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# **A mindful shift: an opportunity for mindfulness-driven tourism in a post-pandemic world**

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## **Abstract**

Many see the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point for tourism, a chance to reflect on the pressing environmental and socio-economic concerns of the industry, and an opportunity to pinpoint a more desirable direction. However, for tourism to revive as a less impactful and more meaningful industry, more mindful consumers are needed to take factual benefits from the gravity of the current situation. Mindfulness as a practice of bringing a certain quality of attention to moment-by-moment experiences has become an important asset for individuals to cope with the problems of modern life. It is even seen as a significant driver of lifestyle change in Western societies, resulting in an increasing number of more conscious consumers and mindfulness-driven products and services. The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call and opportunity for the tourism industry to embrace the mindfulness movement, trusting in its capacity to reflect on the current problems and to pave a new way forward towards more compassionate and meaningful tourism for both hosts and guests.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness; tourism; COVID-19; tourist experiences; sustainability; compassionate tourism.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to cause the largest downturn that the tourism industry had ever experienced in its history (Becker, 2020). After the 9/11 the global tourism industry was also severely damaged, and as a result, a new normal was established, primarily with new safety percussions (Taylor & Toohey, 2006). However, the current downturn is unprecedented, hitting everyone across the globe, thus creating a common challenge for all tourism stakeholders

(Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). Alternative calls have also emerged: these claim, for example, that in a time when a society is witnessing the collapse of, sometimes to be believed, stable and rigid structures of the capitalist world, a positive shift with more holistic perspectives to the world should/can potentially emerge (Ateljevic, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Rowen, 2020). With this viewpoint paper, we contribute to the current stream of academic commentaries on COVID-19 to raise the call for revisioning tourism in a post-pandemic world from a mindfulness perspective. We build our vision on the momentum of mindfulness movements in Western societies (Gotojones, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2006; Wilson & Pile, 2015), where mindfulness-driven tourism has the potential to set an important agenda for the long-term sustainability of the tourism and travel industry and spark the creation of more compassionate tourism. With this call, we will elaborate on our vision of mindfulness-driven tourism, its organization, and the main downturns of the current tourism industry that mindful tourists could help to resolve at a time of the ‘new normal’.

### **Leaning into the mindfulness momentum**

In simple terms, mindfulness can be defined as ‘an approach for increasing awareness and responding skillfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavior’ (Bishop et al. 2006, 230). As such, mindfulness is perceived in various ways, it is a therapy, a technology, or a lifestyle choice, and it is present everywhere, within schools, universities, military facilities, parliaments, and other realms (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). It became publicly recognized as a means to heal the manifold ills of modern societies (Kristensen, 2018). In the tourism domain, mindfulness has been recognized for its beneficial effects on tourist wellbeing and transformative influences on tourist experiences (Chen, Scott, & Benckendorff, 2017; Kirwin, Harper, Young, & Itzvan, 2019; Loureiro, Stylos, & Miranda, 2019), as well as for its potential impact on the industry’s sustainability agenda and its employees’ performance (Jang, Jo, & Kim, 2020; Lengyel, 2018). Gradually, the tourism industry is becoming aware of this potential of mindfulness, and commercial applications are increasingly emerging to leverage the benefits of meta-awareness within tourist experiences (McGoarty et al., 2020).

The practical knowledge of the profile of mindful tourists and how they behave in real-life tourism situations are rare (Chen et al., 2017). According to Loureiro et al., (2019, 4) mindful tourists are ‘... those who pay attention to the present moment (not the past or the future), attending to the actual somatic sensations lived at the destination in an open, non-reactive and non-judgement, rather tourists accept their present emotions and thoughts’. However, this definition can be seen just as a novel paradigm for further categorisation of tourist typologies, allowing for building appropriate consumer profiles. From a mindful tourist perspective, providing mindfulness services in the tourism domain can be seen as a genuine gesture of sincere care for consumer wellbeing which respects contemporary consumers’ needs, compliments the etiquette of services in the tourism industry, and creates space for improving consumer loyalty (Stankov & Filimonau, 2019a). At the same time, mindful consumers could become more aware of the social contacts (Kang & Gretzel, 2012) which would prompt them to provide more genuine and sincere feedback on tourist services received (Stankov, Filimonau, Gretzel, & Vujičić, 2020)

The effects of the adoption of mindfulness practice in the tourism domain would go beyond the intra- and interpersonal levels. Many calls are pointing out the transformational power of mindfulness and advocating that more present-awareness can be healing for the socio-economic

and environmental problems of a global society (Gotojones, 2013; Wamsler et al., 2018; Wilson & Pile, 2015). However, the transformative potential of the mindfulness movement across the whole tourism industry is still understated (Stankov, Filimonau, Gretzel, & Vujičić, 2020).

### **The COVID-19 pandemic as a wake-up call for the tourism industry**

Lessons from eco-evolutionary dynamics teach us that an environmental change can trigger a rapid evolution among living organisms (Pelletier, Garant, & Hendry, 2009). Nevertheless, the factual change that causes visible transformations, comes from within, from the genomic level. In terms of society, the initiator of today's prevailing understanding of contemplative mindfulness Jon Kabat-Zin (2005) believes that mindfulness is the next evolutionary step of democratic societies, driven by the individuals that are more compassionate and with the experience of ultimate freedom. Indeed, mindfulness as a movement has entered the cultural mainstream of Europe and North America, with all beneficial effects of this contemplative practice to individuals and potential dangers to be wrongly exploited by the propagators of capitalist societies (Gotojones, 2013). Having that said, people's needs and desires are that 'genomic levels' that shape the current outness, appearance, and dynamics of the tourism industry, and we believe that any long-lasting change can only be induced by the transformation of the demand side of the tourism market. Thus, the global pandemic creates, ironically, that external change in the tourism ecosystem and provides a space and time (in literal) for many consumers to reflect on their past and future travel behaviors.

### **The lessons so far and a mindful way ahead**

What we have seen so far with the pandemic is probably not enough for making a strong statement from a tourism-specific, socio-economic, perspective, but we believe that the biblical proposition of its influence over the tourism industry allows us this kind of speculation. What we have witnessed during the pandemic gives us more arguments for advocating the adoption of mindfulness by the tourism industry's mindset. The following will summarize our main points on what we have learned so far, and how a mindful shift could help a post-pandemic tourism industry.

### ***Wherever you go, there you are – Tourism marketing should cater to more conscious tourists***

The title of an iconic book 'Wherever you go, there you are' written by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) resonates well with the paradoxical condition of modern tourism. While most providers insist on promoting and designing enhanced tourist experiences, constantly pleading for more engagement, more enhancement, sometimes going to the extremes, much fewer providers focus is put on the authentic wellbeing of a tourist as a human (Stankov & Filimonau, 2019b). Tourism marketing tries to let tourists believe that participating in tourism experiences will make them happier (Nawijn, 2011). Although tourists are promised with happiness, they are not told that it can not be granted, since it is not entirely in the hand of the providers. Tourists will be amused, but just for a brief moment in time, as that kind of excitement will quickly fade away. The anticipation of holidays or even the reflection on how they went may, in fact, be a more enjoyable and, therefore, happier experience, than the holidays themselves (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002).

The self-isolation and the limitations imposed on freedom of movement in light of COVID-19, like in any other recession, have led the consumers to return to more primary, essential and non-negotiable needs (Starr, 2011). However, the sudden discontinuity from usual everyday routines and the freedom from social and business obligations and support have prompted people to also face anxiety and stress (Usher, Bhullar, & Jackson, 2020). Apart from reported negative behaviors, a portion of people has increasingly started searching for self-help, including meditation, pilates, and healthy lifestyles (Johnson, 2020). These were not just standalone attempts of the consumers left to cope with the problems on their own devices, as the media and organizations involved in the research of mindfulness, as well as the commercial providers of mindfulness-related services, generously offered assistance with advice, free seminars and access to a premium version of their services (The Mindfulness Initiatives, 2020).

A post-pandemic tourism industry could benefit from more conscious consumers, that are more aware of their unconscious behaviors, purchasing patterns, and increased ability to resist the promise of false happiness. Thus, we assume that more mindful tourists will be more preoccupied with the question of happiness and it is likely that they will be more self-aware of delusive tourism marketing (Ivakhiv, 2003). In that sense, traditional approaches to tourism marketing (e.g. promotion of the 3S – sea, sex, and sun) might seem somewhat trivial to them and could be perceived as patronizing advertising (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2000). Therefore, a mindfulness-driven tourism industry could limit the shorthand of tiring stereotypes in favor of a more sincere approach such as promoting vacations as a means of expression of life diversity, active participation, socially and environmentally responsible traveling and not as a final product that can fulfill people's 'dreams and desires' (Stankov, Čikić, & Armenski, 2018).

### ***Quality over quantity of experiences***

Despite the constant efforts to change the face of the current tourism industry, attracting mass tourists is still its major feature. Longer, but rare, holidays become gradually replaced with shorter, but more frequent, holiday journeys. Finally, the constant growth of international and domestic trips and air travel clearly shows the point that modern tourism expands dramatically (Schubert, Sohre, & Ströbel, 2020).

COVID-19 has forced mass tourism to face the wall and stop expanding almost instantly. Indeed, media reports on COVID-19 on cruise ships exposed the problems of the travel industry in almost caricatural fashion (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Inevitably, in the following recovery phase, the tourism industry will attempt to attract as much as it can from the declined mass demand. However, the pandemic, seen as a global event, could be perceived as a chance for adding more quality to future tourist experiences, by making them more memorable (Pizam, 2010). In other words, travel will be less frequent, but this opens up the space to make it less trivial and more valuable. Indeed, market reports show that post-pandemic tourists will ask for more basic experiences insisting on domestic travel (stay-cation) and valuing more spending quality time with friends and relatives (Wootton, 2020). Some destination marketing organizations (e.g. Peru and Cyprus) started campaigns to remind tourists about some basic physical experiences of visits to their countries, like the common sounds of water and nature, food preparation and serving, and other similar tactile experiences that were unavailable to most of the self-isolated consumers during the lockdowns. Indeed, according to some popular advice

given for mindful travel, it could awaken sensory perceptions, taking sensory delights of focused attention to the new external and inner spaces (Currie, 2000).

### ***Technology is not a holy grail, an enemy nor a simple servant***

Contemporary tourism is a technology-driven industry, that highly values technology-enhanced experiences and insists on using state-of-the-art technologies to amplify competitiveness in a digital society (Cimbaljević, Stankov, & Pavluković, 2018). However, the everyday use of technology and its spillovers during travel cause various problematic scenarios of technology usage (Dickinson, Hibbert, & Filimonau, 2016; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Indeed, Kabat-Zinn (2019) emphasizes that the habit of filling every moment with mental content continues even during travel, which ultimately leaves travelers unsatisfied.

We have witnessed that, in a time of a crisis created by COVID-19, people turned towards technology asking for help. For example, there has been an increase in demand for mental health applications during the pandemic (Gordon & Doraiswamy, 2020). There have been various examples of robots replacing people, mobile applications tracking people's contacts, or Big Data analytics predicting the spread of the virus among the population. Most importantly, technology has been used to connect people and replace physical interactions. The reports show an increased public trust in technology, willingness to engage, and to change the attitudes towards it, while some are even willing to temporarily forget about privacy issues for a greater good (Geist, 2020).

Tourism marketing has switched to some already existing and new virtual solutions to satisfy people's desire for travel. However, for most tourists, despite the advances in visual and immersive technologies (Wagler & Hanus, 2018), virtual tourism could serve just as a temporary fix, not a viable substitute to travel. The tourism industry and academics were aware of that fact even before the pandemic, admitting that the overdependency of tourism experiences on digital technology had to be managed carefully, by limiting its use or by creating more meaningful instances of use (Dickinson et al., 2016). The pandemic exposed, even more, the complexity of human-technology interactions reaffirming some of the recent calls that more mindful tourists will be more capable of self-reflection when interacting with technology in tourist experiences (Stankov, Filimonau, & Slivar, 2019).

### ***A path to compassionate tourism***

For a long time, modern tourism has been described with some catchy slogans, such as, a 'passport to peace', or 'the peace industry' which is to promote peaceful cohabitation across national and cultural borders (Bechmann Pedersen, 2020). The current COVID-19 reality of that and other idealistic visions of modern tourism reminds all tourism stockholders that such goals are hardly achievable/manageable and that tourism, as an industry, could hardly keep up with the highest projected expectations. As we mentioned earlier, the idea of tourism being a responsible and sustainable industry is still a far-to-reach goal, as some of the game-changing and promising attempts quickly face the harsh reality of a highly competitive market. For instance, instead of leaving more space for profitability for smaller hotels, new online travel intermediaries impose high commissions and interfere with restrictive price policies and the sharing economy sites very quickly turn into the likes of their commercial, excessive profit-making, counterparts (Slivar, Stankov, & Pavluković, 2019).

Here, consumers largely contribute to the story. A significant portion of consumers is still showing high inconsistency in their proclaimed and actual behavior. The most notable example is a discrepancy between declarative support of the pro-environmental and sustainability agendas and acting oppositely, for example, many tourists are not willing to pay extras for environmental initiatives without having additional personal benefits (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016). Similarly, the current trend of increasing demand for air travel is in opposition to climate-related sustainability goals (Kantenbacher, Hanna, Miller, Scarles, & Yang, 2019).

During crisis events, the values of solidarity, altruism, and compassion emerge as extremely important, not just in the realms of professions directly involved in the crisis, but as higher-level, collective values, such as when wearing a face mask in the community to protect others (Cheng, Lam, & Leung, 2020). Indeed, compassion has been neglected for a long period, as a powerful and universal motivator for enabling aspiration for sustainable tourism or enlightening mass tourism (Weaver & Jin, 2016). A vision of more compassionate tourists leans on the evidence of the emergence of new consumer segments in tourism that are already attracted to mindfulness-themed products and services. With the increased awareness of their behavior as consumers, tourists might be more interested in the global and local impacts, as their purchasing behavior may influence the local economy and the environment (Bechwati, Baalbaki, Nasr, & Baalbaki, 2016; Geiger, Otto, & Schrader, 2018). By being supported with honest support from tourists, the sustainability agendas in the tourism industry would become less difficult to reach. If tourists are more immersed within the present moment, there are better chances to notice what is wrong with the current state of tourism. Tourists may, therefore, become susceptible to notice fake smiles of overworked reception staff or housekeepers taking double shifts that often come from low-income countries. Tourists may further become better aware of the devastating, from the environmental but also socio-economic viewpoint, the context of isolated resorts often placed in those countries (Taranath & Bolisay, 2019). Tourists may not be able to act upon these immediately, nor it is needed at this moment, but these experiences could become transformational in a long-run making from, what is now pejorative called, a mass tourist, to a driver of a mass mindful change and, ultimately, to more compassionate tourism.

### **Concluding remarks**

The COVID-19 pandemic has mobilized the global society pleading to the responsible behavior of every individual. This has forced a shift in global awareness towards the revived views that collective values start from within the mindful individuals (Steidle, 2017), and this capacity, we think, could serve as an ignition to a more mindful solution for the future. We believe that the current pandemic could give rise to more mindful tourists whilst these, in turn, can give rise to more mindful and, ultimately sustainable tourist experiences. These, in turn, should prompt tourism providers to respond to a new demand by adjusting their, currently unsustainable, product offers. According to that vision, more mindful tourists could act as an underlying web that connects, supports, and nurtures the whole tourism ecosystem for the benefit of all.

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