

DISNEYFIED DESTINATIONS

Destination Disneyfication has got the industry squirming. A highly respected European association executive has taken issue with a Dutch proponent of 'second-gate' cities about overcrowded destinations. **Rob Spalding** referees

The exponential rise in leisure tourism is driving conference delegates out of over-stretched and crowded cities, claims a former destination director, Hans van Driem, who once worked for the Netherlands Board of Tourism. Barcelona and Amsterdam have made it official city marketing policy not to subsidise the promotion of leisure tourism but to focus on business events. Palma di Majorca has put a stop on Airbnb rental. Venice, meanwhile, is limiting cruising.

But will these measures help curb numbers? "It is our conviction that the number of tourists visiting classic European cities will only increase!" says van Driem. "Only a terror attack can influence the number of visits."

Since the overcrowding of classic tourist destinations will have an increasingly negative effect on the 'delegate experience', the plan is

inside a 1,000-hectare recreational parkland close to Schiphol Airport, about 20 minutes from downtown Amsterdam.

When Thomas Reiser of the International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis (ISTH) heard of the plans, he was dumbstruck. "Frankly, I don't know what to say about this. If, as I think, this is, a proposed Disney-fication of cities, it is a very bad, and a very sad, idea. I just can't see anyone travelling to Amsterdam or Vienna to go into a Disney-Amsterdam or Disney-Vienna. You may as well sit at home and visit a city in Virtual Reality..."

"We can understand the horrified reaction to the term Disneyfication," responds van Driem. "Let us be very clear...we do not intend to develop an amusement park. The third generation of attractions in Disney's and



Holland: Even better than the real thing?



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Thomas Reiser
International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis

to open a 'second gate' to take the overspill, as Disney does when the strain gets too great.

The conviction that this is the way to go comes from a group working with development consultant IDS, spearheaded by van Driem, on concept drawings for a themed 'edutainment' zone in Amsterdam re-enacting the culture and history of the Netherlands, called HollandWorld™. The 60-hectare themed non-gated attraction will be located

Universal's Studios, for example, is technically completely different when compared with the old type of roller-coasters. People who have visited the brand new indoor attractions at Epcot or 'Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts' at Universal Orlando, will understand this."

But not Tom Reiser perhaps. "To try to reenact aspects of a city that have been there for hundreds of years is strange. A city

or destination will remain important for meetings, but a Disney-like park or attraction will not contribute to this. It is the overall flair that makes a city.

“For association meetings, this may be the opportunity to not hold meetings during the peak seasons when all the leisure tourists are there but to go off-season. This would benefit the cities as they would have business all year round. Or maybe cities will have to decide whether they prefer leisure tourists or business events and maybe prices will rise and this will also have a dampening effect on tourists.”

“To have Florence or Amsterdam ‘Disneyfied’ will be seen by a number

of people as ‘cultural barbarism’”, agrees van Driem, “but of course the content of the ‘Second Gates of Classic European Destinations’ will be completely different. With the latest 4d technology we will be able to present stunning experiences such as the Michael Angelo Experience, the Rembrandt Experience, etc.”

At this moment work is progressing on the development of a prototype for Amsterdam called HollandWorld™/A Taste of the Netherlands. This ‘second gate’ for Amsterdam will be able to cater for between 4-6 million visitors per year and will considerably increase the capacity of the city.

In December last year the Municipality of Amsterdam put a freeze on all new hotel construction in the city, meaning planning applications for hotels are now automatically turned down.



festival grounds of 30 hectares could be used” Reiser, however, believes the overcrowding problem will sort itself out.

“I think this is a typical supply and demand situation – if a city gets too overcrowded, fewer people will come because it is unpleasant and then when the crowds get



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Managing partner at consultants IDS

“The Municipality of Amsterdam is preparing regulations similar to those taken in Barcelona, Venice and elsewhere,” says van Driem. “The strategy is to block further hotel developments in the downtown area and to stimulate developments outside the centre. This is why we plan to build 4,000 hotel rooms on site.”

The choice of meeting destination depends not only on accessibility, the quality of the meeting facilities, and the number of available hotel rooms. Like it or not, the chance to visit famous icons, such as Buckingham Palace, Rijksmuseum, the Brandenburg Gate, or Alhambra, undoubtedly acts as an incentive to boost delegate numbers and can determine how highly delegates rate a meeting.

The Amsterdam plan is not intended to replace Amsterdam’s existing infrastructure, more to function as a ‘break-out location’ for the nearby RAI Congress Center. “Not as a competitor for large conventions and indoor exhibitions,” explains van Driem, “or for outdoor exhibitions, where the adjacent

smaller, more people will come.”

Aspiring second gate cities would necessarily have to bear in mind the growing propensity for scientific and medical meetings to be near research centres or industry clusters. Adjacent to HollandWorld, for example, is Holland Valley, an office location for Dutch innovative industries.

There are many unanswered questions concerning ‘second-gating’. For those associations where future convention destinations are chosen by the membership, who will sell them the concept of second gates?

Will cities be prepared to consider offering subventions to meetings which choose their second gates? Will overnighting delegates have the feeling they are staying downtown? Will second gates be cheaper to meet in?

So far, reaction from associations has been muted. But there’s much to ponder and it’s early days yet. Our international meeting leaders are likely to have much to say on the enigma of second gate cities once more detail is known. Watch this space.

Job done. ■