

From Overtourism to Regenerative Travel: A Commentary on Copen Pay

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For the better part of the decade, destination managers have fought overtourism with a single tool: restriction. Venice charges an entry fee. Barcelona has capped cruise arrivals and faced open street protests by visitor numbers. Amsterdam has run advertising campaigns explicitly designed to discourage certain traveller segments from booking a trip at all. The underlying assumption is that tourist behaviour is a problem to be contained through pricing, quotas, or friction.

Copenhagen has spent the last two years testing a different premise: that visitors' behaviour can be shaped rather than merely limited. Its CopenPay scheme, first piloted by the destination marketing organization Wonderful Copenhagen in the summer of 2024, rewards tourists for climate-friendly choices arriving by train, cycling instead of driving, picking up litter, volunteering at a community garden with free or discounted access to museums, bike rentals, boat tours and meals. What began as a four-week trial with roughly twenty participating venues has since scaled dramatically. As of June 2026, the city made the programmed permanent and year-round, and more than 350 destinations worldwide have reportedly adopted or expressed interest in a version of the model, now packaged for export as "Destination Pay." Berlin has already launched its own adaptation, BerlinPay, and several Italian cities are developing local variants [1,2].

The speed of that diffusion is itself the signal worth examining. CopenPay is not simply a clever municipal marketing stunt; it represents a genuine paradigm shift in how destinations think about the tourist as an economic and environmental actor from a load to be managed down to a behaviour to be redirected.

CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The conventional toolkit for managing visitor pressure rests on deterrence: taxes raise the cost of arrival, caps ration access, and messaging campaigns try to talk certain visitors out of coming altogether. These tools treat tourism volume as the variable to control. CopenPay instead treats tourism behaviour as the variable to control, leaving volume largely untouched. That distinction matters because most European destinations do not actually want fewer visitors than visitors whose presence costs the city and its residents less [3].

This is closer to behavioral economics than traditional destination marketing. Rather than penalizing the "wrong" choice, CopenPay makes the sustainable choice the rewarding one, converting an abstract environmental ask ("please reduce your footprint")

into a concrete transaction with an immediate, tangible payoff. A tourist who cycles to Copenhill and helps tend a communal garden isn't complying with a rule; they're collecting a reward, in the same psychological register as a loyalty programmed or a game mechanic. Wonderful Copenhagen's own language around the initiative reflects this deliberately: leadership there has described participating venues not as passive backdrops but as active partners translating a citywide philosophy into local, redeemable experiences, with the explicit goal of getting visitors to see themselves as contributors to the city rather than consumers of it [4,5].

The programmer's institutional trajectory reinforces the point. What survived past a single pilot summer, attracted more than 30,000 participants, earned a spot on TIME's list of the year's best inventions, and was folded into the European Union's Transition Pathway for Tourism is not a gimmick — it is now infrastructure.

The jump from seasonal experiment to permanent year-round policy, and the emergence of a formal export framework in DestinationPay, suggests Copenhagen has stopped thinking of this as a campaign and started thinking of it as a template other cities can license culturally, if not financially, since Wonderful Copenhagen has made the framework free for other destinations to adapt [6].

That said, the model is not without open questions. Positive-incentive schemes are typically easier to scale in cities with strong existing cycling and transit infrastructure, generous municipal tourism budgets, and a base of attractions willing to absorb the cost of "free" admission in exchange for footfall and brand association. Whether a reward-based system can achieve the same behavioral shift in a destination without Copenhagen's cycling culture, or with more price-sensitive local operators, is an empirical question the current wave of imitators Berlin, Bremen, Florence, Ravenna — will start to answer over the next few seasons [7].

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

For destination managers and DMO leadership, three practical takeaways follow from CopenPay's evolution from pilot to permanent policy.

First, audit incentive structures before adding restrictions. Before reaching for a tourist tax or a visitor camp, destination managers should map which sustainable behaviors already exist in their city's infrastructure, public transit, bike networks, volunteer programmes and ask whether those behaviors could be rewarded rather than simply hoped for. The lowest-cost version of this is a partnership model: local attractions provide discounted or free access in exchange for verified sustainable action, with the DMO absorbing coordination and marketing costs rather than direct subsidy [8].

Second, treat attractions as active partners, not passive redemption points. CopenPay's design deliberately positions museums, tour operators and cultural venues as co-authors of the visitor experience rather than backdrops. Managers replicating this should involve venue partners early in program design, since venues that understand and buy into the sustainability narrative are more likely to actively promote the scheme to visitors than ones simply asked to honor a voucher [9].

Third, build for permanence, not seasonality, from the outset. Copenhagen's own experience suggests the biggest strategic risk was leaving the program as a limited-run pilot for too long, which capped its ability to build habitual visitor behaviour or a durable brand association with the city. Destinations exploring similar schemes should plan a credible path from pilot to permanent, year-round infrastructure, rather than treating a summer trial as the end state [10,11].

The broader lesson for the field is this overtourism is often framed as a numbers problem, solvable only by reducing arrivals. CopenPay's traction suggests it can also be treated as a behaviour

problem, solvable by making the sustainable choice the more rewarding one. That reframing doesn't replace the case for caps and fees in destinations genuinely over capacity, but it gives destination managers a second lever, one that builds goodwill with visitors instead of resentment, and one that a growing number of cities are now willing to bet on.

CONCLUSION

CopenPay offers a practical way to reconsider how tourism contributes to urban life. By linking sustainable actions with meaningful experiences, the programme encourages visitors to participate in caring for destinations rather than simply consuming their attractions. Its approach aligns with earlier research on behavioural incentives, social norms and environmental engagement. However, rewards alone cannot resolve overcrowding, housing pressures or the environmental costs of travel. Destination managers should therefore integrate incentive programmes with capacity management, accessible transport and policies that protect residents' interests. Successful adaptation requires committed local partners, straightforward participation rules and rewards that remain financially viable. Evaluation should measure additional environmental benefits, community outcomes and sustained behavioural change, rather than relying only on participation or satisfaction. Copenhagen's experience provides a promising model for experimentation, but its wider significance will depend on evidence from destinations with different resources and infrastructure. Regenerative travel becomes a credible ambition when visitor engagement produces lasting benefits for local communities and ecosystems.

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