

BRUGES' TOOLBOX TO BALANCING TOURISM

Bruges' strategy on tourism management - Bruges, Belgium

1. DESCRIPTION

Bruges has developed a comprehensive and integrated strategy to manage tourism while safeguarding the city's habitability. First introduced in the 1990s—most notably through a hotel development freeze in 1996—the strategy has continued to evolve in response to urban challenges and changes in the tourism sector. Today, this “toolbox” approach combines regulation, planning, and stakeholder engagement to address tourism pressures across the city.

2. CONTEXT THAT MOTIVATED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTICE

Bruges faces significant tourism pressure, with approximately 8 million visitors annually and only around 20,000 residents in its historic center. The medieval urban structure, characterized by narrow streets and high heritage value, amplifies congestion and conflicts between visitors and residents. Like many heritage cities, Bruges risked losing its residential population and transforming into a tourism-dominated environment, putting also in danger the preservation of the built environment.

3. APPROACH/METHOD

Bruges' toolbox combines regulation, planning, and stakeholder engagement initiatives:

- **Tourism flow management (crowd management):** Limitation of guided group sizes (max. 20 people), time-slot systems for tour buses, creation of an intermodal hub around the railway station, and regulation of cruise arrivals.
- **Urban zoning and spatial strategy:** Creation of a “Golden Triangle” where major tourist attractions and commercial activities are concentrated, reducing pressure on other parts of the historic center. This includes the investment in new infrastructure for tourism use (e.g. the BRUSK, a new contemporary art center) aiming at concentrating the tourism flows in one part of the city.
- **Accommodation regulation:** Hotel development freeze in the historic center since 1996 and strict limits on short-term rentals (small-scale, resident-led B&B model)
- **Governance and stakeholder dialogue:** Regular meetings with major tourism operators, dedicated municipal staff maintaining daily contact, and a digital platform providing real-time operational information.
- **Cross-sector municipal coordination:** Strong collaboration between tourism, urban planning, heritage, mobility, and environmental services within the city administration.



Historic Center - Visit Brugge | © Jan Darthet

- **Complementary measures:** Promotion of overnight stays (cultural programming and congress tourism), environmental management (electric boats regulations for transit in canals), cruise passenger tax (to be implemented in January 2027), and adaptive reuse of heritage (capitalization of a green belt for mobility and recreation of residents and visitors).

4. EXPECTED/IMMEDIATE/MEASURABLE EFFECTS

Measurable results

- Stability of the resident population in the historic center (key success indicator)
- Increased tourism-related revenues (e.g., accommodation taxes)
- Improved distribution of visitor flows

Expected effects

- Long-term preservation of habitability in the historic center
- Reduction of tourism-related pressures (housing, congestion, noise)
- Shift toward higher-quality, longer-stay tourism

Immediate effects observed

- Reduced overcrowding in key areas
- Improved coexistence between residents and visitors
- Better regulation of tourism-related economic activities

5. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Tourism must be actively managed to preserve habitability in historic centers, not just economic growth.
- A balanced approach between residents, heritage, and visitors is essential for long-term sustainability.
- Spatial strategies (zoning and concentration) can effectively reduce pressure on sensitive areas.
- Strong governance and continuous dialogue with stakeholders are critical to implementation.



Lehu Square - Copyright © R. Escher

FOR MORE INFORMATION :

<https://www.brugge.be>

