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Reflections on How the COVID-19 Pandemic can Change Tour Guiding

Luis Miguel Brito

Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril, miguel.brito@eshte.pt

Cristina Carvalho

Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies (ESHTE), Portugal, cristina.carvalho@eshte.pt

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Reflections on How the COVID-19 Pandemic can Change Tour Guiding

Miguel Brito

Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril (ESHTE), Portugal
miguel.brito@eshte.pt

Cristina Carvalho

Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril (ESHTE), Portugal
cristina.carvalho@eshte.pt

This short editorial paper reflects on the Tour Guiding industry in 2020 and the impact of COVID-19. The paper suggests that while the pandemic and its associated lockdowns has devastated the tourism industry, it has also encouraged those working in the industry to be more innovative and imaginative in their business practices. While the impact of the virus is acknowledged, it is proposed that 2020 may be a turning point in redefining tourism in general and Tour Guiding in particular.

Key Words: tour guiding, pandemic, COVID-19, innovation

The first issue of the *International Journal of Tour Guiding Research* (IJTGR) did not mention the present Covid-19 pandemic just because (much like the WHO) we didn't yet have a notion of how long it would last and how serious it could be. The first issue of the *IJTGR* was published in May 2021, and to date the 6 papers have been downloaded almost 700 times.

Unlike the first issue, this second one cannot ignore the Corona Virus because it has invaded our lives and we know it will deeply influence not only our future lifestyle but also the whole tourism system.

Until February 2020, the perspective of having the best tourism season ever prevailed amongst all stakeholders in the sector – more hotels were being built, more restaurants were opening, more events were being promoted, more people were planning to travel, and obviously the professionals were preparing themselves to give an appropriate response to the ever-growing tourism industry's demands.

According to the UNWTO (<https://www.unwto.org>), globally in 2019 there were about 1,460 million arrivals, whereas for 2020 it is now estimated that

the numbers dropped to about 20%-30% of that number, i.e. about 440 million arrivals. The WTO also considers that over 75 million jobs are currently at risk.

In other words, the positive scenario envisioned up to February 2020 went down the drain. All of a sudden, the hospitality industry started to see their reservations cancelled and many tourism professionals went home to work online, if they were lucky enough, because many of their counterparts simply lost their jobs.

In the case of tourist guides, their agendas were reduced to nothing. They simply became unemployed. Not only organised parties but also congresses and incentives (the MICE sector in general) were cancelled and they did not take place at all in 2020, with very few exceptions. After the various lockdowns, tourists didn't want to travel together in the same bus or plane. This particularly impacted on peripheral countries such as Portugal and Malta which are strongly dependent on air travel. Tourists still can't visit sites and monuments together; they have to keep a certain degree of physical (social) distance. Therefore, tourist guides

lost their work and, in many cases, where they were lucky enough to find some work, saw their fees being reduced.

We believe that Covid-19 mostly affects senior people and we know that 75% of tourist parties are composed of people over 50 (Brito, 2012). This cohort of people started to avoid travelling and instead started to save money knowing not what the future would hold. Perhaps now is the time to start working with smaller groups, younger parties, and groups comprised of families and friends, while we plan for the return of the older clients in the more distant future.

‘Safe and Clean’ is now a sort of motto, a rule followed everywhere. This also has implications in the work of tourist guides. They have to guarantee that tourists feel safe and confident while travelling. And we don’t mean only international tourists, because out of the blue domestic tourists started representing the majority of the clients for the year 2020. Thus, tours must be adapted to this new clientele, which will predominate until we have a situation where the various vaccines have taken effect, or some other consensual solution keeps the virus at bay. Only after that will tourists restart to travel abroad.

Many guides saw their names on the list of unemployed people, although the state in many European countries granted them with a subvention. That was obviously not enough to keep the lifestyle most guides had before; some guides decided to change activity, working in a number of different sectors, from real estate companies to call centres, taking advantage of their communication and interpersonal skills.

To overcome the present situation, those who stayed in the guiding business kept on studying to requalify themselves through further academic education, themed webinars, practical training, while also either creating their own walking tours or attending new walking tours planned and executed by their fellow colleagues. Like a twist of Fate or the flip of a coin, these sudden alternatives have become the positive side of the crisis. One of the accusations previously

made to certified tourist guides was that they were passive, not creative and not very open to change, maybe because they didn’t need to change. In 2020, they felt the need to reinvent themselves, becoming more creative, inventing new tours, especially walking tours that they promote on social media, since sightseeing on motor coaches is difficult, as mentioned before. Guides also became more innovative, for instance by using new technologies to better promote themselves as entrepreneurs, and also using audio devices and electronic props on their tours.

The tourism industry is becoming larger and more complex with increasing types of enterprises, tourists, tours and guides, and it is spreading across national territories, invading the outskirts of the towns. Local consumption and domestic travel will begin to prevail in 2021, but everything will slowly expand and the international business will recover again. The use of the local countryside has erupted as a trend and guides should prepare new themed tours related to nature. Concerns about ecology and sustainability will indeed influence more and more the ways that people travel and fulfil the consumption of destinations (i.e. scenery and cultural uniqueness). Therefore, towns and regions should take this COVID-19 break to re-define and re-programme their load capacity, as some already have, and act accordingly.

References

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UNWTO (<https://www.unwto.org>).