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Cover Page Footnote

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Global tourism was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, but an exception can be seen among walking tour companies providing tours for locals in Budapest, who saw a rise in demand for their tours during the summer and early autumn of 2020. During pre-pandemic times tourism levels broke records annually, and one of the main concerns was overtourism in certain cities, but due to COVID-19, international arrivals hit record-lows and millions of jobs became endangered. Meanwhile data show that local alternative walking tours in Budapest could operate sustainably during the pandemic at almost the same capacity as before, because local residents started to discover their own neighbourhoods. In the time of social and physical distancing walking tours proved to be a viable solution for locals to discover the city in safe ways. Academic research on guided walking tours is getting more attention in the past decades, focusing on several subjects such as the role of the guide or the value of co-creation, but less attention is given to the new phenomenon of proximity tourism, where local residents participate in experiences originally designed for visitors. The aim of this paper is to investigate why thematic walking tours are in such a high demand among residents of Budapest, and how these local tours can provide a resilient proximity tourism product during the pandemic.

Key Words: local walking tours, Budapest, COVID-19 pandemic, proximity tourism

Introduction

Urban tourism is a phenomenon which has been getting more attention from academics recently (Ashworth & Page, 2011), and in the case of Budapest, Hungary it has been growing extensively in the past decade, reaching record numbers of international visits every year. More than 50% of tourists visiting the country visited the capital (KSH, 2019), most of them coming to see urban attractions of the city. Similar to other tourist-historic cities, architectural and cultural heritage are the main attractions for visitors and these many layers often need the interpretation of a local guide, especially during the usual 2-3 day stays by tourists who only have a limited amount of time to discover the city.

Recently a new form of alternative walking tour is becoming popular (Rátz, 2017) during which the city is introduced from a fresh perspective. While some tours are in popular places, usually these walks explore off the beaten track locations.

This way visitors can learn about the local culture in authentic ways, away from the crowds. These alternative thematic walking tours are also popular among locals who join these walks to explore their neighbourhood, participating in an experience originally created for tourists (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Budapest provides an extensive example of this paradigm shift in the tourism industry, with dozens of local walking tour companies specialising in creating experiences for locals.

The tourism industry was hit really hard by the COVID-19 pandemic in Budapest. Visitor numbers dropped drastically in 2020 following global tendencies. Due to the lack of international tourists most tour guiding services had to close shop or find alternative virtual means of reaching their customers. One exception in Budapest was local walking tour companies who saw an even bigger interest from citizens during the summer of 2020, making this form of urban tourism more resilient during the pandemic.

To understand how this new form of proximity tourism emerged in Budapest, this paper will first provide a brief overview of guided walking tours research to contextualise the question of locality in tour guiding. Then an introduction to the complex architectural and cultural heritage layers of the Hungarian capital will be given and the flourishing local walking tour industry of Budapest will be presented. Finally, the 2020 season of local walking tour companies will be analysed in more detail to answer the main research question of this case study, how and why these tours are a resilient form of tourism that merit a more profound interest in their research.

Guided Walking Tours in Urban Environments

When arriving to an unknown place the help of guides has always been important to explore the new area (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). The guide has local knowledge that facilitates the understanding of the local context and history, acting as an interpreter or mediator (Weiler & Walker, 2014) so that visitors get a better understanding of what they are looking at. The earliest known presence of guides dates back to the Roman Empire, when the wealthy aristocrats visited Hellenistic cities in their free time (Walton, 2005). In the port of Athens guides would offer their services to visitors to show the landmarks of the city, but they did not need to interpret the cultural context of the built environment since the visitors would come from the same cultural background. Throughout history guides have been present in cities, and in the 19th century guidebooks also started to appear as a facilitation of discovering a city (Gordon, 2014). The modern guided tour phenomenon however, started with the rise of global tourism in the second part of the 20th century.

Academic literature has been focusing on urban tourism for decades (Ashworth & Page, 2011), and more recently, studies are being conducted in guided tourism research (Zillinger, Jonasson & Adolfsson, 2012; Chen, Weiler & Black, 2018; Black, Weiler & Chen, 2019). The performance-role of the tour guide is a main focus in recent studies (Galí & Camprubí, 2020), analysing how the personality

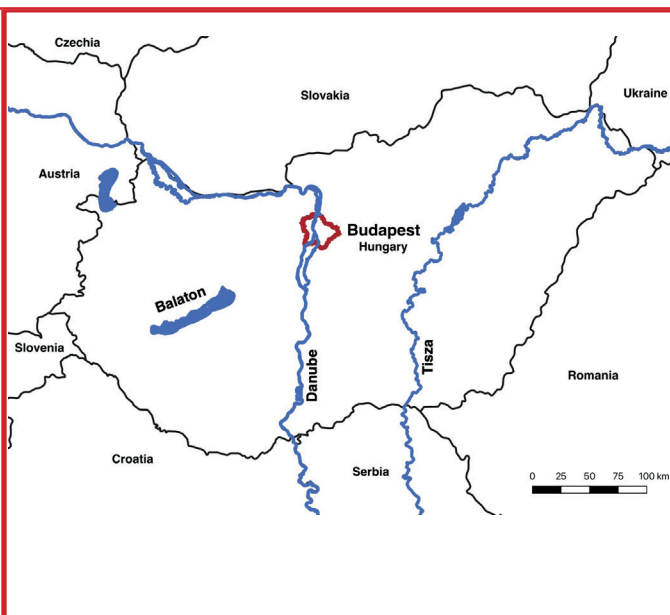
and interpretation skills of the guide can influence participants (Cohen, 1985). The value of co-creation during walking tours is also an important component of guided tour research (Larsen & Widtfeldt Meged, 2013), analysing the active behaviour of tourists during walking tours. Another aspect in understanding tourist behaviour in cities is measuring their movement in the city (Shoval & Ahas, 2016), which shows interesting correlations to where guided tours take visitors.

A subject which has not yet been researched by many is the role of locals participating in walking tours in their own city. Most of the published research has a strong focus on international tourists exploring the city they arrive to, but in recent years a new trend has started where locals choose to experience their own city and act as tourists themselves (Richards, 2017). Following the terminology of Hoogendoorn and Hammett (2020) these ‘resident tourists’ act as normal visitors, generating economic and cultural developments in their neighbourhoods. The term ‘*proximity tourism*’ is being used more frequently by scholars (Salmela *et al.*, 2021), and one of the most common ways for locals to engage in tourist experiences is by participating in guided walking tours in their own city (Diaz-Soria, 2017) to better understand the history and built environment of their own neighbourhood. The tours which interest the locals are a new tourism product referred to as alternative tours, referring to how these tours provide a non-conformist way to explore the city. We can find such alternative tours in the tourism offer of many major cities such as Paris, Barcelona, Athens, Berlin (Rätz, 2017) or even Chicago, but few have received such interest from the local population as in the case of Budapest (Smith & Zátori, 2016).

Bottom-up initiatives of organising local communities to rally to a cause are a part of urban life since Jane Jacobs¹ (Klemek, 2008), and in recent years a global

¹ Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) was an American-Canadian journalist, author and activist, who organised grassroots efforts to protect urban neighbourhoods. In 2007 a number of ‘Jane’s Walks’ were organised in Toronto, in memory of her life and works. This has now become an international phenomenon, and walks are organised globally around May 4th which is the anniversary of her birth.

Map 1: Location Map - Hungary and Budapest



Source: Open Street Map. Graphics: Author (Exported from QGIS)

movement of *Jane's Walks* has surfaced as an annual event of friendly neighbourhood walks around the world (*Jane's Walk Website*, 2021). In western European and American cities, local governments regularly organise site visits to new development areas for locals as a tool of inclusion, explaining main concepts and initiating discussion about the future of the site (Gustavsson & Hallin, 2013). This paper will argue that walking tours created for and attended by locals is a resilient tourism product, but in order for them to be successful the availability of a complex urban fabric is necessary.

Reading the Complex Urban Fabric of a Post-socialist City: An introduction to Budapest

Budapest is the capital of Hungary, the largest city in the country, and a regional centre in Central-Eastern Europe (see Map 1). The city has a population of 1.75 million people, and it is the political, economic and cultural centre of the whole country (Puczko, Ratz & Smith, 2007). Located on the banks of the Danube, the city is divided and connected by the river. In many senses it is a city of contrasts, Buda sits on the mountainous terrain of the western bank, while Pest stretches out to the plains of the East.

The city of Budapest is fairly young, being established only in 1873 by the joining of Pest, Buda and Óbuda, but the area has been inhabited since pre-Roman times, and has been continuously developing ever since. Unfortunately, many historical events have led to the destruction of the city, but Budapest was always rebuilt by its citizens. The Hapsburg armies destroyed the city when taking it back from Ottoman occupation in 1686, and again during the freedom fight of 1848-49. More recently the turbulent times of the 20th century left the city in ruins - the 1945 siege of Budapest, and also the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against the oppressing Soviet regime. These events on the other hand created the opportunity that is one of the most appealing traits of the city's urban fabric: its layered complexity where different architectural styles can be found next to one another.

The architectural landscape is dominated by late 19th century historical styles, built during the ‘golden age’ of the city and inspired by Paris and Vienna. The most visited landmarks, such as the Parliament building, Fisherman’s Bastion or Andrásy Avenue were constructed during this period. The city is also a listed UNESCO world heritage site ‘... including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrásy Avenue’ since 1987 and extended in

2002. It is mainly characterised by neo-historical styles. The typical tenement houses of Budapest, organised around half-private courtyards were also built around 1900 (Benkő, 2011). Exemplary pieces of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture are scattered around the city with organic and nature-inspired forms (Hill, 2014). Furthermore, Budapest followed global trends between the two world wars as well, making space for modernist apartments, Bauhaus villas and institutions. On the other hand, heritage buildings include older constructions from the classical style of the early 1800s such as the National Museum, baroque structures such as most houses in the Castle District, many churches, and even Turkish baths, Gothic constructions, and Roman viaducts can be found.

During the siege of Budapest, one of the bloodiest battles of the 2nd World War in the winter of 1944-1945, the retreating German army blew up all seven iconic bridges over the Danube. Following the bombings by allied forces the Soviet army advanced into the city, and after 3 months of urban battle Budapest was 'liberated'. The aftermath of the siege was catastrophic for the city, with more than 80% of buildings damaged or destroyed (Ungváry, 2005). In the second part of the 20th century many heritage buildings were reconstructed, but the empty lots left after the war were gradually filled with socialist modernist architecture. After the regime change of 1989 the city's architecture changed quickly, introducing a brief period of late post-modernism followed by a very respectful contemporary design period in the early 2000s, introducing a new architectural language into the city.

Architecture is often regarded as the more or less scenic background for urban life, but in the case of tourist-historic cities it is also a main attraction for visitors. In the case of Budapest, this brief (and intentionally incomplete) overview of the city's architecture highlights the diversity of built heritage the city can offer to tourists. Similar to other European historic capitals all major architectural eras left their mark on the city, and in a unique way they coexist next to one another, creating a diverse urban fabric. However, during the socialist period of

the second half of the 20th century, citizens became alienated from their history and the cultural heritage in the city. Therefore, a lot of stories about the built environment and about the capital remain to be rediscovered by its citizens. This might explain why locals are so interested in guided walking tours; they appreciate the help of a professional guide to translate the complexity of the built environment and the historical layers hidden between the buildings.

The Image of Budapest

The image of Budapest has not been clearly defined since the regime change of 1989 (Smith & Puczkó, 2012). Multiple initiatives were started by the Hungarian National Tourist Office and the Tourist Office of Budapest, but the potentials of branding the city have not been realised (Puczko, Ratz & Smith, 2007).

There are more than 1 million litres of thermal water surfacing in Budapest every day, and thermal bath culture in the city is very popular. One of the main tourist activities is visiting the world-famous spas of the city, so one initiative was to brand Budapest as 'The City of Waters'. Other attempts included 'The Capital of the Danube', focusing more on the eclectic inner city, the wide variety of museums and the UNESCO World Heritage area of Budapest. The latest branding strategy by the Hungarian Tourism Agency debuted in 2018, creating the brand 'The Spice of Europe', in order to better position Budapest as a tourist destination.

The lack of a clear strategy that has lasted longer than a few years has led to a perception of the city by visitors that mainly includes cheap prices, and not the architectural or cultural values.

The spatial distribution of the tourist offer is concentrated around heritage sites of the city, and the architectural diversity described above mainly remains unnoticed among visitors (Kádár, 2014). Alternative walking tours take advantage of the situation, taking visitors to unexplored parts of the city, but as we will see in the next section their popularity is based principally on locals attending these experiences.

Local Walking Tours of Budapest, the Rise of a New Phenomenon

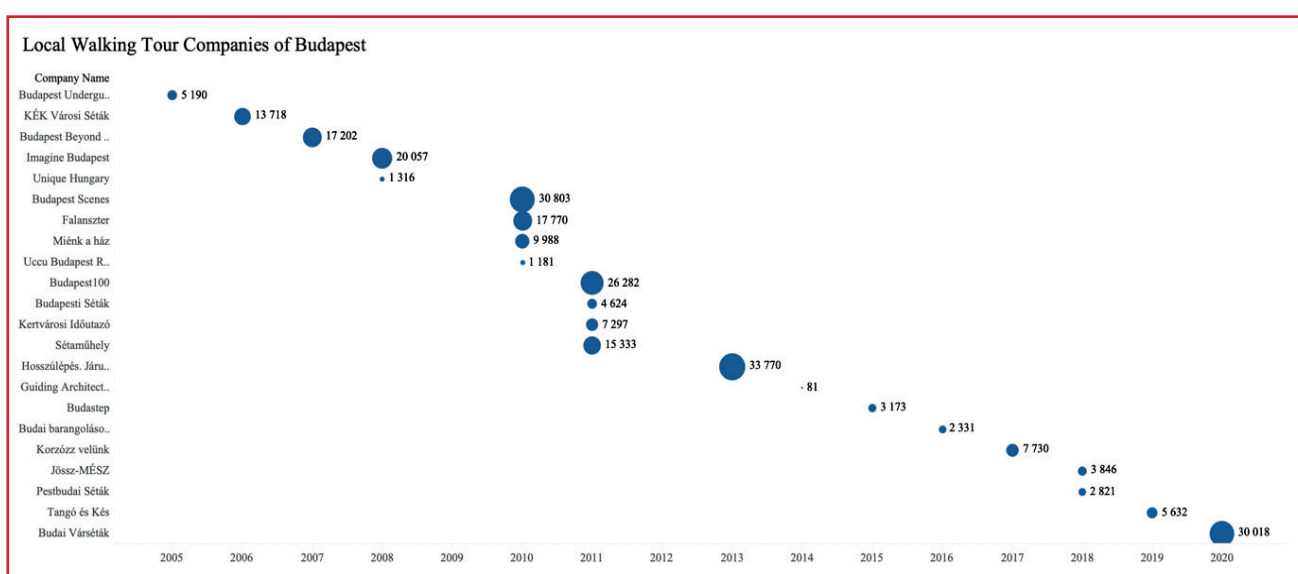
Walking tours are a popular form of exploring Budapest among visitors. Tourists arriving to Budapest can join organised city visits, bus tours, boat tours and other classic walking tour experiences, led by professional tour guides. The Association of Hungarian Tourist Guides (MISZ) was established in 1989 and the Hungarian Tourist Guides' Association (MIE) was founded in 2016, both to represent the interests and rights of tour guides. There are currently around 15,000 official tour guides working in Hungary, the majority in the capital. Tour guiding is regulated by law. In order to be a certified guide one has to complete a specific training program, but sanctions for unlicensed guiding are rare. This is also due to the fact, that only tour guiding in a foreign language is part of the regulations, therefore walking tours for locals are not controlled. Free guided tours are also popular in Budapest, and similar to many foreign tourist destination (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020) the tip-based system disrupts the regulation of tour guiding.

Walking tours are popular among locals. Since 1990 MISZ joined in with the global annual event of International Tourist Guide Day, started in 1985 by

the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA). This has become a popular event in Budapest. A similar initiative is European Heritage Day (<http://oroksegnapok.gov.hu>), organised every September since 1999 in Hungary. During this event, visitors can enter heritage buildings and participate in walking tours.

Budapest is adapting to global tourism trends, and it seems that both for local and domestic tourists the built heritage is one of the main attractions in the city (Smith & Puczkó, 2012). In recent years a new form of alternative guided walks appeared in Budapest, attracting not only tourists, but more importantly a growing number of locals to discover their own city. These guided tours are called alternative because they are made for the niche tourism market, for visitors interested in specific themes of the city. The tours usually take the consumer to 'off the beaten track' places, parts of the city which are not frequented by tourists, but still have many interesting attractions for the visitor, often providing first-hand authentic experiences (Rátz, 2017). Alternative guided tour companies provide tours in different themes such as architecture, literature, gastronomy, local history, sociology, ethnography and many others (Klaniczay, 2014).

Figure 1: Local Walking Tour Companies of Budapest by Year of Foundation, with Facebook Page Likes as of June 2021



Source: Author. (Exported from Tableau)

Authenticity is an important factor in tour guiding, and recent research shows that it plays an important role for the experience of the consumer (Zatori, Smith & Puczko, 2018). In the case of alternative tours, the authentic experience often comes from the fact that the tour guide is a professional in the particular theme of the tour, which enhances the consumer's satisfaction (Lin, Lin & Chen, 2017).

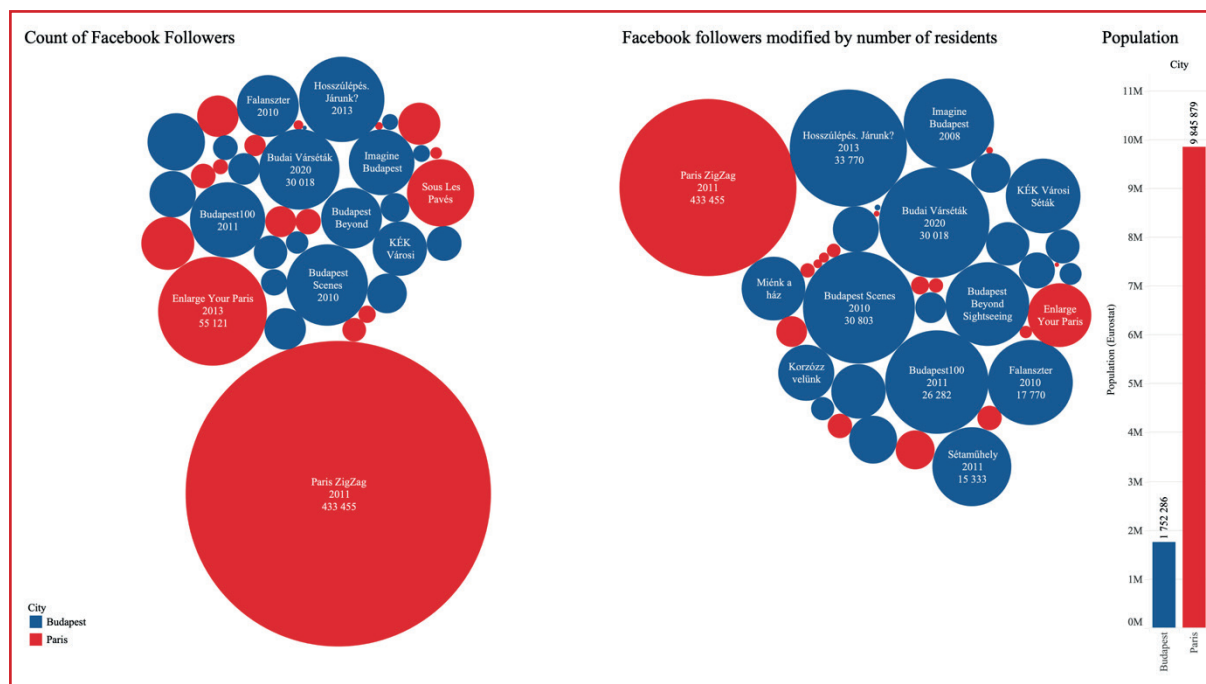
Between 2005 and 2015 more than a dozen local walking tour companies were created in Budapest (Figure 1). Their primary objective was to present the city to visitors from a new perspective, but rather early on their focus shifted to locals who took great interest in this new alternative urban activity. A similar change of audience from tourists to locals is described by Ormond & Vietti (2021) in relation to *Migrantour*, an international tour guiding service present in multiple European cities. This also correlates with the naming of the companies: in the first few years English names were preferred, but after 2010 companies chose catchy Hungarian names (Figure 1).

For locals there are several motivations for joining a walking tour to rediscover their own neighbourhood. As categorised by Diaz-Soria (2017) these experiences can be educational, professional, recreational or a tourist experience. Most studies about tour guiding focus on international or domestic tourists (Zillinger, Jonasson & Adolfsson, 2012), whereas in the case of Budapest this new trend of alternative walking tours mainly attracts locals, creating a very special market and brand opportunity. Companies have a very strong social media presence, sharing architectural, urban and historical trivia about their walks on a daily basis, creating a new type of tourist gaze, mainly focusing on locals (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2020). In 2018 three companies formed the Hungarian Walking Association (HWA) to be able to organise thematic walking tours held to a certain standard of quality. In 2019 the first Night of Walks was organised by the HWA, a similar concept to Night of Museums or Night of Spas.

One of the first organisations to host urban walks for professional and educational purposes was KÉK – Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre, an NGO founded in 2006. Their main goal is to broaden the discussion about architecture and cities, and as a tool to reach locals they started organising architectural walking tours and building visits. Among other programs they started one of the most successful local urban festivals, the Budapest100 (BP100, 2022). During the two-day event locals can visit 100-year-old open (often residential) buildings all around the city, where volunteers and residents prepare place-making activities and exhibitions about the buildings' histories. The event is visited yearly by approximately 20,000 people, and has won multiple national and international awards as a best practice. During the festival there are several walking tours organised by enthusiastic volunteers, residents, and local patriots. During the first decade of the festival more than 500 houses opened their gates, showing locals a new opportunity to interact with architecture and the city.

There are currently more than twenty companies in Budapest who specialise in local walking tours (Figure 1) and several events occur annually focused on organising thematic tours for locals. These companies realised the potential of proximity tourism and enriched their alternative tourism offer of Budapest with locals in mind. There are certain themes, such as focusing on a specific architectural style during a tour which is provided by multiple companies, usually involving an art historian or an architect to guide the group. Some tours focus more specifically on one area or district of the city. Often these thematic tours take visitors to places previously considered 'dangerous' and 'stigmatised', trying to change the public image of the location (Hoogendoorn & Hammett, 2020). However, in doing so they bring into question some ethical concerns about walking in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018). One innovative initiative to battle these contradictions in Budapest is walking tours organised by Uccu Roma Informal Educational Foundation which are

Figure 2: Comparison of Local Walking Tour Companies of Budapest and Paris based on Facebook Page Likes as of June 2021
(modified by the population of the two cities)



Source: Author. (Exported from Tableau)

led by Roma youngsters, who contribute with their own experiences to the discovery of the Roma values and also to reduce Roma-related prejudices (Uccu, 2021).

One of the themes that got the attention of locals early on was the Jewish heritage of Budapest. Other popular themes include history, music, literature, and gastronomy. What they all have in common is that their main goal is to provide experiences for locals to (re)discover their city.

A common way to measure the popularity of a tourism product is to compare the number of followers on social media platforms such as Facebook. Similar companies, providing tours to locals about the built and intangible local heritage of the city exist in Paris, France as well. The French capital's unparalleled richness of architectural and cultural heritage draws millions of visitors every year, so it is natural that the tourism offer of the city includes experiences for locals as well. Local programs can be differentiated in their case as easily as in Budapest, because of the language barrier. The possibility of researching

proximity tourism in Anglo-Saxon destinations is much more limited as all programs are in English. The number of Facebook followers of 14 companies providing walking tours in French language for locals was compared to that of the Budapest walking tour scene where 20 local walking tour companies were identified (Figure 2). The most popular company is *Paris ZigZag*, originally a magazine focusing on the cultural heritage of Paris but also organising local walking tours. Their popularity is also due to their active online presence and content creation about the French capital. Out of the top 15 most ‘liked’ walking tour companies, 9 are from Budapest. To better compare the popularity of local walking tours in the two capital cities the measures can be corrected with the population of the given settlement. In this case 13 out of 15 companies are from Budapest. What this comparison allows us to conclude is that even though local walking tours are popular in other European capitals, they receive an especially strong interest in Budapest, and the resilience of these tours became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Local Walking Tours During COVID-19 (2020) in Budapest

Global tourism was intensely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, creating a never before seen drop in international travel. Reports by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) show that international arrivals dropped by 74% in 2020 as compared to 2019, damaging the global economy by 1.3 billion dollars and endangering 100-120 million jobs in the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2021). It is estimated that the sector will take years to recover and get back to the levels of 2019. 51% of European stakeholders involved in tourism say the situation will only normalise by 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Hungary in early 2020. Similar to other European cities immediate restrictions were put into place by the government and the country went into lockdown. The first lockdown lasted from mid-March to late-May. During the summer the country opened up again, lifting travel bans and allowing all activities to restart with certain safety measures for approximately a 5-month period. In mid-November the second wave caused the country to go to lockdown again, which lasted until the summer of 2021.

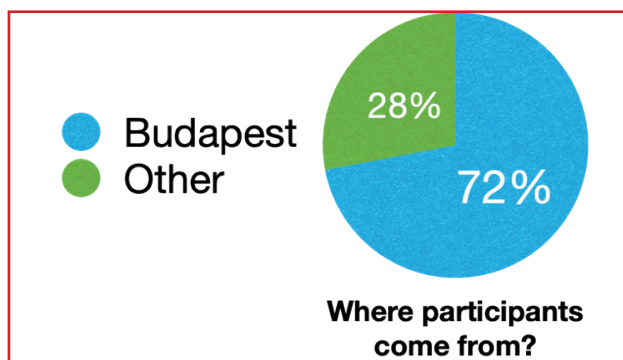
The number of visitors in Hungary followed global trends in 2020. In the third quarter of the year international arrivals dropped by almost 50%, based on the data provided by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO). Urban destinations suffered even greater losses with 73% fewer arrivals in the third quarter, the time of year that generally is the most popular time to visit Hungary (HCSO, 2021). For most foreign visitors, Budapest 'is' Hungary (Puczko, Ratz & Smith, 2007), thus, the majority of international visitors come to the capital. Therefore, the lack of international tourists was especially hard for Budapest. Even though the restaurants, bars, cultural institutions and accommodations could open for the 5-month period of the summer and early autumn, the lack of arrivals brought the tourism industry to an almost complete halt. There was one clear exception in the tourism sector which was able to operate at full capacity:

walking tour companies organising tours for locals.

Local walking tour companies have become increasingly popular since they first appeared in Budapest. The HWA predicted that 2020 would be year of walking tours, and most companies were preparing for a very busy season, which was unfortunately interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the first lockdown of spring 2020, several walking tour companies searched for new methods and mediums to show citizens their own city. Short interviews were conducted in May 2020 by the author with the organisers of the three most prominent local walking tour companies of Budapest (Klaniczay, 2020). *Sétaműhely* (Walkshop), a company founded in 2011 seized the opportunity to develop self-guided walking tours and urban treasure hunts based on their normal thematic walks. Others, like the KÉK Urban Walks team (KÉK, 2022) used the time to enhance their online presence. They created a collection of free online geo-databases where citizens could find information about the built heritage in their own neighbourhood, recommending people to discover their city during occasional health-walks. Several attempts were made by different actors of the field to organise online virtual walking tours as well, but most of the companies and the HWA agreed that walking tours are an analogue form of experiencing the city, and cannot be substituted in any virtual form, therefore, they stopped all activities completely during the lockdown.

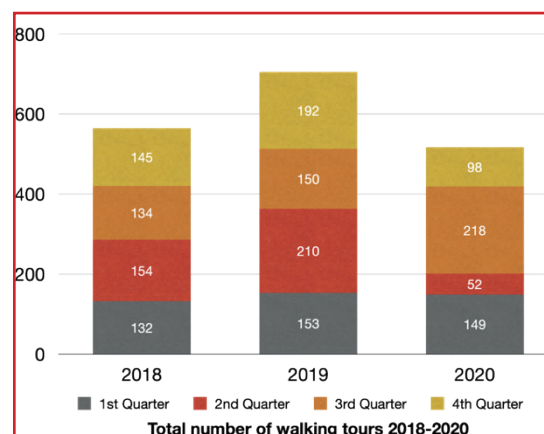
The 5-month period from May to October, during which Budapest was once again open to cultural events and tourists, provided the opportunity for companies to try to make up for the lost months in the spring. *Hosszúlépés.Járunk?*, a company founded in 2013 is one of the most popular walking tour organiser in the city (Hosszúlépés.Járunk?, 2021). They are also the founders of the Hungarian Walking Association, and have a very strong online presence in social media. In 2019, before the pandemic they had more than 18 000 participants in their walking tours, 72% of whom came from Budapest, 27% from other Hungarian cities, with less than 1% from

Figure 3 – Distribution of Participants by Location of Residence

Source: Hosszúlépés.Járunk? Graphics: Author

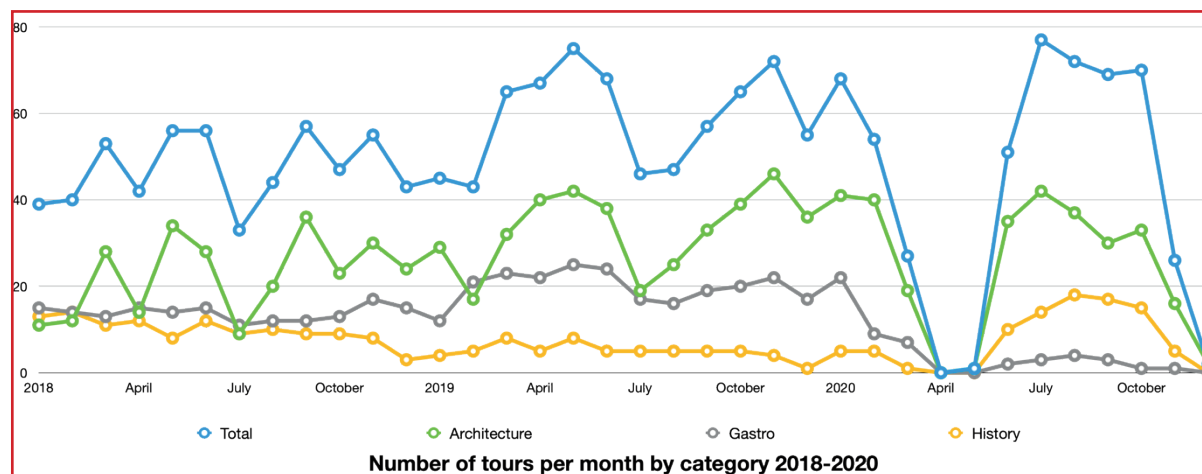
foreign countries (see Figure 3). Data provided by the company for this research paper shows that the most popular time of the year for walking tours was usually during spring and autumn. In 2018 and 2019 they conducted a total of 565 and 705 walking tours respectively, and even though they could not increase this number in 2020 they were still able to organise 517 tours during the year of the pandemic.

If we examine Figure 4, we can see that in the 3rd quarter of the year (July, August and September) they were even able to surpass their previous years in the number of walking tours organised by 48%, the same quarter where international arrivals to Budapest dropped by 73%. Further examining the data provided by the company it can be seen that the summer and early autumn of 2020 was by far the

Figure 4 – Number of Conducted Walking Tours 2018-2020

Source: Hosszúlépés.Járunk? Graphics: Author

most successful period. Figure 5 shows the walking tours organised by *Hosszúlépés.Járunk?* subdivided into categories based on the main theme of the tour. They classify their tours as follows: architecture, history, gastronomy, literature and other, out of which this paper focuses on the first three themes which are the most popular ones. It is interesting to notice two differences between pre-pandemic and pandemic times. Historical tours became increasingly popular during the pandemic. This shift in popularity can be explained by the rise of domestic tourism. Another interesting detail is that gastronomic walking tours used to be very popular before the pandemic. The company's trademark 'gastro tours' included 'A Bite of China', taking visitors to the Chinese district of Budapest, and a tour called 'Bottled Legends'

Figure 5 – Number of Conducted Walking Tours per Month by Category 2018-2020

Source: Hosszúlépés.Járunk? Graphics: Author

during which participants could discover the ancient champagne factory of Törley. During the 2020 pandemic these gastro walking tours were less popular due to safety measures introduced during the tours.

Several general public safety guidelines were introduced in 2020 around the world. The most common was wearing masks and keeping 1.5m distance between each other. During walking tours these criteria were easily met as small groups could keep distance, and as an outdoor activity the risk of catching the virus was significantly lower. Walking tour companies introduced numerous other rules to guarantee that their activities stayed safe. The HWA provided a list of safety measures to be implemented. The maximum number of participants was lowered. On-site paying for tickets was limited to credit card to minimise physical contact. Following the same idea, tablets and other materials that were usually passed around during the tour stayed with the tour guide during the walk. Interior spaces and crowded locations were avoided during the tour and in many cases microphones were used to enable guides to speak in masks and from a distance.

In mid-November the second wave of the pandemic caused the country to limit public programs and cultural events, and a full lockdown was implemented, with curfew between 20:00 and 05:00. Companies organising local walking tours had to stop once again, but even though they could only operate during half of the year most of them could organise almost as many walking tours as in pre-COVID times, making this form of cultural program one of the only COVID-resilient experiences.

Conclusions

Local walking tours became one of the most popular cultural experiences during the pandemic in Budapest. There were more guided tours during the summer and autumn of 2020 than in previous years (Figure 4) and walking tours were called the ‘best COVID-safe cultural programs’ by the media.

Thematic walking tours are increasingly popular around the world (e.g.: Hoogendoorn & Giddy 2017;

Mavini 2020; Ormond & Vietti 2021) and there is a growing number of studies focusing on various sub-themes of the field (Galí & Camprubí, 2020), but academic research mainly focuses on foreign tourists participating in these experiences (Díaz-Soria, 2017). Meanwhile the new phenomenon of proximity tourism is becoming more popular, when locals participate in experiences originally designed for tourists (Richards, 2017).

This paper argues that the urban fabric and the architectural complexity of Budapest makes the city an ideal location for thematic tours. Based on the research of the market of local walking tours in the city it is evident that the last decade and a half have brought many successful initiatives and demand for this kind of proximity tourism experience is growing among locals. New companies focusing especially on organising local walking tours are being set up every year. Furthermore, as data provided by *Hosszúlépés. Járunk?* shows, the popularity of these local tours is increasing, even during the corona virus pandemic.

Participating in a walking tour is a good and practical way for locals to discover their own neighbourhood. While getting a unique experience they can learn more about the built heritage and the history of a district. Academic research does not yet focus on the potentials of using the methodology of walking tours to enhance the attachment of locals to their own city or, to examine changes in local identity after participating in these urban excursions. This case study provided an insight into the unique local walking tour industry of Budapest, a city with a complex urban fabric, and is a good basis for further research to examine the potential of local walking tours in community involvement and urban development. What can be deduced from the popularity of these walking tours among locals, is that a classic product of tourism can be effectively recontextualised in urban areas, and even though tourism can be severely affected by global phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, walking tours can become a sustainable form of tourism, as in Budapest. Local walking tours have great potential for making the cultural life and community of cities more resilient and sustainable.

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