

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD STABILITY AND PEACE THROUGH TOURISM?

Francisco Rojas Aravena¹

Abstract

Tourism encompasses ways of life, new learning experiences, and novel perspectives on the world and others. The cultural and social tools provided by tourism are significant, personal, and irreplaceable. Understanding the needs of other cultures and learning about diverse traditions fosters in individuals a renewed vision of life—how it functions and the best ways to engage with people and the world. Tourism has the ability to create more accurate perceptions, allowing people to appreciate the environment, biodiversity, folklore, and traditions in a more meaningful and symbolic way. Through tourism, countries can progress and generate greater economic growth, leading to improved social conditions. However, challenges may arise from tourism dependency. Unemployment, gentrification, poverty, inequality, environmental damage, and water resource depletion are some concerns linked to mass tourism and over-reliance on the industry. Despite its benefits, tourism's consequences can create significant issues. Therefore, strategies must be developed to integrate conscious and responsible tourism globally. Nevertheless, tourism fosters stability, which is essential for peace.

Keywords

Tourism. Peace. Sustainability. Culture and challenges.

Summary

Introduction: Is it possible to build stability and peace through tourism? 1. Tourism creates knowledge. 2. Wars, pandemics and violence are a major obstacle to tourism. 3. The impact of mass tourism. 4. Alerts from SDG6. 5. Health and violence pandemics and tourism. 6. Final reflections. References.

¹ Rector, University for Peace – UN. Ph.D, Utrecht University, NL.

INTRODUCTION: IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD STABILITY AND PEACE THROUGH TOURISM?

Tourism acts as a bridge between cultures. It enables dialogue and allows people to learn about diverse lifestyles, traditions, and histories across the planet. The insights and knowledge gained through tourism regarding the heritage and history embedded in every corner of the world are invaluable.

In times of harmony and stability, tourism thrives. Economic growth generates resources and progress for nations and individuals, who can then dedicate part of their leisure time to tourism—exploring other regions, historical sites, and natural parks. Political and economic stability are essential elements for promoting and developing tourism.

In a world marked by violence, wars, climate crises, emerging viruses, and the resurgence of known threats, opportunities to contribute to peace, reconciliation, and mutual understanding require shared knowledge.

Promoting peace has become a fundamental objective in the new cycle of the international system, as highlighted in the United Nations' 2024 declaration on the future of global governance. The rule-based global order is being replaced by armed conflict, war, and violence. Conflicts and wars dominate the current international system, with the UN and multilateralism under attack. Peace is fragile, necessitating a global movement to address existential threats.

The international system is rapidly changing. No single actor—not even powerful states—can effectively address global risks such as climate change, the Anthropocene, nuclear threats, human mobility, or the consequences of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. This was already evident during the financial and health crises of recent years and in the face of the growing impact of transnational organized crime. These challenges demand cooperation, political will, early warnings, and mitigation through

multilateral agreements under the UN framework. Mutual understanding is key.²

Tourism fosters reciprocal knowledge through direct dialogue, visits to museums, and historical sites spanning millennia. Understanding humanity's history and heritage equips each generation to act collectively toward global harmony.

Developing trips, tours, and enjoying walks and stays in other places allows us to understand other cultures and countries through a tourism lens. This deeper understanding can create greater opportunities to empathize with others and foster a shared sense of humanity—that we all inhabit this unique space, our planet. Traveling enables direct awareness of the environments of other geographical regions. It also allows us to delve, whether superficially or deeply, into the history, architecture, and culture of those places.

All of this forms the foundation for building social, educational, cultural, psychological, and personal bridges that can generate opportunities to create and strengthen bonds of understanding. From this foundation, calls can emerge for establishing spaces and platforms for dialogue, which could open avenues for interaction, trade relations, educational exchanges, and bilateral interinstitutional collaboration between countries.

On this basis, new opportunities for building broad understanding among communities and societies will arise through increased contact and interaction. Tourism transmits and generates empathy—an indispensable quality in our interconnected and interdependent world. Through this, we can contribute to a peaceful context and promote a culture of peace and peaceful coexistence.

² Rojas-Aravena, 2024.

1. TOURISM CREATES KNOWLEDGE

Tourism has a long history. Travelers' accounts in literature attest to this, as they have generated knowledge for humanity. Today, tourism and travel have become part of our daily lives. They have evolved alongside advances in transportation, emerging as a new lifestyle—a recurring, temporary pursuit. Increasingly, people dedicate a portion of their resources, time, and lives to traveling and exploring different places: historical sites, sacred destinations, architectural marvels, culinary traditions, and the folklore of diverse cultures.

Tourism has regained momentum after the severe blow of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, global tourist arrivals reached 1.4 billion.³ For many countries, tourism is a primary or one of the main sources of income, making it central to the development of both developed and developing nations. However, this is not guaranteed, as there are significant fluctuations in tourism-generated revenue. These fluctuations create vulnerabilities tied to shifts in tourism rates. The most recent example of this was in 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. WARS, PANDEMICS AND VIOLENCE ARE A MAJOR OBSTACLE TO TOURISM

Wars and instability directly impact tourist arrivals. Economic fluctuations in both origin and destination countries significantly affect the number of travelers. Tourism is closely tied to economic development due to the opportunities it creates—or the disruptions caused by negative trends. Tourists require access to lodging, food, and transportation, which drives demand and fosters a circular economy that benefits specific countries or

³ UN, 2025.

regions. Conversely, declines in tourism rates in nations where it is a primary income source lead to economic recessions and unemployment.

In addition, global shifts in relations, work practices, communications, and technology have transformed service industries. The pandemic shattered traditional models of service delivery, normalizing remote work and incentivizing businesses to adopt virtual operations. This redefined the relationship between work, technology, and location.

Globalization gave rise to digital nomads—individuals performing remote, location-independent work. Many began traveling domestically or internationally, immediately linking their lifestyles to tourism. Regions with reliable connectivity became hubs for professional endeavors, spurring a form of tourism tied to service-based tasks unbound by fixed locations. This has benefited host countries, which have streamlined visas and stays for such professionals.

Despite tourism's economic benefits, many destinations lack regulations to ensure equitable distribution of tourists. Large agencies often monopolize resources, limiting gains for host nations. In countries where tourism drives over 60% of jobs and income⁴—such as Caribbean nations like Antigua & Barbuda, Aruba, St. Lucia, and the US Virgin Islands, or regions like Macao—these imbalances directly destabilize financial systems and employment rates. Such economies must prioritize early warnings, precautions, and preventive measures to mitigate risks.

The significant benefits of tourism for countries also come with substantial negative counterparts. One increasingly critical issue is mass tourism.

This form of tourism creates problems such as the displacement of local communities due to pressure on residents in central urban tourist hubs or coastal regions. Mass tourism directly impacts access to water, as large numbers of people create incremental demands on food supplies, driving

⁴ Neufeld, 2020.

up prices in local markets. These price hikes become unsustainable for residents. Protests in European cities against the tourist use of apartments and housing highlight how rentals rise disproportionately, forcing locals to relocate for affordable options or sell their properties. This fuels global gentrification, displacing community members to create privileged, luxurious spaces with unaffordable prices⁵ for locals, impoverishing those compelled to abandon their homes, traditions, and culture.

Some cities have opted to charge an "entry fee" for access to the city or specific high-demand sites, such as iconic buildings or landmarks, as a measure to manage overcrowding and mitigate impacts.

3. THE IMPACT OF MASS TOURISM

Even under the challenging conditions created by mass tourism, it is evident that tourism provides employment and improves quality of life in the areas it reaches. It generates job opportunities that would otherwise not exist in those regions. However, given the potential negative effects, a balance must be struck between employment opportunities—particularly for young people—and the need to keep local populations rooted in geographic areas that become high-demand tourist zones.

Cultural identity is highly vulnerable to the changes tourism imposes on traditions, dances, and crafts in tourist areas. Efforts to develop “new,” delocalized artistic expressions—devoid of tradition—to cater to tourist demands often dilute authenticity. Gentrification distorts rural culture and land use, causing irreparable harm to communities, primarily through shifts in land allocation, water resources, transportation, and local commerce.

It is essential to manage tourism in a sustainable manner. Key priorities include safeguarding local housing, water access, biodiversity, and

⁵ Wills, 2024.

supporting community-driven enterprises. Equally critical are early warning systems and preventive measures to address safety risks, such as curbing sexual tourism—especially the exploitation of minors—and combating human trafficking, which often targets displaced populations, particularly women.

The exploitation and strain on tourist areas—whether beaches or historic centers of centuries-old cities—due to rising land values lead to conflicts over land use, water access, and socio-environmental tensions. In Thailand and other nations with expansive coastlines, coral reefs, and marine ecosystems, pollution, boat traffic, jet skis, and daily footfall from thousands of tourists⁶ threaten these fragile environments.

Water scarcity in tourist hubs has become a critical issue demanding urgent action and urgent measures to Address it. Hotels, for instance, require roughly 2,000 liters of water daily *per guest* for food preparation alone⁷, particularly water, intensifying competition over dwindling reserves meant to sustain local communities. Wetlands and biodiversity suffer cascading effects, disrupting wildlife habitats and ecological balance.

In the case of Guanacaste, Costa Rica, a region historically plagued by water scarcity due to its arid geography, now faces heightened tensions as it transforms into a premier tourist destination. Luxury hotels and residences—many with pools—proliferate. This has generated conflicts due to the high demand for water by hotels dedicated to mass tourism, which has unleashed great discontent among the local populations.⁸ These local populations see limited benefits beyond low-wage hotel jobs, as all-inclusive resorts rarely reinvest in community development.

⁶ BBC, 2018.

⁷ Switch Water Supplier, 2023

⁸ Cañada, 2019.

This reality extends far beyond Costa Rica. Nations reliant on tourism grapple with similar water crises. The water supply required to maintain hotels, golf courses, and other tourist-reliant businesses affects access to water sources and inflates costs, jeopardizing the equitable distribution of water among local populations and the demands of new tourist areas and investments.

4. **ALERTS FROM SDG 6**

Global international organizations have emphasized measures to address and combat this global challenge. The 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include Goal 6—clean water and sanitation—prioritizing universal access to safe drinking water. International bodies advocate for policies that balance tourism's benefits with equitable water use, particularly in vulnerable regions of developing countries where tourism-driven investments might otherwise be absent. Effective agreements between local populations and investors are crucial, requiring state regulation as a coordinating force under the rule of law.

Security and tourism are deeply interconnected. While tourism can spur economic growth, it may also attract crime to previously unaffected communities. The influx of tourists can draw criminal networks specializing in theft, assault, and—in severe cases—drug trafficking, which is aggravated by violent territorial disputes – including intentional homicides – endangering even innocent bystanders.

5. **HEALTH AND VIOLENCE PANDEMICS AND TOURISM**

Many cities and countries have been ravaged by a crime pandemic, which directly impacts tourism, causing sharp declines in visitor numbers. This is particularly evident in the Americas, home to 38 of the world's 50 most dangerous cities⁹—a reality that devastates tourism prospects not only in

⁹ Security, Justice and Peace, 2025.

these urban centers but also across surrounding regions. Violence fuels deeper poverty, while poverty, in turn, perpetuates crime and social and economic disinvestment, trapping communities in a vicious, regressive cycle of instability.

Political instability drives tourism to vanish. Terrorism compounds this by deliberately targeting tourist hotspots to amplify fear, aiming for global psychological impact rather than local disruption alone.

Tourism flees from war zones. This is exemplified by the case of Ukraine, with great damage to infrastructure and the subsequent migration of millions of people. The continuation of the war makes tourism impossible. By 2023, UNESCO calculated that the infrastructural damages amounted to more than US\$ 1.5 billion, based on data from the first 12 months of the Ukraine-Russia war.¹⁰ This has increased considerably in the two subsequent years of war. Under these conditions, tourism disappears as a source of income. Wars directly affect the historical, cultural, and social capital of those involved. In Ukraine, many historic buildings and UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been severely damaged, which will necessitate an enormous economic investment to restore major cities to their previous state. In some cases, this will prove impossible. It has been estimated that approximately US\$ 9 billion are needed to restore Ukraine's capital city.¹¹ Similarly, renewed war in the Middle East has led to a complete halt in tourism to the region's sites of religious importance. The destruction of cultural heritage sites cannot be reconstructed; they constitute permanent losses.

Health issues and the emergence of pandemics have immediate effects on tourism, as well as on the global transportation systems that support it. Global health situations like the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted

¹⁰ Szigethy-Ambrus, 2025.

¹¹ Azoulay, 2024.

tourism, paralyzing global connections and relations between countries and regions. For over a year and a half, tourism virtually disappeared from the planet. Cities, historical sites, museums, cathedrals, mosques, and beaches were left empty.

Natural disasters—including hurricanes, landslides, floods, desertification, and wildfires—inflict catastrophic consequences on tourism. The intensifying climate crisis and global climate emergency are reshaping the planet, manifesting in extreme weather events such as torrential rains, devastating floods, uncontrolled wildfires, destructive landslides, and the rapid disappearance of glaciers. These phenomena disrupt nations and deter tourist arrivals. A striking example is the Thailand tsunami, which displaced over 100,000 workers, obliterated hotels, and led to a prolonged economic recovery¹². Similar devastation is foreseeable from the earthquake that struck Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and southern China this month (March 2025), claiming thousands of lives and decimating both tourist infrastructure and ancient centers of religious heritage¹³. Likewise, the DANA storm system over Valencia ravaged one of Spain's premier tourist regions¹⁴.

A distinct category of tourism involves visiting locations where significant historical events unfolded—such as major battles, pivotal negotiations, or political-diplomatic milestones—or structures where crucial decisions shaping humanity's progress (or regressions) were made. Often termed "military history tourism," this practice stems from the desire to witness and comprehend history firsthand—to physically inhabit the spaces where pivotal moments transpired. It embodies the urge to stand where history was made: the battlefields of Waterloo, Dunkirk, or El Alamein.

¹² ILO. 2005.

¹³ Humanitarian Aid, 2025.

¹⁴ Tourism and Society Think Tank, 2024.

Similarly, visiting sites associated with humanity's most negative chapters—such as the Nazi concentration camps, particularly Auschwitz, which remains one of the most visited—reflects this form of tourism. Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan also hold profound significance for such travelers. These locations serve as both educators and witnesses to pivotal events that shaped the post-World War II international order. Grand cathedrals, the Vatican and its museums, castles, and other historical structures—including the University of Salamanca—also fall under this category. The pyramids of Egypt, Mexico, and Peru, along with sites like rocket launch pads, decommissioned aircraft carriers, or ships anchored at historic ports worldwide, further exemplify this trend. Humanity's defining historical events have undeniably become integral to modern tourism¹⁵.

6. FINAL REFLECTION

Tourism has encompassed various categories to satisfy the diverse interests and desires of different individuals and groups—from historical, cultural, and culinary tourism to recreational travel and battlefield or museum visits. Each of these reflects humanity's multifaceted curiosity to delve into history, culture, and the exploration of places, countries, museums, paintings, and sculptures. There is also a more sociological form of tourism, where the focus lies on understanding people from a broader perspective, emphasizing personal connections and deeper human bonds.

There is a need to restore peace in the world and rebuild a society where moral principles prevail—and tourism can play a role in this. If people were to view the world through a "tourist lens," but with a deeper curiosity for cultures, traditions, and ways of life, knowledge would expand, fostering greater understanding of behaviors and expressions beyond stereotypes. These cultural learnings would cultivate new perceptions and enable more

¹⁵ Guzmán, 2021.

peaceful coexistence. Conflicts would diminish, and we could collectively strive to enjoy life with greater harmony.

Thus, peace and mutual understanding are essential for safe and meaningful tourism. Efforts must begin at the local level to establish secure tourism networks, forging alliances to preserve customs and traditions, bridging tourism with culture, and protecting the environment and biodiversity that make many destinations so appealing. Promoting sustainable tourism that fosters peace is fundamental.

REFERENCES

Azoulay, A. (February 14, 2024). Ukraine: UNESCO estimates the damage to culture and tourism after 2 years of war at \$3.5 billion. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-estimates-damage-culture-and-tourism-after-2-years-war-35-billion> (accessed 27 March 2025).

BBC. (April 16, 2018). 5 tourist destinations threatened by overcrowding (and two are in Latin America). <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-43783982>

Cañada, E. (2019). Water conflicts in Guanacaste, Costa Rica: Responses to tourism development. Yearbook of Central American Studies, University of Costa Rica, 45. <https://revistas.ucr.ac.cr/index.php/anuario/article/view/37666/42489>

Guzmán, F. (June 24, 2021). Dark tourism: visiting places marked by tragedies. Gaceta UNAM. <https://www.gaceta.unam.mx/turismo-oscuro-visitar-lugares-marcados-por-tragedias/> (accessed 27 March 2025).

Humanitarian Aid. (March 30, 2025). Myanmar earthquake: search and rescue efforts continue in race against time. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1161716> (accessed 31 March 2025).

International Labour Organization (OIT). (April 11, 2005). After the tsunami in Thailand, the tourism industry fights back. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/after-tsunami-thailand-tourist-industry-fights-back> (accessed 27 March 2025).

Neufeld, D. (May 22, 2020). Visualizing the countries most reliant on tourism. Visual Capitalist. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/countries-reliant-tourism/> (accessed 26 March 2025).

ONU Tourism. (January 21, 2025). International tourism is recovering in 2024 to pre-pandemic levels. <https://www.unwto.org/es/news/el-turismo-internacional-se-recupera-en-2024-hasta-los-niveles-anteriores-a-la-pandemia#:~:text=Con%201.400%20millones%20de%20llegadas,de%201a%20historia%20del%20sector>. (accessed 26 March 2025).

Rojas-Aravena, F. (2024). Introduction by the Rector of the University for Peace to the Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the Work of the University for Peace for the Period 2021–2024. University for Peace.

Security, Justice and Peace. (February 19, 2025). 2024 Ranking of the 50 Most Violent Cities in the World. <https://geoenlace.net/seguridadjusticiaypaz/webpage/archivos.php>

Switch Water Supplier. (July 19, 2023). The impact of tourism on water stress & scarcity. Water Industry News. <https://www.switchwatersupplier.com/the-impact-of-tourism-on-water-stress-scarcity/> (accessed 26 March 2025).

Szigethy-Ambrus, N. (February 06, 2025). Tourism during the war – how Russia, Ukrainian and European tourism changed. Oeconomus Economic Research Foundation. <https://www.oeconomus.hu/en/analyses/tourism-during-the-war-how-russian-ukrainian-and-european-tourism-changed/>

Tourism and Society Think Tank. (November 11, 2024). The impact of DANA on the tourism industry In Valencia (Spain) from a technical perspective.

<https://www.tourismandsocietytt.com/noticias-y-newsletter/2024/2024-noviembre/ultimas-noticias/el-impacto-de-la-dana-en-la-industria-tur%C3%ADstica-de-valencia-desde-una-visi%C3%B3n> (accessed 31 March 2025).

Wills, M. (October 4, 2024). Global gentrification. JSTOR Daily. <https://daily.jstor.org/global-gentrification/> (accessed 26 March 2025).