Tourism Development: Issues for Historic Walled Towns

TOMI BREZOVEC
University of Primorska, Slovenia

DAVID BRUCE
University of the West of England, United Kingdom

This paper discusses issues in tourism development and visitor management in historic walled towns. Historic towns and walled towns in particular, attract tourists that enjoy the preserved medieval ambience, architecture and picturesque streets. Tourism has an impact on economic and social life as well as on the urban and natural environment. Walled towns and cities with their obvious barriers exemplify and crystallise issues, challenges, and opportunities critical to the development of tourism.
A research designed to identify issues related to tourism development and visitor management in walled towns included an extensive questionnaire and two workshops. Eight European historic/walled towns were included in the research: Chester (United Kingdom), Piran (Slovenia), 's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands), Valetta (Malta), Arabarri (Spain), Lucca (Italy), Lörrach (Germany), and Verona (Italy). The questionnaire was used to identify the tourism profile of participating towns as well as the issues and concerns related to tourism development. Participating towns discussed their concerns and exchanged their views and good practices at two workshops. Identified issues include providing adequate tourist information, involvement of residents in tourism development, development of products to decrease seasonality, and concentration of tourism demand. The paper presents good practices and suggests solutions in solving tourism related issues in historic walled towns.

Key words: tourism development, tourism destination management, cultural tourism, walled towns, historic towns, heritage

Introduction

Interest in culture, heritage, and history is resulting in an increasing number of visitors to historic sites and many regions and towns are exploiting such interest for the benefit of tourism and economic regeneration (Richards 1996). Tourist-historic cities (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990), as an important segment of culture and heritage tourism, attract visitors for their historic background, art treasures,

and architecture. Besides that, other motives, such as education, relaxation, sense of belonging, and entertainment are among most frequently cited motives for visiting historic urban areas (Konečnik 2002; Poria, Butler and Airey 2004). On top of that, visiting historic urban areas is one of most important motivators for travel. A research among potential visitors of the Istrian peninsula in the Adriatic has shown that visiting historic urban centres and architecture is the most important motivator for travel (38.6% of responses), followed by cultural landscape (17.0%) and gastronomy (9.8%) (Brezovec, Sedmak, and Vodeb 2007).

Historic walled towns have an advantage over other historic towns for their preserved walls which are a special tourist attraction. The walls testify to the historic importance of the town, since during the course of history not every town was allowed to erect or able to afford walls. This was a usually a privilege granted from a ruler to loyal and important, strategically located towns. Conquered towns were often even ordered to destroy their walls to demonstrate loyalty to a new ruler but also to weaken their defences and so become more vulnerable and controllable. Such changes in the ownership of the heritage can leave legacies of disputes (Bruce and Creighton 2006). The development of weapons, especially introduction of artillery, and evolution of military tactics led to abandonment of the traditional (vertical) walls as an element of defence. As a result, many walls were left without maintenance or even removed, to make space for enlargement and further development of towns. The material was usually used for the construction of other buildings or even causeways. However, not all towns destroyed their walls and today there are still many towns with partially or completely preserved walls and other defensive infrastructure. Surviving walled towns say much about the history and traditions of all historic towns, even those whose walls have long since disappeared or been overlaid with new buildings.

Walled towns have a rich history and attract tourists with their concentrated preserved inner centre, medieval ambience, and with their walls that are a tourist attraction on their own. Since the walls are unique to each town, they are also an important landmark and often act as an element of identity for the town's residents. While the walls are often seen as a positive element for tourism and act as an attraction for tourists, they also represent a barrier for further development. Walls physically delimit the inner city area leaving very little space for further development. In addition to that, the historic core itself is often subject to strict building regulations introduced to protect the historic appearance of the town.

Rising demand for heritage and cultural tourism is putting pressure on historic towns that were not designed to accept such volumes. Growing numbers of visitors, their concentration in some parts of the town and the seasonality and periodicity of their visitations often cause problems. Traffic and pedestrian congestion, economic dependency on tourism, loss of identity and damage to historic monuments and buildings are often cited as negative impacts of tourism on historic towns (Laws 2001; Swarbrooke 1999).

Ashworth (1993) has argued that the success of heritage tourism can have a negative impact on the assets on which it is based. The increasing number of visitors might turn what was originally supposed to be a pleasant experience into a rush to see only the most important sites, with only limited positive economic benefit for the town. Furthermore, it can result in negative social and environmental impacts. In walled towns such negative impacts are exacerbated due to the limited area in which heritage tourism has evolved. It is therefore necessary to manage tourist flows to mitigate these ill effects of tourism for the town and its residents. World Tourism Organization (WTO 1995) and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP 1996) recommend the adoption of the carrying capacity concept when developing and managing tourism in a specific destination.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The research presented in this paper was part of a larger ARCHWAY (Access and Regeneration of Cultural Heritage in Walled Towns) project, an EU Interreg IIIC West Zone funded scheme that aimed to develop and expand shared expertise on a range of key urban development issues in the specific context of historic walled towns and cities. The issues addressed were conservation, transportation, heritage management and spatial planning as well as tourism development. The aim of the project was to provide answers that would help local authorities to manage their walled towns better.

The research on tourism was designed as a two – stage process. The first stage was to identify issues in tourism development and to assess the importance of tourism for each participating town. An extensive questionnaire was designed to obtain data on the size and seasonality of tourism, organization of tourism at the local level, tourism communication practice, residents' attitude to tourism, and the importance of tourism for the local economy. The questionnaire was sent to the public servants responsible for tourism development in the participating towns. Returned questionnaires (eight out of the nine partner towns responded fully) were analysed and fed back to

respondents before the second stage began. The second stage of the research consisted of two three-day workshops six months apart. These workshops aimed to discuss survey results, and to share and develop a set of good practice procedures in solving identified issues. Participants met in person first in April 2006 followed by the second meeting six months later in October 2006. The meetings were tape recorded and transcripts were made available to all of the participants after each workshop and have formed a rich source of data on the views and attitudes of professionals working in and for walled towns.

The eight European towns participating fully in the research were Chester (United Kingdom), Piran (Slovenia), 's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands), Valetta (Malta), Arabarri (Spain), Lucca (Italy), Lörrach (Germany), and Verona (Italy). All of the towns were partners in the ARCHWAY project and had formally agreed to full cooperation during the whole research process over a three year period. They are also all members of the Walled Towns Friendship Circle.

Analysis

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

All questionnaires were returned in due time to allow analysis before the first workshop, at which the respondents met in person. The research has shown that regardless of the fact that all of the participating walled towns attract visitors, tourism is not equally important to all of them. Some towns have grown in size and have expanded beyond their picturesque historic centres and town walls. Development of the industry and services provided jobs and attracted new residents that now depend on activities other than tourism. Examples of such development can be found all over the world (e. g. Verona and Chester). On the other hand, there are also towns where there has been little expansion outside of their historic core, and the towns have maintained their medieval aspect and size delimited by the town walls (e. g. Piran and Valetta). In such instances, tourism has a more important role in providing jobs and income since there are limited alternative job opportunities.

Another element of differentiation between walled towns is the volume of tourism and the seasonality of tourism demand. It should be noted here that the size of tourism demand is not relative to the size of the town and neither is the seasonality of the demand. However, the importance of tourism to the local economy is an important driving factor for marketing and developmental activities of both the
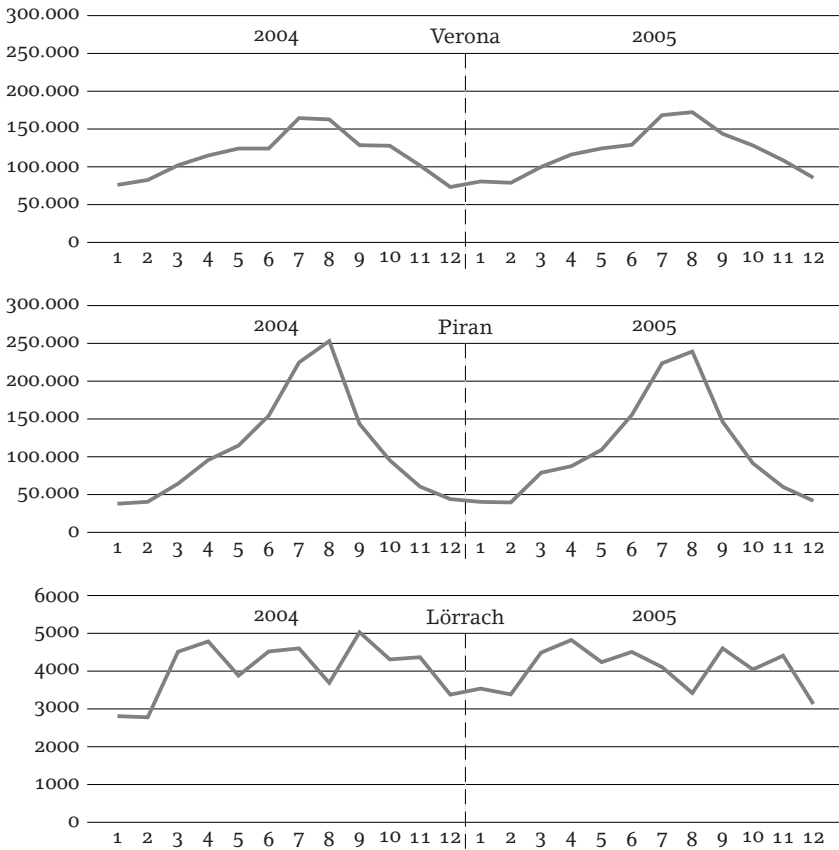
FIGURE 1   Seasonality of tourism demand (bednights) in Verona, Piran
and Lörrach, 2004–2005

public and the private sector. Tourist demand and seasonality de-
pend on factors such as attractiveness of the product, availability of
tourism products all year round, and the distance from generating
markets.

While the size, seasonality and importance of tourism to the local
economy differ among towns, residents' attitude to tourism shows
less variation. Some independent studies on residents' acceptance
of tourism done in the past five years show that residents of these
towns generally share a positive view on tourism. They generally
recognise the economic and developmental potential of tourism.
However, they also mention negative effects of tourism in the form
of environmental (urbanization, traffic) and social damage (loss of
identity, crowding, social exclusion, etc.). Earlier work specifically

on small historic (walled) towns in tourism intensive areas such as Mallorca (the town of Alcudia) and North Wales (the town of Conwy) showed up to one in five residents being seriously ill-affected (Bruce, Jackson & Serra 2001).

IDENTIFIED ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

A debate during two workshop sessions has revealed that the attitude towards the walls is twofold. On the one hand, the walls can be seen as a barrier and as a limitation to physical development of the inner town. Walls also create accessibility problems for modern vehicles and need funds for maintenance. On the other hand, town walls can also be regarded as an asset and/or an opportunity for further development. There are many positive aspects of the walls that should be considered. The participants of the workshops agreed that the walls should be regarded not as a barrier, but as a link between the inner town and the outside area. The walls can also serve as a reference point to visitors and residents alike. As the walls are usually very noticeable, it is convenient to set a meeting point at a specific town gate or to give directions in relation to the walls. A walk on the wall can provide a good basic orientation to newcomers and visitors of the town. Another distinctive asset of a walled town is that it can provide the experience of authentic medieval urban space with a clear delimitation of the inner and outside world. In some instances, the walls are suitable also for recreational activities. Climbing, walking and jogging on the walls are just some examples of potential use. Cultural events are another example of potential activities involving walls and surrounding area.

A very important role of the town walls is that they are an element of a distinctive town's image and an element of pride for the town's residents. The wall, its gates and towers, are often depicted in a town's insignia (crest, seal, etc.). They are also often used as an element of tourist promotion and are shown in brochures, postcards and other promotional materials.

Finally, the walls can be an important element of the tourist offer of a historic town. Depending on the state of preservation and the importance of the walls, they may even be the most important attractor for visitors and tourists. Town walls can be developed as a product suitable for various market segments – from school children learning about local history, and lovers of cultural and historic sites to romantic couples watching sunsets.

The research shows that walled towns share some common issues related to tourism development, despite the range in importance of

tourism to specific walled towns, and differences in size and stage of tourism development. These issues include:

- development of the walled town as a tourism product/attraction,
- the impact of tourism on local residents,
- seasonality and volume of visitor flows,
- accessibility, transport, and parking,
- the long distance transport issue,
- information services for tourists.

These issues are intertwined and there is no clear cut line between them. Consequently, it is necessary to adopt a holistic approach in tourism development to assure sustainability. Ad hoc solutions of specific problems tend to cause problems in other professional areas.

Development of the tourism product involves intense planning, market research, product development, and cooperation of all stakeholders in tourism. Lack of careful and balanced planning can result in development of a monoculture in the tourist product. Historic town centres can be transformed into just one big restaurant, into a shopping centre, or into a gigantic museum or even into a theme- or fun-park. The visitors attracted to such a monoculture may not be the most desirable segments for the town as a whole and its residents.

European Walled towns do not have a large population living within the walled centre and the number of visitors may often and easily outnumber local residents, who in response may adopt negative attitudes to tourism. Consequently, tourism becomes alienated from local life and evolves into a parallel reality. Tourists have no (or only limited) contacts with locals and live the destination in their own 'reality,' very different from the real life of local residents. However, growing numbers of tourists search out 'authenticity,' which suggests that separating locals and tourists is a short-term palliative. Amalgamation of interests of residents and tourists, who share same urban space, can provide a good basis for further development of tourism. It is obvious that this issue is more relevant to communities with a smaller number of local residents. A large urban centre has a critical mass of local residents large enough to bear large numbers of tourists and visitors. In such cases, resident – visitor issues are less evident or do not even exist.

Seasonality of tourism demand is another issue that is important to walled towns as it creates peak inflows of visitors. Peak season months and events may attract a number of tourists that is several

TABLE 1 Average stay of visitors/tourists at a specific destination

The Arabarri Towns	Chester	Den Bosch	Lörrach	Lucca	Piran	Valletta	Verona
3 hours	2–3 nights	4–6 hours	1–2 nights	2 days	2.25 days	n/a	2.60 days

times larger than in off-season periods. These temporary large numbers of visitors create large logistic problems (accessibility, parking, congestion of pedestrian zones, etc.). An example of such concentration is the Arena of Verona. In 2004, there were 640,000 visitors to the Arena, of which 500,000 during the opera season in July and August (although, confined pleasurably in the arena for the duration of an Opera, they may be less trouble than their overwhelming numbers might suggest).

Walled towns as tourist destinations attract visitors from far away as well as from their regional and national catchments. They therefore generate transport and the often ill-effects that accompany it. These ill-effects of long distance transport for leisure (and business) tourism are a significant element in man-made global warming. Although 75%–85% of leisure tourists come to walled towns and cities by car, they do so in efficient group sizes (e.g. a full family car) and not over very long distances. On the other hand, they only stay for a relatively short time.

Only certain world renowned cities attract intercontinental tourists to themselves. Of towns included in this research only Verona and perhaps Valletta fall into this category. Valletta is also the capital of an island economy and apart from cruise holidays, which it is actively promoting, is inevitably heavily dependent on air transport to bring in tourists. All the others, and indeed also Verona, in most instances serve to provide valuable tourist experiences either closer to home or as part of a holiday, which the interest of a walled town may tend to make longer. The impact of their tourism on global warming is therefore probably positive, relative to many other forms of tourism.

Discussion and suggestions

INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL RESIDENTS

Tourism is an activity that is not limited only to the tourism industry but involves, directly or indirectly, other economic activities as well. It is also a spatial activity and has an impact on urban development and the use of land. Tourist services are not limited to visitors but are

also available to local residents that live and work in the destination. It is therefore important to establish the cooperation among various stakeholders that are involved in tourism. Public authorities, private sector, and residents and their associations, have different interests in tourism and often it is very difficult to come to an agreement on how to develop tourism. A survey-based analysis of stakeholders in small walled towns in the 1990's has shown that it is necessary to include all stakeholders in tourism development and planning to provide for sustainability (Bruce et al. 2001).

Restaurant owners, shop keepers and hoteliers support tourism since it boosts their business. Their interest is to increase the number of tourists and to use as much space as possible for their business activities. They often exercise pressure on local authorities to issue permits for the use of public space for commercial activities or to open new premises. Limitations that derive from historic protection programmes, and/or local authority regulations, are seen as obstacles to the development.

Walled towns are not only a tourist attraction but are also places where people live. They have a different view of tourism than does the industry. Although residents usually support tourism and recognise its economic benefits, they express concern when it comes to social and environmental issues. Crowded streets, shops and restaurants with their offer aimed at tourists, and noise are just some of the negative effects that can arise from tourism. When tourism development starts to interfere with the daily activities of residents, support for tourism changes. Local residents become more interested in tourism and they start to express their view on tourism development and point to its negative aspects. A carrying capacity assessment of the larger Piran area (Jurinčič 2005) has pointed out negative factors such as inadequate infrastructure to accommodate seasonal traffic (pedestrian and car), noise, and littering. Residents may express their negative attitude in various ways. For example, they may demand that local authorities limit tourist flows or adopt measures for the protection of their natural and cultural environment; residents may even show hostility to tourism operators and visitors.

Residents who live within the walls have to cope with numerous limitations of the life in the historic town. Their everyday life is hardened by accessibility problems, conservation constraints, old historic buildings that are not adapted to modern standards, etc. Despite numerous disadvantages, living in old centres can also be gratifying. Having an address in the walled centre of the town may be consid-
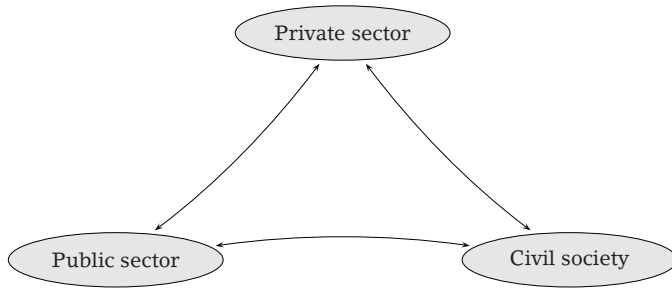
FIGURE 2   Stakeholders in tourism at the local level (adapted from Brezovec and Brezovec 2004)

ered prestigious and may stimulate the sense of pride for the residents (as is the case in the Arabarri towns and Valetta).

Although public – private schemes are more and more popular, such partnerships in walled towns may be problematic as tourism is mostly based on the use of cultural heritage. On the other hand, property values in the inner cities tend to be higher than in other parts of the town. It is thus evident that residents want to be involved in any development that could impinge on the value of their property and/or their way of life.

A prerequisite for getting residents involved in tourism is timely and explanatory information on planned activities and on further development of tourism. Individuals, resident groups, various associations and clubs can be seen as valuable assets for tourism. Although they do not have the decision making power of local authorities, nor can they invest in tourism businesses as largely as does the private sector, they can offer valuable insights on a variety of issues as well as voluntary work, and other activities that derive from their special interests (e. g. singing, charity, gardening, even religion). Inclusion of residents in tourism raises the level of hospitality and offers an opportunity to tourists to meet locals and vice versa.

Involving local residents in tourism does not necessarily mean greater expense. Various voluntary organisations are willing to do certain jobs just for the privilege of saying that they do them. Volunteers have access to zones and places restricted to visitors, and that is also a reward for them. Another possibility is to involve retired people who want to stay active. Especially useful can be the inclusion of former managers and decision makers who have good business connections and can obtain goods and services at a more favourable prices or help in fundraising for projects.

DEALING WITH THE SEASONALITY OF THE DEMAND

Adoption of measures with an impact on tourism should be based on relevant statistical data. The numbers of tourists and visitors in various seasons of the year provide the pattern of demand for the local tourism product. Tourism data analysis gives a certain insight into tourism demand. It reveals market segments and their specifics in tourism product consumption. Number of arrivals, bed-nights spent and length-of-stay are the most frequently used data. In addition to that, the average amount spent per visitor per day gives data on the economic dimension of tourism.

Identification of peak periods helps in deciding what kind of investment or product development is necessary to make demand less seasonal. If the existing tourism product attracts visitors only during the summer months, a destination should develop tourist products that would attract visitors in other months of the year. This could be, for example, a theatre show, exhibition, or a theme festival.

Another dimension with an impact on the crowding is the spatial distribution of attractions. When the inflow of tourists to the inner town is very large, appropriate measures should be adopted to lessen the pressure on the walled town. A major attraction (e. g. a cathedral, a monument, a historic house), is a 'must see' sight for tourists who often come to a destination to see a specific point of interest. Long waiting lines, crowds, etc., may make their visit unpleasant. Similarly, clustering shops and restaurants close next to another may also create pedestrian congestion. Such is the case in Verona, Italy, where a *'visitors' highway'* is created between the Arena and Julia's house, the two most visited attractions in town. Careful planning of spatial distribution of tourism related businesses can greatly improve visitors' experience

It is necessary to apply visitor management measures when tourism attractions are clustered in a limited geographical area. Distribution of tourists within the historic centre as well as in a wider area outside the town walls will improve overall visitor's experience and will spread economic benefits in the region. Setting new attractions on the outskirts of the town, introduction of street performers in less crowded streets, management of opening hours of shops, museums, galleries and other attractions are just some of the examples that may lessen the pressure on the most visited attraction. In 's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands), they have designed a pathway beneath the town walls to lessen the pressure on the walls. In Lucca, Italy, botanical gardens act as an absorption area for the inner cen-

tre. Piran, Slovenia, has designed a network of pathways in the larger outer area to spread tourist flows and lessen the pressure on the historic centre. Chester in the UK specifically uses its complete wall top walkway to distribute tourists and local pedestrian visitors alike.

INFORMATION SYSTEM

The walls that were erected in the past to protect the town and keep unwanted visitors out are now limiting physical development of the town. Usually there are only a few entrance points (gates) where visitors can enter in the inner circle, the streets are narrow and there are no parking facilities – or only limited ones. It may therefore be desirable to adopt specific measures in order to avoid or diminish the crowding of the area within the walls. Nowadays the line of the walls and gateways can be used to mark out an area where pedestrians can be allowed to dominate the street, priority being given to pedestrian traffic and cars made to be less dominant than in more open environments.

Providing adequate information to visitors prior to their entrance in to the walled town centre is considered a basic measure that helps avoid unnecessary crowding within the walls. This can be done by setting information points at the wall gates or at the parking area outside the walls. A step further is providing essential information alongside main access routes to the town and on the internet. Basic directions and information are usually provided at a larger distance from the attraction. The information should become more specific the closer the visitor is to the final destination. These measures will help smoothing the flow of visitors while they are in the town centre. If the information is provided well in advance (internet, on main access routes, at the parking area, at the city gates), tourists can prepare for the visit. Time spent within the walls will be quality time and there will be less wasted time in tourists' search for information at the city centre.

Another measure that helps managing visitor flows is setting-up good signage system. Clearly marked tourist attractions and pathways are essential for good orientation and help visitors to feel comfortable and safe. 'You are here' boards with clearly marked main orientation points (e. g. wall and its gates, bell tower, main square, a river, bridges etc.) are important as they provide information on various directions and give the visitor a sense of orientation.

A signage system is a tool that can be used to direct visitor flows into the desired direction, be it away from a residential area or to spread them into less visited areas thus spreading benefits to

the wider area (shopping, dining …). An effective signage system must take into consideration visitors' segments, their languages, age groups, and interests, and should be designed in a clear and visible way. Modern technologies, such as cell phones and GPS as in Valetta or Canterbury can be used to direct visitors to desired locations or to provide visitor information and even specialised guidance for disabled visitors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As is the case in all research, this study has a number of limitations. One of them is the fact that there were only eight towns included in the research, although as in depth qualitative research such a number is not unusual. Nevertheless similar research should include more cases and could indicate more firmly if the findings and suggestions of this research could be applicable to other places. Another limitation of this study is the fact that it did not include the analysis of visitors and their perception of the issues identified in this study. Such a study could provide additional information for effective management of tourism in walled towns.

To conclude, it is suggested that tourism related issues usually found in historic centres are more intensified in walled towns due to the spatial limitation that the walls represent. Destination managers and local authorities should therefore adopt visitor management techniques and carrying capacity assessment to lessen the negative effects caused by uncontrolled numbers and flows of tourists.

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