UNWTO Inclusive Recovery Guide

Sociocultural Impacts of COVID-19

Issue 2: Cultural Tourism

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#Buildbackbettertourism

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Note

The *UNWTO Inclusive Recovery Guides on sociocultural impacts of COVID-19* are living guidelines. The document is subject to revision as the health situation evolves and more information becomes available on the most effective ways to make tourism and culture inclusive and accessible for all.

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An inclusive response for cultural tourism

In the first quarter of 2020, COVID-19 brought global tourism to a standstill, confining people to their homes, as many countries entered into strict lockdowns. **Culture was indispensable during this challenging period,** with millions of people seeking out cultural experiences from their homes. The ability to **virtually access and enjoy culture** served a sense of comfort, as well as a source of **inspiration for the travel of tomorrow.**

The staggered summer opening in 2020 had set bases for a rather slow recovery of cultural tourism in both rural and urban areas. Unfortunately, the **pandemic continues to put people's livelihoods at risk.** With millions of jobs at stake, this unprecedented crisis threatens to permanently damage the fragile ecosystems of the culture and tourism sectors.

Cities have traditionally played a major role in cultural tourism. They were the first, but also among the most to be affected by the pandemic, that resulted in restrictions and shutdowns in urban tourism. However, being hubs of innovation and creativity, they were the first allowing their inhabitants and people around the world to embrace culture in alternative ways. On the other hand, tourism in rural areas offers important opportunities for recovery as travellers seek less crowds, open-air experiences and local cultures.

The COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the intrinsic and unavoidable connection between urban and rural development.

Effective solutions require inclusive approaches at all levels, **bringing together** artists, creators, tourism and culture professionals, the private sector and local communities, and all relevant stakeholders **for an open dialogue and real-time solutions.** The **backing of policymakers is needed** to make sure these solutions prosper on the ground.

As the crisis continues with destinations re-opening and closing across the world, the tourism and culture sectors are **required to adapt quickly and respond effectively at short notice.** The global pause of travel has created an opportunity to move away from unsustainable practices of the past, **towards more resilient, inclusive and resource-efficient models** that contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In the context of the **International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development 2021,** cultural tourism has an important role to play in promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth, fostering innovation and providing benefits and empowerment for all.

Recommendations

Promoting synergies today will strengthen the cultural tourism of tomorrow

- **Exchange good practices and lessons learned to enhance responses and recovery.** Tourism and culture are facing similar challenges in adapting to new COVID-19 visitor regulations, such as social distancing, modification of facilities, as well as the digital transition. Greater collaboration between the tourism and culture sectors can enrich practices and result in **joint approaches to comply with all the measures and regain visitor confidence**.

- **Create participatory governance structures.** Gather artists and cultural professionals, local communities, the private sector and destination representatives **to agree and act upon a shared vision** for their cultural destination and enhance competitiveness. Greater coordination is needed to increase and strengthen international cooperation and networks that can facilitate this process.

- **Open discussion on a conscious and responsible cultural tourism.** Explore how destinations and cultural institutions can **respond to their roles within societies.** The latest global events show how cultural destinations can sensitize wider audiences on the society's need for intercultural dialogue, social justice and responsible consumption.

Supporting culture as a win-win for tourism destinations

- **Enhance the role of culture in destinations.** Cultural products and experiences are key assets for destination marketing strategies but they also require equal relevance in the **emergency and support planning.** Revenue loss and forced closures are **severely impacting** heritage sites, cultural events, spaces and institutions, **weakening destinations' competitiveness and market differentiation.**

- **Inspire travellers to re-discover their local culture and creative industries.** Create new experiences that feed in the tourism offer to reengage with **local communities**. Tourism strategies can target **domestic travellers** by reconnecting them with their own cultures and heritage. By diversifying their audiences through culture, and not focussing only on international markets, **destinations will pave the path for a long-lasting recovery.**

Strenghtening the revival of urban and rural experiences

- **Foster urban tourism through culture.** Leverage creativity and cultural diversity to **boost entrepreneurship and innovation** in urban destinations. Create platforms for **funding and investment** to make local economy **more vibrant** and to engage different social groups in the recovery, particularly women, youth, LGBTI and migrants.

- **Trigger interest in rural destinations.** Seeking open-air settings, which enable social distancing and tourism flow dispersal, putting rural destinations among travellers' current preferences. The promotion of local ways of life and cultures will **attract new audiences, extend the range of beneficiaries and discourage rural–urban migration.**

- **Reinforce urban–rural connectivity.** Recognize the value and role of cities as connecting hubs for urban–rural connectivity. Improve connectivity between urban and

rural areas to **diversify tourism offers,** which will ultimately result in strengthened urban–rural complementarity in tourism, as well as new synergies and collaborations.

Building a more resilient tourism and culture workforce through the digital transition

- **Build-back-better with decent employment models, training and professional upskilling.** This refers in particular to **new technologies** and customer service adjustments to new health measures that **require up-to-date skills.** The improvements will support the efforts of both sectors geared towards **talent retention** and a more **resilient workforce.**

- **Support digital access and digital literacy.** Globally, 46% of the population does not have access to the Internet. In some countries, the infrastructure remains insufficient to support the digitization of culture. **Digital upskilling of women, youth, iIndigenous peoples** and marginalized communities is urgently needed as they are facing severe exclusion.

- **Promote the rights of cultural creators.** While the digital transition provides important opportunities for cultural tourism, it also risks deepening inequalities and standardizing cultural dissemination. Recognizing the social rights of artists and cultural professionals is key for ensuring **meaningful and diverse cultural tourism experiences.**

Harnessing technology to make cultural tourism more competitive

- **Develop expertise in distribution and promotion.** The digital shift requires **commercial skills** so creators, institutions and businesses can place their products

and experiences in the digital market. The **creation of start-ups and alliances with key players** bring **competitive advantages** and can benefit local communities.

- **Consolidate alliances with technology and media partners.** Forge **win-win partnerships** that leverage lasting benefits. These may include tailored **virtual reality** experiences to complement the limited access to cultural sites, partnerships with **social media** to showcase destinations' culture, or the **development of applications** enabling a **safer visitor experience.**

- **Introduce a comprehensive place-based approach for cultural tourism.** Develop tourism experiences based on the cultural uniqueness of destinations across different fields including cultural heritage, gastronomy, design patterns and other forms of local cultural expressions. Such an approach involves local creators, cultural practitioners and inhabitants in the **shaping of tourism policies and practices.**

Fostering community-based tourism through living heritage

- **Raise awareness of the important role** of communities and cultural practitioners and their living heritage on the sustainable development of tourism. Address a wide range of tourism stakeholders from policymakers to development departments, tourism experts, tour operators, travel agencies and other stakeholders working in the field.

- **Ensure that communities and practitioners are main beneficiaries and have a leading role in tourism managment.** The pandemic is an opportunity to rethink and review tourism experiences related to living

heritage, towards re-shaping and rendering them **more inclusive and sustainable.** The viability of the heritage should be in no way diminished or threatened.

- **Develop community-centred tourism initiatives that actively engage practitioners of local and traditional knowledge.** Strengthen systems for transmitting living heritage to future generations through sustainable tourism. **Explore how living heritage in tourism can improve the livelihoods of communities and practitioners,** while safeguarding the social functions and cultural meanings of that heritage.

- **Actively involve communities and cultural practitioners in tourism strategies and management planning.** The rights and aspirations of the communities and practitioners should be **fully ensured** in relation to the development and management of cultural tourism through living heritage.

Fostering a cultural tourism recovery for all

- **Produce and collect data for informed planning and decision-making.** Following the initial support packages, it is key to evaluate now the results achieved and revise future plans to include those left behind. It is relevant to gather **data allowing to assess**

the impacts and the support provided to **women and youth**.

- **Recover cultural tourism for all.** In the tourism experience, destinations' key players should cater to the needs of **persons with disabilities and seniors,** as greater **accessibility benefits everyone.**

Protecting nature is key to safeguarding culture

- **Ensure the protection of natural heritage and biodiversity in cultural tourism destinations.** Nature is an important stage and source of inspiration for cultural practitioners. It is imperative **for the survival of main cultural expressions in destinations,** such as the ones related to indigenous cultures and their ways of life.

- **Educate visitors to be respectful and mindful of both the natural and cultural values** properties and protected areas they visit. This will help ensure responsible, low-impact tourism while **enhancing the visitor experience**.

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Resources and good practices

The UNWTO Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics (Article 7, paragraph 2) calls for conducting tourism policies and activities "[…] with respect for the artistic, archaeological and cultural heritage, which they should protect and pass on to future generations; particular care should be devoted to preserving monuments, worship sites, archaeological and historic sites, as well as upgrading museums which must be widely open and accessible to tourism visits".

The World Tourism Day 2020 celebrated during the pandemic, highlighted the role of tourism in providing opportunities outside of big cities and preserving cultural heritage. The *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development* called for the respect of cultures of rural communities and equal sharing of economic gains from tourism. UNWTO also kept promoting its *Recommendations on Sustainable Development of Indigenous Tourism*, adopted by the UNWTO General Assembly, as a set of guidelines for the tourism sector and visitors on responsible and ethical tourism in indigenous communities.

UNWTO issued, in collaboration with the Basque Culinary Centre, a set of *Guidelines for the Development of Gastronomy Tourism*. The partners launched the 2nd Gastronomy Tourism Start-Up Competition during the pandemic, awarding projects in Thailand, Puerto Rico, Denmark, Spain, Republic of Korea, Italy and Kenya. UNWTO published in 2021 *A Tour of African Gastronomy* gathering 30 top chefs from the continent.

The *UNWTO Recommendations on Urban Tourism* issued in 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, stress the contribution of tourism in the creation of urban spaces that foster cultural diversity and heritage preservation. In partnership with CyArk and UNWTO, Google Arts & Culture brought together on the World Tourism Day collection of virtual travel with thousands of museums and cultural destinations to explore.

During the lockdown, UNESCO Creative Cities have demonstrated their potential of combining culture with innovation and technology to strengthen urban tourism. Examples from UNESCO Creative Cities have been showcased in the report *UNESCO Creative Cities' response to COVID-19*. The creative solutions emerged in a great variety of destinations, ranging from Barcleona (Spain), Krakow (Poland), Barcelos (Portugal) in Europe, to Hangzhou (China) and Bangkok (Thailand) in Asia, all the way to Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Portoviejo (Ecuador) in the Americas, among others.

UNESCO established a Task Force on Culture and Resilient Tourism with the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Convention (ICOMOS, IUCN, ICCROM) in 2020. The Task Force is leading a global dialogue addressing key issues relating to tourism and heritage management during and beyond the crisis.

The UNESCO World Heritage and Google Arts & Culture Partnership is an interactive online exhibition featuring World Heritage properties, including first-hand accounts from site managers about the impact of COVID-19.

The UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Pledge in partnership with Expedia Group focusses on promoting sustainable tourism and heritage conservation. The pledge takes an industry-first approach to environmental and cultural protection, requiring businesses to introduce firm measures to eliminate single-use plastics and promote local culture. The initiative is expanding globally in 2021, providing capacity building tools for hospitality businesses and communities that have been hit hard by COVID-19.

The second edition of the *Training Handbook for Silk Road Heritage Guides in Central Asia* in partnership with UNWTO and the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) released in 2020 during the pandemic, sheds light on the importance of safeguarding intangible heritage and the central role of communities in in this process.

The World Heritage Journeys of Europe platform by UNESCO and National Geographic was developed with EU support to promote sustainable travel to 34 cultural World Heritage Sites. In 2020, the network of sites met virtually to share good practices for handling the COVID-19 crisis. Virtual experiences were promoted via social media and the sites were featured in the 'EU's culture – close to you' summer campaign.

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Some facts on culture and tourism amidst COVID-19

- [Global tourism suffered its worst year on record in 2020](). With international arrivals dropping by 74% in 2020, destinations worldwide welcomed **1 billion fewer international arrivals than in the previous year,** due to an unprecedented fall in demand and travel restrictions:[1]

  - Asia and the Pacific, the first region to suffer the pandemic and the one with the highest level of travel restrictions recorded, the largest decrease in arrivals in 2020;

  - The Middle East and Africa both recorded a 75% decline;

  - Europe recorded a 70% decrease in arrivals, despite a small and short-lived revival in the summer of 2020. The **region suffered the largest drop in absolute terms,** with over 500 million fewer international tourists in 2020; and

  - The Americas saw a 69% decrease in international arrivals, following somewhat better results in the last quarter of the year.

- The collapse in international travel results **in an estimated loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues.** The crisis has put between **100 million and 120 million direct tourism jobs at risk,** many of them in small and medium-sized enterprises.[2]

- Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic, many countries are **reintroducing stricter travel restrictions.** These include mandatory testing, quarantines and in some cases a complete closure of borders, all weighing on the resumption of international travel. The gradual rollout of a COVID-19 vaccine is expected to help **restore consumer confidence,** contribute to the easing travel restrictions and normalize travel in the year ahead.[3]

- 90% of the countries closed or partially closed World Heritage Sites during 2020.[4]

- 90% of the world's museums were forced to close at the height of the pandemic in 2020, and more than 10% may never reopen.[5]

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1   World Tourism Organization (2021), 2020: Worst Year in Tourism History with 1 Billion Fewer International Arrivals, UNWTO press release, 28 January 2021, UNWTO (online), available at: https://www.unwto.org/news/2020-worst-year-in-tourism-history-with-1-billion-fewer-international-arrivals (17-02-2021).
2   World Tourism Organization (2021), UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, volume 19, issue 1, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: https://doi.org/10.18111/wtobarometereng
3   Ibid.
4   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021), Monitoring World Heritage sites closures, UNESCO, Paris, available at: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/cultureresponse/monitoring-world-heritage-site-closures (17-02-2021).
5   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021), Museums around the world in the face of COVID-19, UNESCO, Paris (online), available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373530 (17-02-2021).

- Physical distancing and lockdown measures led to the cancellation or postponement of many festive events and rituals around the world, which has raised major social and economic consequences on communities that rely on cultural tourism associated with these intangible cultural heritage practices.

- Cities with a revenue based reliant primarily on tourism may see acute economic shrinkage as earnings from international tourism are estimated to considerably decline accompanied by the loss of 120 million jobs.[6] For instance, according to the Singapore Tourism Board, this city-state is losing about 18,000 to 20,000 tourists a day, and the figures could plummet further if the situation persists for longer.[7]

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6   United Nations (2020), Policy brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World, UN, New York (online), available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVIDANDCITIES.pdf (17-02-2021).
7   Keith Tan, Chief Executive of Singapore Tourism Board.

Useful links

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