

Bath goes cold on coach party tourists

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Bath has been a popular tourist destination since the great and the good of Georgian England flocked to sample the healing waters of its spas.

Today, however, it is a victim of its own success. Coach parties of [tourists](#) attracted by the city's Roman baths, 18th-century architecture and Jane Austen connections have been accused of swamping the world heritage site and damaging its listed buildings.

To combat the damage and [pollution](#) caused by more than 100 coaches clogging the streets every day, the city has banned them from driving through grade I listed crescents and is planning to introduce a £100 charge next year for coaches to enter a clean air zone in the city centre.

Bath, which has a population of 90,000, welcomed a record 6.25 million tourists last year, up from 5.7 million in 2016. Barry Gilbertson, chairman of the City of Bath Unesco World Heritage Advisory Board, said that "over-tourism" was damaging the streets and buildings. Hundreds of coach parties brought daytrippers who might only get out to take a photograph without spending any money, he claimed. Monitoring by the residents' association in the Circus, a grade I listed street of townhouses that form a circle, recorded 438 individual coach companies driving through between July 2017 and July 2019.

Mr Gilbertson said: "Bath suffers from a large number of coach tourists who spend almost nothing in the city.

"They come from London and essentially pick people up, drive to Stonehenge, where they have to pay, and then come to Bath where they don't have to pay to get in, and then they might go off to Warwick where they pay to go into the castle and then they zoom off down the motorway to London.

"In Bath these people leave no money, just pollution from their coach. This sounds harsh but it's true and the current administration is very aware of this. That's one of the reasons why they want to charge a coach £100 to come into the city."

He said that 52-seat coaches, which can weigh seven tonnes when fully laden, were cracking the vaulted streets and pavements, as well as causing visible pollution damage to the exteriors of the limestone townhouses.

"The council really do struggle to keep the public realm up to scratch," he said. "If you walk around you see cracked paving stones, broken kerbs and yellow lines degraded to the point where it is hard to see. This is all to do with the volume of traffic."

Last year 1.2 million people stayed in the area, spending more than £266.5 million. In contrast, the five million day visitors spent only £191 million.

“A person who doesn’t stay in the city spends between £5 to £15 per day and a lot of the coaches don’t spend any money,” Mr Gilbertson said.

“What we should be trying to focus on is attracting cultural tourists. Somebody interested in the culture of the area probably stays overnight and maybe goes to a museum during the day, or the theatre and adds a meal . . . Those people on average spend something like £115 to £150 a day per person.”

Amsterdam, which has a population of 830,000 and about 14 million tourists a year, has a citizen-to-tourist ratio of 1 to 17. In Bath it is 1 to 85.

Robin Kerr, chairman of the Friends of Bath Residents’ Association, said new width restrictions were being put in place at the grade I listed Lansdowne Crescent to ban coaches after buildings were hit about once a month by drivers struggling to turn.

“We have lots of activists who spring out with cameras whenever there is damage and we lecture the coach drivers and ring the companies,” Mr Kerr said.

“It’s not because we don’t want tourist coaches, it’s because they are damaging the street and they are constantly hitting the buildings. We have plenty of tourists now, we don’t need more tourists but we do need higher grade tourists who will spend more money and stay longer. Let the daytrippers go somewhere else.”

Visited by overtourism

Last year the Oxford English Dictionary made “overtourism” one of its words of the year, defining it as an excessive number of visitors heading to celebrated locations, damaging the environment and affecting residents’ lives. Different areas have different strategies to deal with the problem.

In Amsterdam, with visitors forecast to rise to 42 million by 2030, the city's tourist board has decided to stop advertising and focus on “destination management”.

In Edinburgh, which had 4 million visitors last year, the Scottish government is looking to add a new “tourist tax” of £2 per night to the price of any hotel or Airbnb stay during the first week of a holiday.

Oxford is looking at a £1-a-night tourist tax on hotels and wants to work with other local authorities thinking about similar proposals, such as Camden, Westminster, Birmingham, Brighton and Cornwall.