



# IT IS NOT ABOUT TOURISTS: THE CASE OF BARCELONA

LOCAL  
STORY

## **Albert Arias, in an interview with Minouche Besters and Konstantinos Gournianakis**

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Barcelona was the first wide-known example of a city becoming so popular that its own citizens began rebelling against the mass influx of tourists. But it was also among the first to develop a structured approach that combines lovability with livability. Albert Arias, a leading expert on tourism at Barcelona City Council wants to make one point very clear: “We won’t solve tourism-related issues through tourism policies solely, but with an integrated urban agenda for tourism activities.” Those two are very different, as we come to understand during our interview.

### **CLOSING OF PARK GÜELL**

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Albert says it was the closing of Park Güell as a public city park that prompted him to recognize a new approach to touristification was needed. Park Güell, located on the outskirts of the central city area, had grown so popular that it was frequently getting overcrowded. In response the municipality decided to close off a large part of the heritage site, turning it into a tourist attraction with entrance fees, and thereby effectively turning a public park into an “open air museum”.

Tourism was not such a hot topic back then in 2009. Albert was an urban academic, coordinating courses on city management at the university. “Park Güell was my backyard, I lived nearby, so the whole talk about closing it off made the discussion on tourism personal. As residents, from the social movements at that moment, we did not blame the tourists. We also didn’t want to segregate domestic residents and tourism at all, as what was at risk was the openness of this public space.” However, as a professional, he came to understand that he did need to reevaluate the way local policies work with respect to tourism issues. Park Güell was partially closed in October of 2013, but the discussion on touristification had just begun.

### **MORE NEGATIVE SIDE EFFECTS: AFFORDABILITY**

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Back in 2007 Barcelona’s downtown residents were already feeling the impact of their city’s rising popularity. Property rental prices in the city centre had become unaffordable for locals. The authentic feel of La Barceloneta and other traditional ‘barrios’ was largely lost as the areas became more and more touristy. Not just during the day, but also at night. Residential buildings were refurbished to cater to AirBnB guests, while local shops disappeared. The situation was so dire that the local government decided to ban hotels in the city centre to try and mend the unwanted situation.

Eventually, it became clear to city makers that Barcelona was facing an unprecedented challenge of having to deal with the tremendous impact of the city's attractiveness to tourists. In just two decades Barcelona went from a industrial regional capital to one of Europe's hotspots. The 1992 Olympic games only added fuel to the fire and low-cost companies did the rest.

*"Can anyone blame the tourists for visiting a city and having a great vacation", asks Albert? "Of course not, but everything should be better managed and regulated by legislation to make the city enjoyable for everyone without jeopardizing the quality of life of residents."*

## KEEPING THE BALANCE

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So the question then becomes: how can we maintain a balance between having an enjoyable public space for everyone, both tourists and residents, while safeguarding it from an overwhelming tourist influx that would certainly decrease its attractiveness along with the quality of life? The key is to understand that once we have made a place attractive, it is very difficult to turn it back. To tackle the issue of touristification we need to look at the bigger picture. It is really a question of inclusivity.

## REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

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According to Albert, tourism should be grasped as an inherent activity of the the city, not as an external discrete object. More than 150 000 tourists flock to Barcelona each day. However, this is number alone is not a problem. Rather, it should be contextualized according to the effects generated in the city. Restrictive measures to regulate activities are just part of the solution but there is no unique answer to tackle a phenomena such as overtourism. The answer lies in reframing the problem.

In the current status quo the wealth generated by tourism does not flow back into the whole of the city and its inhabitants. At the same time Barcelona residents suffer many negative side effects: lack of affordable housing in the city centre, inaccessible heritage sites that are no longer public, diminishing sense of ownership and community feel in the neighbourhoods, to name a few. There is no question that tourist amenities should be present in a city, but a local grocery shop should not be closed down to give way to another fish spa or a Nutella store. The problem is not the tourists per se. It is not just a matter of how many visitors can carry the city but but the lack of integration of tourism-related effects in the general urban agenda.

## INTEGRATED POLICY

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"We won't solve tourism-related issues through tourism policies solely, but with an integrated urban agenda for tourism activities." Albert proposes the swift implementation by the municipality of an integrated strategy for managing the destination by ensuring its sustainability, reconciling to the maximum all the elements at stake and promoting the greatest possible social return of tourism activities satisfying the enjoyment of visitors without jeopardizing the quality of life of the locals.

He believes that the integration of tourism in the Barcelonese urban agenda should be prioritized. Tourist-related revenues, although they are very scarce yet, should be invested directly in city infrastructure, affordable housing programmes, better public spaces throughout the city and so on. The adequate redistribution of wealth generated from tourism should benefit Barcelona residents and help create a more sustainable long-term strategy for tourism.

Barcelona offers a vivid example of how tourism can overwhelm a city. At the same time it shows a way forward which makes compatible the interests of tourists and the rights of residents, instead of treating them as mutually exclusive. Inclusiveness should never give place to opportunism, and sustainability must become a top priority for every city, providing great places for both local residents and foreign visitors.