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Europe and Island Tourism

This is part of our special feature on **Tourism: People, Places & Mobilities.**

In the wake of the Greek "financial crisis," some observers were surprised to note that the Greek islands, with their less-developed economic fabric, weathered the storm much better than their urban counterparts (Psycharis et al., 2014). The explanation probably lies in the islanders' smart ongoing connection to family and land, leading to social safety nets and the generation of side activities – olives and olive oil, vegetables and fruit, wine and other spirits – which explains the manifest resilience of the islanders. Such embedded security would elude the throngs of the displaced unemployed in the urban centers of Athens/Piraeus and Thessaloniki. But there is also the rootedness of the vibrant tourism industry and its ability to satisfy visitors by exposing them to intimate experiences afforded by close encounters to Greek food, drink, and traditional customs on the islands.

Europe is the world's most mature tourism market; and European islands are some of its specific locations that are most seriously exposed to "golden hordes" that have been travelling to such places for decades (Turner and Ash, 1975): initially as part of European grand tours reserved to the intellectual elites; and more recently on low cost budget airlines and cruise ships.

Some of the essentials of island tourism are self-evident and obvious to any traveler: island destinations can only be reached, and departed, following a journey over water. The watery expanse traversed, usually by ship/ferry or by airplane, is inevitable: some would see this as an essential component of the island tourism experience, a cathartic exercise where the geographical transition already starts to cleanse the traveler from the stress and burdens of home (King, 1993; Baum et al., 1997).

Secondly, tourists arriving to or leaving from islands are more easily monitored, and statistics more easily maintained. The ferry and cruise ship terminal and the airport become the choke points for tourism traffic, and are the sites for any border controls, especially if the island is an internationally distinct jurisdiction. Sea and airports are typically located near or around the capital city, itself typically the major port city, and hence island tourism unwittingly promotes the urbanization of island settlements (to the chagrin of outlying population centers who are chafed at missing out on the economic benefits of tourism) (Baldacchino, 2013; Baldacchino & Ferreira, 2013).

Thirdly, islands may develop specific cultural traits that mirror those of evolutionary biology and which lead to endemism and distinct native species. Flora, fauna, and distinct cultural traits – such as language, diet, dress, dance, and other customs – evolve idiosyncratically on island spaces and may offer a welcoming contrast to contiguous mainland fare, even where such mainlands are relatively close (no wonder that such island-based identities often foment island nationalism, which can in turn find eventual expression in political sovereignty.) This exoticization of island spaces is a boon to an island tourism industry which can thus depart from the all too easy but placeless "sun sea and sand" and its anodyne allure (Apostoulopoulos and Gayle, 2002).

Fourthly, and on the negative side, small islands can become tourism destinations all too easily and rapidly. There are many "small island tourist economies," which are dependent on high annual visitation figures, and which are often many multiples of the figures for the resident populations. The tourism density challenges the infrastructure, threatens the sustainability of natural resources, and poses threats to the very quality of the tourism experience. Beaches are packed, waste piles up, traffic heads to gridlock, local biota are threatened with extirpation, and tensions arise if and when locals feel that they are being short-changed (Doxey, 1975; McElroy, 2006; McElroy and De Albuquerque, 1998).

The geographical and political status of each island contours and massages the outcomes of these impacts. Islands that are connected to mainlands – via, bridges, tunnels, causeways – may lose their "island effect" and become *de facto* peninsulae; they are already physically close to land, hence the fixed link. For the other island units, *ceteris paribus*, the closer the island is to its contiguous mainland, the larger looms the scale and impact of tourism. Meanwhile, the greater the degree of political autonomy enjoyed by an island, the more likely that it can take customized decisions and can adopt such policies that speak to its own tourism strategy and vision. This explains the inclusion of the four summative and factual statistical tables that follow below (Pleijel and Baldacchino, 2014). The tables permit a quick overview of the number of islands located within each geographical cluster, but also organized by

level of political autonomy (or governance capacity). The latter is important since it serves as an indicator of how capable any island is at addressing development challenges *locally*: the greater the level of the island's political autonomy, the greater the likelihood that the disposition to identify and address problems lies at home (rather than in some mainland town or city across the water). Thus, in particular to island tourism, islands with greater powers of jurisdiction are likely to have a greater international or regional visibility as destinations, can take specific measures to market and brand themselves as tourism locales, and can address industry specific challenges – say, environmental degradation or coastal use conflict – as they may arise.

We now turn to discuss the notion of island tourism within the specific context of Europe, although this noun also calls for its own definitional reflections and associated angst.

European Islands beyond Europe

The notion of "Europe" is itself fraught with difficulty. The only reason Europe is a continent is because the definition of a continent was established by Europeans (Lewis and Wigen, 1997). Otherwise, as a Eurasian peninsula, Europe's claims to continental status would have been objectively similar to, say, India, or South East Asia. Jurisdictionally, similar challenges arise: within the European Union (EU) and its (current 28) member states, there are various territories that are not geographically part of Europe but are nevertheless integrated with or within the EU, a number of them being effectively part of Europe: with fully-fledged European citizens, wielding European passports, and using the euro as their currency. It is no coincidence that all these territories (bar two) are islands: even so, one exception, French Guiana, is an island of sorts, being cut off by rivers on all landward sides from the rest of the South American continent. While the other exception, Gibraltar, perched at the end of the Iberian peninsula and Spain (which maintains an active claim to the UK territory), is more enisled politically than various other island units.

These territories come in two political clusters: first, the Outermost Regions (OMRs) of the EU, as much part of the EU as Paris or Frankfurt, and consisting of territories that form part of the mainland states of France (Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion, Saint Martin and most recently Mayotte), Spain (Canaries) and Portugal (Azores, Madeira). Second, the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs), which remain affiliated to their metropolitan countries but are NOT part of the EU. These include six Dutch islands (actually five and a half) – Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, St Eustatius and Saba; Greenland and the Faroe islands (within the Kingdom of Denmark), the French overseas territories of New Caledonia, the Scattered Islands of the Indian Ocean, Wallis and Futuna, St Pierre et Miquelon, St Barthélemy [or St Barth] and French Polynesia; and the United Kingdom Overseas Territories, all of which (bar one) are islands: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Montserrat, Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, Falklands, South Georgia and South Sandwich, British Indian Ocean Territory, Pitcairn, St Helena and its associated islands, plus the non-island Gibraltar. St Barth switched from OMR to OCT; while Mayotte switched from OCT to OMR.

With this set-up, and political niceties aside, Europe has a presence and foothold in every ocean on the planet, even though there is a clear concentration of territories in the Caribbean specifically and in the tropical regions generally. Hints of tropical paradise and delight continue to taunt millions of tourists to the shores of these small sub-national locales; the metropolitan affiliation typically means that nationals from their patron state are likely to visit in droves, their minds at rest that, in the main, they can still speak the same home language, use the same home currency, and enjoy the same home cuisine and customs in their tourist destination.

Martinique is French to the bone, and yet it lies in the Caribbean, between the sovereign island states of St Lucia and Dominica. It was incorporated into the French Republic in 1946, and its inhabitants have since lived this surreal existence of being French and European, with continental levels of remuneration and consumption; and yet mainly of African descent and with chronically high levels of unemployment, supported by generous social welfare benefits. The economy fits neatly into the MIRAGE model: the country survives thanks to transfers: remittances (R) that are a direct consequence of migration (MI), mainly to mainland France; and official aid (A)

disbursement from the French state, and which supports extensive government employment (GE). I could feel and see this situation during my visit there. With the economy operating at French European standards of living, many operations are uncompetitive cost wise. Hence the island attracts relatively few tourists, and most of these (over 80 percent) are well heeled French. The overall feeling is one of lack of entrepreneurship, a strong role of the state in the economy, and a society that is locked in a dependent relationship which has raised standards of living beyond all comparison with its Caribbean context. The GDP/per capita is a healthy US $14,500. Yet, the agricultural sector is stagnant; and the 'sugar island' must import sugar. 70 percent of all employees in the formal economy are civil servants.

The North Atlantic

Closer to continental Europe proper, the youngest and least developed tourism market is that of the North Atlantic. The main reason is climate: the allure of 'cold water' island tourism is a recent development. No sun, sand and sea here – but tradition, indigeneity, isolation and ice/snow is turning into a winning appeal for the strong-hearted looking for land based adventure and exhilaration (Baldacchino, 2006). Tourism in Iceland has boomed, and strong numbers have been wandering along the nature reserves of the Lofoten islands; watching polar bears on Svalbard; trekking the Cuillin mountains in Skye; visiting the clifftop fort of Dún Aonghasa on Inishmore; musing over prehistoric standing stones in Orkney; doing the whisky trail on Islay; participating in the Oerol festival on Terschelling or the book festival on Ouessant; and bird watching on Shetland. Indeed, the first 'cold water' island tourism paper is probably that by Richard Butler about Shetland, an experience he writes about thanks to his interest in bird watching (Butler, 1996).

Here, we are dealing with very low numbers of visitors, turning up mainly in a short tourism summer season, but who tend to be environmentally and culturally friendly and savvy. Repeat visitations are common, bed & breakfasts are more common than hotels, and the rental of second homes is popular. Tourism here aligns nicely with notions of sustainability. Climate is a challenge; but in this context rain, cold, strong wind and/or sleet are to be expected and are not bound to dampen tourist moods. Islands here tend to be larger, more remote and fewer in number, with rather low population densities. The European countries most engaged in island tourism are the British Isles, along with Western France, Norway's long western and northern coastal fringe and the Netherlands, along with Iceland, the world's only cold water sovereign island state. For a glimpse into the geographical and jurisdictional spread of the 252 North Atlantic islands, see Table 1:

Table 1

North Atlantic		Political dimension				
		Local community – no jurisdiction	Municipality	Region, State or Province	Country	
Geographical dimension	Overseas	0	0	0	1	
	High seas	38	26	10	0	
	Coastal	118	30	1	0	
	Bridged	21	6	1	0	
		177	62	12	1	

Iceland is the only member of the 'overseas' category in the tables that accompany this paper. The country, independent since 1944, has done very well in spite, or because, of its peripheral location and definitely non-tropical climate: the wind is cold and the temperature hovers typically between -5^0 and $+15^0$ Celsius all the year round. The country has positioned itself as a transit stop for trans-Atlantic flights,

but has also become a popular stand-alone tourist destination on its own right. The island straddles the continental shelf and offers a stark, lava-sculpted landscape that draws visitors interested in hiking, bird watching, and witnessing its awesome natural features: glaciers and accompanying volcanoes and rivers, geysers, hot springs and saunas, the Northern Lights, whales in the surrounding seas. After a tiring day of travel, the urban hub of Reykjavik – which runs on naturally available geothermal power – offers something for all tastes, ranging from rave parties for the young to the Symphony Orchestra in the Concert Hall. Reykjavik is the only capital in the world where you can fish (in the Ellidaar river) and catch fresh salmon. Iceland also boasts some fine cuisine, including its pure water, excellent beers and an impressive range of seafood, the country's major export industry. It was the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010, which led to thousands of flight cancellations that drew attention to this Nordic nation. Some 2.3 million tourists will visit Iceland in 2017: this would be five times as many as in 2010, and causing what many would describe as serious environmental strain.

The Baltic

Somewhat similar climatic experiences can be expected in the Baltic Sea, which lies at similar latitudes. But this is practically an enclosed aquatic space, with limited "high seas," meaning nature can be harsh but less so than in wide, oceanic spaces. Average purchasing power in the countries bordering the Baltic is also higher than those on the North Atlantic fringe, which causes the quality of tourism to be different and more affluent: for example, the purchase of second homes is common. The nature of islands in the Baltic is also different: smaller on average, closer to each other, and also closer to the mainland, making them more accessible and thus more suitable for frequent and repeat visitation. Indeed, the Baltic is the location of the world's densest archipelago, stretching from Åland to Turku. There are 1,589 populated islands in the Baltic Sea (and many other unpopulated ones), organized geographically and politically as follows (see Table 2).

Table 2

Baltic		Political dimension			
		Local community – no jurisdiction	Municipality	Region, State or Province	Country
Geographical dimension	Overseas	0	0	0	0
	High seas	49	10	3	0
	Coastal	1,135	25	4	0
	Bridged	343	17	3	0
		1,527	52	10	0

Kökar is the easternmost of the islands that make up the archipelago of the autonomy of Åland, which straddles the narrowest part of the Baltic Sea, between Stockholm, Sweden and Turku, Finland. The rocky islands are home to some 250 hardy folk who survive by exploiting the ups and downs of seasonal tourism: the short summer – typically, six weeks – brings in yachts and pleasure craft from the affluent neighbourhoods, a few summer residents from 'mainland' Åland, and some backpacking tourism, who collectively boost the local economy. For the rest of the year, the place is quiet and the rhythm of life is slow. A salmon fish farm which used to operate here has now closed down. The land is made of granite and the soils are shallow, clayey and poor; there is not enough arable land to support any extensive agricultural activity. There is an extensive, non-cash, informal economy, where people make their own home renovations, forage for wood to serve as fuel to heat their homes during the cold season, and occasionally catch their own fish, shoot elk and deer, and grow some vegetables, thus saving on hiring labor or paying cash for food

and services. The municipality is the largest employer on Kökar, and it staunchly protects 'make work' projects. There is one convenience store, one school, one artist-in-residence facility. There is no police presence. The one critical marker of time discipline applies just for those planning to depart the island: the ferry schedule. Travel to the Åland mainland depends on a single ferry service and the trip takes 2.5 hours each way. Kökar is hardly a tourism destination, but its rustic authenticity is its main attraction: it does well with its 2,500 summer residents and some 30,000 annual visitors (Baldacchino and Pleijel, 2010).

Last but not least, we visit the Mediterranean, Europe's largest sea. The region is home to some 120 million persons, with some 200 million annual visitors, mainly but not exclusively during the summer period. The number of islands here is similar to the North Atlantic; but the climate conditions are very different. The Mediterranean is also home to Europe's eight largest islands (excluding Iceland and the British Isles). These are all larger than 1,000 km^2 and are not sovereign states in their own right. The largest of these is Sicily (the world's most bridgeable island, and Europe's largest Mediterranean island in terms of both land area and population), Sardinia, Crete, Corsica, Mallorca, Euboea (which is bridged), Lesbos and Rhodes. The Mediterranean is also home to two sovereign island states (Malta and Cyprus, although the latter is a complex jurisdiction divided between three *de facto* states). Additionally, the region boasts the extensive archipelagos of Spain, Italy, Croatia and Greece, with Turkey clinging to a few islands of its own. (The long North African coast has but few populated islands, the most notable being Djerba and Kerkennah in Tunisia). The region has long been an exemplar of heavy tourist visitation numbers that far exceed the number of local residents; this is leaving considerable strains on the local environmental fabric: think party-goers in Ibiza and cruise ship visitors to Santorini. A snapshot of the geographical and jurisdictional distribution of the 284 populated islands of the Mediterranean is provided in Table 3:

Table 3

Mediterranean		Political dimension			
		Local community – no jurisdiction	Municipality	Region, State or Province	Country
Geographical dimension	Overseas	0	0	0	0
	High seas	96	42	6	2
	Coastal	104	27	0	0
	Bridged	1	6	0	0
		201	75	6	2

For all its troubled recent history as a divided island, **Cyprus** is a thriving tourism destination. Just over 3 million visitors, mainly of the "sun, sea and sand" type, spent time there in 2016, the largest national segment coming from the United Kingdom, and followed by Russia. The island boasts various sandy beaches, vibrant night life and excellent food, as well as rich cultural assets that straddle centuries. Nicosia is its bustling capital, one of the very few capitals on islands that is *not* a coastal city. Prehistoric ruins, fortifications, monasteries and churches dot the limestone landscape. Coastal cities like Limassol and Paphos welcome tourists all the year round; while locations in the (unrecognized) Turkish Republic of North Cyprus – like Kyrenia – tend to be more seasonal. The 'Cyprus Question' remains unresolved which means that Nicosia is Europe's only divided capital (and one of the world's rare exemplars of island capital cities that are not coastal).

All islands are spaces encircled by water, but their tourism offerings and experiences tend towards a uniqueness that is also a blend of very particular natural and cultural

assets. In this brief paper, an intermediate position is proposed. Not all islands are the same; yet, not all islands are different: they share particular geographical locations and their political relationships to Europe (and the European Union) help significantly in offering what one hopes is a valid conceptual framework towards the critical and comparative analysis of island tourism. The OMRs and OCTs with their truly global reach, the North Atlantic, the Baltic and the Mediterranean offer four, mutually exclusive, organisational categories around which to build a compelling rationale and handy profile of island tourism in Europe.

Europe is diverse enough, and its tourism industry is mature enough, to be able to support such different island tourism destinations, which in turn beget different island tourism experiences. For all the beguiling simplicity and monotony of an island as being "a piece of land surrounded by water," tourism does flush out and celebrate the specific personality of islands and their inhabitants. Only in this way is island tourism sustainable in the long term. Europe's islands manifest different responses to the supreme challenge of steering clear of, or moving away from, the mass market tourism trap. Looking at these islands in terms of the four broad geographical regions of provenance presented in this article should help, one hopes, to better frame the challenges faced in terms of more specific factor endowments.

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Photo: French travel poster shows an automobile driving along a road in Greece, ca. 1930, Everett Historical | Shutterstock

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