Tourism in cities has a well-established history of contributing to urban development, and it is anticipated that this trend of growth will persist in the future (Postma, Buda, & Gugerell, 2017; Spirou, 2011; Timur & Getz, 2009). Yet, in our rapidly changing and unstable world, conventional approaches to city exploration are undergoing simultaneous transformation, giving rise to novel perspectives on understanding, encountering and interacting with tourism cities (Li, Nguyen, & Coca-Stefaniak, 2021). Post-pandemic, however, scholars have emphasised the importance of not reverting to standard practices; rather, they urged for a shift toward transforming the global tourism system to better align with the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Furthermore, there is a growing consensus among scholars, policymakers and industry experts regarding the necessity of enhancing the coordination between tourism and broader urban planning. This alignment aims to address the challenges of overtourism and facilitate the establishment of a sustainable tourism sector capable of adapting to uncertainty and crises effectively (Koens et al., 2022). We need to critically assess existing practices and explore alternative, yet forward-looking solutions that benefit tourists, local communities and the destinations where tourism occurs. Crucially, the well-being of residents, tourists and environment is closely tied to the trajectory of urban development, as tourism significantly contributes to the overall quality of life in tourism cities and aligns with the principles outlined in the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs. A key concern is therefore how tourism is managed in cities and how tourists engage with urban spaces, all with the aim of creating positive impacts on those tourism cities (Qiu Zhang et al., 2017).

The central theme of this special issue, titled “Rethinking Tourism in Cities – Alternative Spaces and Responsible Practices”, revolves around our dedication to rethinking tourism and exploring alternative approaches to the consumption and production of tourism cities. The concept of alternative tourism is not new, however. It originated from a countercultural resistance to modern mass consumerism and a concern for the effects it has on fragile host communities (Cohen, 1987). Essentially, it encompasses various facets of tourism aligned with ecological, societal and community values, with interpretations ranging from tourist products to solutions, planning and strategies for tourism development (Lanfant & Graburn, 1992). To address something as “alternative” inevitably assumes distinctiveness in comparison to something else, or a certain level of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs while showing openness to different approaches (Fisker et al., 2018). What we aim to do here is to analyse tourism in cities through the initiatives undertaken to create and harness their potential while envisioning alternative ways in the collaborative production of urban spaces. We are, however, aware of and sensitive to distinctions, diversity and uncertainty, while simultaneously recognising the diverse wholes that arise from the complexities of our worlds. To this end, we approach the concept of “alternative
space” openly, seeing it not only as something different from the mainstream or conventional but also as spaces that generate valuable knowledge through the interactions occurring within them.

With this special issue, we wish to celebrate the innovative, unconventional and responsible practices that are reshaping the urban tourism landscape as well as the diverse approaches to exploring tourism in cities. The theme draws inspiration from and addresses the “Rethinking Tourism” theme of World Tourism Day 2022, which was prompted by the Coronavirus pandemic. It subsequently triggered conversations, initiatives and efforts directed at enhancing the tourism industry’s responsibility and adaptability to changing global conditions, with a particular focus on the post-pandemic period and broader post-crisis scenarios. The special issue has joined these efforts in critical rethinking of urban tourism, particularly in cities where tourism plays a significant role. To this end, it focuses on identifying and highlighting alternative spaces within cities that may not traditionally be considered tourist destinations but hold the potential for meaningful, even transformative, experiences. It also seeks to explore and promote responsible practices that benefit not only tourists but also the local communities and the environment. In the following sections, we summarise the contributions within this special issue, spanning some of the world’s well-known cities such as Toronto, Coimbra and Shimla, and lesser-known cities, such as Maribor and Mostar; even the abandoned places such as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone; the authors twist the tourist-resident roles, make efforts to reveal the unseen and even encourage crowding in certain tourism places.

**Embodied and creative interactions with(in) alternative spaces**

Several studies in our special issue underscore the growing interest in alternative urban tourism experiences and practices that enable meaningful encounters through storytelling, imaginative narratives and deep immersion into the place, its communities or narratives, all contributing to social sustainability. By way of example, Veera Ojala, in the article “Chernobyl dreams: investigating visitors’ storytelling in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone” discusses the visitors’ documentation of the site’s narratives. In conceptualising the Zone as a storyscape and its narratives as intangible heritage, the author explores the visitors’ engagement with these resources and the resulting articulations from the engagements as translated into verbal and visual storytelling. Thus, the visitors play a significant role in bringing Chernobyl’s unique landscape and heritage into the public eye and contributing to the co-creation of its heritage. This study is a valuable addition to the urban tourism literature by shifting the emphasis toward understanding how tourist destinations are created through the interplay of various imaginative elements. In this process, tourists actively contribute to the formation of the social and cultural imagery associated with the tourist site through the stories they share. This research is useful in deepening our understanding of how these narrative spaces may convey deeper insights, both perpetuating and questioning established social norms and conventions.

Jada Lindblom and Christine Vogt take us to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In their article “Playing tourist” in a divided city, they explore the social and affective impacts of city exploration by inviting residents to “play tourist” for a day. Their study makes an interesting shift from a “like-a-local” approach to embracing a “like-a-tourist” perspective in residents’ explorations of their own city. This study suggests the potential of local tourism-like experiences to offer engaging and enjoyable opportunities even in one’s own familiar surroundings. The authors highlight the intricacies of interpretation when someone acts simultaneously as a resident and a tourist, merging their personal knowledge and experiences with the presumed objectivity and information-consuming aspect of being a visitor. While some participants engaged in what might be seen as unconventional behaviour by crossing traditional boundaries, this was often driven by pro-social motives. These individuals often sought a sense of shared humanity or personal connection, even when exploring places that might be seen as culturally distinct. The findings of this research
suggest that adopting a like-a-tourist approach to exploring one’s own city can foster a greater appreciation for the diverse neighbourhoods and cultures that constitute its social fabric. Furthermore, there is an indication that residents’ recognition of their city’s uniqueness is linked to a heightened sense of local pride. For certain individuals, this experience acted as a reminder of the familiar attractions and resources within the city and its surroundings, which are often taken for granted in everyday life.

The article by Kelley A. McClinchey, “Street art and creative place-making: urban tourism regeneration in Toronto, Canada” aims to discuss the place-making processes within the urban context. They suggest that exploring alternative tourism forms in Toronto has the potential to enhance economic resilience and rejuvenation, with potential benefits for urban social sustainability. This new urban tourism trend caters to tourists seeking curated experiences that revolve around the everyday lives of local residents. Public art therefore serves as a means to satisfy both residents’ and tourists’ desires for authentic urban experiences, creative environments and a sense of community connection. The authors specifically focus on the way in which street art contributes to place-making and the potential for urban tourism to trigger regeneration. In a broader context, street art plays a significant role in fostering creative place-making and advancing the concept of new urban tourism. One of the appealing aspects of street art as an unconventional urban tourism form is its alignment with community place-making, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to the place. As the author suggests, it also showcases a more “gritty, edgy form of creativity”, characterised by distinct elements of ethnic, racial and gender diversity and inclusiveness.

Tourism interventions as responsible practices

Tourism interventions in urban destinations refer to deliberate actions, strategies or initiatives implemented by various stakeholders to enhance or manage tourism and its impact in cities (Bramwell, 2012). These interventions often aim to address specific challenges, foster sustainability or create positive outcomes. For example, Pinaz Tiwari and Nimit Chowdhary situate their study in the Indian context, to explore “What makes Indian domestic tourists crowd-friendly in the post-COVID-19 phase?”. Through the lens of social motivation theory, they examine the crowding effect among Indian domestic tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic. While crowding is typically associated with negative impacts on a destination due to an excessive and unsustainable influx of visitors to a certain area, this study was concerned with the positive effects of crowding in a state of crisis. The authors argue that understanding the altered tourists’ psychology towards the crowd and their travel behaviour are crucial factors for a successful recovery from crises. The presence of people at a destination adds value to the tourists’ experience and highlights the transformation in their behaviour and psyche. This understanding can inform strategies for post-crisis recovery by making more efficient use of crowded spaces, thus mitigating the negative impacts of overcrowding.

In framing genealogy tourism as an alternative form of cultural tourism, Norberto Santos, Claudete Oliveira Moreira and Luis Silveira draw our attention to the “unseen” tourism potentials in their contribution titled “Genealogy tourism and city tourism in Coimbra. Proposal for a Jewish culture route.” The authors explain that the places associated with the history of Coimbra’s Jewish community remain mainly unnoticed by both residents and tourists. They point out that their quantity, diversity and authenticity bear witness to the Jewish presence in Coimbra, and are sufficient assets to create a tourist route based on these resources. They, however, are not officially designated as tourist attractions; instead, they remain unexplored fragments of untold stories. They often lack official recognition, making some of them inaccessible and devoid of historical context. Since the Council of Europe officially endorsed the European Route of Jewish Heritage in 2005, the authors saw this as an opportunity to establish the Jewish cultural trail in Coimbra’s historic centre, highlighting local Jewish events, such as conferences, exhibitions and educational programmes. This intervention could serve as an alternative means to disperse the
concentration of tourists from main tourist hotspots while alleviating overtourism issues and enriching the tourist experience of less-explored areas, including those associated with the Sephardic Jews of Coimbra who settled in these areas during the Middle Ages.

In the article “AR and VR-based travel: a responsible practice towards sustainable tourism”, Kaushik Samaddar and Sanjana Mondal focus on the impact of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology on cultural tourism in emerging economies, specifically India and Bangladesh. The article aimed to investigate the behavioural intention of adopting AR-and VR-based tourism products that showcase a destination’s cultural attributes and demonstrate how technology-driven tourism products can promote sustainable development in a post-pandemic tourism market. The study also validated the potential of using AR and VR tourism products to promote responsible behaviour among tourists. The authors argue that cultural tourism not only fosters greater cross-cultural engagement and understanding, but also empowers local communities through supporting the preservation of local arts, crafts, culture and traditions, empowers host communities. Consequently, it reinforces their cultural values, while also being recognised as a significant economic catalyst. A stronger connection to the cultural aspects of a destination through AR and VR may therefore lead to increased engagement, thus contributing to greater economic benefits for the region and facilitating business growth and higher revenues.

“Framing the tourist spatial identity of a city as a tourist product” by Melita Rozman Cafuta offers a methodology for shaping a city’s tourist spatial identity and leveraging it to uncover alternative urban outdoor spaces. With restrictions on indoor interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, open urban areas like streets, squares and parks have gained importance as “safe” tourism spaces. This intervention is therefore particularly relevant for post-pandemic tourism, as it encourages the use of open spaces and supports the development of alternative tourist sites. The proposed methodology served to unlock the potential of existing and prospective micro-destinations within cities. It not only facilitates an analysis of the current state but also aids in the identification of alternative outdoor urban spaces that can be developed to attract both short-term tourists and the local population, a new target demographic. Ultimately, this approach aids in identifying outdoor tourist sites that are memorable, welcoming and versatile, and can be recommended by city guides and incorporated into walking routes.

The article “Tourist walkability and sustainable community-based tourism: conceptual framework and strategic model” authored by Peik-Foong Yeap and Melissa Li Sa Liow offers another intervention to combat overtourism in tourism cities. The notion of walkability has gained global attention as cities strive to become more pedestrian-friendly and seamlessly integrated with public transportation systems. Walkability hinges on a variety of factors, with Southworth (2005) defining a place as walkable when its built environment promotes and enhances walking by ensuring pedestrian safety and comfort, efficiently connecting people to diverse destinations within a manageable time and effort frame and providing visual interest along the way. In the context of tourist walkability, this concept extends a destination’s carrying capacity while minimally impacting residents’ quality of life and liveability, as well as tourists’ experiences. The issue of overtourism, which this paper addresses through the concept of tourist walkability, plays a pivotal role in working towards sustainable tourism objectives that balance the rights of residents with the right to travel. The authors suggest that tourism authorities and policymakers should implement tourism initiatives that incorporate pedestrian activities while effectively managing the physical environment and social interactions between tourists and residents.

New urban realities

The special issue aimed to provide new perspectives on tourism cities by inviting the authors to discuss unconventional tourism spaces and practices. We highlighted those places within cities that are often overlooked by tourists, such as lesser-known neighbourhoods, cultural sites or initiatives like street art, community projects or local events. While promoting responsible practices, tourism empowers local communities,
helping them benefit from tourism while preserving their cultural and natural assets. To this end, the first theme illustrated the potentials of meaningful encounters in urban tourism, from the narratives of Chernobyl to the rejuvenation of Mostar and the creative regeneration of Toronto’s streets. Within the second theme, the authors discussed various interventions to nudge responsible practices, such as crowd-friendly tourism behaviour or technology-driven cultural tourism. They are aimed at addressing specific challenges contributing to sustainability while creating positive and meaningful impacts. The ideas and practices discussed in the special issue may serve as examples of alternative ways of tourism development and responsible growth of tourism cities.

While exploring existing yet potentially messy alternative urban spaces and practices, our special issue primarily emphasised current possibilities, recognising them as the catalysts for substantial transformations that could lead to markedly different urban futures. This approach does not reject the utopian perspectives; rather, it directs our attention to extracting present potential from the existing urban realities. We consistently question whether a broader transformative potential exists within these alternatives, rather than simply celebrating them for their distinctiveness. While we do possess a utopian sense of what alternative urban futures might entail, our primary focus here was on the critical examination of contemporary urban realities, which will eventually serve as the foundation for those future ideas to be realised.

References


