

## Article

# Island Tourism-Based Sustainable Development at a Crossroads: Facing the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** Tourism is often seen as the ‘golden ticket’ for the development of many islands. The current COVID-19 pandemic, however, has ground global tourism to a halt. In particular, islands that depend heavily on tourist inflows—including mass-tourism islands, and small island developing states (SIDS)—have seen their revenues diminish significantly, and poverty rates increasing. Some alternative-tourism islands have fared better, as they have focused on providing personalized, nature-based experiences to mostly domestic tourists. This article focuses on the experiences of mass-tourism islands, SIDS, and alternative-tourism islands during the COVID-19 pandemic, and offers possible post-pandemic scenarios, as well as recommendations for sustainable island tourism development. Although the pandemic has largely had a negative impact on the tourism sector, this is a unique opportunity for many islands to review the paradigm of tourism development. In this newly emerging world, and under a still very uncertain future scenario, the quadriptych of sustainability is more important than ever. Responsible governance and management of islands’ natural resources and their tourism activities, addressing climate change impacts, the diversification of islands’ economies, and the promotion of innovative and personalized tourist experiences are all necessary steps towards increasing islands’ resilience in case of future economic downturn or health- and environment-related crises.

**Keywords:** mass-tourism islands; alternative-tourism islands; small island development states (SIDS); sustainability; COVID-19 pandemic



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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a massive global business; by the end of the last century, international tourism was generating well over USD 450 billion, and less than two decades later, in 2019, world international tourism was generating tourist receipts of USD 1.5 trillion [1]. This explains why in 2000, most nations had already jumped on the tourism ‘bandwagon’; indeed, for a large number of countries, their tourism sectors were already significant contributors to their gross domestic product (GDP) and had also been integrated as a key factor of their forward-looking development strategies [2,3].

However, as early as the 1990s, it was recognized and documented that tourism, as a driver of economic growth, always generates complex social trade-offs [4]. These trade-offs are inevitable and ubiquitous, and confront, on the one hand, the social benefits produced by the tourism sector—mainly in the form of the welcomed economic activity and employment it generates—with, on the other hand, the social costs imposed by tourism activities, notoriously evident in the form of environmental, natural capital, and cultural degradation [5–9].

Although tourism is accompanied by negative externalities, it is often seen as the ‘golden ticket’ for the development of many islands, as a means to generate income and employment, reduce poverty, develop infrastructure, and transfer technology and skills. In many cases, due to islands’ key challenges—extreme population dynamics, low economic diversification, insularity and peripherality, and low levels of education and training—tourism is viewed as the panacea for development [10]. In fact, 49 of the world’s principal non-sovereign territories, of which 92% are islands or archipelagos and 65% have a tropical or tropical maritime climate, exhibit a large reliance upon tourism and financial services, and have attained high levels of per capita gross national income as a result of tourism development [11].

In the last two decades, observing the benefits that tourism can bring to the local economy, many islands have employed strategies to attract more visitors. For instance, as a result of this focus on tourism development, small Pacific Islands states experienced an increase from about half a million visitors in 2000 to approximately 1.4 million visitors in 2018, which translated into an increase from USD 479 million in international tourism receipts to 2.2 billion during the same period. Caribbean small states—a major tourist destination—went from almost five million visitors in 2000 to 7.4 million visitors in 2018, and from USD 5.5 billion in tourism receipts to USD 12 billion [12]. Other popular and more consolidated island destinations, such as Cuba, Malta, and many Greek islands, experienced a similar upward trend in international tourist arrivals and receipts [12].

Nevertheless, while tourism can be the answer to many development issues that islands face, it can also have serious sustainability impacts: economic (increase in prices, infrastructure costs, opportunity costs), socio-cultural (loss of authenticity, cultural exploitation, social tension), and environmental impacts (land degradation, air pollution and noise, waste and sewage problems, water pollution, biodiversity loss) [13–16]. This is particularly the case with mass-tourism islands, that is islands that are characterized by a large volume of tourists compared to the concerned territory and to the local population density, resulting eventually in saturation of the area, degradation, and loss of attractiveness [17].

In contrast to mass-tourism islands, alternative-tourism islands are islands that promote a sustainable type of tourism that is based on a dialogue with the local population and is adjusted to the capacity of the local area to cope [18]. Although the term ‘alternative tourism’ or ‘special-interest tourism’ faces classification issues, it is often described as an umbrella term, encompassing various types of tourism, such as ecotourism, justice tourism, and community-based tourism [17–20].

Until the beginning of 2020, global tourism growth prospects had been very encouraging: the World Tourism Organization (WTO) informed in its usual annual report that in 2019, the world tourism industry had experienced its 10th consecutive year of sustained growth. International tourist arrivals showed an increase of 4% with respect to 2018, totaling 1.5 billion total arrivals [21]. Unfortunately, very early in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, causing the current economic downturn, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. As a result, as soon as August 2020, the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, informed the public that the global tourism industry had been devastated by the pandemic, that international tourist arrivals had decreased by more than half and earnings had plummeted, with USD 320 billion lost in exports in the first five months of the year alone [22].

This paper deals with the impact that COVID-19 has had on island tourism, particularly in the case of mass-tourism islands, alternative-tourism islands, and small island developing states (SIDS). It also provides possible postpandemic scenarios and suggestions for the future of tourism development in island destinations, taking into account current and future sustainability challenges, as well as the changing map of international tourism, as result of the pandemic.

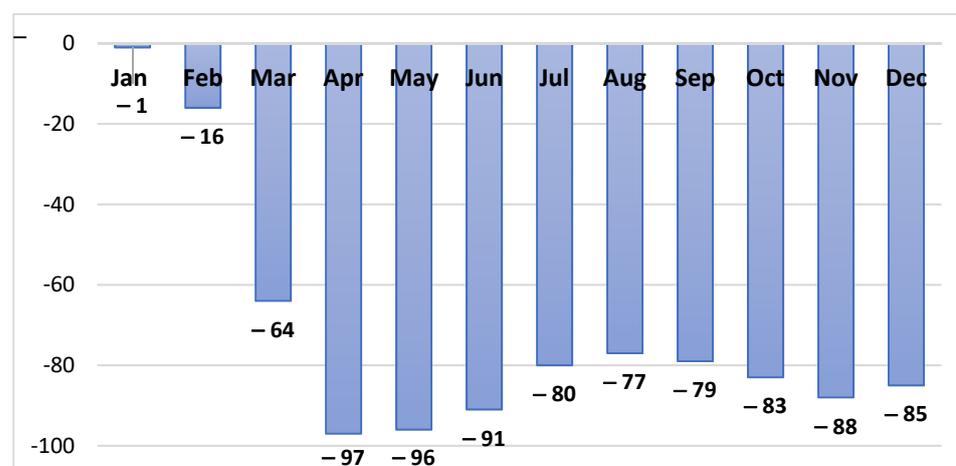
## 2. Impact of COVID-19 on International Tourism

To understand the potential direction and magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on the global tourism sector, it is necessary to realize that, on the one hand, unlike the usual positive and negative economic shocks that drive economic fluctuations of common occurrence, pandemics are adverse events, and so their effects on health and economic outcomes tend to be all on the negative side [23]. On the other hand, a global pandemic is likewise a natural disaster that functions as an exogenous shock with potentially grave economic consequences. However, as Ludvigson et al. [24] have concluded, unlike a conventional natural disaster shock, the COVID-19 shock is a multiperiod event that simultaneously disrupts supply, demand, and productivity channels, that is almost perfectly synchronized within and across countries, and that has cataclysmic health, social, and economic implications not just for the foreseeable few weeks after the crisis, but for a long time period.

These facts explain the dramatic impact the emergence and spread of COVID-19 has had on the global travel and tourism industry, with a subsequent devastating effect on local and national economies, livelihoods, and opportunities on all continents, making 2020 the worst year on record for the tourism industry [21]. More particularly, due to the pandemic:

- 100–120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk; women, who make up 54% of the tourism workforce, youth, and workers in the informal economy are particularly vulnerable;
- International visitors' spending may have declined by an estimated USD 910 billion to USD 1.2 trillion;
- An estimated 1.5% to 2.8% of global GDP may be lost;
- The economic development and sustainability of many small island development states (SIDS), least developed countries (LDCs), and African nations that rely heavily on tourism may be in danger: tourism represents over 30% of exports for the majority of SIDS and 80% for some of them;
- An estimated USD 5.5 billion in financial assistance would be needed to counteract the adverse effects of the pandemic on SIDS' economies; and
- Resources for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage may be significantly reduced, as funding stemming from tourism receipts for biodiversity and heritage conservation has been significantly reduced [21,25].

As can be observed in Figure 1, international tourist arrivals experienced a 74% drop in 2020 compared to the previous year.



**Figure 1.** Global international tourist arrivals (January–December 2020). Note: Monthly change (%). Source: [26].

The largest decrease in international tourist arrivals was experienced by Asia and the Pacific region, with a –84% reduction in 2020 in comparison to 2019; the least decrease

was experienced by the Americas, with a  $-69\%$  reduction [27]. The hardest hit region was Europe, where there were approximately 522 million fewer tourist arrivals in 2020 in comparison to the previous year. Globally, there were 1.07 billion ‘missing’ international tourist arrivals.

Actual air reservations in 2020 were reduced by 81% in comparison to 2019; the regions most severely affected were Asia and the Pacific ( $-85\%$ ), and Europe ( $-83\%$ ) [28]. The cruise industry was particularly devastated as well. During the last few decades, the cruise industry played an important role in generating jobs and economic opportunities for millions of people around the world, including for the people living on islands, directly or indirectly employed in the tourism sector. Prepandemic data show that in 2019, 29.7 million people had gone on a cruise, generating USD 154.5 billion in total output worldwide, and that the industry employed 1.16 million people worldwide. An average passenger would spend USD 385 in port before boarding a cruise, and USD 100 in port visiting during a cruise. However, between mid-March and September 2020, the suspension in cruise operations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in losses of more than USD 77 billion in global economic activity, 518,000 jobs, and USD 23 billion in wages [29].

### 3. Impact of COVID-19 on Island Tourism

Tourism has long been the main economic activity for numerous islands all over the world, thus providing their populations with much needed job opportunities and different types of income sources, as well as foreign exchange earnings [30]. Indeed, before the pandemic, tourism was the backbone of the economy for many islands and island states, especially since in many cases there were no other alternative economic activities [31]. In 2019, island tourism experienced growth across all continents: mature destinations in the Mediterranean reported increased tourist arrivals; in Oceania smaller island destinations—such as Guam, French Polynesia, and Samoa—recorded solid growth; in the Americas many smaller Caribbean island destinations reported a large increase in the number of tourist arrivals; while in Sub-Saharan Africa, the island destinations Madagascar and Comoros recorded double-digit growth in arrivals [27].

COVID-19—besides having a devastating impact on the health and life of many islanders—dealt a heavy blow to tourist arrivals and tourism exports, thus directly affecting islands’ economic development and people’s livelihoods. Nevertheless, not all islands were affected to the same degree, depending largely—among other factors—on the level of tourism dependence. Mass-tourism islands were particularly hard-hit by the current pandemic. Famous islands, such as Mallorca, the Canary Islands, Mykonos, and many Thai islands, were already suffering from the uncontrollable arrival of tourists, which led to serious sustainability issues, such as waste disposal, water pollution, biodiversity loss, and land degradation [32,33]. Measures were taken to reduce the impact on the environment and local community, such as for example, the limit of 8000 cruise tickets per day imposed in Santorini [34,35].

COVID-19 brought a collapse in tourist arrivals, which led to a significant rise in poverty rates. Mallorca, for instance, with an estimated 75% of all income directly or indirectly linked to the travel industry, has seen a dramatic decrease in tourist numbers, which in turn led to an increase in poverty; in the Calvia municipality, with a population of approximately 52,000 people, 1500 households rely solely on welfare benefits [36]. Due to past regional economic shocks, the threats of global warming, and the impacts of the current COVID-19 pandemic, such heavily tourism-oriented island economies are facing critical future challenges regarding the continued viability of their traditional growth strategies, particularly their heavy reliance upon environmentally harmful long-haul air travel and cruise tourism [11].

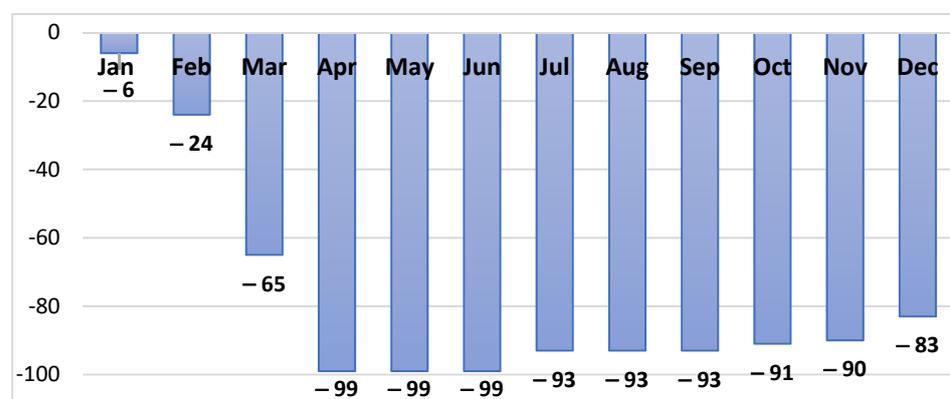
Unlike mass-tourism islands, alternative-tourism islands have generally fared much better during the pandemic. These islands include places that are generally not so well known to foreign tourists and attract mostly local visitors, are generally small, often with no easy access, and provide alternative experiences to the ‘sun–sea–sand–sex’ offer of many

mass-tourism island destinations, such as nature and outdoor activities, wine tasting, and cooking lessons.

A clear example of such island is the Greek island of Ikaria, which does not depend on foreign tourism, since most visitors are locals. As more Greeks travelled within their own country due to the pandemic, Ikaria actually received more Greek visitors than in previous years, who were interested in nature activities, such as hiking and bird-watching [37]. Another example is the island of Rapa Nui—Easter Island in Chile, with a population of about 10,000 people. In this case, the island was hit harder by the decrease in tourist arrivals. With 60% of the island's economy depending on tourism, approximately 4500 people were directly employed in the tourism sector; due to the pandemic, 1800 families were left without work. Nevertheless, there was no increase in poverty levels: in order to fight unemployment, the local government hired 1200 workers with resources from the municipality, in order to perform activities such as diving to clean the ocean floor. They also invested in agricultural sustainability, and emphasized the need for every household to have a source of fresh produce [38].

Other islands that were particularly affected by the drastic decrease in tourist arrivals were the small island developing states (SIDS). These islands are a group of developing countries that experience particular social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities. The SIDS currently include 52 countries and territories situated in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and South China Sea (AIMS). While SIDS are not a homogenous group, they do share certain characteristics that can act as barriers towards their sustainable development. Such characteristics include a narrow resource base that deprives them of the benefits of economies of scale, small domestic markets, high costs for energy infrastructure, transportation, and communication services, long distances from export markets, growing populations, unstable economic growth, low and irregular tourism flows, little resilience to natural disasters, and fragile natural environments [39].

Many SIDS rely heavily on tourism. In 2019, there were 44 countries that relied on the travel and tourism industry for more than 15% of their total share of employment [40]. Out of these, 27 were island nations, and almost all (24) were SIDS. Sixteen were SIDS in the Caribbean, one of the regions most affected by the decrease in tourist numbers, as it depends almost completely on visitors from the United States, Canada, and Europe, regions which have been heavily impacted by the pandemic [41]. Furthermore, in the list of the ten countries most vulnerable to the current decrease in tourism, measured in tourism as a percentage of GDP, there are three SIDS: Fiji (13%), Mauritius (10%), and Jamaica (9%) [26]. Figure 2 presents the dramatic drop in international tourist arrivals to SIDS.



**Figure 2.** International tourist arrivals to SIDS (January–December 2020). Note: Monthly change (%). Source: [26].

There were about 3.4 million tourists that visited SIDS in May 2019; a year later, this number had dropped to 22,000 [26]. Overall, it is estimated that the SIDS 'lost' 33.7 million international tourist arrivals due to the impact of COVID-19.

On account of the strict enforcement of border closures, many SIDS have been largely spared the worst of the health impacts of the pandemic; if that has not been the case, the situation would have been much worse, since these states have limited public health infrastructure and populations with high rates of comorbidities. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has led to negative economic and social impacts, with—in most cases—a large increase in poverty and extreme poverty. A recent study tracking the pandemic's impacts on families in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands has shown that 85% of households use various coping strategies in their daily life, with more than half of respondents in Papua New Guinea reporting that they had reduced the number of children attending school, and more than half of Solomon Islands respondents saying that they had reduced their food consumption [42]. In Fiji, where one-third of the workforce has lost their jobs due to the impact of the pandemic, people rely on remittances from relatives abroad, while many have returned to their villages or taken up fishing and farming in order to provide for their families [43].

Closing the borders has devastated these tourism-dependent economies, such as those of Vanuatu and Fiji, which shrank by more than 20% in 2020 [44]. When these economies will be able to open businesses, and their borders, and welcome foreign tourists is largely dependent on the vaccine rollout; in the case of Vanuatu, with a population of 307,000 people living across more than 60 islands, the majority of the population will not be immunized until 2023. The Marshall Islands expects to have vaccinated its adult population by June, while Palau has already immunized more than 17% of its 18,000 population [44].

#### 4. Postpandemic Island Tourism Development

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, more research on the health, socioeconomic, and cultural impacts of the pandemic on island tourism, as well as on possible future scenarios, has become available [41,45,46]. There is growing evidence of the tourism paradigm shift on development worldwide. For example, in an exploratory study, Sanjeev and Tiwari [47] concluded that the pandemic response has prompted large technological advances, profit management, personnel training, the development of new tourism services, and online education. They also find that these changes had been coupled with larger tourism industry integration, sustainability practices, better housekeeping services, new medical tourism, and virtual tourism among others. On the other hand, Matiza and Stabbet [48] concluded that, in spite of the large number of contemporary studies analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in general, academic work on the effect of the pandemic on the subjective safety associated with tourism activity is still minimal. This could be especially detrimental for islands tourism, because the remoteness and isolation of many islands could create a false sense of their lack of safety.

Current analyses and discussions on what the future holds for island tourism development and possible tourism paradigm shifts are obviously mostly tentative and speculative. The conclusion of most such research is that, taking into account the effects of the pandemic, climate change, the negative impacts of unsustainable island tourism development, and the need to improve islands' resilience in the face of crises, islands need to focus on developing a greener and more sustainable island tourism [45,49], on domestic tourism [50,51], on developing alternative, nature-based types of tourism experiences [51,52], and on economic diversification [52,53].

In terms of postpandemic island tourism recovery, according to a UNWTO Panel of Experts, a return of the tourism global industry to its prepandemic levels does not seem possible before 2023. In fact, 43% of the experts do not expect this to occur until 2023, while 41% of them expect a return to the 2019 levels in 2024 or later [21]. This projection comes into sharp contrast to the prepandemic growth of the tourism sector: between 2009 and 2019, international tourism receipts grew 54% in real terms, exceeding the 44% of growth of global GDP, which made the tourism industry a pooling sector of the global economy [54].

Nevertheless, there are clear indications that global tourism is picking up again, slowly but surely. From early July through mid-December 2020, there were more than 200 cruise

sailings globally, with the cruise industry prepared to resume services primarily in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean in 2021. With strict protocols in place and the support of local and regional authorities, cruise ships are resuming operations around the world [29].

The question remains, though, whether in a postpandemic world, island tourism will follow a 'business as usual' paradigm or whether the pandemic might lead to a more responsible and sustainable type of tourism. Even before the pandemic, many island destinations had introduced restrictions and laws, in an effort to reduce the negative impacts of mass tourism and protect the often-fragile environments of these places: in Indonesia, the government imposed a USD 10 entry tax for tourists in order to preserve the environmental conservation of Bali, while the Galapagos archipelago in Ecuador allows travelers to stay for a maximum of four nights and five days per ship, with a frequency of four landings within any 14-day period [55,56].

Easter Island is already contemplating a new type of tourism that it aspires to have once the pandemic is over: a type of tourism that is not massive and where tourists collaborate towards the island's sustainability. Local authorities envision that the number of flights will go down to four per week, thus reducing the negative impact of an increasing number of tourists on its fragile environment, while local businesses are focusing on creating new tourist experiences—once the pandemic is over—that are more personalized, creative, and more nature-centric [38].

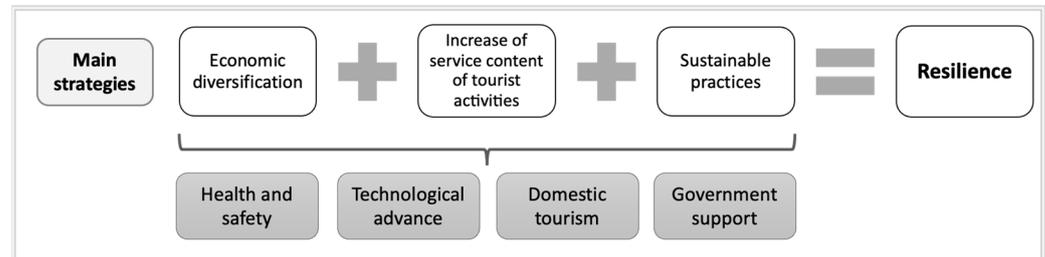
Another strategy that some small islands are undertaking, as a place-marketing tool, is advertising themselves as 'COVID-free' destinations, in order to attract tourists that are generally more cautious regarding their holiday choice. For instance, various small islands in Greece—with less than 1000 inhabitants—have joined the 'Liberty' government vaccination program, with the aim to be 'liberated' from the perils of COVID-19; their adult population is now 100% vaccinated. Other islands will soon be following, in an effort to acquire the 'COVID-free' label, and be ready to welcome domestic and foreign visitors [57]. This poses an additional strain on many small islands that pre-COVID-19 did not attract many tourists: factors such as a lack of accommodation, waste management capabilities, and biodiversity impacts, need to be taken under serious consideration before welcoming an increasing number of tourists.

'COVID-free' tourism locations could become highly valuable places for tourists affected by the 'COVID-stress syndrome'. This syndrome has two most distressful characteristics: first, the fear of COVID infection and of coming into contact with objects or surfaces contaminated with the coronavirus; and, second, a pandemic-related compulsive checking and reassurance-seeking regarding possible pandemic-related threats [58,59]. The mental health toll from this syndrome is quite serious, as a US Census Bureau's survey of December 2020 showed that 42% of the people surveyed exhibited symptoms of anxiety or depression, which represents an 11% increase from the previous year. Moreover, the worldwide picture is similar, according to the data provided by surveys from several other countries, such as United Kingdom and India [60]. This implies a valuable opportunity for tourism-oriented islands to offer safe 'COVID-free' places for rest and recovery, and holiday locations for the general public and tourists affected by 'COVID-stress syndrome' or just for healthy customers looking for tourism destinations with the highest insulation from COVID-19.

After the pandemic, a path that islands should consider taking—especially the ones that are heavily dependent on tourism—is the one provided in Figure 3. A strategy that could increase the resilience of many islands in times of crisis is economic diversification [52,53].

The diversification of island economies—towards agriculture, wine-making, services—should be coupled with innovative tourist packages with higher content of services specifically responding to tourists' newly emerging demands (that is, less crowded and more nature oriented-activities, or products intensive in local components). The Seychelles, for example, has already experimented with economic diversification: during the COVID-19 period, it has increased its tuna exports, while at the same time the government has been

offering retraining opportunities for displaced tourism-sector workers. Furthermore, the government in Barbados, in an effort to maintain social spending, has created jobs in non-tourism sectors, such as agriculture and infrastructure development [61].



**Figure 3.** Way forward for sustainable development of island tourism destinations. Source: Own elaboration.

On the other hand, economic diversification needs to be combined with sustainability practices (there are already islands that, for instance, are embracing the ‘plastic-free’ concept; another possibility could be ‘pesticide or (certain) chemical(s) free’ islands), which can lead to increasing resilience in case of economic downturn or in the face of pandemics. With respect to creating a more sustainable tourism economy, on 7 August 2021, the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) clearly stated that: “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred” [62] (p. 5).

Post-COVID-19 recovery plans need to focus on the ‘quality’ of tourism development and not on ‘quantity’. Already, many local communities, wishing to avoid the prepandemic scenario when cruise or massive tourism had resulted in negative economic, environmental, and social impacts, have shifted towards ‘domestic tourism’, with much more emphasis on conservation, ecology, and the importance of cultural heritage (see for example, the case of Akaroa, in New Zealand, [51]). Domestic tourism can indeed represent an opportunity for many islands so as to address the devastating health and socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, and improve residents’ quality of life and tourists’ safety, by providing a more sustainable type of tourism development, with a focus on experiential, rural, and active tourism [63].

There are tremendous prospects for islands to tap into other opportunities, as teleworking has become the reality of many businesses and economic sectors. Currently, more than 20 percent of the workforce could work remotely as effectively as they could if working from their prepandemic offices, which would imply three to four times as many people working remotely than before the pandemic [64]. Thus, combinations of telework with affordable living costs in distant COVID-free and properly Internet-connected touristic locations, may offer a newly promising market for tourism-oriented islands trying to capture new customers from high-income/high living cost regions, foreign or domestic. Already islands, such as Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, and the Cayman Islands offer new long-term permits, of up to 12 months, in order to attract foreign visitors wishing to move their virtual offices to these idyllic environments [61].

Of course, the feasibility of such strategies depends on many factors, including the islands’ remoteness, development level, population education and training, and support from national and regional government. There are already signs that diversification is more central than ever: the Spanish national and regional governments have announced that they want to spend the EUR 140 billion earmarked for Spain under the EU’s pandemic rescue packages on ‘future-oriented industries’, and not on tourism; the regional government is prioritizing funding for universities, culture, and agriculture [36].

It seems that now, more than ever, island tourism-based development is at a crossroads. Numerous factors will have an impact on which way it will go, including how the COVID-19 pandemic will unfold, the political decisions that will be implemented

regarding economic reactivation, how the tourism industry itself will react, and how the 'new' type of tourists will choose their holiday destination. Among the challenges ahead, there is the need for governments, on the one hand, to capitalize on the large cultural digitalization revolution occurred worldwide: the immense expansion of online work and of everyday activities, such as family issues, interactions and interconnections of all sorts, shopping and social life in general are evolving at an impressive speed. On the other hand, governments need to support the much-needed low carbon transition that will lead the structural transformation needed to build a more sustainable and resilient tourism economy [54,65,66].

As a result of the current crisis, uncertainties regarding the global economy have greatly increased, and the longer health-related restrictions are imposed, the deeper the overall economic impacts will be, and the harder and slower will be the recovery. Indeed, the current crisis has shown what truly radical uncertainty looks like [67]. This might lead to overcautious and pessimistic economic behavior from people in the near future. A danger for the recovery ahead is that consumers and firms, faced with the much larger uncertainty of the current economic scenario, may decide to reduce their spending and investment, thus making the economic recovery even more difficult in the coming months and years. Even worse, if a lasting economic crisis leads to stagnation, a vicious cycle of low productivity growth, low or no returns on private investment and near-deflation, will, in turn, make risk-averse people save more and reduce demand even further. The final result could be general dissatisfaction, leading to economic nationalism pushing governments to shut off their own economies from the rest of the world [68].

As Gopinath [69] explains, the globalization trend of the previous decades could be significantly slowed down for different reasons. First, after the recent economic lockdown, firms could now have more trust in supply chains that are more local and robust and, therefore, less global. Second, capital controls could be reimposed as emerging markets, which previously embraced globalization and a steady opening to capital flows, may now shield themselves from the destabilizing forces of sudden economic stops. Third, people may self-assess their personal risks and decide to curtail travel indefinitely, significantly reducing international mobility and travel. Obviously, this could imply a significant impact on world tourism in general, and on island tourism in particular. However, COVID-free islands that are able to coordinate and use safe and carefully structured travel means, such as charter flights and/or combinations of purposely arranged buses and other vessels, could capture a probably large new segment of health-conscious tourists, with a high willingness to pay for tourism locations offering high protection from pandemic threats and that are also attractive in terms of cultural, natural, religion, historical, artistic, spiritual, culinary, adventure, entertaining or otherwise appealing experiential content.

Moreover, the increasing number of people that before the pandemic struck were criticizing the globalization trend of the last few decades—from different fronts and with arguments—could now increase in number, and more and new arguments could be provided for closing borders and confining one's nation within its domestic safety. 'Nearcation'—that is, people's decisions not to take the risk of travelling by plane abroad or even domestically, and to instead go to nearby destinations—has been a rising trend. This has been the case, for example, for England, with people discovering a new love for 'The British Staycation' [70], and the United States, which has seen a rise in overnight trips [71]. This could be a blow to the economies of many islands that rely heavily on tourists from the United Kingdom (especially islands in Southern Europe), and the United States (particularly Caribbean islands).

On the other hand, there is also the scenario that people, tired of quarantines and isolation, and in dire need of 'escaping', will again reassume traveling, either domestically or abroad, especially as COVID-19 cases are going down in many countries. This increase in traveling has already translated into rising airfares and hotel rates. For instance, the average hotel rates in early May 2019 in Cancun, Mexico, were USD 160 a night, then dropped to just USD 45 in 2020, and now they are about USD 205. The case is the same

in Hawaii: from USD 263 in 2019, hotel prices dropped to USD 122 in 2020, and they are now slightly higher than the prepandemic period, at USD 269 a night [72]. As the title of a newspaper article succinctly puts it: “Travel was cheap when no one was traveling. That era is over” [73] (np).

Political decisions and motivations are also playing an important role in the future of islands’ development, as there seems to be a de-coupling of islands from their mainland in terms of holiday travel possibilities, especially in the case of European tourism. For instance, in the UK government’s list of countries and territories concerning COVID-19, this de-coupling can be seen in the cases of Portugal (Portugal, including the Azores are on the amber list, while Madeira is on the green watchlist), Spain (as of 19 July 2021, the country and all islands are on the amber list, while before this date the Balearic Islands were in the green list), and Greece (Greece and all islands are on the amber list) [74]. While there is certainly a medical reason for this separation between islands and mainland, political pressure could be involved as well: on the one hand, pressure from the people/voters who want to be able to enjoy their holidays in idyllic island destinations as before, and on the other hand, pressure from countries whose economy depends on tourism and would like to see bans lifted as soon as possible.

In the context of an ever more competitive global tourism industry, it is imperative for islands to creatively use their unique resources in an effort to provide a more personalized and differentiating experience for the more cautious tourist. Thus, islands need to effectively utilize their resources in order to satisfy tourists’ needs and expectations with a view at the same time to maintaining sustainability and economic development [75]. In fact, the inclusion of effective demand-oriented activities in the service content of the overall tourist experience will be a key orientation for the future of island tourism destinations.

## 5. Conclusions

Stepping into uncharted territory, there can only be speculation on how tourism in general, and island tourism in particular, will actually develop. Current analyses demand an open-minded, ‘out-of-the-box’ discussion, because today there are a large number of socioeconomic, environmental, and political variables that are changing and that will need much more time to finally settle down. COVID-19 has hit economies and societies very hard, with many of them severely struggling; in the future, numerous islands will continue struggling to recover. Taking into account current and future challenges, tourism—an important development strategy and tool for many islands—needs to become more responsible and sustainable. In the post-COVID-19 world, certain potentially long-lasting tourism implications, such as the emergence of new markets and niches, increased digitalization, and crisis management, should be taken into account by all tourism destinations, and particularly island destinations that have to face additional challenges to their development.

The postpandemic period could also be an opportunity for more islands to align their tourism sector more closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in an effort to build a sector that is sustainable, more inclusive, and resilient. According to the EU Commissioner of the internal markets, “[there is an opportunity to take advantage of the current crisis] to reinvent the tourism of tomorrow—towards a more sustainable, resilient and innovative sector” [76] (np).

More research is needed into sustainable tourism policies, practices, and strategies that will take into account not only the health, socioeconomic, and environmental impacts of the pandemic, but also the emergence of a new ‘type’ of tourist that is more local, more concerned about health and safety issues, and more interested in personalized experiences. Of course, the type of prepandemic tourist—the one looking for the 4 S’s—is still and will most likely continue to be very much present. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the uncertainties surrounding economies and societies around the world, it is crucial to devise strategies that will ultimately regain tourists’ confidence, but which will also provide sustainable tourism development solutions to islands that have seen their economies and societies being hit hard by the pandemic. Islands have now a unique opportunity to

reinvent themselves, in order to be able to become resilient in the face of future economic, health or environment-related crises.

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