

Amsterdam: a strategy to keep a growing city in balance

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Background

Amsterdam is more popular than ever. The number of residents and businesses is growing, and the number of visitors from both the Netherlands and abroad has been increasing substantially for the last six years. The amount of visitors increased from 11 million in 2005 to 18 million in 2017 and due to a worldwide trend of fast growth in travel and tourism, we expect a further growth in the upcoming years.

Tourism is an important sector in Amsterdam's economy. In 2015, visitors spent 6.3 billion euros in the city. There are 65.000 jobs¹ in the tourism sector, which count for approximately 10 % of all the jobs in Amsterdam². Thanks to the visitor economy, the city has a wide range of outstanding museums, shops, restaurants, attractions and other facilities. Although there was a broad support in society for the growth of the tourism industry after the 2008 financial crisis, things changed around 2014 when the economy had recovered and the number of visitors began to increase.

Around 2014, the flipside of the economic success of Amsterdam's tourism and visitors industry became visible in popular neighbourhoods and in particular in streets around the main tourism attractions such as the Dam Square and Red Light District. Some parts of Amsterdam's historic city centre, with its narrow streets and alleys, are simply too small for the increased number of visitors with overcrowding as a result. Moreover, overtourism and crowdedness in Amsterdam go hand-in-hand with an ever-increasing number of shops and services focused only on tourists. As more bicycle rental companies, souvenir shops and stores selling food for immediate consumption open, the store offer in the city centre is shrinking.

When more and more local residents reported that their neighbourhoods were changing and that the quality of life is under pressure, it was clear that the Amsterdam city government has to take action against the increased nuisance, unwanted behaviour by tourists, shops and services focused only on visitors, illegal hotels, holiday rental and overcrowding.

Actions taken

Since the crowdedness, nuisance and declining quality of life in busy areas had been caused by multiple factors (the increasing number of people, unwanted behaviour, new services, the rise of holiday rental platforms) a broad set of measures, actions and new rules seemed the only right solution. The Amsterdam city government soon came to the conclusion that simply spreading visitors across the city and region or stimulating visitor itineraries would not be the only solution for the fast increasing numbers of visitors coming to our city. These measures therefore include new rules to regulate or sometimes even prohibit particular kinds of tourist activities and facilities. Below, I will discuss the main four strategies of the municipality and give examples of some of the most striking measures we have been taking for the past few years.

¹ <https://www.ois.amsterdam.nl/toerisme>

² van Benthem, M., Fijnje, J., Koopmans, C. C., & Tieben, B. (2017). *De impact van de bezoekers-economie op Amsterdam*. (63 ed.) Amsterdam: SEO Economisch Onderzoek.

1. Maintaining the quality and diversity of stores and facilities

Since October 2017 there are no new tourist shops allowed to open in the city centre. Based on the advertisements, presentation, assortment and operation of new stores will be decided whether a new shop is aimed at tourists or immediate consumption. With this firm measure, Amsterdam is the first city in Europe to ban new tourist shops and facilities.

In order to keep neighbourhoods with growing numbers of tourists liveable, Amsterdam has a very restrictive hotel policy. The municipality designated a number of areas, covering all the popular neighbourhoods, where permits for new hotels will no longer be issued. Some areas of the city are however covered by a “No, unless” policy, which means that a proposed new hotel is only allowed when they are sustainable, provide more than just sleeping accommodation and add something to the neighbourhood. The initiative also needs to have the support of local residents.

Like in every popular European tourist destination, private holiday renting has increased dramatically over the past years. In order to ensure that houses are primarily used for living, strict rules have been implemented. Locals are allowed to rent out their home while they are away, to a maximum of four guests up to 60 days a year (from 2019 this will be up to 30 days a year). Moreover, all landlords must register their property with the City of Amsterdam, in order to help our efforts to clamp down on illegal holiday rentals and make it easier to track violations. Like all accommodation providers in Amsterdam, landlords have to pay tourist tax on their income from holiday rental. People renting out their home but failing to adhere to the regulations risk being fined.

2. Reduce nuisance and regulate tourist activities

In order to reduce nuisance we intensified enforcement in the areas that most need it. Since the end of 2016, a special team of enforcement by the municipality and the police have been active in the Red Light District in order to reduce parking pollution, crime, unwanted behaviour and noise. Furthermore, the municipality has a new approach to clean the city in busy areas and after events. Over 200 designated hotspots were intensively cleaned to reduce litter. In 2017, the public space was cleaned before the next morning after 10 major events, such as King's Day, New Year's Eve and Pride Amsterdam.

As the city is getting more crowded, the need to make clear decisions about what kind of activities are desirable and which should be restricted or prohibited is needed. The beer bike was prohibited in parts of the city centre. These bikes affected public order (people shouting, public drunkenness and urination) and caused frequent jams in the most crowded parts of the city. Horse carriages will no longer be allowed from April 2019 and the city of Amsterdam recently announced that the use of more kinds of transport aimed at fun and recreation, like bicycle taxis, segways and hottugs, will be limited.

Stricter rules for guided tours through the Red Light District and Dam Square were implemented from April 2018. Guided groups larger than 20 people are no longer allowed in the area, tours must be finished by 11pm, the use of loud speakers is prohibited and guides must ensure that groups stand with their backs to the sex workers.

New innovative measures are being developed and tested in order to keep the busiest areas safe and liveable. For example with the implementation of a crowd management system in the Red Light District and the recent launch of a campaign that aims to raise awareness among Dutch and British male visitors aged 18-34 of what behaviour is allowed and what is not allowed in Amsterdam. The target groups of these campaigns are approached at an early stage when they are planning their stay and when being in the city. The campaign is targeted in the city centre by means of geofencing the campaign. As soon as a member of the target group enters the red-light district, Rembrandtplein, Leidseplein or the area around Amsterdam Central Station, they will receive content and messages via

social media. The campaign was developed in collaboration between Amsterdam Marketing, the municipality of Amsterdam and businesses from the tourist industry.³

3. Spreading tourists out of the city and across the region

The city marketing activities of Amsterdam, executed by Amsterdam Marketing⁴, shifted in 2015 from the promotion of Amsterdam as a tourist destination to spreading visitors, promoting cultural participation of residents and promoting the city among businesses. Amsterdam Marketing for example promotes attractions across the region and has campaigns for neighbourhoods outside the crowded city centre.

4. Creating more public space in busy areas

Because of the increasing number of residents, businesses and visitors, the public space in Amsterdam is used more intensively. Some roads in the city centre are therefore being redesigned in order to steer traffic flows in the right direction.

Communicating with and involving local stakeholders

Citizens and business in the busy neighbourhoods of Amsterdam are well organized in interest groups that are in constant dialogue with the city of Amsterdam, including the Amsterdam city government, about the issues that concern overtourism and liveability in the city centre.

In order to involve residents from all neighbourhoods of the city, with different backgrounds and from different ages, we established a special Think Tank “City in Balance”. This group is asked to share ideas and possible solutions for problems related to overtourism.

A taskforce tourist sector was established in 2017. Its members are representatives from museums, hotels, tourist attractions and Amsterdam Marketing. The taskforce aims to provide solutions for the nuisance caused by the increasing growth of visitors.

Monitoring and responsive measures

Monitoring of developments in tourism, crowdedness and livability on the one hand and the effects of policy measures and actions on the other hand are done in two ways. Firstly, we collect objective data with regard to topics such as the numbers of residents, visitors and jobs and the use of different kinds of accommodation and transport. Secondly, we collect subjective data, such as opinions of residents and entrepreneurs, which provide insight into the experience of tourism, crowdedness and their impact on livability.

Conclusions

Although visitors are important for the local economy and welcome guests, in times of rapid growth of tourism, an integral approach with firm measures is needed to keep the city livable and lovable. As the executive board of the city of Amsterdam recently stated: “Tourism is part of the international character of Amsterdam, but the negative consequences sometimes overshadow the positive sides of it. A new balance is therefore needed in which residents are the first priority and visitors remain welcome.” More

³ www.iamsterdam.com/en/our-network/amsterdam-marketing/about-amsterdam-marketing/news/enjoy-and-respect

⁴ Amsterdam Marketing is the city marketing organization of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, active in the fields of promotion, information, research and services.

measures to manage the flipside of the growth of the number of visitors in the upcoming years are therefore being prepared.

More information

For more information visit: www.amsterdam.nl/stadinbalans (in Dutch only), www.amsterdam.nl/en or contact Thomas de Jager (City of Amsterdam - Department of Economic Affairs): t.jager@amsterdam.nl.