

Hypothesis

# Unconventional Tourist Mobility: A Geography-Oriented Theoretical Framework

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**Abstract:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism had permeated all spaces of experience, reaching nearly every country, region, community, and corner of the globe. In recent decades, the meanings, implications, and roles of tourism have also expanded significantly. This article focuses on unconventional tourism mobilities, including same-day visits, which are an important but often neglected part of the tourism system, constantly challenging both scholars and tourism industry stakeholders. Unconventional tourism is an umbrella term that covers most kinds of unregistered or unaccounted tourist mobilities, some of which might not appear to be ‘tourism’ but should be in certain localities and under certain conditions. Given the growth of unregistered tourist flows and unaccounted leisure (or utilitarian) mobilities, there is a need in tourism studies to apply innovative research methods and to reconceptualize the meanings of tourism in different geographical and social contexts. It is expected that people’s desire to travel in the post-pandemic era will educe new spatial and temporal travel experiences and behaviours in which unconventional tourisms will play an important role. To better understand this phenomenon and to evaluate the development of new approaches to travel and behavioural spatialities, new ways of thinking, new theoretical constructs, and new methodologies are needed. This article seeks to explore certain hidden or invisible tourism mobilities, focusing on the geographical patterns, processes, and hidden aspects of unconventional tourism.

**Keywords:** unregistered tourism; unconventional tourism; unaccounted tourism; short-haul travel; same-day travel; cross-border mobility; VFR tourism; sharing economy; shopping tourism



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic decline in world tourism [1]. According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) data [2], there was an 87% drop in international tourism demand in 2020 and a 56% drop in 2021 compared to 2019, which was a record high year. The crisis in the global tourism industry provides an opportunity to assess the development of tourism in the 21st century and to carefully plan for its revitalisation [3]. The spread of the pandemic closely correlates with the lifestyle of our time and with travelling becoming an ordinary practice [4]. Intensive tourist mobility contributed to the spread of the coronavirus to almost all countries on Earth in the first three months of 2020 [5]. In 2019, the UNWTO [2] recorded 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals, double the number of arrivals in 2000. Multiple changes underlie the dynamic growth of tourism over the last two decades; understanding these mechanisms will help construct post-pandemic scenarios and realise the vision of sustainable tourism [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented silence to popular tourist destinations around the world. Deserted streets, empty terraces, and closed restaurants, cafes and bars—a doomsday atmosphere

was realised by globetrotters in previously crowded neighbourhoods. The waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have raised hopes for greater sustainable uses of places but have also shown the downside of the temporal collapse of the experience economy and experience society [7]. The extent of lockdowns, quarantines, and travel restrictions differed by country and region, but the reduction of environmental pressures was greatest where both long-term and same-day tourist mobility had previously been present [8]. In the resurrected mobilities of the post-pandemic period, innovative solutions will likely emerge to help promote and support sustainable destination management [9].

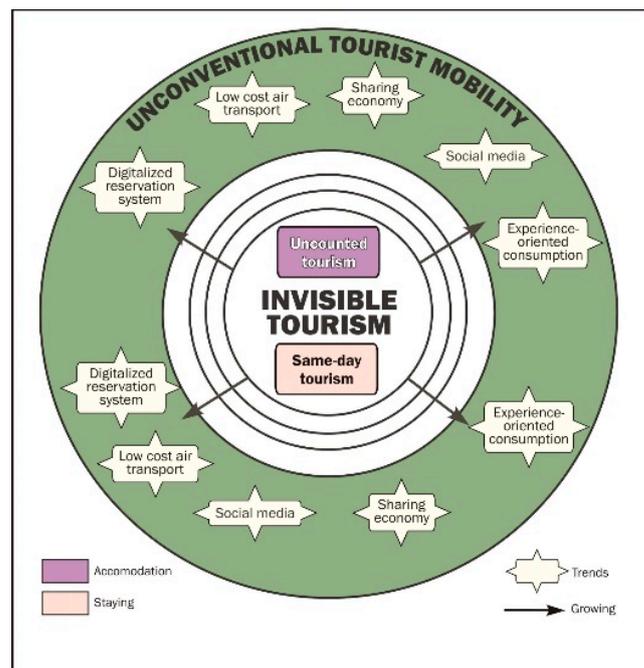
The impressive statistics produced by the UNWTO are primarily representative of measured and recognized tourist flows, not of invisible mobilities that also fit under the auspices of tourism [10]. For example, domestic same-day travel, cross-border and transit same-day trips, and overnight stays outside registered accommodations, including the use of second homes, courtesy lodging, and informal accommodations, are for the most part outside the scope of official tourism statistics [11]. 'Invisible tourism' estimates and periodic surveys are done in some countries, but there are no databases for international comparisons [12], yet this is a salient part of the tourism system worldwide.

The European Parliament and the Council of Europe adopted regulations concerning European tourism statistics in 2011 [13], clearly stating that (5) "The changing nature of tourism behaviour since the entry into force of Council Directive 95/57/EC of 23 November 1995 on the collection of statistical information in the field of tourism, with the growing importance of short trips and same-day visits contributing substantially in many regions or countries to the income from tourism, the increasing importance of non-rented accommodation or accommodation in smaller establishments, and the growing impact of the Internet on the booking behaviour of tourists and on the tourism industry, means that the production of tourism statistics should be adapted."

The European Commission has required Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, to draw up a methodological manual that must be regularly updated. However, even the political will to make invisible tourism visible has failed to produce tangible results. The UNWTO and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimate that domestic tourism is several times larger than international demand but, due to data collection gaps, few numbers are available for scientific analysis of this segment [14].

Unconventional (or invisible, or hidden) tourism mobility refers to trips involving the use of accommodation outside of regular statistical data collection and trips of less than 24 h in duration (Figure 1). Unconventional tourism mobility as conceived here differs from conventional tourism in essentially two ways: the nature of the accommodation used and the short length of stay. Unconventional tourism is, therefore, statistically invisible, but the characteristics of travel consumer behaviour are relatively well captured and essentially the same as conventionally measured tourism. In a given destination, the same tourist activity can be carried out in both unconventional and conventional modalities (e.g., a day visit to a ski resort or a beach holiday in a second home property provided free of charge by friends) [15]. Unconventional tourism mobility thus overlaps with conventional tourism mobility, in both space and time, and managing the two phenomena together poses significant challenges for planners, developers and managers.

The phenomena associated with unconventional tourism mobility have been known to tourism researchers for decades, yet they remain under-researched due to the estimated volume, assumed impacts, and the difficulty in drawing parameters for analysis. The lack of a conceptual framework to explore unconventional tourism mobilities has been an additional obstacle to the discussion of the phenomenon. However, profound changes in the nature of tourism (in particular overtourism) have drawn attention to the economic, social and scientific potential of unconventional tourism mobility [16]. There is also a growing recognition that hidden tourism is symbiotic with the trends that are driving its broader uptake so the need for invisible tourism to operate smoothly has implications for the formation of trends, and in some cases the trends themselves can be interpreted as unconventional tourism (e.g., CouchSurfing) [17].



**Figure 1.** Model of unconventional tourist mobility. Source: authors' conceptualization (design: Livia Kaiser).

It is difficult to draw boundaries that mark the changing nature of tourism and to determine the period which has now generated and increased the need for a complex exploration of unconventional tourism mobility. The emergence and market penetration of low-cost airlines [18]; the widespread use of the internet and online retail spaces that facilitate the purchase of most tourism services [19]; the ability to share travel experiences instantaneously on social media [20]; the diffusion of the sharing economy [21]; the fact that consumption is not only a means of satisfying needs but also a means of accumulating experiences and avoiding boredom [22] all have played a significant role in this process.

If we look at the above processes in their historical context, the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries is when the very nature of tourism changed on a global scale, affecting almost all segments of society and generating measurable results in national economies. Conventional market processes in tourism have been joined by unconventional ones driven by several business and technological innovations. First, the alternative to expensive, convenient, and privileged air travel has become cheap and democratized air travel [23]. Second, online booking systems have made it possible to bypass travel agents and ticket offices when purchasing travel products, even with immediate validity [24]. Third, experience narratives have become real-time, spreading across the web through visuals, posts, hashtags, comments and 'likes' on Facebook and Instagram platforms, and transforming marketing communication [25]. Fourth, because of Airbnb, private homes have become commercial places to stay and attract tourists in droves with the promise of 'living like a local' [26]. Finally, historically popular tourist destinations have become victims of overtourism, and simultaneously, many previously unknown geographical locations have entered the world tourism marketplace, offering an almost inexhaustible pool of experiences [27].

In Europe, unconventional tourist mobility has also been catalysed by policy changes, such as the expansion of the European Union, facilitating the free movement of people, and the expansion of the Schengen Zone, which abolished most border controls, thereby contributing to the reduction of the unpleasantness often associated with border crossings [28]. In a market dominated by planned trips, mostly related to the possibility of taking some time off work, the share of spontaneous impulse trips generated by internet-based marketing communications has also increased [29]. Discount airfares that facilitate even one-day return trips have in many cases led to hyper-fast consumption of a desti-

nation/product/service without necessitating overnight accommodations [30]. Changes in the world of work and learning, especially due to the advance in digital technology, have created opportunities for blurring the boundaries between the private and the official spheres and between leisure and work. The use of second homes as home offices and ‘workations’ (work during vacation) both broaden the conceptual framework of unconventional tourism mobility [31].

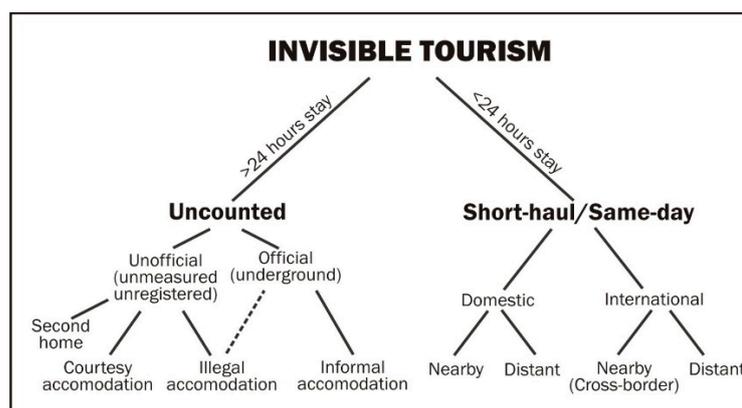
As the issue of spatiality is a primary concern in understanding the characteristics of unconventional tourism mobility, geography and related disciplines have a major responsibility to address our gaps in knowledge. The challenge is two-fold: to strengthen the theoretical background on the one hand and the methodological arsenal on the other. The theoretical framework can be built up through a critical literature review on different issues linked to unconventional tourism mobility, while the methodological framework needs to be improved through an evaluation of the procedures used in previous studies. The primary objective of this paper is to outline the theoretical concept of unconventional tourism mobility by analysing and evaluating the literature on the common set of trends leading to invisible tourism and overtourism. Emphasis is placed on the geographic aspects of mobility and on the methodology, which can support the recognition of invisible tourism.

## 2. Invisible Tourism

Tourism statistics and databases facilitate the systematic monitoring of tourism phenomena and processes [32]. In principle, official statistical data have been collected at border crossings and from lodging establishment records [33,34]. Data from these sources support the UNWTO’s assertion that tourists are people who spend at least one night away from home. In certain countries, border and/or accommodation statistics are complemented by surveys using different methodologies [35,36]. The global tourism statistics published annually by the UNWTO [2], which are representative of international tourism flows and comparable over space and time, are a combination of the above data collection methods. Given the statistical definition of a tourist and typical data source points, tourism statistics are not suitable for monitoring tourism mobility of less than 24 h in duration and travel that does not entail the use of registered accommodation—together termed here ‘invisible tourism’, ‘unconventional tourism’, or ‘hidden tourism’. Statistically, invisible tourism generates tourist flows that affect the socioeconomic, sociocultural and natural environments in the destination [37], even if it is not counted directly. Although no official statistical data are collected on invisible tourism, service providers’ statistics, onsite surveys and estimates (e.g., number of tickets sold, one-day city card sales, and parking receipts) are collected for different purposes [38]. Because the methodologies in data collection differ significantly, it is almost impossible to compare data.

### 2.1. Unobserved Tourism

De Cantis et al. [39] define unobserved tourism as visits where tourists stay in a destination for more than 24 h and spend the night in unofficial establishments or in official establishments but are deliberately not registered by the host (mainly due to tax evasion) (Figure 2). The former is also called unmeasured tourism, the latter underground tourism. Based on their studies in Sicily, De Cantis and Ferrante [11] found that the number of tourists staying on the island is almost the same in official and in unofficial establishments, but they did not attempt to estimate the number of visitors concealed by the managers of official establishments. Unobserved tourism stays of at least one night generate a noticeable turnover in the destination [40]. On the one hand, this translates into increased revenues from the use of non-accommodation tourism services, and, on the other hand, it undermines the principle of sustainability [41]. Parocco et al. [42] point out that both unobserved and short-haul tourism pose serious challenges to data-driven planning.



**Figure 2.** Model of invisible tourism. Source: authors' conceptualization (design: Livia Kaiser).

Within unobserved tourism, a distinction is made between unofficial and official tourism. Unofficial accommodations include second homes for owners' use or for family members, the total or partial letting of owned or rented property to distant relatives or friends on a courtesy basis, and illegal accommodations operated specifically for business purposes but completely hidden from the authorities. One of the characteristics of second homes is that they are usually specifically intended for leisure purposes, whether they are located in prominent or secluded tourist destinations, and thus increase the demand for local or regional tourist services despite their stay not being recorded in any database [43]. The full or partial letting of owned or rented property on a courtesy basis is most often carried out in the context of VFR tourism [44]. In these cases, the owner or tenant offers guests the temporary use of a dedicated space (e.g., guest room) without payment or offers overnight accommodation in other parts of the property without registration (e.g., in the living room, garage, garden tent). A key feature of VFR tourism is that the guest and the host usually spend as much time together as possible, and so a significant proportion of meals are also served in the host's household. Although VFR tourism is not necessarily linked to tourist destinations, the guests often use tourist services as leisure activities, in which hosts also are involved [45]. Some prominent tourist destinations specifically control and sanction the use of properties (including second homes) disguised as VFR tourism. The CouchSurfing movement is an organised form of accommodation by courtesy, a reduced form of home-swapping, where members of an online community stay overnight in each other's homes during their travels, with no statistical reporting obligations on the part of the host [46]. Illegal accommodation—accommodation that is operated without a licence or a declaration of the existence of the accommodation—can occur anywhere in the world, but is more likely to be found in regions where income concealment is an integral part of everyday life [47]. Spending nights outdoors 'under the sky', such as sleeping in tents, sleeping bags, caravans, or cars, should also be considered under the umbrella of non-official accommodation [48].

Official accommodations become part of unobserved tourism when managers conceal from authorities some of their income, mainly for tax evasion purposes [49]. By doing so, they operate informally, either seasonally or for a certain proportion of the actual turnover. For example, they offer their services legally, with official permits (subject to registration), but the recorded bed-nights do not match reality.

A very specific type of informal accommodation is represented by sea- or river cruise ships with several hundred or thousands of passengers on board, which stay parked at least one night in a destination's harbour. These stays are not included in official destination statistics, and cruise passengers are considered day-trippers [50].

Likewise, hotels which once operated legally but have had their licences withdrawn or surrendered, have retained their marketing and/or sales channels, and still receive guests at certain intervals, operate on the conceptual borderline between formal and informal accommodations. This also includes operators who run several different types of

accommodation (hotel-apartment or camping-bungalow/caravan) but conceal the turnover generated in one or the other.

## 2.2. Same-Day Tourism

Travel within 24 h without an overnight stay is part of the broader phenomenon of short-haul tourism [51,52]. Official statistical counts of same-day visitors, or day-trippers, can only be made at border posts, where government controls are enacted and travel documents presented (e.g., passports, visas, vaccination documents) as a condition for entry into the country. Same-day tourism takes place both internationally and domestically, with the length of the journeys (in time and distance) typically being rather short, both subject to a return to the place of origin within 24 h, or more precisely without an overnight stay (Figure 2). The length of the trip and the return journey essentially depend on the means of transport used [53]. Despite the fact that day trips are popularly perceived as trips to areas near one's residence, there are also trips of less than 24 h to destinations hundreds or even thousands of kilometres from the place of origin, thanks to efficient air travel and high-speed rail. Although climatic conditions can influence short-haul tourism, their seasonal effect is somewhat lower, as water-based holidays, which attract large crowds and require long hot summer periods, or ski tourism, which is linked to cold, wet winter weather, are by definition peripheral to day trips.

The archetypes of same-day tourism in international contexts are cross-border shopping tourism, health tourism, VFR tourism and business tourism. Shopping tourists travel to purchase goods and certain repair and maintenance services available on the other side of a national border, motivated by lower prices, better quality, a greater product selection, a more attractive sales environment, the purchase of certain goods not available at the point of origin, and faster, more efficient service [54]. Day-trip international health tourism involves the use of services that are either linked to health insurance or self-financed [55]. Health care providers in Mexican municipalities bordering the US are visited by Americans seeking less-expensive care and Mexican citizens living in the US without adequate health insurance [56]. In Hungary's border region with Austria, day visits by Austrian health tourists are driven by Hungarian dental services, which are both low-cost and high-quality by international standards [57]. In border regions where history has divided families and communities that had lived together for generations, international day visits to relatives are a common travel activity [58]. While business tourism usually assumes a stay of at least one night with premium services, brief visits of less than 24 h to offices or worksites relatively close but in another country are common, especially where good transport links make day-tripping easy [59].

In the case of short-haul, domestic tourism, it would be difficult to highlight archetypal tourism products similar to international ones. However, it can be noted that the most common activities during domestic day trips are visits to natural environments offering a wide variety of recreational activities, visits to iconic sites of cultural and heritage tourism, gastronomic strongholds, sport events, amusement parks, and visits to relatives and friends [60,61]. The distance scale of domestic trips shorter than 24 h depends to a large extent on the size of the country's territory, because the length of a trip within a country's borders is incomparably different in a microstate than it is in a very large country [62,63]. It is also related to the available transport infrastructure. Where domestic flights are available, it is obviously possible to cover a return trip over much greater distances within 24 h than in regions where only land connections are available (although high-speed rail may be an alternative to air transport) [64].

## 3. Geographical Factors and Methodological Challenges

Time and distance are closely connected and are among the most important attributes of tourism mobility; thus, understanding the geographical factors of unconventional tourism is important [65–67]. Tourism entails changing one's environment, seeking experiences, and using services. This supposes, according to traditional understandings,

that tourism-motivated consumption is tied to at least one night away from the place of residence, at a registered lodging service [68]. Although unconventional tourism mobility is not a new phenomenon, there is a need for its statistical recording, scientific examination and more conscious management [69]. The tourism trends of the 21st century contribute, on one hand, to the increased demand for shorter journeys, providing more intensive experiences and, on the other hand, to the horizontal and vertical extension of tourism space [70]. The fact that early-morning and late-night flights have become fashionable means that tourism destinations are accessible within a one-day round trip, evoking the need to re-define tourism in certain situations [23]. If destinations that have previously been almost unknown among international tourists now appear on airline route maps and in marketing campaigns, and within a destination, parts of a city located away from the traditional tourist zones are garnering more tourist attention, then the appearance of new tourism geographies defined by unconventional mobility becomes more evident [71,72]. The increasing desire (generated largely by social media) for life satisfaction through travel (a need once outlined by Maslow), the rapid expansion of transportation in both techniques and technologies, and the rational use of shared accommodation, including second homes and courtesy accommodation, have led to such high numbers of invisible tourists that characteristics of change in consumer behaviour in time and space are almost impossible to examine [73].

The wide range of methodological tools at researchers' disposal can potentially help develop databases that extend over and above simple border-crossing and accommodations statistics. The exploration of, and better acquaintance with, the macro- and micro-changes of unconventional tourism can contribute both to a deeper understanding of certain phenomena, as well as to their effects and management. Representative surveys undertaken from time to time among foreign tourists in a country and among domestic tourists in their own homelands can help refine and triangulate statistical data collected at border crossings and lodging establishments, as they also explore the volume, characteristics and geographical extent of unconventional tourism [74,75]. These surveys are extremely costly and their databases are incomplete, even from the point of view of macro-changes. Surveys dealing with travel of less than 24 h are typically done at a very local or regional level. Thus, they are rarely representative of broader populations and are less comparable, but the results may be adequate to evaluate unknown or hidden factors of tourism consumption in a given destination [76,77]. Research undertaken by a local authority or destination management organisation can provide opportunities to assess the micro-mobility of tourists within the community by having visitors list the sites visited or show them on a map [78]. Even before the spread of digital cameras and smartphones, photo elicitation studies and photograph content analyses enabled researchers to understand tourists' consumer behaviours, especially the extent of their mobility in the destination. For the most part, there were two consistent methods. One was the use of tourists' personal photographs; the other was asking tourists to take pictures using disposable cameras provided by the researcher [79]. Digital photography provided a breakthrough in two main ways. First, film cameras were no longer necessary and the digital images were easier to store and analyse. Secondly, the exact location and time of the photograph could be digitally stamped with the help of GPS coordinates [80]. Digital photographs energized the use of social media and online photo-sharing platforms. Because of this technology, using 'geotags' (certain cartographic algorithms), it became possible to assemble databases to better understand the spatialities of tourism regions [81,82].

Exploring unconventional tourism mobility is possible through regular, countrywide quota sampling surveys among international and domestic tourists, paralleled with the tourism demand of the relevant communities and/or regions at the same time. The costs of such a massive endeavour would likely be returned with a greater understanding of tourism satellite accounts and in the results of efforts to stimulate the economy. However, such surveys would not produce an exact picture of the spatial and temporal characteristics of macro- and micro-sized changes in tourism mobility [83], but they might produce some

level of actionable data. Using mobile cellular data from smartphones might be part of the solution [84]. Cellular transmission towers are located relatively near one another and record mobile phone use within their radius, constantly producing large databases daily [85]. Using big data technology and current analytical tools with programmed algorithms, tourists' mobility, including the locations visited and lengths of stay can be determined. Although the use of mobile phone data to explore unconventional tourism mobilities is still in a nascent phase, it has a great deal of potential for making invisible tourism more visible.

#### 4. Conclusions

A common characteristic of economic and social development is the movement from unconventional to conventional. What was unconventional at one time becomes conventional later through processes of change and normalization. This cycle is also apparent in tourism, although the period of change to conventional from unconventional appears to be getting shorter [86]. In the history of tourism, technical and technological innovations are the most notable milestones that have effected the most change in travel patterns and tourist attitudes. For example, in 1841, Europe's first tour operator, Thomas Cook, started his global enterprise, which continues to operate today, built upon Stephenson's Rocket, an early steam locomotive. In 1958, the first Boeing jet airliner, the 707 model, initiated a breakthrough in intercontinental and transoceanic flights. At the turn of the 21st century, massive advances in information and communications technology pervaded everyday life in the Global North and Global South and ushered in the latest chapter of tourism history. The underlying ethos of tourism—seeking experiences, visiting other environments, and utilizing services, were common in all three periods of history and have remained the essence of tourism.

The unconventional features of tourism discussed in this paper are not new or previously unheard of; overnighting in non-registered accommodations or same-day journeys have long been acknowledged as part of the tourism system, but their volume and diversity have increased as a result of trends endemic to the first decades of the 21st century. As acknowledged earlier, unconventional tourism is defined largely by the non-use of registered lodging and a short length of stay, which does not necessarily fit the UNWTO's official definition of a tourist or tourism. Thus, it may be relegated to the margins of tourism by national or supranational authorities because of its 'invisibility' and position outside the normative scope of statistically measurable tourism.

Our attempt to introduce the concept of unconventional or invisible tourism mobility aims to advance the following: (1) to produce a succinct and simple conceptual umbrella to discuss the unobservable (and unmeasurable) mobilities and same-day tourism; (2) to extend and differentiate the scope of these phenomena; (3) to explore the potential for more systematically analysing these hidden manifestations of tourism in the face of a 'data desert'. Geography plays an important role in the conceptualization of unconventional tourism mobility, particularly as regards place, distance, and temporality, yet the spatial and chronological features of unconventional tourism have so far received little academic attention. Geographers have a special responsibility to explore patterns of horizontal and vertical mobility, as well as the length of stay associated with them. Scholars should not be content with the limited information and data available. Rather, new and creative methods need to be developed to create databases that can help researchers better understand otherwise 'unmeasurable' manifestations of tourism. Digital photographs, including those posted by internet users, are a potentially lucrative source of data, especially because they are digitally stamped with GPS coordinates. Likewise, mobile and cellular data generated by smartphones might be alternative sources of tourism statistics, especially in light of the scarcity of data otherwise. Studying unconventional and invisible tourism mobilities serves to create a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of new turns in 21st-century tourism and contributes to the development of data-driven tourism management. It also creates a more holistic view of tourism in its broadest sense, rather than what is normally

measured and accounted for, and has the potential to support the concept of sustainable development as communities and industry leaders begin to recognize the potential socio-economic and sociocultural contributions of alternative tourisms that traditionally have been unaccounted and overlooked.

The perspectives on forgotten tourism or unconventional tourism at the centre of this article have inspired previous research. Representatives from many disciplines have recognized the research potential on the topic, including management, urban studies, landscape architecture, statistics, and environmental science, yet it remains tangential to the thrust of mainstream tourism research. Our hope is that the concept of unconventional tourism will become more accepted among researchers, with the potential to generate additional international research. The most important task for the future is to develop, in cooperation with statistics offices and tourism management representatives (governmental decision makers), a comprehensive monitoring system that will be more inclusive in providing credible, comparable and regular data on the real and more holistic processes of tourism.

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