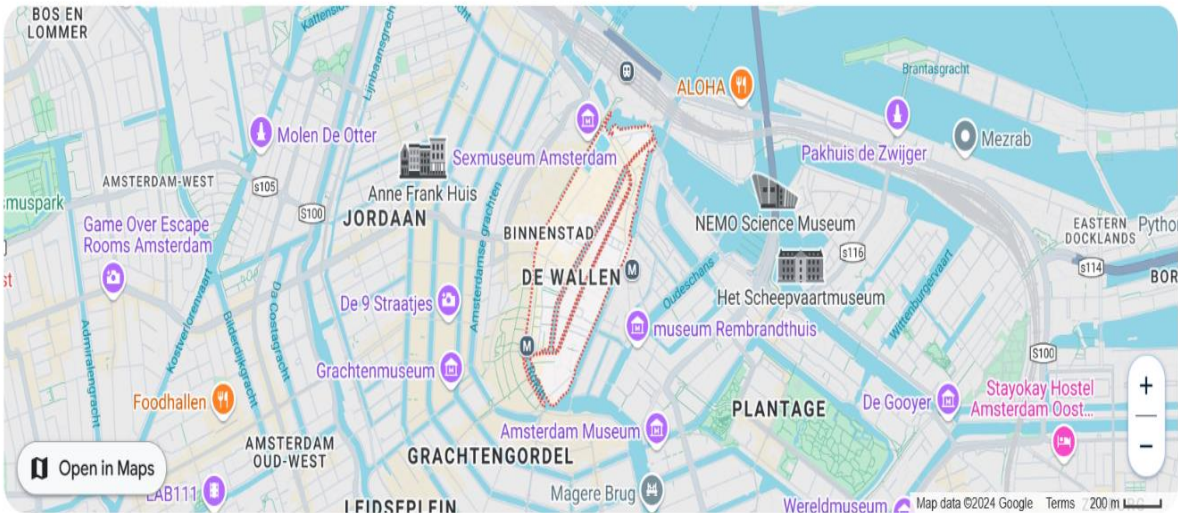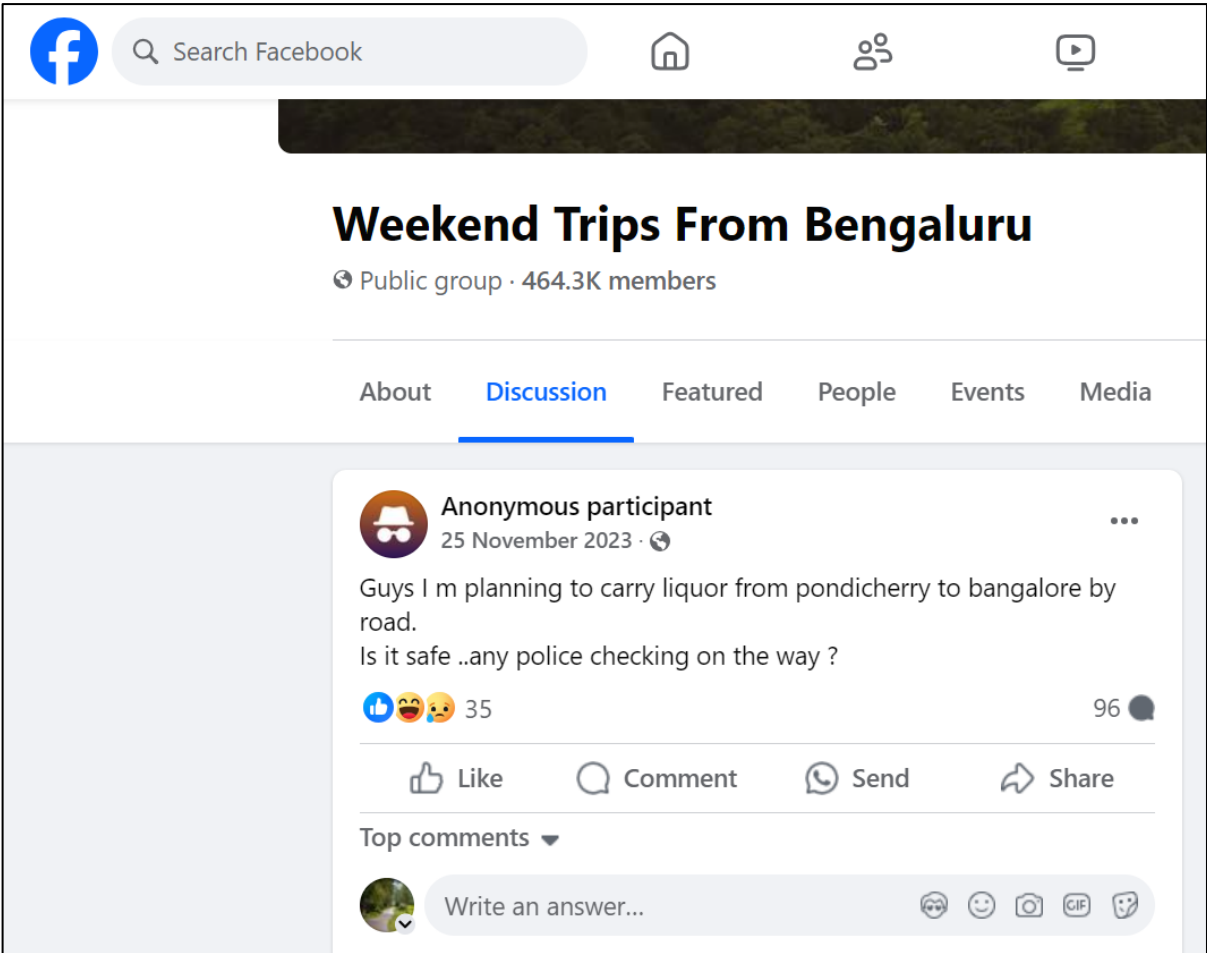## Exhibit – 11 Location of Amsterdam Cruise Port Terminal

Map data © 2024 Google

Exhibit – 12 De Wallen – The Red-light District of Amsterdam

Map data © 2024 Google

Exhibit – 13[42]

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