

# **The future of Arctic tourism and where it may lead us**

Studying Arctic tourism futures in the context of Svalbard

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In this blog post I want to discuss a very topical issue which is also the subject of my master's thesis in tourism research, namely last chance tourism narratives in the context of Arctic tourism futures. Thereby, I want to explore future narrativities at destinations which – following their current discourse – seem to have an expiration date. I wrote my thesis under the title “From last chance tourism to gone destinations? Future narratives of Svalbard as a post-Arctic tourism destination”. A title which both has the potential to spark controversy as well as fuel the discussion on the future of Arctic tourism destinations. I specifically chose to more closely examine Svalbard as a destination of reference as Svalbard is often taken as a prime example of a last chance tourism destination in academic literature and contemporary discourse. So, let me take you on a journey of discovery and provide you with a first glimpse of last chance tourism and the discussions on Arctic tourism futures.

## **What is last chance tourism?**

But perhaps we should take it back a few steps to provide context. What even is last chance tourism and why does the term provoke some worrisome thinking when looking to the future? To put it as simple as possible, last chance tourism describes all travel to destinations at risk of disappearing or changing in a way that supposedly makes them uninteresting for the future tourist to travel there. In the context of the Arctic, it is mostly climate change that could pose a threat to future travel. At present, the general narrative on Arctic tourism mostly describes travel to snowy and icy landscapes and pristine, untouched nature. It promises the tourist a journey to explore a region so utterly different to any other place on the globe. What will happen though if climate change melts all this away and we view the polar regions in a future, post-Arctic scenario? Will the Arctic still be interesting enough to travel to with a large portion of the cryosphere<sup>1</sup> gone? How will the future narrative on Arctic destinations (need to) change? And in turn, how do tourism experts at a destination that is referred to as a last chance tourism destination narrate their view of the future? It is especially the latter question that posed the main research focus within my study.

## **The discourse on the future of last chance tourism destinations**

Why is the discourse on the future of last chance tourism destinations such a touchy subject? Per definition, last chance tourism implies that there might be no direct tourism future at a destination that falls into that travel category. It is therefore quite interesting to dive deeper into how last chance tourism is discursively approached in both academic as well as contemporary discourse. When looking at different texts, blogposts, and journal articles on the last chance tourism phenomenon four different narratives are found that describe the general discourse on last chance tourism: narrative of hope, narrative of remembrance, narrative of demise, and narrative of reverse pioneering.

## **Last chance tourism narratives**

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<sup>1</sup> The cryosphere describes the earth's frozen water body, e.g. snow and ice

The first last chance tourism narrative is the narrative of hope. As the name entails, the narrative has quite a hopeful undertone to it. It is most commonly discussed with the concept of ambassadorship/place stewardship as a result of experiencing the change at a destination first hand. In theory, this experience leads to an increase in advocacy for and place attachment to a destination. Very commonly, it is emphasized that there are efforts to educate the visitors on what is at stake of losing in hopes for them to change their behaviour. So to say, visiting destinations at risk of disappearing adds a dose of reality to the sometimes quite intangible concept of climate change and, in theory, raises awareness.

The second narrative is the narrative of remembrance. Last chance tourism destinations are oftentimes discursively approached in a way that suggests that they will be disappearing – no matter what. Within this narrative it is suggested that tourists try to preserve a certain memory of last chance tourism destinations by travelling to them and experiencing them in the same way they were always portrayed and imagined. Last chance travel can thus almost be seen as a form of pilgrimage in which tourists pay their respects to a destination and honour its memory in the face of irreversible change.

The third narrative is the narrative of demise. By last chance tourism destinations being communicated through the very demise that characterises them, a certain urgency to visit and experience a destination before it is too late is created. Now, what is interesting is that tourists want to see and experience the fragility of certain places and species but only so much that this notion of loss and threat is only in the air, hovering over the place but not completely changing the place and experience itself. One could therefore say that last chance tourism is capturing a frozen moment in time, a literal tipping point and only then it is interesting and desirable to visit.

And lastly, the fourth and final narrative is the narrative of reverse pioneering. Last chance tourists are practically chasing after the feeling of being able to see and experience something before it is indefinitely too late. The tourist is thus motivated by a distinct fear of missing out on something. In turn, being able to see a dying destination or a struggling species before it is too late suggests a certain feeling of achievement to have been amongst the few lucky last ones.

The paradox within last chance tourism that also connects the four narratives is that ironically, the very effort to travel to destinations at risk of disappearing speeds up their demise. Even though last chance tourism advocates argue that travel to fragile destinations opens up the tourists' eyes to what is at risk of losing, studies suggest otherwise. A heightened sense of environmental consciousness is only found in a very limited number of visitors and does not seem to prevail for long after the travel experience ends.

### **Last chance to...? Svalbard's tourism futures in the context of Arctic tourism developments**

To put the four narratives into a more practical context, let us next view them in the context of an actual destination: Svalbard. To gain a more holistic understanding how people living and/or working at a so-called last chance tourism destination view the future, I got in touch with eight tourism experts involved in Svalbard's tourism industry. The discussions I had with them suggest that the current developments on the archipelago will lead it into a more

controlled tourism future. May it be due to new regulations being passed to further control and limit tourism or the current developments regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new set of regulations currently being passed on the archipelago could potentially make tourism less attractive and favour a shift of Arctic tourism focus elsewhere. Especially Russia was named as a serious competitor to look out for in the future. Arctic tourism developments are characterized by quite a fierce competition – may it be in the light of tourism alone or also when taking other economic branches into consideration. How those developments may impact a future Arctic tourism experience may however be a question that remains unanswered for now.

Especially for smaller competitors within Arctic tourism the Covid-19 pandemic could have had serious impacts. As with many other places, many actors had to leave Svalbard's tourism industry when the pandemic hit and tourism was suspended indefinitely. It might now be the bigger competitors that will shape Svalbard's tourism future or the future of Arctic tourism in general if we wish to view this development in a wider context. In the context of Svalbard, it may be especially Norwegian-owned businesses that could profit from the current regulations being passed.

The majority of interviewees felt the need to point out that they disagree with the current way tourism is conducted on the archipelago. At present, the tourism experience seems to be quite consumption-based and also seems to display different last chance tourism notions. Meaning that travel to Svalbard promotes quite a short-lived experience and, on some occasions, actively uses the last chance tourism attitude and fear of missing out on something to sell their experiences. All in the name of a photographic trophy to be shown off to others after the trip or for the tourists to achieve a memory to hold dear after their visit.

The interviewees called for a need to approach future tourism efforts differently. Especially taking in the travel experiences through the lens of a smartphone is something that would not fit with the nature setting Svalbard has to offer. Consequently, some advocated for banning phones altogether and thereby create a little travel bubble of reconnecting with nature and also ourselves far away from electronics – resembling a way of how early Arctic pioneers may have felt when they first set foot on the archipelago. In a way, this would enable the tourist to experience the fragile environment the Arctic is home to.

### **Looking post last chance tourism**

One could argue that we as the tourists have set ourselves on a higher, elevated position above nature and the environment we experience. Taking it back a step and actively engaging with nature in a more raw way that is not filtered through the view of a phone screen could help remind us of our place and own fragility in this world. This approach to tourism is especially interesting in the light of climate change which impacts the Arctic regions more than any other region on this planet. Perhaps then, Arctic tourism could free from last chance tourism notions in the experiences it provides and reach a more wholesome overall tourism experience that is better combinable with the fragile environment it takes place in.