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## How big data could help London beat over-tourism

By [Matt Hill](#)



Tourists enjoying Buckingham Palace. Image: Getty.

London has always been vying for the top spot of the global tourism charts. In 2016, the city's visitor numbers first hit record levels, at 19.1 million overseas arrivals, and projections suggest that number will have increased by 30 per cent by 2025.

The benefits to the city of this booming tourism market are clear: as well as strengthening the capital's global reputation as open

and welcoming, international tourism contributes £13bn annually to the economy and supports 309,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

As tourists continue to arrive in droves, however, the question of how to sustainably manage the influx – and make sure that the city continues to reap the rewards of its global popularity – will become more pressing.

London isn't quite on a par yet with the Netherlands, where the country's tourist board recently announced that it would effectively stop promoting Amsterdam as a destination for international travellers in order to ward off the ill-effects of over-tourism in the city. But, looking at that 30 per cent projected increase to the UK, there may be a need to begin future proofing against the same problem.

What if, rather than redirecting tourists away from the city centre when they arrive, authorities employed methods in advance: making tourists aware of the diverse neighbourhoods to explore and cultural experiences to seek out, right across London, which would influence their decisions on where to stay and visit before they even get here?

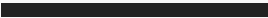
London First has just published the first ever borough-by-borough analysis of the impact of international visitor spending and accommodation in London. Anonymised and aggregated data provided by Airbnb and Mastercard has allowed us to see clearly who is visiting: where they're staying, shopping, eating, drinking; when they're doing it, and why. We can see trends in the behaviours of different nationalities – tourists from China, for example, like to stick in the West End, while German and Italian visitors are keener to explore markets and restaurants outside the centre.

Speaking of the West End, a huge amount of spending (unsurprisingly) goes on in London's tourism core. But there's also a substantial amount being spent by tourists across the rest of the city: a 'halo' of 19 boroughs, roughly covering travel zones 2-3, accounts for £2.8bn of spending, supporting more than 60,000 jobs. The data showed that growing tourism by just 10 per cent annually in this area would add £250m pounds to the economy and over six thousand jobs.

The economic benefits of encouraging more visitor spending in outer city neighbourhoods and far-flung districts is clear. But what's also made obvious by the report is the potential for authorities to leverage this sort of data to sustainably grow tourism while safeguarding their cities against its negative effects, now and in the future. With a clearer picture of where, why and when international tourists are visiting, authorities can adapt their promotion, investment and national tourism policy levers, marketing individual areas to international visitors potentially before they even arrive.

Our research, while only a first step, shows that innovative data partnerships of the kind that produced these results are worth doing – and have potential to be adopted not just at a national level in the UK but by cities globally. Facilitating data exchange between public and private partners is not always easy but could be a critical tool for London, and any other tourist destinations looking to avoid inclusion on the growing list of European cities who are scrambling too late to protect their city centres, residents and small business owners against the double-edged sword of “too much tourism”. A three-pronged approach of data exchange, innovative analytics and digital transformation must be leveraged, to help cities better manage their growth challenges, improve efficiency and support economic development.

*Matt Hill is programme director at London First.*



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# People hate flight shame – but they won't stop flying

By [Roger Tyers](#)



Plane goes bye bye. Image: Getty.

Despite flying being [the single fastest](#) way to grow our individual carbon footprint, people still want to fly. Passenger numbers even [grew by 3.3 per cent globally](#) last year alone. The hype around “[Flygskam](#)” – a global movement championed by climate activist Greta Thunberg that encourages people to stop travelling by plane – seems to have attracted [more media attention](#) than actual followers.

A [2019 survey](#) found that although people in the UK were increasingly concerned about aviation emissions – they were also more reluctant to fly less. This might reflect how flying has become normalised in society, aided by ticket prices which are [on average 61 per cent cheaper](#) in real terms than in 1998. I’m

increasingly asked by peers about how they can fly “sustainably”, the “greenest” airlines, or the “best” [carbon offsets](#) to buy. People want to avoid flight shame, without avoiding flights.

The industry has reacted quickly. Websites like Skyscanner, used to compare flight options between destinations, now show customers a “greener choice” – displaying how much less CO<sub>2</sub> a certain flight emits, compared to the average for that route. These [green choices are determined](#) to be flights that use more direct routes, airlines that have newer aircraft, or can carry more passengers.

While [there are cases](#) where two airlines operating the same route can produce very different emissions, on short-haul routes, emissions differences are invariably small – usually less than 10 per cent. The greenest option would be to travel by train, which has as much as [90 per cent fewer emissions](#) than equivalent flights. However, Skyscanner [stopped showing passengers](#) train options in 2019.

Meanwhile, popular budget airline Ryanair – whose CEO only recently admitted [climate change isn't a hoax](#) – now claims to have the [greenest fleet of air planes](#) in Europe. The company's modern, fuel efficient planes – alongside its ability to fill them with passengers – does make it the “greenest” air travel option out there. However, Ryanair had a total of 450 planes in operation in 2019 (compared to [only 250 in 2010](#)) – meaning that despite its fuel-efficient planes, the sheer quantity of fuel they burn is why they were named one of Europe's [top ten polluting companies](#) in 2019.

Last year also saw [carbon offset schemes](#) become popular. These schemes allow passengers to pay extra so their airline can invest



in environmental projects on their behalf – thereby making a flight theoretically “carbon-neutral”. British Airways now offsets all of its customers’ [domestic UK flights](#), while Ryanair also has a scheme allowing passengers to buy offsets for their flights, with proceeds going to projects including a whale protection scheme – which appears completely unconnected to [reducing carbon](#) at all.

Easyjet has also started buying offsets on behalf of all its passengers – costing a total of [£25m](#) a year. This has apparently been a successful [PR move](#), with internal research finding that passengers who were aware of the offsetting policy were more satisfied with their flight than customers who didn’t know.

Passengers might feel satisfied, but whether their offsets actually reduce carbon is less clear. [Critics question](#) the time-lag associated with offsets, especially tree-planting schemes. A plane that flies today pollutes today – but a tree planted today [won’t remove carbon for years](#). As for “avoided deforestation” [projects](#), which aim to protect existing trees, proving these trees [wouldn’t have survived](#) without offset funding is almost impossible.

Airlines often claim that their offsets [save high levels of carbon](#), at a conveniently low price. For example, Easyjet only invests £3 per tonne of carbon it emits in a carbon offset scheme. But such a low-ball investment might not even be able to give these carbon offset schemes the finances needed to actually offset the effects of one tonne of carbon. For context, the EU Emissions Trading Scheme currently [trades carbon at £21 a tonne](#), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change thinks carbon should be traded at a [minimum of £105 a tonne](#). Newer, and more expensive [offset models](#) – which extract carbon directly from the air look promising – but are hard to scale up.

The other danger of these cheap offsets is that travellers might believe they solve the problems caused by flying – so they won't change their travel behaviour. Indeed, [one government minister](#) even argues that there's no need for people to fly less, because low-carbon and electric flights are around the corner. Despite reports that [solar or battery-powered](#) planes are coming to the rescue, current plane technology is going nowhere fast.

This is partly because jet fuel on international flights [isn't taxed](#), which leaves little financial incentive for the industry to invest in big technological shifts. Aircraft manufacturers Boeing even predicts it will [produce 44,000 planes by 2038](#) to accommodate the [8 billion passengers](#) flying each year by then. Those planes will look, sound and pollute much like today's ones.

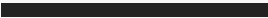
Aviation is currently forecast to account for [almost a quarter](#) of global emissions, and be the UK's [most polluting sector](#) in 2050. And if the government's recent bail-out of [failing airline Flybe](#) is anything to go by, aviation will continue to be let off the hook.

Carbon offsets and “greener” tweaks might only help to further rationalise the status quo, and prevent tougher policies from coming into play – such as [taxing frequent flyers](#), or stopping airport expansions. But as [climate-related natural disasters](#) become more common, radically changing our attitude to flying will soon be unavoidable.

*[Roger Tyers](#), Research Fellow in Environmental Sociology, [University of Southampton](#).*

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