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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Cyclades: balancing between current shortcomings and future regenerative perspectives in cultural tourism

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Context of the study

Until July 2021, the repercussions of the pandemic had been grave for tourism-dependent countries, such as Greece, and particularly the Cycladic Islands—heavily tourism-dependent economies (Constantoglou & Klothaki, 2021; Medová et al, 2021; WTTC, 2021; TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022).

The rest of the 2021 season, however, proved especially successful for Cycladic tourism, posing the question of why and how a tourism destination may survive, but also redevelop after such a crisis.

The Cyclades' cultural heritage and assets tend to be their most significant comparative advantages, distinguishing and upholding them as tourism destinations, vis-à-vis their competitors.

The broad spectrum of these cultural assets elicits variable cultural tourism, a form of tourism that has been especially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its global and local repercussions (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Knezevic et al., 2021; Iaquinto, 2022).

A great number of cultural activities ingrained in local ways of life were banned or did not take place at all during 2020, especially those conducive to large concentrations of participants/ spectators, such as religious feasts and all sorts of cultural festivals.

Study objective and research questions



A critical overview and analysis of the relationship between culture and tourism in the Cycladic islands of Andros, Syros and Santorini, in the context of the anticipated regeneration of both cultural and tourism development, in the post-pandemic era.

RQ 1. What is the impact of the pandemic and consequent governmental measures on a) Cycladic tourism patterns and b) Cyclades tourism businesses during the pandemic (end of tourism season summer—fall 2020)?

RQ 2. What is the outcome/ reactions of the pandemic and consequent governmental measures for Cyclades cultural tourism (for the tourists and the local side) as a result (before—after the pandemic, same period)?

During/ since the pandemic: a turn towards more 'green' and sustainable tourism, favouring outdoor locations and less crowded, safe, and protected destinations (Purcell et al, 2020; Knezevic et al, 2021; INSETE, 2021).

Hence, the significance and centrality of the natural environment ('nature'). The lure of culture in contemporary tourism trends, however, is less obvious and more tentative, rendering research into culture-motivated tourism ('cultural tourism') useful and timely (Jacobsen et al, 2021; UNWTO, 2021).

The complex, reciprocal and manifold role of culture in shaping a more sustainable future in tourism is very promising: cultural tourism can be "green" enough, versatile enough, attractive enough, socially equitable enough and economically lucrative enough.

This exploratory study turns to those who propel and enact tourism trends, e.g. significant local tourism actors and stakeholders, in an effort to ascertain/ understand immediate problems and new trends about Cyclades' cultural tourist activities, businesses, and institutions affected by this crisis, as well as visions of their future re-instatement.



Why culture and cultural tourism

Methodology and research design

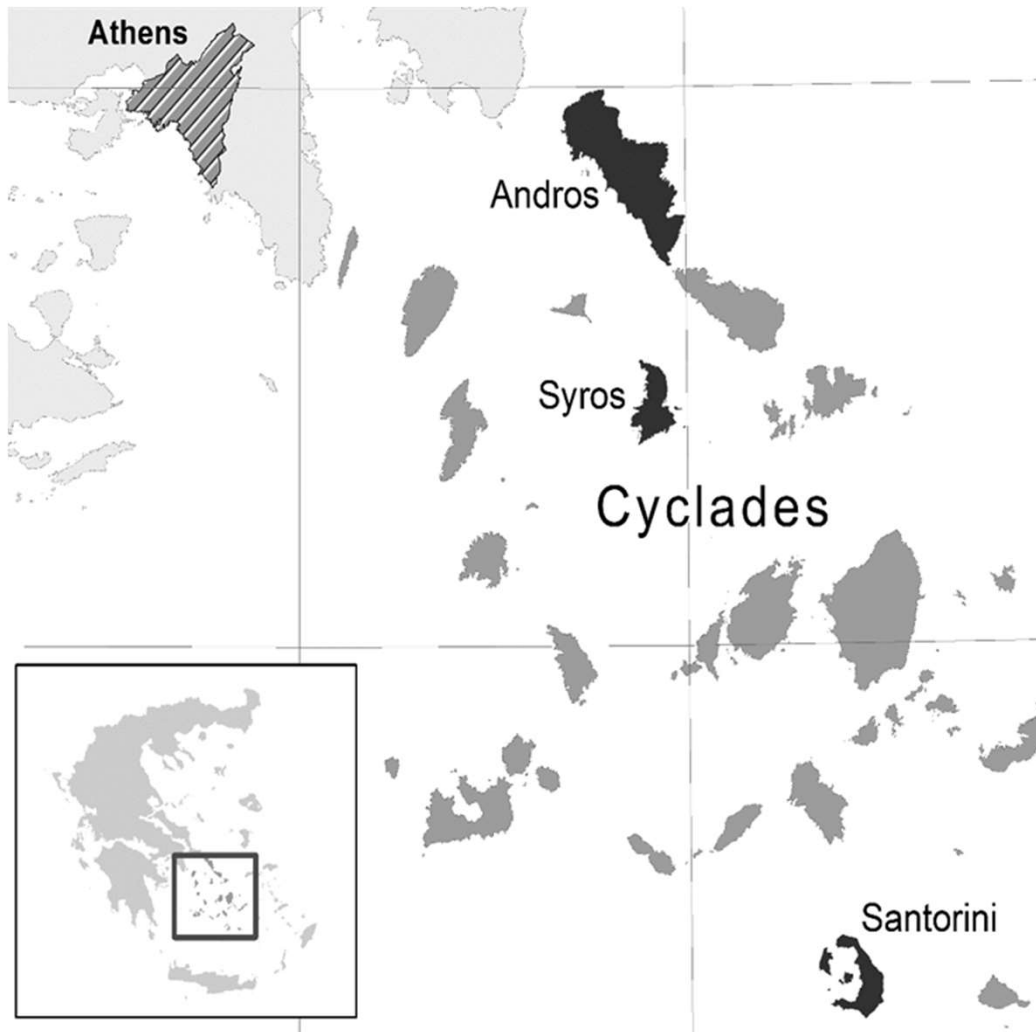
This study relied on a multi-methodological approach, undertaken and effectuated between fall 2020 and spring 2021, in the context of the SPOT HORIZON2020 EU project, which focuses more generally on cultural tourism and Europeanization, aiming towards sustainable development benefitting host communities and regional economies [SPOT Proposal Part A, p.3, <http://www.spotprojecth2020.eu>].

Specifically, for purposes of triangulation, the methodology was based on:

- a) a series of in-situ in-depth interviews with key informants,
- b) an intensive questionnaire survey of local businesses (70 in total) and
- c) a focus group panel discussion with key local/ regional stakeholders e.g. senior executives in the island municipalities in the sectors of tourism and/or culture and local/ regional development.

For purposes of this presentation, we will report on the survey results only, but use the other two sources of information to frame our concluding discussion. The findings of all three methods of data collection were in agreement and supported each other.

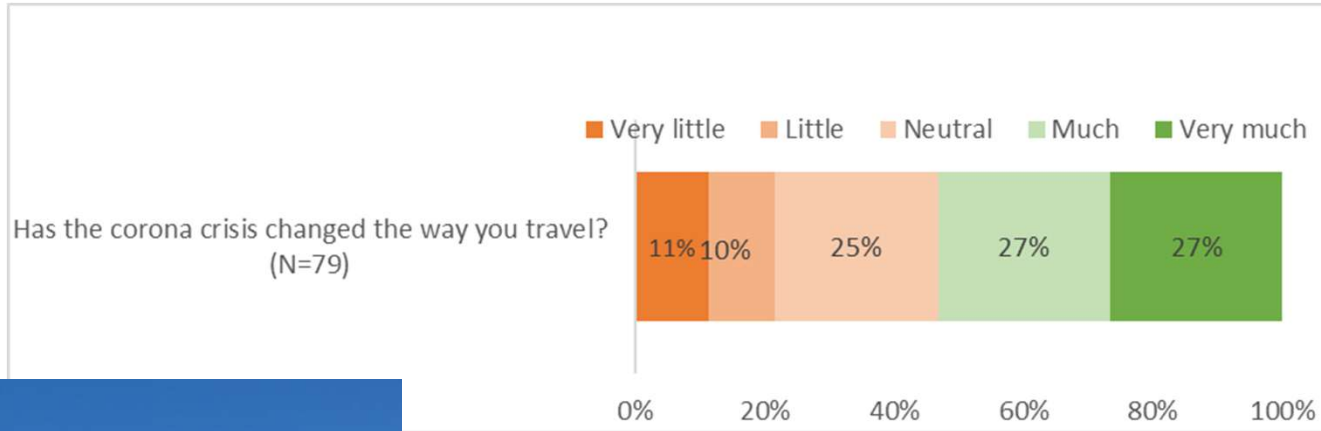
Case study: the Cyclades (Andros, Santorini, Syros)



Source: Laboratory of Cartography and Geoinformatics, Department of Geography, University of the Aegean

The Cycladic Archipelago of Greece was selected, a) as a significant global tourism destination, b) as a case of a small-island tourism-dependent destination, but also c) because of its especially rich past and present cultural heritage, constituting its distinctive tourism-attraction profile and competitive edge. Fragile insular character.

The Cyclades (especially the islands of Mykonos and Santorini) are among the most world-renowned and highly-competitive global-tourism destinations in Greece (WTTC, 2020; INSETE, 2020), with significant implications for these islands' economic survival and development.



Changes in tourist ways of traveling due to the COVID-19 pandemic (closed-ended question)



Types of changes in traveling patterns as a result of the pandemic (open-ended question)

The majority of tourist respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed serious restrictions on their frequency of traveling, especially on traveling abroad.

The majority also stated that they took shorter holidays than usual.

Several European tourists stated that they chose Greece, because they felt safe there and trusted the way that the Greek State had handled the pandemic and its repercussions on the country.

Furthermore, based on our tourist sample profile, many domestic tourists chose 'staycations' in the Greek islands, rather than travel abroad.

Those who did manage to travel in 2020 expressed their concerns about the safety measures that they had to take vis-à-vis the pandemic, referring to feelings of being 'cautious' or 'anxious' while traveling. They described feelings of insecurity and annoyance for having to wear masks and constantly use sanitizers.

Many also stated that they tried to avoid public transport as much as they could, preferring to rent their own transportation vehicles when traveling around the islands.

Comparison of current visit to that/those of pre-pandemic times (closed-ended question)



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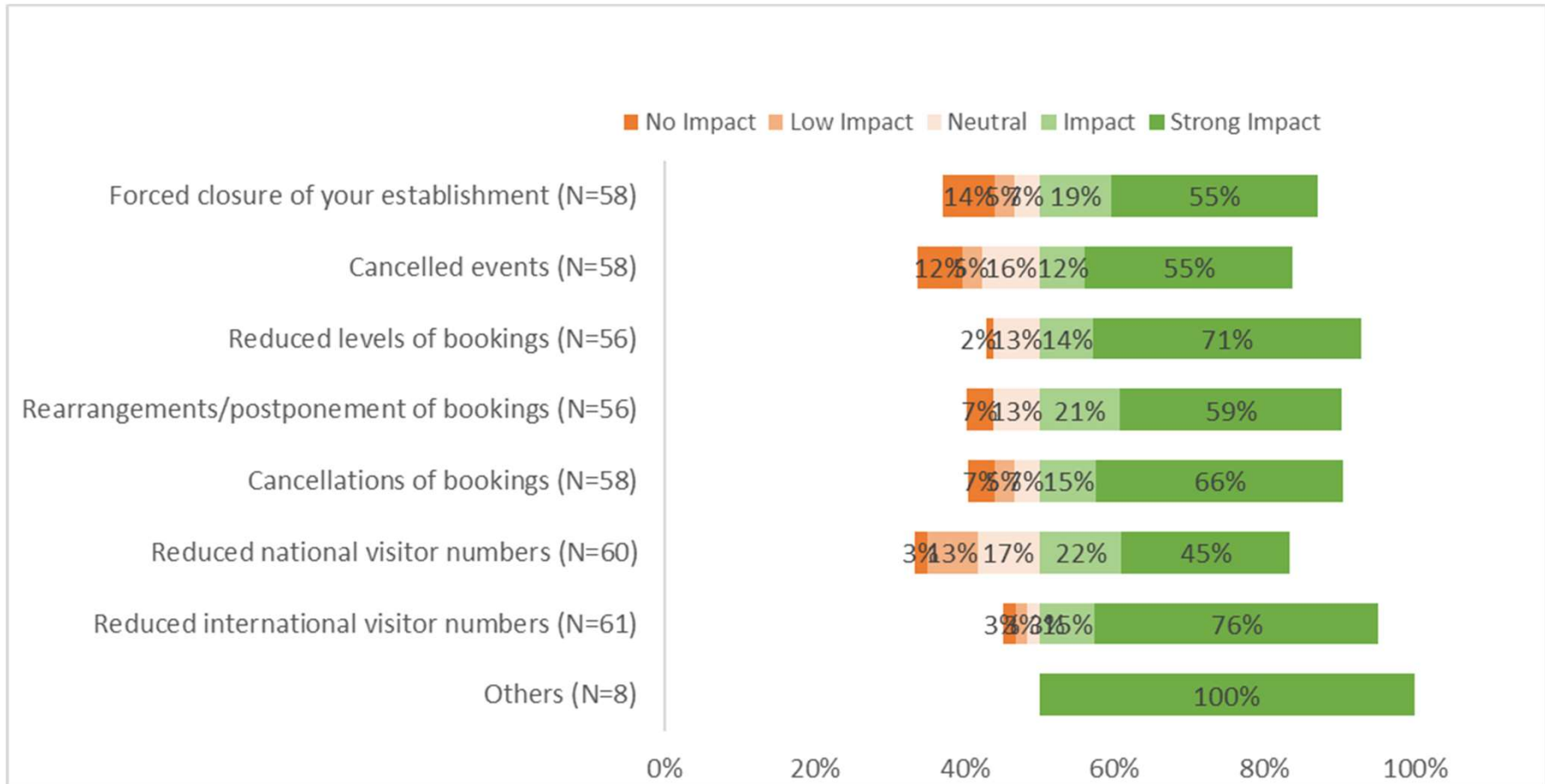
The highest percentage of our respondents (39%) stated that they were more satisfied with their pre-pandemic visit(s) to the area. The main reasons are related to travel restrictions during the time of the pandemic, and the lack of cultural activities and events due to pandemic risks and their repercussions.

A fairly high percentage of respondents (17%) said that they could not see any difference between the two points in time: this must be viewed in the general context of high levels of tourist satisfaction from cultural tourism in the Cyclades, as a rule (Trip Advisor 2022), and the loyalty of 'repeat customers'.

A surprising 18% stated that their tourism experience was better during the summer of 2020 than other visits in the past. It can be inferred (researchers' knowledge and personal observation) that the latter interviewees were the type of tourists who tend to prefer quieter holidays rather than the hustle and bustle of busy towns, crowded beaches, party/ feast atmosphere, noisy situations, etc.

Some tourists (offline questionnaires) had the opportunity to share with us their enthusiasm for enjoying a very relaxing and unusually crowd-free August in the three island destinations (i.e. in Santorini).

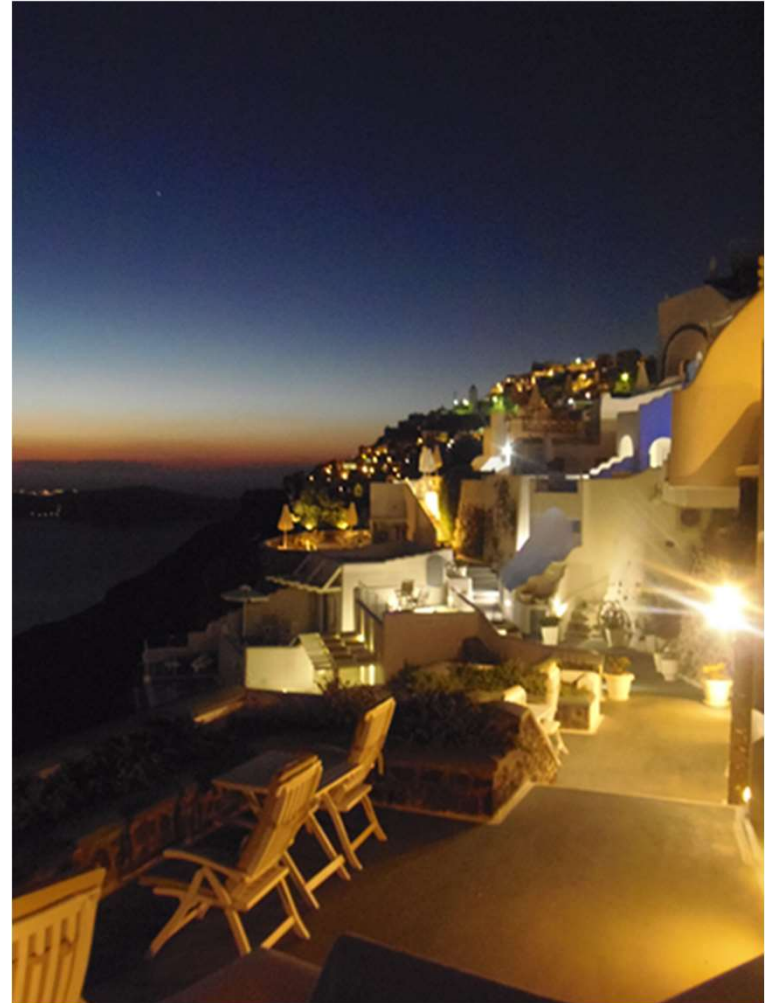
Impact of the pandemic on the businesses (closed-ended question)



Businesses' measures to offset the negative impact of the pandemic (closed-ended question)

The measures followed by our respondents to combat the impacts of the pandemic specifically were: Development of new initiatives and products (24%); Development of new digital services (39%); Enhancement of existing digital services (42%); Exploration of new markets (45%); Maintenance of connections with existing customers (50%); and Advertising as normal (48%).

However, based on the fact that these percentages are all below 50%, we may deduce that these business owners/managers seemed rather disinclined to take any forward-looking actions, but rather assumed a 'let's-wait-and-see' attitude as to how the situation would evolve. They felt abandoned by the State, left to their own devices.



Businesses' measure(s) regarding employees (closed-ended question)

The unfortunate measures that businesses were reportedly forced to take because of the pandemic regarding their workforce were as follows: first to lay off staff (98%), then to furlough staff with pay (93%) or partial pay (82%), while 88% of them redirected their staff to other tasks. New hiring was evidently severely affected.

Furloughed staff in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic was paid a horizontal 534 Euros/ month. For some employees, this could often be considered as partial payment, in comparison to their monthly salary (i.e.1.000 Euros/ month). For employees who received minimum salary in Greece (e.g. 683 euros/month), the answer could be furlough without pay.

The study's findings most significantly expose long-underlying structural problems to the islands' tourism sector, which have thus become clearer and more specific.

Thus, insights drawn from this study may hopefully be useful in short-, medium-, and long-term future cultural tourism planning, marketing, and management, in similar small-island tourism-dependent destinations.

Government assistance received by the businesses to offset pandemic impacts (closed-ended question)

The Greek state seems to have responded to the pandemic crisis in the business world, mainly through incidental financial assistance. Specifically, 56% of the respondents replied that their businesses received financial assistance in the form of furloughs and 23% that they received financial assistance in the form of loans, while only 16% mentioned 'General advice'. (These findings are also in agreement with corresponding relevant national and local statistics).

Pandemic=opportunities & visions: "not a lack of visions vis-à-vis culture, but a lack of planning and mechanisms to materialize these visions and produce tangible results towards their future sustainable development".

Responses: General stakeholders' agreement that all sides/ parties/ sectors/ levels of governance ought to be involved in the islands' cultural tourism development and decision-making, a need/ demand verified through researchers' on-site participant observation.

Felt that pandemic-induced developments may lead to all sorts of new/ reformed types of cultural tourism: more spatially secluded; engaging smaller numbers of people/ participants; more abstract and digitally-supported types of experiences; more authentic experiences; or more controlled and hybrid big-event activities.

Sustenance of business (closed-ended question)



Few business representatives (27%) replied that they had managed to sustain their business for one full year, followed by 25% of respondents who replied '6 months' and 17% who replied '9 months'; only 7% were reportedly able to sustain their business for over a year. Many businesses closed down indefinitely-many of them in the culture sector.

According to the opinions of most local/ regional tourism stakeholders, business owners seemed to have used funds from the previous profitable fiscal years (2018 and 2019) towards their 2020 business needs and survival.

However, "all parts/ aspects of the cultural sector have been gravely affected", with very questionable prospects of returning to the pre-pandemic status quo for the workforce previously employed in culture.

Grave impact on the businesses, but tourist satisfaction with their visitation practices was reportedly mixed.

Serious curtailing of tourist mobilities, in terms of type of tourism, ratio of domestic vs. foreign tourism, frequency of travel, length of stay at the destination, type of transport used, preferred type of destination, behavioural patterns during traveling, cultural activities engaged in at destination, etc.

The role of culture—the competitive edge of Greek island tourism vis-à-vis other similar global destinations—is yet largely unexplored, as regards its potential contribution to future sustainable tourism, emerging from the transformative processes of current crises.

All of our interviewees and stakeholders expressed the need to coordinate and regulate future inflows better, in order to realize such alternative types of tourism, acknowledging the importance of culture for tourism, and **cultural tourism itself as “the future of the islands”**

...as long as culture is embraced by the local side as part of their everyday practice and reality, rather than becoming a tourist product.

Conclusions

