

## **THE END OF ‘BUSINESS AS USUAL’? REIMAGINING BARCELONA TOURISM AFTER COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the impact of Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) on tourism in Barcelona, identifying the pandemic as a crucial turning point and window of opportunity for redefining the sector and reimagining Barcelona’s relationship with tourism. Throughout the pandemic, Barcelona’s tourism sector has experienced an unprecedented drop in visitors and revenue. The city must embrace new strategies for tourism and development in order to remain resilient in the face of this crisis. Cultural tourism offers both a short-term opportunity for economic recovery and a longer-term solution to the city’s pre-existing sustainability issues. In addition to capitalizing on Barcelona’s wealth of cultural resources to attract ‘proximity’ tourists, cultural tourism affords future opportunities to reduce the negative externalities of mass tourism and to reimagine a more sustainable tourism model for the city. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the paper weighs the present need to promote tourism’s potential contribution to economic recovery against the future challenges of post-Covid-19 tourism and Barcelona’s need for greater sustainability. We include qualitative analysis based on press and document analysis of local newspapers and city government and tourism sector documents, as well as quantitative analysis of existing economic and tourism data and the results of a residents’ survey undertaken through the SPOT project (EU-H2020). In doing so, we highlight

the role cultural tourism may play in Barcelona's inclusive growth after Covid-19, addressing prior sustainability issues and promoting a more equal distribution of tourism's benefits. This paper also contributes to the ongoing dialogue between researchers and government and tourism actors regarding tourism's role in local development and the future of the city, thus contributing to future strategies and policies.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Covid-19, Sustainability, Sustainable Cities

### Introduction

Barcelona's relationship to tourism is complex, both at present and throughout the city's historic past. In the years prior to the Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, Barcelona was considered an "over-touristed" destination, with nearly 9.5 million annual arrivals and 19.8 million overnight stays registered in 2019, in a city of just over 1.6 million residents (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019b; Observatori del Turisme, 2020, p. 31). The rise in mass tourism has deeply affected Barcelona in varied ways. Residents have long registered their discontent with the leakage of economic benefits to external agents and the loss of access to public space that has accompanied globalized visions of Barcelona as a tourist city. Further negative externalities of mass tourism have damaged the quality of life in the city, including increased complaints about noise, incivility, and littering. Steep increases in rents and housing prices have also been tied to the growing prevalence of short-term vacation rentals (Cócola-Gant, 2016). Still, tourism's economic impact is undeniable, as the sector provided over 96,000 formal jobs and constituted 7.3% of the city's GDP by the end of 2018 (Ortiz & Pont Algueró, 2019). The spill-over effect of tourism on related sectors has also meant that tourism contributes extremely high revenues to the city and sustains the livelihoods of many residents who work within the tourism sector and related areas.

The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply impacted tourism in Barcelona and across the world as countries continue to address the major health and mobility issues posed by this global crisis.

Barcelona has experienced a particularly steep drop in tourism, with 2020 visitor numbers falling to a level similar to the years before the city hosted the 1992 Olympic Games and redeveloped itself as a premier tourism destination. In 2020, Barcelona saw just 2.1 million visitors (-77.8%) and 3.9 million overnight stays (-80.3%) (Observatori del Turisme, 2021, p. 33). However, despite suffering enormous losses in the years since the pandemic began, the tourism sector is still very much alive and has already begun to reimagine itself for the post-Covid-19 future.

This paper centres on the most pressing issue faced by Barcelona's tourism sector today: the urgency of redefining both tourism's future strategies and its potential for contributing to the economic recovery of the previously heavily-touristed city. We present recent responses to this dilemma, as well as engaging with the future challenges of post-Covid-19 tourism in Barcelona. Here, we propose that cultural tourism offers not only a short-term solution for economic recovery at present but also a longer-term solution to pre-existing issues of sustainability in the tourism sector and its relationship with the city. Thus, this paper seeks to reimagine tourism as a sector capable of correcting its previous negative externalities and of building future strategies based on truly inclusive growth.

### **Theoretical considerations and city context**

#### **Sustainable tourism**

Tourism has grown exponentially since 1945, in direct relation to increases in the wealth and well-being of households worldwide. As a result, it has been widely perceived to be an effective vehicle for socio-economic development. Currently tourism is deeply entangled in environmental systems and cannot be considered outside of the ecosystems in which it takes place (Hall, 2019). Following the unprecedented 73% drop in international tourism recorded in 2020 due to the impact of Covid-19 (UNWTO, 2021), traditional tourist destinations are

currently analysing not only how to survive this crisis but also which pathways may provide the best guarantees for sustainable recovery.

Many critics have decried the unsustainable development of global tourism in the recent past, focusing on the effects of tourist mobility on climate change (Peeters & Landré, 2012; Scott et al., 2012), the overcrowding of destinations (Seraphin et al., 2018), and the damage tourism does to residents' quality of life (Uysal et al., 2012). At present, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), laid out in the 2030 Agenda, exert a strong influence on possible strategic lines and future progress at the local level, especially concerning the evolution of global tourism and its influence on local environments. Though the 2030 Agenda does not directly reference tourism policy, its resolution mentions the tourism sector three times (Hall, 2019) and SDG No. 8 focuses on the economic aspects of tourism and its contribution to the creation of wealth and jobs, thereby reinforcing the need for "sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2020). This is the umbrella under which future sustainable cities may deal with the unprecedented challenges tourism has faced under Covid-19.

Tourism can create significant economic benefits in terms of jobs and economic growth, but it also has important social and environmental impacts on local communities. The importance of attaining a balance between the environmental, social, and economic pillars of tourism at the local level has already been widely discussed (Choi & Murray, 2010; Hall & Richards, 2000), though the topic has recently become a key aspect of local community discussions and city agendas. Accordingly, the success of sustainable tourism requires dialogue between individuals with different perspectives on tourism and its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. These diverse needs must be integrated and made compatible with one another, a practice achieved through the active participation of all stakeholders in the

debates regarding their shared objectives and in the processes they must follow to achieve them (Butler, 1999; McCool et al., 2001).

Several key questions arise regarding both the short-term and long-term recovery of local tourist destinations: How will the pandemic continue to affect tourism consumption? How are traditional tourist organizations refocusing their activities? What kinds of policies should local governments pursue for the future? The greatest challenge for tourist-centred cities will be the management of tourism through a sustainability lens, rather than simply promoting pre-Covid-19 styles and rates of tourism. As Hall states, 'The fundamental challenge the SDGs and their tourism advocates face if they want tourism to be a 'sector of hope' is shifting from a growth mentality to one that explicitly commits humanity to prospering and travelling within the limits of the ecosystems of which we are a part' (2019, p. 1056).

### **Changes in tourism consumption: The increasing relevance of cultural tourism**

In the past several decades, we have seen a progressive evolution in patterns of leisure consumption due to lifestyle changes (Hardy et al., 2018; Richards, 2014). The need to escape one's daily routine, the reduced cost of long-distance travel, the proliferation of second homes, and the desire to seek new experiences or direct contact with nature have expanded opportunities for the development of new economic activities, though they also may threaten sustainable development. Considering the negative impact that previous tourism models have had on local communities and their territories, the pandemic offers a chance to overcome these effects and to develop a new model for the use of local spaces and amenities. There is a clear and beneficial connection between tourism and culture, as creativity and cultural narratives are essential in promoting tourist destinations. Tangible and intangible cultural assets also strengthen the competitiveness of cities in the global market. Thus, cultural resources and practices partially determine the scope of urban attractiveness, as tourists increasingly seek

authenticity and the distinctive traits of specific locations in the global tourism market (OECD, 2008).

According to Richards, the drivers of cultural tourism can be summarized by the growth of several factors: the increasing consumption of tangible and intangible heritage, the growing role of the arts in cultural tourism, the strong link between tourism and creativity, and an augmented interest in cultural consumption (2014). Thus, cities like Barcelona that boast a solid cultural history, a wealth of tangible cultural heritage assets, and a vocation for the arts and creativity are excellent targets for a tourism strategy based on culture and its related aspects.

The mutual understanding between culture and tourism is shaped through the sum of various partnerships, including tourism authorities, local governments, land control authorities, cultural management agencies, civic groups, politicians, tourist establishments and their representatives, and residents. The combination of such diverse actors ensures that tourist destinations are meant not only to be attractive to visitors but also to enhance the quality of life of residents. This collaboration reflects a process of social engineering (Ooi, 2013) that safeguards the possibility of success for both the sector and its activities precisely because it relies on a shared shaping of the conditions necessary for tourist activities and a collaborative diagnosis of the starting point for implementing these activities.

Policies and actions that purposefully utilize cultural assets as distinctive features for attracting tourism (and its economic benefits) should be implemented with the consensual agreement of all actors involved. Furthermore, both current and future innovations in the development, management, and marketing of tourism must address key issues like the sources of tourism funding, the conservation of cultural assets, the integration of tourism into local development policies, and the preservation of social and multicultural diversity (OECD, 2008).

The pandemic has only accelerated the need to solve these pending questions regarding the relationship between culture and tourism, as well as how best to ensure their sustainability.

### **Destination Barcelona: Attractiveness and conflict in the tourist city**

In 1992, Barcelona's trajectory was altered abruptly by its efficient and professional organization of the Olympic Games, jolting it out of a long period of 'non-existence' and thrusting it suddenly into a position of international fame as an attractive tourist destination (Pareja-Eastway, 2009). The 'Barcelona model' has been used as a frame of reference in later events and urban planning contexts in the city and other urban areas worldwide, though little attention has been paid to the particularities of Barcelona's context in that historical moment. The city was uniquely positioned to achieve this level of acclaim and economic growth precisely because, at the time, it was defined by the emergence of democratic values and a collective willingness to succeed in producing a flagship event that would resituate the city within the international urban hierarchy.

From this point forward, theories on augmenting urban attractiveness (Florida, 2002; Florida, 2004; Landry, 2008) were of paramount importance to the city's strategy for becoming a flourishing urban hub, wherein creativity, talent, and innovation were its main resources. Struggles with the consequences of the city's sudden attractiveness to artists, the 'creative class', and highly-skilled workers were already present by the end of the 2000s, when processes of gentrification were exacerbated in various areas. This led to the displacement of previous residents and artists, who were evicted from areas where private capital was invested to carry out large-scale landscape interventions in the name of urban regeneration (Casellas et al., 2012).

Simultaneously, tourism was strongly influenced by both the city's international popularity and its intrinsic assets, particularly its cultural resources. The number of annual

visitors climbed steadily, reaching unprecedented figures and becoming a great source of economic wealth for local businesses, hotels, restaurants, and shops. Barcelona soon became an international reference for tourism promotion, while its local government became a model of success for managing the effects of this booming sector.

Similar to many cities in Europe and around the world, temporary subletting platforms proliferated, contributing further to the growing scarcity of rented dwellings and creating new gentrification battlefronts (Cócola-Gant, 2016). The negative social, economic, and environmental consequences of mass tourism led to a hostile atmosphere in which residents manifested their resentment of tourism, provoking mass mobilizations and social unrest (Hughes, 2018). Before the pandemic, the social situation in Barcelona could be characterized as being in a state of collapse with regards to tourism, with many mourning the city's 'death by success' (Ramos & Mundet, 2020, p. 115).

### **Methodology**

This paper has employed a mixed-methods approach that includes both qualitative and quantitative analysis. In terms of qualitative research, we began by conducting a broad search of local press sources and relevant tourism and government documents to become well-versed in tourism policy at the local, regional, and national levels, as well as in the economic and social changes resulting from augmented tourist flows and the onset of Covid-19. We also searched for information on potential policy pathways for the tourism sector and the city's economic recovery. Likewise, we carried out extensive research on past and current academic trends in studies on sustainable and cultural tourism, as well as issues related to the specific positive and negative externalities of tourism in Barcelona.

In terms of quantitative research, we have compiled and analysed existing economic and tourism-related data from a wide range of sources, focusing particularly on data at the local



level. We have also analysed the secondary quantitative results of a survey of local residents conducted in October 2020 as part of our participation in the European Union-funded SPOT project, which is currently in progress under the Horizon 2020 framework. This survey was conducted with 40 residents of the Eixample district of Barcelona, the area in which most of the city's major Art Nouveau tourist attractions are located. The survey was written in Spanish and Catalan and was distributed online using the snowball method. We attempted to collect responses from a variety of age groups, genders, and periods of residence in the area to ensure the maximum possible representation of the population.

**Research findings: The state of tourism in Barcelona before and during Covid-19**

As we have mentioned, the pre-Covid-19 state of tourism in Barcelona may be broadly characterized by the complicated coexistence of the sector's positive impact on local economic development and employment, and the negative externalities of mass tourism that have adversely affected many residents' quality of life. However, Covid-19 has marked a considerable turning point. On 14 March 2020, the Spanish government declared a national State of Emergency and mandatory home lockdown that lasted until 21 June 2020, wherein residents could leave only for essential errands. Throughout 2020-2022, residents have weathered many rounds of Covid-related restrictions, which have waxed and waned with six major waves of infections to date. These have included restrictions on travel and movement (from the national to the municipal levels); the total closure and reduced opening hours of businesses in the tourism, cultural, hospitality, leisure, and nightlife sectors; nightly curfews; ever-changing limits on occupancy and private gatherings; mandatory masking in indoor and outdoor public settings, and more. The strong lack of tourism in 2020 and its slow recovery in 2021-2022 have inspired mixed reactions, with some residents celebrating a return to 'Barcelona for Barcelonans', while many others lament the loss of income and livelihood derived from tourism, particularly in spill-over sectors.

### **Local development and employment**

The tourism sector's contributions to local development and employment are undeniable. In 2018, the sector accounted for 7.3% of the city's GDP and comprised 8.6% of employment in Barcelona, providing 96,256 jobs to persons working directly in the sector (Ortiz & Pont Algueró, 2019). However, these figures do not consider the large number of workers employed in non-formalized contracts in the tourism sector, nor do they reflect the spill-over effect of tourism on other related sectors, such as hotels, hospitality, and transportation. According to Ortiz and Pont Algueró, 'if we consider a broader definition of the sector, including the transport of passengers, the organisation of conferences, artistic activities or some sporting activities with a significant impact on tourism, the number of jobs approaches 150,000' (2019).

### **Visitor numbers**

Such a significant economic impact was possible precisely because the sector experienced seemingly limitless growth before Covid-19, with higher numbers of visitors recorded nearly every successive year. As Figure 1 shows, the official number of tourists staying in hotels more than doubled in the decade between 2000-2010, before growing steadily each year from 2013 to 2019. The only exceptions to this growth were 2017 (-.19 million visitors) and 2020 when tourist visits dropped dramatically (-7.37 million) to a level only slightly higher than the city's pre-Olympic years.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

In 2020, the 'Covid effect' saw visitor numbers decrease -77.8% from 2019, with the number of overnight stays also dropping dramatically (-80.3% from 2019) (Observatori del Turisme, 2021, p. 13). Many of the 2.1 million tourist visits registered in 2020 were likely made in Q1, before the onset of the pandemic in Europe.

## **Types of tourists**

Covid-19 has also impacted the type of tourists visiting the city. As Figure 2 shows, since 2005 the number of international visitors has been consistently higher than the number of Spanish nationals visiting Barcelona, with international visits growing proportionally larger over time until the start of the pandemic (2020). The exaggerated drop in tourism in 2020 marked the start of a new trend in the type of visitors during the pandemic. From Q4 of 2020 onwards, the number of national visitors began to eclipse the number of international tourists. This is likely due to ongoing mobility restrictions issued at both the national and the EU levels.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

## **Tourist activities**

Before Covid-19, the most-visited tourist attractions in 2018-2019 were overwhelmingly activities of a cultural nature (see Figure 3). Apart from the Barcelona Aquarium and the FC Barcelona Museum, the remaining eight attractions belonged to cultural categories. More than 4.7 million tourists visited the top-ranked attraction, the Sagrada Familia Basilica, while an additional 3.2 million tourists visited Park Güell (No. 2) and the La Pedrera (No. 7) and Casa Batlló (No. 9) homes each drew over one million tourists. All four of these Catalan Modernist sites were designed by famed architect Antoni Gaudí and hold UNESCO World Heritage status. Museums were also extremely popular destinations, including the open-air, popular culture museum Poble Espanyol (No. 5) and more traditional museums such as the El Born Cultural Centre (No. 6), the Picasso Museum (No. 8), and the CosmoCaixa science museum (No. 10). This strong representation of cultural sites in the city's most-visited tourist attractions is a clear indicator of the importance of Barcelona's cultural assets to the tourism sector. The most-visited sites located in the city of Barcelona followed a similar pattern in 2020, with 12

of the top 17 sites being cultural institutions. However, the first year of the pandemic also saw a significant increase in visits to outdoor areas, such as Park Güell, the Barcelona Zoo, and the Cable Car and Castle of Montjuïc (Observatori del Turisme, 2021, p.195).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

### **Tourist satisfaction**

According to the Survey of Tourism in Barcelona, which has been carried out by the City Hall annually since 2011, pre-Covid-19 tourist satisfaction has been consistently high, with an overall satisfaction rating of 8.6 or better (on a ten-point scale) each year since 2015. As Figure 4 illustrates, tourists' overall satisfaction with the city increased more than one-tenth of a point between 2011-2012 and remained fairly constant at 8.4 for several years before jumping an additional two-tenths of a point (to 8.6) in 2015. Satisfaction increased a further one-tenth of a point in both 2016 and 2017 (to 8.7 and 8.8, respectively), and values consistently averaged 8.8 points until the onset of the pandemic, which caused a slight dip in overall visitor satisfaction (to 8.7 in 2020). This decrease is likely explained by the large drop in visitor numbers and the changed conditions brought on by government-mandated health and travel restrictions.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Furthermore, the annual Survey of Tourism in Barcelona also provides an interesting look at the elements that tourists value most in the city. Table 1 shows the evolution of satisfaction ratings for each element that has been surveyed annually since 2011 (without breaks). On a general note, ratings for most elements tended to fluctuate more in the earlier years of the survey (2011-2014) before stabilizing and either remaining constant or rising from 2015 to

2019. Notable exceptions were the level of satisfaction with safety, beaches, and the level of noise, which all displayed slight downward trends in the years prior to the pandemic (2017-2019). Ratings for all elements suffered a clear dip in 2014 (except safety, which increased more than four-tenths of a point), suggesting a change in survey methodology or scoring; this was also the first year that scores were reported to just one decimal point rather than two.

Tourist satisfaction ratings dropped for nearly all elements from 2019 to 2020 with the onset of the pandemic, and notable downward shifts were seen in the categories of entertainment, bars and restaurants, beaches, and general cleanliness during a year of lockdowns and restrictions. However, accommodation ratings rose three-tenths of a point, perhaps due to the increased availability and affordability of accommodations for the much lower number of visitors during 2020.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Finally, while nearly all the elements surveyed have received average ratings of 7 points or higher across time, architecture and culture have consistently obtained the highest ratings of satisfaction (outpacing the level of overall satisfaction) and have tended to rise over the pre-pandemic years. The higher ratings afforded to architecture and culture— as opposed to more traditional indicators of mass or leisure tourism, such as entertainment, bars and restaurants, shopping, accommodation, and beaches— are further indications of cultural tourism’s potential for attracting visitors. By the same token, the relatively lower levels of tourist satisfaction with general cleanliness and level of noise indicate the need for greater sustainability in the city.

### **Residents’ satisfaction with tourism**

In contrast to tourists’ high satisfaction, residents have expressed greater levels of dissatisfaction with tourism’s effects on the city in pre-pandemic years. According to an annual

survey conducted by the Barcelona City Hall, residents have identified tourism as the city's main problem to varying degrees each year for the past decade. As Figure 5 illustrates, relatively low levels of the population claimed tourism to be a major problem from 2010 to 2013. However, this percentage doubled each year from 2013 to 2016 and peaked in 2017, with 15.6% of city residents claiming tourism as the main (negative) issue facing their city. In 2019, the rate of dissatisfaction fell for the second consecutive year to 5.2%, down from 10.3% in 2018.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

This dissatisfaction is due to many factors, although the effects of mass tourism—overcrowding, complaints of noise and incivility, littering, and the leakage of economic benefits to international tourism agents—were most often cited in both the surveys conducted by the City Hall and in press coverage. In 2018 and 2019, tourism was replaced by other top concerns that were related to the sector, such as housing access and a lack of safety, mobility, and cleanliness (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018, p. 17; Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019a, p. 17). The impact of short-term vacation rentals through platforms such as Airbnb has led to the increasing scarcity of affordable housing, as well as influencing the rise in rent prices across the city, which peaked in 2019. The average monthly rent in Barcelona rose to 980.50 euros per month in Q1 of 2020 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020) and remained over 900 euros per month in 2021, with the last available statistics citing average rents of 918.80 euros per month in Q4 of 2021 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021c).

However, press coverage indicates that the lack of tourism in 2020 and 2021 has caused residents' opinions to shift. Some feel advances have been made in the absence of tourism, such as improvements in overcrowding and greater access to the city's attractions. However, many also lament the economic losses sustained by those employed in tourism and related

sectors, as well as the permanent shuttering of local businesses in formerly tourist-heavy areas. At the end of September 2020, stores, bars, and restaurants in Barcelona's historic centre reported an average -70% loss in billing, while other establishments reported individual losses of up to -90% (La Vanguardia, 28 September 2020).

### **Tourism's strategic responses to Covid-19 and policies for reactivating the economy**

Strategic responses to Covid-19 issued throughout 2020 and 2021 have been highly focused on economic aid and shifting tourism strategies to draw visitors at the local and regional levels, while slowly incrementing the number of international arrivals when possible. Apart from several campaigns offering direct aid and loans to businesses in the sector (issued by all levels of government), longer-term programs and policy decisions on tourism have been scarce. Regional and local policies for reactivating the city's economy have been more conspicuous, with major policies announced in 2020 and 2021.

The first and most prominent strategic refocusing of tourism in Barcelona (and the region of Catalonia) has centred on 'proximity tourism', or the attraction of local, regional, and national visitors, as well as some tourists from nearby countries, in the immediate wake of the pandemic's onset. This has necessarily involved the rebranding of many standard tourist attractions for a new tourist profile (largely local or regional), as well as the rethinking of which kinds of sites and activities may be further developed for touristic purposes. A campaign launched by the Catalan Tourism Agency urged 'proximity' visitors to travel by using the slogan 'Catalonia is your home' (Catalan Tourism Agency, 2021).

Significant efforts are also underway to capture the new 'digital nomads' that can work from anywhere in the world. While Barcelona has long welcomed such workers due to its pleasant climate, cultural attractiveness, and inclusion in the EU's 'freedom of movement' immigration pathway, the pandemic has expanded opportunities for fostering economic growth

under this strategy, since many more workers and businesses are opting into this arrangement. The regional tourism authority of the province of Barcelona has joined with local tourism authority Turisme de Barcelona to run the campaign “Barcelona Workation”, which features the hashtag #workfrombarcelona and the slogan “Move your desk, change your life” (Diputació de Barcelona, 2021). This program offers digital nomads a package deal including housing, temporary medical insurance, a pass to visit 25+ museums, and special agreements with a variety of services such as gyms, co-working sites, and transportation. Although this campaign has been focused on residents of the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, the Spanish national government is reportedly developing plans for a Digital Nomad visa that would further standardize this work-life situation for individuals from outside the EU.

While formal policies have not yet been introduced regarding cultural tourism’s role in the future of the sector, it has been highlighted as a key element for ‘reimagining the tourism on offer’ in the city, provided it is also coupled with measures to ensure sustainability and engage with technological innovation (Barcelona ReAct, 2021). In January 2021, Barcelona City Hall’s Council of Tourism and Creative Industries hosted a debate on the topic of ‘City, Tourism, and Culture’ that aimed to re-examine the city’s relationship with the ‘visitor economy’ and to both resituate and strengthen the dialogue between the cultural and tourism sectors (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021b). In February 2021 Barcelona also declared that it will lead a new network of Spanish cities focused on promoting cultural tourism in order to turn culture into a ‘motor for the recovery of the tourism sector in the post-COVID era’ and to attract ‘quality’ tourists (Muñoz, 2021). Traditionally, ‘quality’ tourists have been those who opt for longer stays and greater spending per diem, as opposed to the growing number of ‘low-cost’ leisure tourists who spend little on flights and accommodation and have scarce contact with local culture and products, generally preferring the city’s beaches and nightlife. It remains



to be seen whether connecting culture with ‘quality’ tourism will shift the term’s meaning, thereby including both economic elements and a greater focus on cultural engagement.

At the regional level, the Generalitat de Catalunya created a new Commission for the Elaboration of a Plan for Reactivating the Economy and Social Protection (CORECO), which constitutes ‘a public sector response to the economic and social challenges stemming from COVID-19’ and includes specific aid for businesses, freelance workers, and tour guides in the tourism sector who have been economically affected by Covid-19, among other initiatives (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021b). On 21 July 2020, the commission issued a plan for regional economic recovery that is designed to reinforce public services and the productive capacity of the region, reduce social inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, and accelerate the region’s transition toward a more sustainable and resilient economic model (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021c). This plan will invest a total of 31.765 million euros in 20 programs and 145 specific actions carried out under five main pillars: Economy for life, digitalization, ecological transition, knowledge society, and other transversal actions.

At the local level, Barcelona City Hall released the Barcelona Green Deal, the city’s new plan for post- Covid-19 economic recovery, in April 2021. This plan is based on the interaction and cooperation of six key sectors: the digital, creative, local business, tourism, IT, and health sectors. It will focus strongly on the development of IT and digital solutions to current local and global problems, as well as putting sustainability at the centre of its strategic efforts (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021a). A noteworthy change is the city’s decision to prioritize its reconfiguration as a ‘digital city’ rather than relying on tourism to the same extent as in the pre-Covid-19 past.

### **Discussion: The future of tourism in Barcelona**

As a result of the changes the pandemic has produced in the number of tourists, visitor typologies, and tourist activities in Barcelona, as well as the strategies currently being projected by the tourism sector and city officials, Covid-19 represents a turning point for the city's relationship with tourism. Barcelona is fortunate to have a highly developed tourism sector with a great deal of collaboration between tourism bodies, governmental actors, and many other stakeholders. Figure 6 provides a map of some of the main actors in the city's tourism ecosystem.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

It is crucial for local government officials and tourism actors to take advantage of the window of opportunity currently offered by the pandemic to redefine tourism and its relationship to Barcelona's residents, economy, and related sectors. It is unclear whether government officials and tourism actors hope to return to 'business as usual' (i.e., pre-pandemic strategies and similar levels of tourism revenue), either in the short-term or in the long term, though we advocate for rejecting such an approach in favor of seeking longer-term sustainability in both the city and the sector.

In the medium and longer-term, future tourism strategies must engage with the city's pre-Covid-19 goal of reducing mass tourism. A focus on the quality of the tourist activities offered, rather than attracting larger quantities of tourists, will go a long way toward mitigating the negative externalities of the past. The 'proximity' tourism strategies presently being employed are also likely to instil greater equity between visitors and residents, given the blurring of boundaries between these two groups. However, these are only starting points. Much more can and should be done to improve tourism's sustainability and its relationship to the city. Future policies should consider tourism's sustainability and its role in economic

development not as mere elements of a strategic plan, but rather as central tenets of the sector's activity.

One way to foster comprehensive sustainability is the continued promotion of cultural tourism within the city's tourism and development agendas. Cultural tourism may provide both a short-term solution to the economic losses caused by the present lack of tourist activity and a longer-term solution for attracting 'quality' tourism. It may also increase the sustainability of the city's tourism and cultural sectors by both investing in and capitalizing upon Barcelona's existing cultural assets, which form a key part of the city's identity and attractiveness for visitors. In fact, local and regional government officials have already realized the vital role culture will play in local development and social cohesion, both at present and in the post-Covid-19 future. Although restrictions on travel, mobility, and the hospitality sector have continued well into 2021 and 2022, culture was declared an 'essential service' in September 2020 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020a). Likewise, the Barcelona Green Deal has positioned the cultural and tourism sectors— alongside the IT, digital, health, and business sectors— as future leaders of local economic development (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021a).

As the pandemic continues, increased investment in cultural tourism sites and activities may provide not only an outlet for augmented economic activity in the tourism sector but also new positive externalities associated with cultural engagement and exchange, such as the alleviation of isolation experienced during the pandemic. These same benefits will also be vastly important in the long-term future of the city and its relationship with tourism, especially if both aim to develop a greater degree of social and cultural sustainability. A focus on the rich cultural offerings that already exist in Barcelona- from the products of its creative and cultural industries to its cultural heritage and traditions- will necessarily attract a distinct type of visitor with more interest in experiencing and respecting the city than the leisure tourist of pre-Covid-19 times. This marks a shift away from mass tourism and prior notions of 'quality' tourists

(based on spending habits) to a new target of ‘quality’ tourism: visitors with greater interest in cultural history and authenticity.

Despite the potential benefits of cultural tourism, several important considerations must be made to ensure the full range of its potential future success. First, it is more important than ever to reconsider and redefine the scope of cultural tourism in our constantly changing world. The EU-funded SPOT project (H2020) is one example of the concerted efforts of 14 EU countries and Israel to broaden this definition and to employ cultural tourism in the name of greater sustainability in the sector. The project seeks to include an even wider array of sites and activities in the field of cultural tourism, including popular culture, activities stemming from increased globalization and the ease of (pre-Covid-19) travel, and activities reflecting the patterns of digital consumption that have sustained cultural tourism during the pandemic. The project will also indicate new areas with potential for development or improved sustainability through a digital application. Such efforts are vital to keeping up with worldwide changes in urban environments and the tourism sector, as well as signalling cultural tourism’s potential for creating more positive resident-visitor relationships in previously over-touristed cities.

Second, it will be necessary to institute creative thinking and innovative marketing strategies to rebrand certain aspects of local culture as visitor destinations for the new Covid-19-era tourist: the local or regional resident. Likewise, these attractions will need to employ innovative thinking and advertising to attract national and international visitors in the current moment and the post-Covid-19 future, as competition for resources and revenue will likely be fierce. However, to guarantee true sustainability, future innovations should no longer be motivated primarily by economic gain, but rather must consider their impact on local development, culture, and identity.

Third, greater connections should be made between the cultural and tourist activities on offer, as well as thoughtfully increasing collaboration and support between the sectors as they

work toward a shared goal of increasing sustainability. This means not only ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism stay in the city and benefit residents but also resisting the future massification of Barcelona's unique cultural assets, including both existing cultural heritage sites and new areas tapped for expansion or development (Bishop et al., 2021). The old model of local development based on the unfettered growth of tourism is no longer feasible. Instead, the city must involve residents directly in local cultural agendas and widen their access to established cultural sites, events, and activities alongside tourists' access (Bishop et al., 2021). Finally, if Covid-19 becomes endemic, cultural tourism must be willing to adapt to the constantly changing 'new normal', providing more inventive and accessible solutions to the problems and opportunities prompted by ongoing health concerns and differing types of visitors.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has addressed the central issue facing Barcelona's tourism sector today: the necessity of redefining pre-Covid-19 tourism strategies to ensure the sector's continued success and its potential for contributing to post-Covid-19 economic recovery. We have provided a picture of tourism's reach in Barcelona both before and during the pandemic, as well as enumerating recent responses from the tourism sector and local and regional policymakers. Furthermore, we have proposed that cultural tourism offers a productive solution for economic recovery in the short term, while also providing a means for increasing sustainability in both the sector and the city in the longer term.

Covid-19 represents a turning point in our understanding of tourism in urban areas. It has accelerated the already existing need to find creative solutions for managing and reinventing tourism in previously over-touristed cities like Barcelona, where pre-pandemic tourism was defined by both economic benefits and community tensions. The resident

community was often neglected in decision-making processes regarding tourism and its impacts. However, during the pandemic, community and sustainability have become far more central to the city's definition of economic vitality, and thus will feature far more heavily in the mapping of a new range of strategies for the future of tourism in the city.

In the short term, Barcelona is well-positioned to shift toward the more intentional and sustainable model of cultural tourism, which can lessen some of the negative externalities of mass tourism by attracting a more respectful and engaged type of visitor. In addition to the amenities already associated with cultural tourism, the *experience* of the city has become a new element of attractiveness for foreign visitors and city residents alike. Thus, cultural tourism—in all its variants—represents a more authentic and sustainable alternative to mass tourism, and it is likely that other cities can and will follow Barcelona's lead in using cultural tourism as a flagship for implementing new, sustainable approaches in the sector.

In the long term, good governance—both within the tourism sector and in its collaboration with major stakeholders—will be crucial to ensuring the sector's continued success. Just as the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for reconfiguring strategies for tourism and local development, so too does it provide an opportunity for greater governance, allowing representatives of diverse sectors to move forward together in a way that was not as common, nor as critical, in the past. Any successful reimagining of tourism must be achieved through the agreement of numerous stakeholders in the sector and the city, including the local community. Furthermore, ongoing partnerships between stakeholders are essential for defining shared priorities and achieving common objectives, due to the variety of resources and knowledge each actor brings.

The pandemic has further highlighted Barcelona's need for novel platforms that foster greater agreement between agents and heightened levels of governance. The recent founding of a new Centre of Excellence for Innovation in Tourism (Eurecat, 2020) is one such step

toward more efficient and effective governance. This type of cross-sector collaboration will only become more important as Barcelona begins to align its tourism strategies and policies with the new pathways for economic development defined by the Barcelona Green Deal, which are determined significantly by the need for sustainability and the promotion of the city's blue and green economies.

In advocating for the adoption of cultural tourism as a strategy for improving the comprehensive sustainability of tourism in Barcelona, this paper highlights the role culture may play in inclusive growth after Covid-19. In this way, we address the sector's prior issues regarding sustainability and promote a more equal distribution of tourism's benefits between tourism actors and city residents in the future. We also seek to contribute to the ongoing dialogue between academic researchers and actors from the city government and tourism sector regarding the future of tourism and the city after Covid-19, thus playing a role in future strategic lines and policy decisions.

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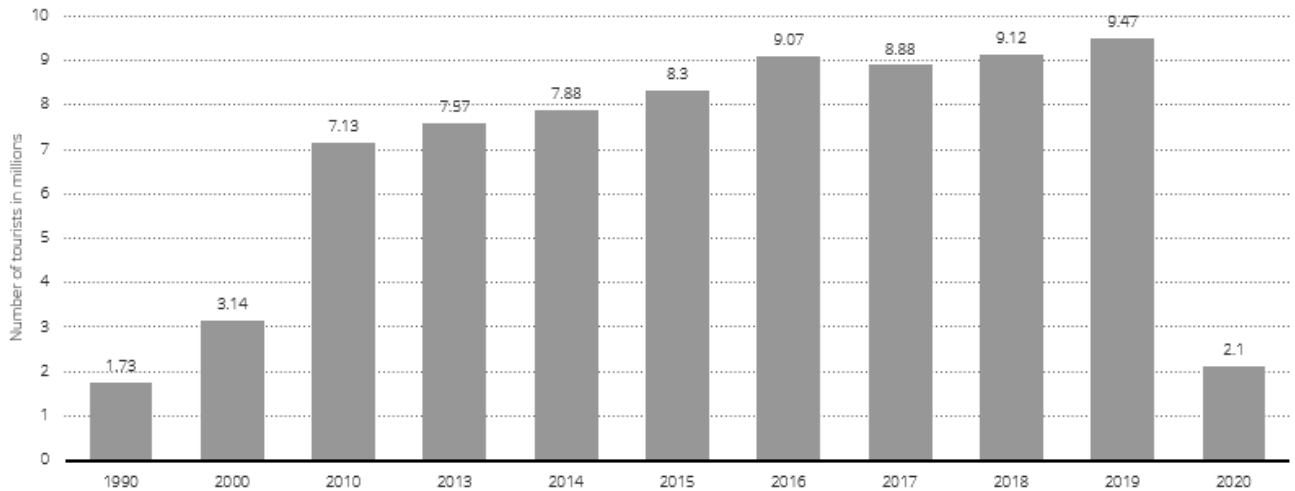
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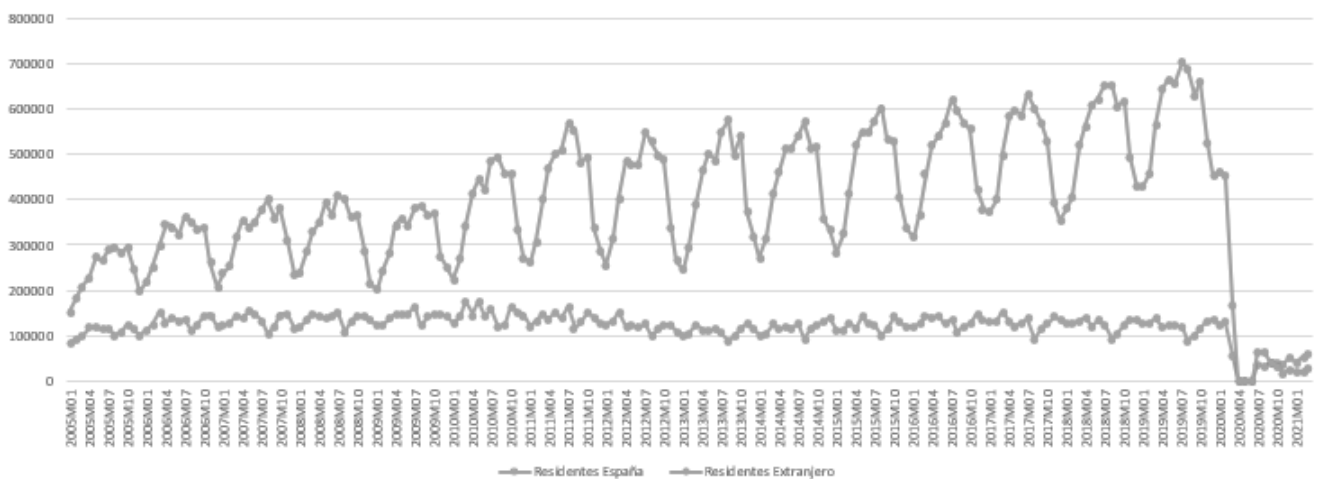
## FIGURES

**Figure 1: Number of Tourists Staying in Hotels, 1990 to 2020 (in Millions)**



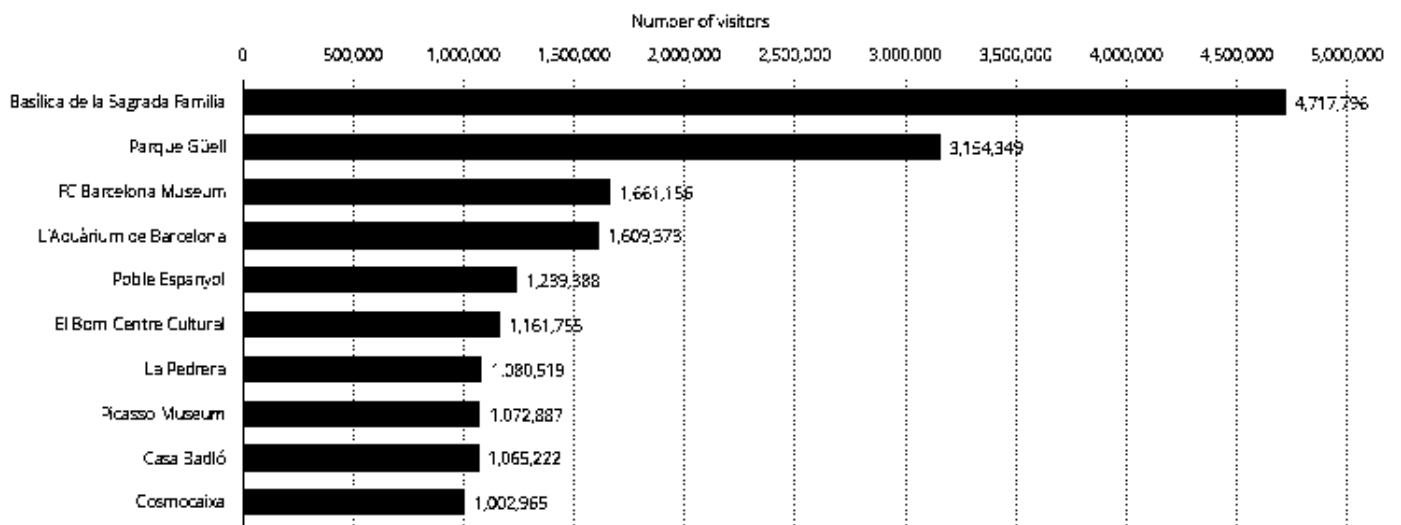
Source: Gremi d'Hotels de Barcelona; Turisme de Barcelona.

**Figure 2: Number of Visitors to Barcelona (by Nationality), 2005-2021 (in Millions)**



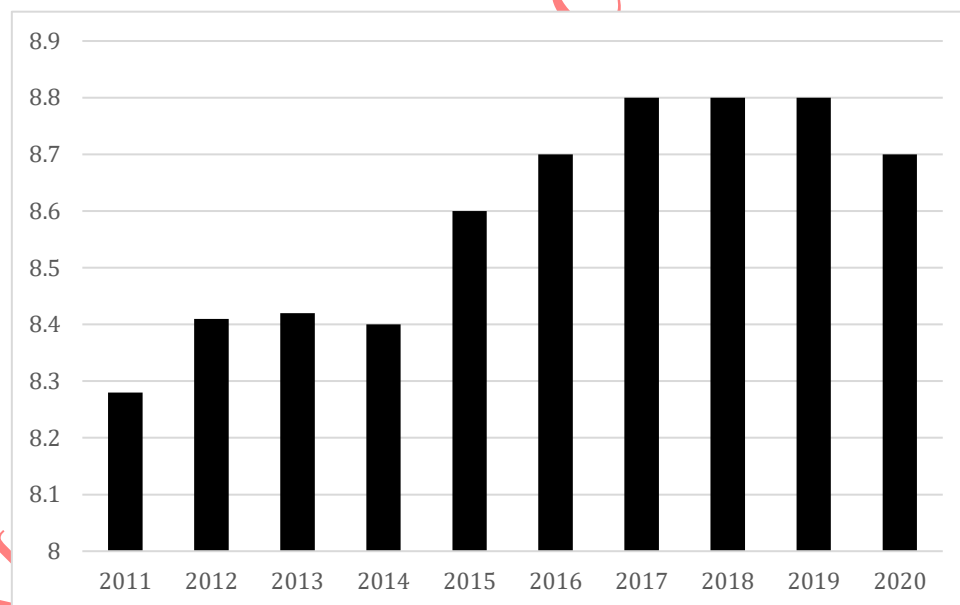
Source: Spanish National Statistics Database.

**Figure 3: Most-Visited Tourist Attractions in Barcelona, 2018-2019**



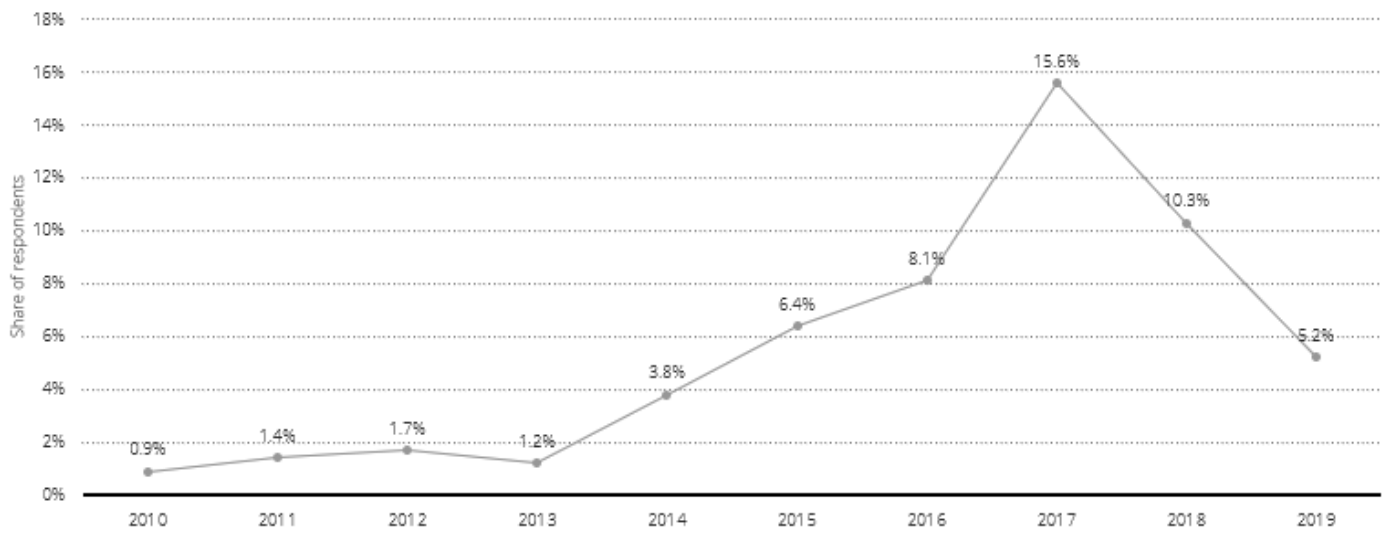
Source: Statista, Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona.

**Figure 4: Overall Tourist Satisfaction Rating for the City of Barcelona, 2011-2020 (Scale of 0 to 10)**



Source: Prepared by the authors, based on the Survey of Tourism in Barcelona 2015-2020 and Tourism Surveys and Statistics reports from the Diputació de Barcelona (2011-2014).

**Figure 5: Percentage of Barcelona's Population that Considers Tourism the City's Main Problem, 2010-2019**

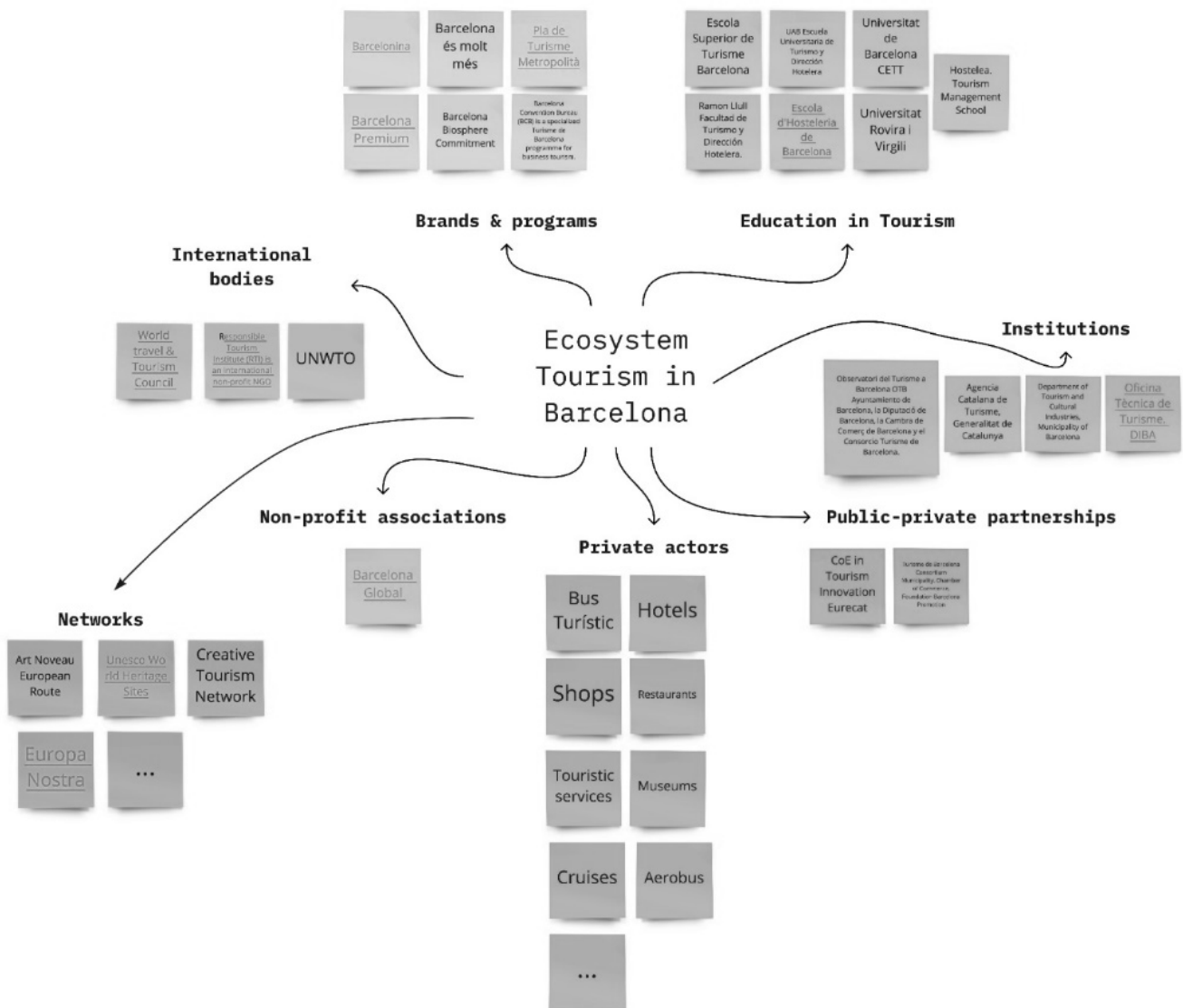


Source: Statista, Ajuntament de Barcelona.

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**Figure 6: Map of Key Actors in Barcelona’s Tourism Ecosystem**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: Tourist Satisfaction Ratings for Specific Elements in the City of Barcelona, 2011-2020 (Scale of 0 to 10)**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Architecture	9.06	9.09	9.21	8.8	9.1	9.1	9.3	9.3	9.3	9.2
Culture	8.65	8.79	8.82	8.5	8.8	8.7	8.9	8.9	9.0	8.8
<b>Overall evaluation</b>	<b>8.28</b>	<b>8.41</b>	<b>8.42</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>8.7</b>
Entertainment	8.36	8.52	8.51	8.3	8.5	8.5	8.6	8.6	8.6	8.1
Public transport	8.19	8.43	8.34	8.3	8.4	8.4	8.5	8.5	8.5	8.3
Character and kindness of the local people	8.41	8.73	8.71	8.2	8.3	8.4	8.5	8.5	8.5	8.3
Bars and restaurants	8.14	8.35	8.44	7.8	8.2	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.4	8.1
Shopping	8.14	8.40	8.60	7.8	8.2	8.2	8.4	8.3	8.3	8.2
Accommodation	8.19	8.47	8.44	7.8	8.0	8.0	8.1	8.1	8.1	8.4
Safety in the city	7.53	7.66	7.46	7.9	8.1	8.2	8.2	8.1	8.0	7.9
Beaches	7.98	8.35	8.75	7.7	7.9	7.8	8.0	7.9	7.9	7.6
General cleanliness	7.82	7.89	7.95	7.6	7.9	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.5
Level of noise	7.14	7.19	7.15	6.8	6.8	7.0	6.9	6.8	6.9	6.8

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on the Survey of Tourism in Barcelona 2015-2020 and Tourism Surveys and Statistics reports from the Diputació de Barcelona (2011-2014).

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