Future strategies for tourism destination management: post COVID-19 lessons observed from Borobudur, Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this viewpoint paper is to show practical post COVID-19 observations as lessons for the future of tourism destination management and help inspire the tourism industry and academic community.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on observations by, and discussions among, both international and Indonesian tourism experts and relate to the case of the famous UNESCO World heritage site, the Borobudur temple, in Indonesia.

Findings – As a result, the authors observed the following measures that have been taken by the local authorities; setting limits to the amount of visitors, increase the visitor area, provide guided tours only, work with price mechanism, mitigate the physical impacts of visits and involve the local community in the value chain. The paper shows that the COVID pandemic has unintentionally created urgency and an opportunity for the local authorities to deal with already ongoing and structural overtourism related issues. This demonstrated that a lockdown was needed to get out of a lock-in.

Originality/value – This paper fits in the ongoing debate on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. As it provides a practical case, the values of this paper lie in bridging the gap between conceptual contributions to the debate and practical observations. Also many links with the continuation of the overtourism debate are made.

Keywords Future policy, Post-pandemic tourism, Tourism management, UNESCO World Heritage, Overtourism, COVID-19

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

What does the future of tourism management look like after COVID-19? Are we striving for business-as-usual, or will it be business-as-unusual (Heslinga *et al*., 2020; Postma *et al*., 2020, 2023; Yeoman *et al*., 2022)?. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on the global leisure, tourism and hospitality sector (van Leeuwen *et al*., 2020). Especially in those destinations that are dependent on international travel the impact has been severe, as borders have been closed for a long time and the recovery of international tourism arrivals is still not back on the levels pre COVID-19. Despite crisis impacting the sector, some considered the pandemic to be a wakeup call and as an opportunity to rethink tourism. As Winston Churchill was working to form the United Nations after Second World War, he famously said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste". In another context, that of tourism recovery after COVID-19, this reflects the using of a crisis as an opportunity to bounce forward, and thereby build tourism destinations back better and not bounce back to the initial situation running into the same potential problems.

Many publications have been produced the past three years about the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism and hospitality sector and whether this is a game changer or not (Cheer *et al*., 2021; Lew

et al., 2020; Papp *et al*., 2023; Tomassini *et al*., 2021; Yeoman, 2023). Given that the COVID pandemic is quite a recent phenomenon affecting tourism, most of these papers remain conceptual show scenarios, visions and potential outlooks. Not surprisingly the translation into a practical setting remains still under researched. With this paper, we try to bridge this gap by showing practical observations of bold changes that were made at the Borobudur Temple close to Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The purpose of this viewpoint paper is to use these observations as input to rethink the future of tourism management.

Why looking the Borobudur? This iconic temple in Indonesia is one of biggest and most impressive Buddhist temples in the world, is one of the most well-known UNESCO World heritage sites in the world, and because of that, an enormous tourism magnet that attracts many visitors per year (Damanik and Yusuf, 2022). The increasing number of visitors has had major economic impacts, but it also has been creating overtourism related problems (Peeters *et al*., 2018). Crowding is, for example, a huge problem; the temple has been suffering from overcrowding as 10.000 visitors per day was not uncommon. For many visitors paying a visit to the Borobudur is on their bucket list. Apart from a bad visitor experience due to annoyance of the many other visitors, overcrowding also lead to physical damage to the holy temple. Of course there is the physical damage to the temple due to tourists that walking and some even climbing on the structure. Moreover, littering has become a big problem as cigarette buds are found everywhere and even chewing gum has been stuck on the temple by people in some places. These problems have been steadily increasing over the past years. The COVID pandemic and the lockdowns ensured that visitors were not coming anymore (Figure 1 shows Borobudur temple almost deserted) and gave the authorities some time to rethink the way Borobudur could be visited in a more sustainable way. This paper shows field observations from this particular case study to assess what has been done so far manage Borobudur better.

Figure 1	Borobudur temple with very limited visitors

Source(s): Authors (2022)

As a method, field observations were combined with group discussions and policy analysis. The observations are based on a fieldtrip taking place in October 2022 where tourism experts from the Netherlands and Indonesia gathered to visit the Borobudur area. Together they have been doing observations at the temple and have been engaging in discussions with the local authorities. To support these observations, the new policies that have been implemented were consulted.

Rethinking tourism destination management using 5 observations from Borobudur temple, Indonesia

Observation 1: set a limit

The first observation is the installation of the regulation of the capacity of the visitors that can enter the temple. Before COVID-19 hit, it was not uncommon that 8,000–10,000 visitors per day would pay a visit to the temple. In the newly designed regulation, it says that only 1,200 visitors per day could enter. In addition, after the closure of the temple due to COVID-19 pandemic and for conservation purposes, visitors could not enter at all due to a special permit from the national government in Jakarta. However, there has been a new policy that allows tourists enter the temple limited to only 200 visitors, and it will gradually reach to maximum 1,200 visitors per day. The duration of visits is limited from 09.00 to 17.00. The restriction was made to maintain the carrying capacity of the temple based on recommendations of a study by the temple management authority, PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur. Setting a maximum number of visitors reflects the ideas behind thresholds in the Doughnut Destination (Hartman and Heslinga, 2023) and is something that is occurring in other destinations in the world (for example the city of Amsterdam).

Observation 2: make "the cake" bigger

Second, it was observed that the authorities invested in the idea of spreading visitors (UNWTO, 2018) across a larger space by making use of zoning and trying to get visitors away from "the honeypot". In practice, this means that more attention was given to the buffer zones around the temple, ensuring that visitors are not coming for just one thing (the temple itself), but have a longer and better experience that they gives them more joy. For example, by launching the Borobudur Tourism Authority Board, the central government intended to immediately spread tourists from the center of the temple to outside Zone 5, the version designed by JICA in 1979. One of the new areas, in the form of a luxury camping area, was built about 15 km south of the temple ground. Access to this area is even easier thanks to its proximity to the land transportation route from the new international airport to the temple area via the 63 km long Menoreh hills. In addition, around 20 Village Economic Centers (*Balai Ekonomi Desa/Balkondes*) were developed. The Balkondes were created particularly to invite a bigger community participation to the tourism development in the villages surrounding the temple. Therefore, visitors will have diverse attractions in addition to the temple itself. For Borobudur to remain the primary destination brand and to attract visitors, a number of local and international events themed on music, sports and writing could be helpful in increasing the offer (and spread the visitor in time and place) and make the experience for visitors even better.

Observation 3: provide guided tours only

A third observation is that the Borobudur temple can only be visited with a guide, before it was possible to do this on an individual basis. Apart from guided tours lead to better and more responsible behaviour by the tourist, it also brings an educational element to the experience, as the guides will inform them about the culture and history behind the temple. This led to a better experience than only taking a selfie for the bucket list. In addition, the involvement of guides in visiting the temple is also a response from the temple authorities to the protests of local guides who cannot benefit from visitors to the temple. Therefore, visitors are required to use the services of a certified guide and are subject to a charge of around USD3.5 per person. This fee is only charged if

visitors go up to the temple platform. In addition, more signages informing do's and don'ts for visitors are placed surrounding the temple. The management has informed that this is part of the way the visitors were educated and involved in the temple conservation.

Observation 4: use the price mechanism

Another observation was the increase of the price visitors need to pay as the entrance fee (UNWTO, 2018). Before COVID-19, the price for entrance ticket rates differ based on the origin of tourists, where international tourists are charged an entry fee of USD25 for adults and USD15 for children whereas just about USD3.5 for the local visitors. This changed in 2022, when COVID-19 cases started to decrease, the government announced to increase ticket prices to USD100 for international visitors and USD50 for local visitors. This measure is, on the one hand, about using prices to find a new balance and has two effects; a higher price will discourage visitors to come and decrease visitor numbers, but at the same time a higher price increases the revenues that can be used for conservation and maintenance purposes. On the other hand, the price increase is not realistic in times when people want to make up for the deficit in tourist experience during COVID-19, and will form a new social segregation, that *'only rich people can go to Borobudur temple'*. Due to a huge protest coming from the tourism actors complaining about the decrease of visitors coming to the temple, the government is considering a new price mechanism, which is likely to be less than 46 USD.

Observation 5: access with damage free footwear only

The authorities have announced that the temple can only be accessed with a special type of shoe, namely Upanat. These *Upanat* are slippers made from *pandan* and are produced by local community in the temple area and is an actualization of the Karmawibhangga relief panel 150 of Borobudur Temple. Before the pandemic anyone could enter the temple leading to physical damage of visitors walking and climbing the temple. According to the analysis of the Borobudur Conservation Center, every year there has been physical depletion of the temple stones of 0.042 cm (Suhartono and Brahmantara, 2020). Therefore, urgent action was required to reduce more severe damage. With these new shoes, visitors can enter Borobudur, but it will do not any serious harm to the temple. Every visitor will receive their entrance ticket, including the Upanat shoe and brochure of the temple, which they can take home with them as a souvenir.

Observation 6: involve the local community and take them seriously

Finally, a cross-cutting observation is that when taking these bold measures, it is essential to involve the local community, in line with UNWTO's policy recommendations to manage tourism growth, "stressing the integration of local communities in the tourism value chain to ensure that tourism translates into wealth creation and decent jobs" (UNWTO, 2018). It also seems important to do so throughout the entire process, from policymaking, the implementation and execution of measures. Initially there was a lack of sufficient involvement of the local community in the planning process, which led to criticism from the local population in choices about, among other things, the price increase. Gradually, involvement of the local inhabitants has been given a lot of scope in the new management setup of the site, for instance, by providing the guided tours concept and within the production of the Upanat shoe.

Conclusion and future challenges

These observations from Borobudur show that the authorities are taking the problem of overtourism and crowding very serious. These strategies for dealing with those problems are considered to be some bold measures. But are these strategies observed completely new? No, not really. Academics and practitioners have been discussing these for years now Koens *et al*. (2018), Peeters *et al*. (2018), UNWTO (2018). However, implementation in such a way that the measures are effectively solving the issues is often problematic (for many reasons). For many years, destinations have been in a certain

lock-in situation, where it was difficult to make big changes that could provide alternative paths of development steering away from overtourism related issues. This study showed that COVID-19 created the urgency and opportunity the get out of this lock-in (Wilson, 2014), by hitting pause and critically rethink how destinations can be managed differently. A lockdown was needed to get the areas out of a lock-in and alter the course of development into a more sustainable one. This was a bold move from the authorities, as it takes guts to do this, but it in the long run, it will lead much more control than before. COVID-19 was unforeseen and unintentionally, but what destinations elsewhere in the world can learn from the Borobudur case is that destinations could intentionally and strategically build in a moment to "hit pause" and letting communities and landscapes recover and regenerate to enhance the destinations' resilience (Heslinga, 2020, 2022).

Although designing and implementing new policies is great, but that does not mean the job is done. In order to work more effectively, the Borobudur case also showed that there are some issues here that need attention for the coming future. These issues are not limited to the Borobudur case, but are relevant for any tourism destination worldwide that is in the process of redesigning their vision, policies and plans for tourism.

1. The involvement of local communities. In the process of designing the new measures, local communities were not fully consulted and involved. Many communities around the site are dependent on the visitors coming to Borobudur and the decrease of visitor numbers was not received well by everyone, as they might feel the risk of losing their business and jobs.

2. Change of jobs. These changes will very likely affect the type of jobs in and around Borobudur. With the management shift there will be a higher need for education programs that support the change of profession. Instead of street vendors selling souvenirs, there should be more focus on the education of tour guides that need to learn about culture, history and hospitality. A stronger focus on the site itself also means more jobs in maintenance and conservation.

3. Ethical dilemma about pricing of heritage. In times where accessibility, inclusiveness, fairness and equity are increasingly important discussion points in tourism, the questions should be raised whether increasing the price of heritage make a visit only possible for the elite and exclude those that cannot afford access to their heritage.

4. Destination governance. For the management of the Borobudur UNESCO Heritage site, there are multiple organizational bodies responsible. There are tourism, conservation and administrative units, but getting them constantly aligned remains a challenges. For better management of the destination, there should be more clarity on the roles and responsibilities each body has (Heslinga *et al*., 2019; Heslinga and Hartman, 2021).

5. Opportunities for VR. With the closure of some sensitive parts of the temple or the temple simply being too expensive to visit, there is a possibility in virtual reality to give visitors the best possible experience. At the moment, this has not yet been developed, but could be a potential new step.

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