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# CHALLENGES OF MASS TOURISM IN SINTRA: A CASE STUDY ON STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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## **Abstract**

*Mass tourism is rising globally, and Sintra, located near Lisbon, exemplifies its challenges. Once picturesque, the town now faces frequent overtourism episodes. This qualitative, descriptive case study explores the issue. After a literature review, eight stakeholder interviews were conducted. Participants included heritage managers, DMCs, guide associations, and two residents' groups focused on sustainability and quality of life. Although key institutional actors declined participation, the study evaluates tourism's impact on Sintra's development. Butler's model was also used to find the current development stage of this tourist destination, which has great cultural and natural importance. Findings reveal widespread concerns and strategic suggestions. To reduce pressure, stakeholders call for better information systems, capacity management tools, and promotion of lesser-known areas. Improved infrastructure – parking and public transport – is also advised. Mass tourism has tarnished Sintra's image and visitor experience. Without integrated management, cultural and environmental damage looms.*

**Keywords:** mass tourism, Sintra, tourism management

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), there were 25 million international tourist arrivals in 1950. By 1980, this figure had risen to 278 million, and by 1995, it had nearly doubled to 528 million. In 2024, UNWTO statistics recorded 1.4 billion tourists globally, with projections indicating this number could reach 1.8 billion by 2030. These figures highlight the extent to which tourism has become a lucrative activity for many countries. As stated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the world, tourism accounts for 10% of global GDP" (UNEP).

However, as noted by several scholars (e.g., Jitsumpun & Muneenam, 2021, p. 1326), tourism produces both positive and negative impacts. The continuous expansion of this activity in various regions have led to the emergence of mass tourism – defined as "a form of tourism that attracts large groups of tourists (...) highly commercialised and offering limited opportunities for host-tourist interaction" (Li, Boley & Yang, 2022, p. 787) – as well as instances of overtourism. The latter refers to



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tourist volumes so excessive that they adversely affect residents, visitors, and the surrounding environment of a destination (Orellana, 2022).

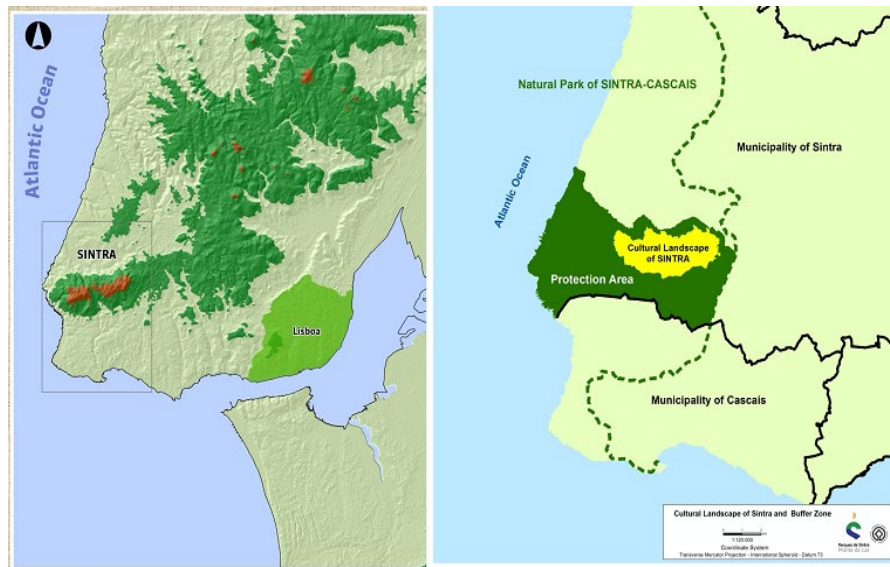


Figure 1 Location of Sintra, its cultural landscape, and protected area

Source: Parques de Sintra – Monte da Lua (<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/iii-0antoniolamas-120613064310-phapp02/95/europa-nostra-forum-saving-europes-endangered-heritage-antonio-lamas-2-728.jpg?cb=1339576613>)

As illustrated in Figure 1, Sintra is a town near Lisbon with a population of 385,654 (CESOP 2021). However, according to local authorities, only around 3,000 residents live in the town's historic centre, an area frequently overwhelmed by congestion and episodes of overtourism (Wilson, 2024).

Owing to its renowned cultural landscape, Sintra was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995 (UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/723/>). Covering an area of approximately 930 hectares, it was the first location in Europe to receive the classification of “cultural landscape.” This distinction has significantly contributed to the influx of visitors, particularly to its main landmarks – the Pena Palace, the National Palace of Sintra, and the Quinta da Regaleira. As shown in Table 1, these sites attract millions of visitors annually.

Table 1 Number of visitors to Sintra’s most visited monuments

Year	Number of Visitors		
	Palácio Nacional Sintra	Quinta da Regaleira	Pena Palace and Park
2019	510.005	1.164.951	2.149.736
2022	371.586	964.612	1.704.729
2023	387.618	1.383.378	1.656.644

Source: Parques de Sintra – Monte da Lua, S.A. (<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/iii-0antoniolamas-120613064310-phapp02/95/europa-nostra-forum-saving-europes-endangered-heritage-antonio-lamas-2-728.jpg?cb=1339576613>) and Fundação CulturSintra (<https://www.regaleira.pt/en/fundacao-cultursintra>).

The primary objective of this study is to understand how mass tourism is currently affecting Sintra and to propose a series of containment measures to help mitigate the issue. In this context, two guiding research questions are posed:

- (i) What measures can be implemented to mitigate the phenomenon of overtourism in Sintra?
- (ii) What are the likely consequences of mass tourism for the future of Sintra and its key stakeholders?

In response to these questions, the study advances two hypotheses regarding Sintra's future:

1. Stakeholders will need to take action to reorganise tourism in Sintra in order to develop sustainable – and potentially regenerative – solutions that enhance the quality of the destination.
2. Mass tourism will lead to Sintra's decline as a tourist destination.

This study is structured into four sections. The first section introduces the research topic, presenting the guiding questions and hypotheses, along with a theoretical overview of Sintra and its distinctive features. It also includes a review of the literature on mass tourism, aiming to contextualise the study and highlight the central issues. The second section outlines the methodology adopted, demonstrating how a diverse range of approaches enables the collection of varied information to reflect the realities experienced in Sintra. The third section presents the study's findings. Their analysis and interpretation will help test the initial hypotheses. For this purpose, various responsible entities and stakeholders involved in tourism will be consulted. Finally, the fourth section offers concluding remarks, including responses to the research questions, hypotheses, and the overarching objectives of the study.

### 1.1. Theoretical Contextualization

The challenges associated with tourism development are inherently complex, necessitating balanced solutions wherein stakeholders, residents, and visitors coexist harmoniously, with all parties benefiting from the evolution of tourism. Achieving such equilibrium requires a comprehensive understanding of the current situation – a task that proves particularly difficult in the case of Sintra, where even the actual number of visitors remains unknown. The only available statistics relate to entries at monuments, as seen in Table 1, though many visitors frequent Sintra without accessing its heritage sites.

To better understand the actual situation and determine the stage of development Sintra occupies as a tourist destination, Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model proves insightful. This model outlines five key stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, and stagnation – the latter potentially leading either to decline or rejuvenation.

By comparing Sintra's current situation with Butler's model, it becomes evident that the destination displays all the hallmarks of the consolidation phase, marked by a critical saturation of carrying capacity:

- Tourism growth begins to slow, either to limit tourist numbers or to preserve exclusivity.
- The local economy becomes heavily dependent on tourism, which emerges as the dominant sector and primary income source.
- Global chains increasingly dominate the local tourism offering – an indication of the industry's globalisation.
- Local discontent becomes more apparent.

However, Sintra also shows signs of having entered the stagnation phase, particularly in the form of visible negative impacts linked to overtourism.

Sintra is therefore undeniably at the end of the consolidation stage and at the threshold of stagnation. Immediate action is required to prevent the destination from slipping into decline. If addressed early, this stage may instead catalyse rejuvenation.

Urgent measures are required to counter overtourism, drawing inspiration from other destinations facing similar challenges. For instance, Santorini has imposed a cap of 8,000 cruise ship passengers per day. In Amsterdam, group tours are restricted and must be led by licensed guides. At Machu Picchu, entry is only permitted via scheduled slots and with an accredited guide. Venice has introduced high tourist taxes, and Florence is preparing to ban atypical vehicles and amplification devices, alongside communication campaigns on sustainable tourism and the establishment of a permanent working group supported by a real-time tourism dashboard (Gonçalves, 2024). In Barcelona – where more hostile reactions to tourism have emerged in recent years, indicative of "tourism-phobia" (Zemla, 2020, n.p.) – tourist groups are restricted to 24 squares and streets, must be accompanied by professional guides, and residents are prioritised in the use of public spaces to mitigate overcrowding.

These examples warrant further discussion; however, new, context-sensitive approaches tailored to Sintra's unique characteristics must also be developed. Although this is a demanding task, optimal outcomes can only be achieved through the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders involved. A literature review can help us understand key concepts – such as mass tourism, overtourism, and carrying capacity – which in turn support the development of effective strategies to ensure that Sintra remains an attractive and sustainable tourist destination.

## 1.2. Literature Review

In tourism discourse, the term *mass* is typically defined as "a large number of human beings [...] seen as forming an aggregate in which their individuality is lost" (OED, 2008). Without individuality, meaningful interaction becomes nearly impossible. According to Naumov and Green (2016), mass tourism refers to the movement of large numbers of organised tourists to popular holiday destinations, primarily for recreational purposes. This phenomenon is characterised by standardised travel packages and large-scale consumption. It is conceptually associated with homogeneous leisure products and pre-organised experiences. As noted by McKercher and du Cros (2002), this phenomenon is also linked to growing interest in culture and nature. Mass tourism may therefore occur in both urban and natural settings, typically associated with organised tours and tourists expecting seamless experiences, regardless of the destination.

However, not all mass tourists rely on package deals or expect full service. The once straightforward relationship between organised tourism and mass tourism has evolved. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the widespread use of online booking platforms have enabled tourists to travel independently, yet in large numbers. These independent or "individual" tourists may now also be classified under mass tourism.

Traditional definitions often overlook the increasingly active and self-sufficient mass tourist. "It is widely recognised that tourism demand and supply are becoming more independent, active, individual, and flexible, which is interpreted as the end of mass tourism" (Poon, 1993), or its transformation into "more diversified forms" (Ioannides & Debbage, 1998; Torres, 2002). These independent tourists travel via low-cost airlines, stay in Airbnb accommodation, join free walking tours, and remain constantly connected via social media. They form long queues at must-see monuments recommended online drawn by the desire to replicate others' experiences and to post photographic evidence of their own (Kroes, 2020, p. 386).

Mass tourism, then, is closely linked to accessibility and affordability, driven by media marketing and social media visibility: we only visit places we know exist. Independent mass tourists may ultimately generate static, homogeneous tourism. Despite their belief in travelling "differently," they are often harder to manage than organised groups due to the unpredictability of their movements. They congregate in the same locations and dine at the same places, guided more by social media than by local advice – undermining both authenticity and meaningful host/guest interaction.

Mass tourism exerts a significant impact on a destination's carrying capacity. According to the UNWTO (2018), it is frequently conflated with overtourism, which arises when carrying capacity is exceeded to the extent that both visitors and locals feel discomfort – compromising the destination itself, as Orellana (2022) also notes. Overtourism, however, is more spatially and temporally specific, referring to micro-spatial areas overwhelmed by excessive visitor numbers at peak times as referred by Komorowski & Holderna-Mielcarek (2019).

Ultimately, the common denominator in both concepts is quantity – yet no fixed thresholds exist. The definition of overtourism or mass tourism depends on perspective, local context, and stakeholder interpretation. A given number of visitors might feel acceptable in one location and overwhelming in another, as both concepts relate to how much a community is willing to sacrifice in terms of quality of life and authenticity in exchange for tourism development. These are socially constructed phenomena (Vainikka, 2013; Butcher, 2020), always linked to carrying capacity, and not always inherently negative.

It should be asked whether the issue lies with mass tourism itself – or with tourism more broadly. Contemporary discourse favours the *traveller* over the *tourist*, the individual over the group, specialised operators over multinationals, local accommodation over global hotel chains, the small over the large – in short: “the good over the bad” (Wheeller, 1991, p.19).

Mass tourism is not inherently devoid of cultural interest or environmentally damaging, as Fussell (1987) implied. It offers tangible benefits to many regions by “creating jobs and generating income” (Jitsumpun & Muneenam, 2021, p. 1235). Some scholars argue that mass tourism can be educational, aesthetic, innovative, adventurous, entertaining, social, family-oriented, and hedonistic – just like other forms of tourism, albeit with similar challenges in achieving authenticity (Vainikka, 2013, p. 277).

However, as Zenker (cited in Stueve, 2024) notes, few residents manage to make a sustainable living from the sector. Agricultural land is often lost to tourist infrastructure, while visitors consume vast amounts of local goods, including food and water. In some cases, “urban residents compete with tourists for access to basic services and goods” (Biagi, Ladu, Meleddu & Royuela, 2020, p. 168), and in natural areas, local ecosystems can be seriously disrupted.

The debate around these issues has made significant and sometimes unexpected progress. In some destinations, discontent among locals has resulted in aggressive actions against visitors. As such, “overtourism is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the increasing resentment and visible backlash from residents” (FEG, 2019). These problems could be mitigated if all stakeholders, particularly the local population, were involved in tourism planning and decision-making.

In the planning phase, resolving issues in mass tourism destinations is critical. Table 2 outlines the main tourism stakeholders in Portugal. The left column indicates their level of participation in tourism decisions; the middle column summarises their roles; and the right column lists relevant Portuguese stakeholders.

Inclusive governance is essential – from central government to individual tourists. Emphasis should be placed on empowering and involving local communities, who must be trained and integrated into local tourism systems, with the aim of viewing tourists as temporary residents and determining “what forms of tourism are desirable within their own communities” (Xiangping, Bynum & Yang, 2022, p. 788). However, “this goal cannot be achieved without adequate education” (Xiangping et al., 2022, p. 792).

Table 2 Tourism Stakeholders in Portugal and Their Level of Participation

Level of participation	Description	Stakeholders in Portugal
High	National tourism organizations who regulate and promote tourism.	Ministry of Economics and the Sea Secretariat of Tourism, Commerce and Services Turismo de Portugal (National Tourism Authority)
	Local entities and authorities who are involved in the promotion and management of tourism and its infrastructures and services.	Coordination and Regional Development Commissions Regional Tourism Authorities City Councils Portuguese Tourism Confederation Professional and Employer associations, Private parties
High/medium	Entities responsible for tourism products and service offers.	Companies, public and private organizations pertaining to the tourism sector Companies, public and private peripheral organizations to the tourism sector
Low/medium	Groups and individuals with involvement or interest in the destination's activities and resources.	Local community Educational establishments (teaching staff, students, specialists and investigators) Consulting companies Self-employed workers Mass media
Low	Individuals who visit the destination for a minimum duration of 24 hours and with motivations connected to leisure, family, and businesses.	Tourists

Source: Mata (2022)

Considering this framework and the current mass tourism phenomenon affecting various parts of the world, it is worth questioning whether these levels of participation should, in some cases, be reversed – granting, for example, the local community a more prominent role in decision-making processes. In the case of Sintra, despite its limited decision-making power, consideration should be given to all visitors, not only tourists. Most visitors to Sintra do not stay overnight in the town, yet this does not preclude them from having an opinion – nor from significantly influencing the destination's image over the medium to long term, particularly through social media.

Several authors argue that “the only way to halt the downward spiral of mass tourism's negative influence is through coordinated action between local government and residents who are aware of its threats” (Komorowski & Holderna-Mielcarek, 2019, p. 70). Similarly, Kroes (2020) contends that tourism is akin to an autoimmune disease, in that although it can be self-destructive, it is also self-regenerative, possessing the capacity for rapid transformation.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Given its exploratory nature, the limited availability of information on the topic, and the small number of interviews conducted, this study adopted a qualitative and descriptive case study approach (Yin, 1989). The research began with a literature review focusing on mass tourism, followed

by empirical data collection through interviews and direct observation, conducted in two distinct phases (2023 and 2024).

Initially, ten semi-structured interviews were planned with high-level stakeholders linked to Sintra's monuments. However, only two responses were received. Other stakeholders did not respond, and several reasons were given, such as: employees of the Municipal Council cited bureaucracy, stating that the Mayor must authorize any participation. Despite the researchers' request sent via email, no authorization was granted. The directors of the Sintra Palaces also failed to reply, citing a lack of factual data sufficient to answer the questions.

Thus, in the first phase of the study, qualitative data were collected through:

1. Email interviews with monument managers (resulting in two responses).
2. Email interviews with five Destination Management Companies (DMCs), from which four responses were received.
3. Email interviews with two tourist guides' associations – AGIC (Portuguese Association of Tour Guides and Tour Managers) and SNATTI (National Union for Tourism, Translators and Interpreters).

All interviews, including open-ended questions, were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Specifically, axial coding was applied to identify relationships between categories and to group responses by recurring themes. Codes were derived inductively from the data and organised according to the main research questions. The most significant and frequently repeated responses were highlighted and categorised in thematic matrices (see Table 3), enabling cross-comparison between stakeholder groups.

In the second phase of the study, prompted by growing public reaction to tourism-related issues in Sintra, two face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from Grupo de Amigos da Vila Velha (GAVV – group composed by residents and shopkeepers) and Associação QSintra (civic movement for the defense of heritage). These interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis, focusing on identifying patterns and contrasting perspectives in residents' and shopkeepers' narratives. The resulting themes were presented in a separate table (Table 4).

## 2.1. Instrument and Sample

The sample for this study comprises two representatives from Sintra's monuments (the curator of museums and libraries and a representative from Fundação CulturSintra), four travel agents from different DMCs, and two representatives from the national tourist guide associations (SNATTI and AGIC). The second phase includes two representatives from resident/shopkeeper associations. This sample is deliberately heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of views across different tourism-related stakeholders.

The email survey directed at the monument representatives, guide associations, and DMCs consisted of three open-ended questions (see Table 3) and was distributed via private email between 15 May and 15 June 2023. For the second phase, the two in-person interviews with Sintra-based associations—also consisting solely of open-ended questions – were conducted in May 2024 in previously arranged public locations, one in Sintra and the other in Lisbon

Interview protocols were semi-structured, and questions were adapted when necessary to suit the expertise and roles of each interviewee (Mata, 2022). Responses were analysed qualitatively to capture the beliefs, concerns, and experiences of each group. The open-ended format allowed for in-depth exploration of perceptions and narratives surrounding tourism management in Sintra.

### 3. RESULTS

Table 3 summarises the findings from the interviews conducted in the first phase of the study. It is divided into four columns. The first column lists the three main questions posed to the various stakeholders, while the other three columns contain their responses: Monuments, DMCs, and guide associations. The underlined words and phrases highlight key viewpoints that were mentioned at least twice.

Table 3 Questions and answers – Sintra Stakeholders

Questions	Monuments	DMC	Guides Associations
<i>1. What measures have already been implemented to prevent overcrowding in Sintra?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Timetables with a reasonable visitor cap</li> <li>– Reservation systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Negotiation with monument authorities</li> <li>– Avoidance of peak hours</li> <li>– Alternative itineraries</li> <li>– Adjustment or cancellation of visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Negotiation with monument authorities</li> </ul>
<i>2. What other measures could be taken to mitigate the phenomenon of overtourism?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create an information channel</li> <li>– Disseminate existing measures</li> <li>– Diversify languages used</li> <li>– Consider tourist typologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Develop a real-time, publicly accessible “traffic light” app</li> <li>– Offer discounts at less visited monuments</li> <li>– Decentralise visits</li> <li>– Promote visits during off-peak periods</li> <li>– Create priority lanes for groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create realistic timetables to maintain service quality</li> <li>– Improve access routes</li> <li>– Establish parking areas outside the town and shuttle services to the historic centre</li> <li>– Allocate separate time slots and entrances for groups</li> </ul>
<i>3. What consequences is mass tourism likely to have on your work in the future?</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– A threat to service quality</li> <li>– Increased visit durations</li> <li>– Complaints due to delays</li> <li>– Elimination of visits to Sintra’s sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Constant struggle to keep to schedule</li> <li>– Decrease in service quality and dignity</li> <li>– Decline in customer satisfaction</li> </ul>

Source: The authors

After analysing Table 3, several considerations can be drawn. Tourism in Sintra faces significant challenges related to overcrowding, particularly during the high season. To mitigate these effects, several measures have already been implemented as shown by the answers to the first question. Among them, the limitation of visiting hours - establishing a reasonable number of visitors per session - and the use of booking systems to better control the flow of tourists stand out. Furthermore, alternative itineraries have been promoted in order to more evenly distribute visitors across the region’s various points of interest. In addition, there has been negotiation with the monuments to avoid peak hours. Complementarily, the practice of adjusting or even cancelling certain visits has been adopted to ensure that the quality of the visitor experience remains at an appropriate level.

Beyond the actions already in place, several other strategies may be explored to further mitigate the phenomenon of excessive tourism in Sintra as revealed in the answers to the second question. Among these is the creation of a real-time, publicly accessible information channel providing data on current visiting conditions and implemented measures. The dissemination of existing initiatives and the adaptation of communication to a wider range of languages are also recommended, given the diversity of visitor profiles. Another possible measure is to encourage visits to lesser-known monuments and sites, for instance through the provision of discounts, as well as the decentralisation of visits to less crowded periods.

The introduction of priority queues for groups, the definition of realistic schedules that ensure service quality, and the improvement of access to the historic centre could also play a key role. The implementation of logistical solutions, such as the construction of car parks outside the old town and the provision of public transport to access this area, could significantly reduce pressure on the village. However, these transport services must operate according to visitors' needs, car parks should be clearly signposted, and spaces must not be reserved exclusively for local residents, under penalty of having no availability for visitors. Finally, it is essential to adjust group visiting times to avoid overcrowding and promote a more peaceful experience for all.

From the perspective of the consequences of mass tourism, considered in the third question, this phenomenon is expected to have negative implications in the future. Chief among the concerns is the threat to service quality, which may be compromised by high demand and increased visit duration, potentially resulting in delays and complaints from visitors. In more extreme scenarios, there is a risk that visits to certain sites may be discontinued due to excessive pressure. The overall quality and dignity of the service may also be undermined, leading to reduced visitor satisfaction and a negative impact on the destination's image.

Subsequently, the study turned its attention to the opinions of residents and shopkeepers. Six key questions were posed to gain a better understanding of the positions held by both groups. The answers are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4 Questions and Answers: Residents / Shopkeepers

Questions	GAVV	QSintra
1. <i>Origin and Objectives of the Association</i>	Concern about the situation in Sintra and the recognition of its heritage	Concern about the situation in Sintra and its preservation (notably the opposition to the Gandarinha project)
2. What is the most problematic situation in Sintra: group tourism or independent tourism?	Possibly the groups, as they do not have time to appreciate and shop.	No data, not familiar with this reality.
3. In Sintra, do we have mass tourism or has overtourism already set in?	Perhaps at certain times it is already too much, and it worsened after Covid.	– "There are too many people." – At certain times, it is already dangerous.
4. What measures have already been implemented to prevent overcrowding in Sintra?	– The Town Council is currently doing nothing. – Previously, there were some ideas, but they didn't go anywhere. – Some parking areas were created far from the center, but no one knew they existed.	There is a great passivity from the Town Council.
5. What other measures can be taken to mitigate the phenomenon of excessive tourism?	The construction of parking areas at entry points, accompanied by adequate information and signage.	Well-located parking areas at the entrance, with connections to public transport. Information should be provided already on the IC19.
6. What consequences is mass tourism likely to have on your work in the future?	A negative image. An article has already been published in an international magazine: <i>The Hell in Byron's Paradise</i> .	This entails a tarnished reputation and a decline in the resident population.

Source: The authors

The tourism situation in Sintra has raised significant concerns, particularly regarding the preservation of heritage and the sustainability of tourism in the region. These concerns stem from the increasing tourist pressure on the town. Initially, there was a focus on gaining recognition for Sintra as a destination of great importance. However, today we face challenges related to its preservation, especially in the context of projects like Gandarinha Hotel, which have sparked controversy.

Regarding the tourism issue in Sintra, the problem of tourist groups is considered the most challenging. The main difficulty lies in the fact that group visitors have limited time to enjoy the city and engage with its local products, thus hindering a full experience. However, there is insufficient data to allow for an accurate assessment of this reality, complicating the definition of effective strategies. In terms of tourism intensity, it is observed that during certain periods of the year, Sintra already faces an overload of visitors, characterising a case of overtourism. This situation worsened after the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the slight slowdown observed in 2023 at the Pena Palace, which was strongly compensated for by the other two monuments (see Table 1). One of the interviewees stated that at certain times, the number of tourists is already excessive, even becoming dangerous.

As for the measures implemented to prevent overcrowding, according to the interviewees, there is a noticeable passivity on the part of the Sintra City Council. Although some ideas and solutions, such as limiting the number of visitors, have been discussed, they were not effectively implemented, reflecting a lack of concrete action. The management of tourism in Sintra seems to lack a more proactive approach from local authorities.

On the other hand, several other measures could be adopted to mitigate the phenomenon of excessive tourism in the city. The construction of parking areas at the entrance to Sintra, with proper signage and connections to public transport, is a suggestion that could help improve the management of visitor flow. The installation of information systems on the main access roads to the city, such as the IC19, would also be an important step in raising awareness among tourists and facilitating mobility within the region.

Finally, the consequences of mass tourism for the future of work and the image of Sintra are concerning. The impact on the city's image is already visible, with negative articles being published in international magazines, as mentioned by one of the interviewees. Such exposure can affect the perception of the destination, damaging its reputation. Furthermore, the growing overcrowding could lead to a reduction in the quality of life for residents, potentially causing a decline in the local population due to the impact of excessive tourism.

It is interesting to note that two different positions were observed among the two associations in recognising the existence of overtourism, with some reluctance from GAVV, possibly because this association represents not only residents but also shopkeepers, who are interested in having many visitors. This aligns among others with Biagi, et al. (2020), Israel et al. (2023), Wilson (2024) and Zemla (2024), who argue that there are different ways communities perceive mass tourism depending on the economic benefits they derive from it.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of tourism issues in Sintra highlights a complex situation, primarily driven by overcrowding and the consequences of mass tourism. Sintra, known for its historical and cultural significance, faces mounting pressures that threaten both the sustainability of tourism and the preservation of its heritage. During peak periods, the intensity of tourism exacerbates overtourism, affecting both visitor experiences and the quality of life for residents.

Considering Sintra's state of development, which, according to Butler's model, is beginning to enter the stagnation phase, it is therefore extremely important to adopt accurate strategies to prevent it from reaching decline. The measures adopted must always be agreed with all

stakeholders, particularly residents. We mustn't forget that the latter are on the front line in terms of the consequences of these solutions, and if they aren't implemented correctly or in good time, they can lead to unpleasant situations such as those that have been experienced recently in some well-known tourist destinations and which, according to the interviews, are already germinating in Sintra.

These decisions should also consider the fact that Sintra is home to both mass group tourism and independent mass tourism, the latter being on one hand slightly more intrusive in the lives of residents, as they have more time to explore areas other than the main streets but in other hand, and still according to the interviewees, these independent visitors having more time make more purchases than group visitors. Any strategies developed should take this reality into account.

Several measures have been taken to manage overcrowding, such as limiting visiting hours and promoting alternative routes to better distribute tourists across attractions. However, these actions have been deemed insufficient, and the Sintra City Council is perceived as passive, lacking a proactive approach. The absence of accurate data on visitor numbers and profiles, along with a lack of coordinated strategies, further complicates effective policy implementation.

The research provides responses to two key questions:

1. What measures can be taken to mitigate excessive tourism? Interviews suggest various initiatives, including creating accessible information channels, implementing digital capacity management systems, and encouraging visits to lesser-known sites. Additional infrastructure, such as parking areas and improved public transport, could ease pressure on the historic centre and enhance mobility.
2. What impact will mass tourism have on Sintra's future? Mass tourism has already tarnished Sintra's image internationally, causing a decline in visitor satisfaction and possibly leading to a decrease in the local population due to heightened tourist pressure. Therefore, managing tourism effectively requires a stronger commitment from local authorities to ensure sustainability, protect heritage, and offer quality experiences for both visitors and residents. Failure to adopt an integrated approach could lead to irreversible consequences for the city's cultural and environmental identity.

The study also addresses two hypotheses being one confirmed and the other indefinite:

Hypothesis 1: Stakeholders will need to take action to reorganize tourism in Sintra in order to develop sustainable – and potentially regenerative – solutions that enhance the quality of the destination. (Confirmed)

Hypothesis 2: Mass tourism will lead to Sintra's decline as a tourist destination. (Indefinite) – Available data are insufficient to confirm or reject this hypothesis.

#### **4.1. Recommendations**

Based on the empirical research itself, after assessing the results and based on the literature review, which includes sources such as Goodwin (2019), Ding, Zhang, Liu, Lu & Liu (2023), Mendes, Ferreira and Dias (2022), Israel, Tumisang and Mpho (2023) and the European Commission (2022), the following measures are also recommended to manage mass tourism in Sintra in a positive and sustainable way:

##### A) Distribute Tourists

- Promote visits during off-peak hours, offer varied entry fees, and create alternative routes for cultural tourists.
- Limit group sizes and encourage advanced reservations for guided tours.
- Develop and promote alternative itineraries like "Unknown Sintra" and "Cultural Sintra."

## B) Legislation

- Implement clear rules for visitors and sanction inappropriate behaviour.
- Regulate local accommodations by setting a maximum number of units and control its dimension.

## C) Empower Tourism Agents

- Involve all stakeholders - hotels, restaurants, monuments, guides - in tourism management.
- Educate the local community to welcome tourists and train staff for emergencies.

## D) Change Transport Habits

- Encourage sustainable travel options, such as public transport or bicycles.
- Promote off-season travel to avoid crowding.

## E) Alter Tourist Consumption

- Encourage local shopping and support the community.
- Promote micro-adventures to reduce long-distance travel.

## F) Implement Smart Tourism

- Use digital tools to share information before, during, and after visits.
- Promote smart sustainability initiatives, like carbon footprint reduction and environmental preservation efforts.
- Enhance visitor experiences through virtual or augmented reality.

This study highlights the importance of controlling tourism growth to minimize negative impacts. Despite offering valuable insights into the phenomenon of overtourism in Sintra, this study is subject to several limitations. Unfortunately, there was an absence of participation from key institutional actors, such as the Sintra Municipal Council and the directors of major palaces, whose views are crucial for a holistic understanding of tourism governance. Future studies should also consider the visitor's perspective, and, in the future, it is also vital to consider the effects of climate change and the potential role of Artificial Intelligence in tourism.

Sustainable development strategies should involve stakeholders and encourage local participation in decision-making. Properly implementing the above proposed measures could improve stakeholder operations and enhance the visitor experience, contributing to responsible development in Sintra.

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