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TOURISM AFTER THE PANDEMIC: SAFETY AS A PILLAR OF TRUST AND GROWTH

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Abstract:
The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruptions in global tourism, with a sharp decline in tourist flows during 2020 and 2021. Although the sector has shown remarkable resilience and recovery began as early as 2022, the process of rebuilding trust in tourism is still ongoing. In this context, tourist safety becomes a key factor not only for restoring consumer confidence but also for the stable growth and sustainable development of tourism. This paper analyzes the role of safety in the modern tourism environment, with particular attention to the challenges arising in the post-pandemic period, including changes in tourist behavior, rising costs, labor shortages in the sector, geopolitical tensions, and the impact of climate change. The importance of integrating safety measures into tourism policies, destination promotion, and planning is also discussed. The aim of the paper is to highlight that safety, as the foundation of trust, is a necessary condition for the long-term growth and competitiveness of the tourism industry in an era of increasing global uncertainty.
Keywords: *tourism, safety, pandemic, trust, sustainable development, tourism policy*

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for modern tourism, causing multiple disruptions and losses that led to the deepest crisis in the history of the industry. As tourism gradually recovers and returns to pre-pandemic levels, academic and professional attention is increasingly focused on issues of sustainability, resilience, and safety as key pillars of the sector's future development. Tourism, as a complex socio-economic phenomenon, is extremely vulnerable to various types of crises from health and safety issues to economic and climate-related disruptions [9]. Therefore, the need to redefine and strengthen safety systems is not only a condition for survival but also a prerequisite for restoring the trust of travelers, local communities, and investors.

Mass tourism, characterized by large numbers of visitors in limited spaces, requires a clearly defined set of fundamental measures aimed at ensuring stable and harmonious development in the interest of travelers, service providers, and the local population. The exposure of people to traffic accidents, the risk of criminal attacks during travel, in hotels or on excursions, and the dangers of fire, food poisoning, and infectious diseases all strongly influence the choice of destination, length of stay, repeat visits, and tourist recommendations. Therefore, countries that seriously consider tourism a core economic activity must develop comprehensive laws and standards for tourist safety.

Contemporary tourist destinations face numerous challenges that go beyond the pandemic the energy crisis, inflation, geopolitical tensions, migration, climate disasters, and resource shortages further complicate the process of sustainable development planning [13]. At the same time, tourists are exposed to various risks from crime, infections, and natural disasters to cultural misunderstandings and lack of adequate information. According to the classification of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), sources of risk are present both within and outside the tourism sector, including individual tourist behavior and the physical characteristics of the environment [23].

Tourist safety must be ensured throughout the entire journey and stay at the destination. In this context, this paper explores the importance of safety as a foundation for the recovery and growth of tourism in the post-crisis period. The focus is on the integration of safety measures into sustainable destination development strategies, the protection of tourists' consumer rights, and the implementation of participatory planning that involves all stakeholders – local communities, tourists, policymakers, and service providers. The aim is to emphasize that safety is not merely a technical or logistical aspect of tourism, but a crucial social and developmental factor that enables a stable, inclusive, and long-term sustainable tourism system.

Theoretical Framework of Tourism Safety

Safety in tourism encompasses a complex set of factors arising from diverse risk sources, posing challenges for states, the tourism industry, and travelers themselves. According to the classification of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), safety risks in tourism are divided into four main categories: risks stemming from the human and

institutional environment outside the tourism sector, those originating within the tourism sector and commercial operations, individual risks related to tourists' personal behavior, and environmental risks including natural, climatic, and epidemiological factors [23]. This typology highlights the multi-layered nature of vulnerabilities in tourism, indicating the need for cross-sectoral cooperation involving public authorities, private stakeholders, and civil society.

In the current context, especially following the global pandemic, increased attention is given to the distinction between natural and anthropogenic risks [19]. Natural risks refer to events that occur independently of human action, such as earthquakes, floods, or the spread of infectious diseases. In contrast, anthropogenic risks result from human activities either unintentionally, due to technical failures, negligence, or human error, or intentionally through violence, crime, or terrorism. An added challenge emerges when tourists, due to unfamiliarity with local language, customs, or legal systems, become particularly vulnerable to misinterpretations or legal and cultural misunderstandings [11].

One of the most important normative international documents addressing safety in tourism is Resolution A/RES/284 (IX), adopted in 1991 at the Ninth Session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization in Buenos Aires [22]. The resolution affirms that safety is a fundamental human need, particularly in the context of international travel, and that ensuring safety contributes to achieving the social and cultural goals of tourism, building international trust, and promoting human rights. The document emphasizes the development of national tourism safety strategies, the adoption of health and sanitary standards, environmental protection, and the provision of accurate and timely information about potential risks. It also underscores the importance of diplomatic and consular support mechanisms and improved consumer protection procedures within tourism services.

From this perspective, the rights of tourists should be viewed through the lens of their status as consumers, particularly focusing on the right to information, physical safety, and legal protection. Accordingly, states are encouraged to establish effective mechanisms for protecting tourists who fall victim to criminal acts, as well as efficient complaint and dispute resolution procedures. Institutional support also includes facilitating access to consular assistance, especially in cases where tourists are unable

to manage emergency situations on their own [5]. Furthermore, governments are expected to assist tourists in cases requiring emergency repatriation or, in extreme situations, in the transfer of mortal remains.

Tourist safety is not limited to the moment of arrival at the destination, rather it spans the entire travel experience from preparation and departure, through the stay and use of services, to the return home [1]. Every actor within the tourism supply chain from transport providers and guides to hoteliers and tour operators bears responsibility for upholding a high standard of safety to ensure sustainable and responsible tourism development.

Harmonization in the Field of Tourist Insurance and Protection in the European Union

Within the development of the single market and the freedom of movement of people, the European Union has paid particular attention to the protection of passenger and tourist rights, aiming to ensure legal certainty and equal treatment across all Member States. The process of harmonization in the field of tourist insurance and protection involves aligning the legislation of Member States, particularly in areas such as consumer rights, passenger rights in air, rail, water, and bus transport, as well as the right to compensation and assistance in cases of trip cancellations, delays, or service disruptions [6].

One of the key instruments of the EU in this area is Directive (EU) 2015/2302 [8] on package travel and linked travel arrangements which protects travelers in cases of insolvency of travel organizers, ensures the right to reimbursement or repatriation, and defines clear obligations for service providers regarding consumer information. Additionally, Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004 [7] governs air passenger rights, including compensation for canceled flights or denied boarding, while Regulation (EU) No. 2021/782 [6] harmonizes the rights of passengers in rail transport.

An important segment of harmonization also relates to the development of the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), which allows EU citizens to access emergency medical care during temporary stays in another Member State under the same conditions as nationals of that country [3]. This instrument represents a significant step toward

standardizing tourists' rights to healthcare and reducing legal and financial uncertainty during international travel.

Through institutions such as the European Consumer Centre Network (ECC-Net), the European Union provides support to tourists in cross-border disputes, offering free advice, mediation, and complaint resolution [4]. These mechanisms contribute to strengthening trust in the internal tourism market and affirm the idea of safe and responsible tourism aligned with the fundamental values of the Union.

Harmonization in the area of tourist insurance and protection in the EU is not merely a technical or legal process, but also a reflection of political will to ensure that all EU citizens are equally protected, regardless of the Member State in which they are located [2]. This creates a foundation for the development of sustainable and safe tourism that respects consumer rights, reduces risks, and enables rapid response in crisis situations.

Current Trends and Challenges in International Tourism After the Pandemic: Implications for Safety and Sustainable Development

According to the latest data from UN Tourism, an estimated 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2024, indicating a near-complete recovery (99%) compared to 2019 levels [21]. This represents an 11% increase over 2023, or 140 million more arrivals, highlighting strong post-pandemic demand, economic recovery, and the successful resurgence of destinations on the global tourism map [21].

The highest growth relative to the pre-crisis period was observed in the Middle East (+32% compared to 2019), while Africa and Europe also surpassed 2019 levels by 7% and 1%, [12] respectively. Standout destinations include El Salvador, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Morocco, and the Dominican Republic, all of which recorded double-digit increases in both arrivals and tourism receipts [12]. Meanwhile, the Asia-Pacific region, although still slightly below 2019 levels, demonstrated significant recovery rising from 66% in late 2023 to 87% in 2024 [12].

International tourism receipts reached a record USD 1.6 trillion, while total export earnings (including passenger transport) amounted to USD 1.9 trillion, surpassing pre-pandemic performance [20] (TravelBizNews., 2025). Particularly noteworthy is the

stabilization of average spending per tourist, estimated at around USD 1,100 in 2024 above the pre-pandemic average of USD 1,000 [20].

While the 2024 data confirm the quantitative recovery of tourism, qualitative development remains a challenge, especially in terms of safety, inflation, geopolitical tensions, and climate-related disruptions. More than half of respondents from the UN Tourism Panel of Experts identified high transportation and accommodation costs, economic pressures, geopolitical risks, extreme weather events, and staff shortages as key barriers to continued growth. Despite this, most experts (64%) expressed a positive outlook for 2025, with international arrivals expected to grow by 3–5% [21].

In the context of this dynamic recovery, the need to balance growth with sustainability becomes increasingly critical. Two global tourism trends are gaining prominence: the search for sustainable practices and the rising popularity of lesser-known destinations. These shifts have direct implications for tourist safety and call for more flexible and proactive risk management strategies, along with the reinforcement of regulatory consumer protection mechanisms in tourism.

This leads to the central argument of this paper: quantitative growth in tourism must be accompanied by the establishment of universal and adaptable safety standards, to ensure that the development of the sector remains sustainable and inclusive, without compromising the rights and safety of travelers. In this regard, enhanced international coordination, the implementation of crisis protocols, the development of digital tourist information systems, and the alignment of safety standards with both local contexts and global challenges are strongly recommended.

Discussion and Key Lessons Learned

Contemporary tourism, faced with the consequences of a global pandemic and a dynamic geopolitical-economic environment, is encountering complex challenges that go beyond traditional safety frameworks. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted the physical movement of tourists but also profoundly shook the foundations of trust that destinations had built over years. Therefore, safety can no longer be viewed as a secondary component of service quality, but rather as a central pillar of tourism development in times of crisis [13].

Within the context of crisis management, there is a clear need for an anticipatory approach identifying potential risks, ensurin g institutional preparedness, and enabling swift response [17]. Many destinations, particularly in developing countries, have not established sufficiently standardized emergency procedures or early warning systems, nor have they developed mechanisms for effective inter-sectoral coordination. This often results in fragmented crisis management, insufficient protection for tourists, and a damaged destination image.A particular challenge is the asymmetry in tourist information, especially concerning their rights, protection options, and access to assistance during travel. Issues such as emergency repatriation, access to healthcare, loss of personal documents, or contact with consular offices require clearly structured support mechanisms that are accessible, understandable, and responsive [16]. In light of emerging trends, it becomes evident that the quantitative recovery of tourism must be accompanied by qualitative improvements in safety standards and the strengthening of institutional resilience. In this context, the issue of "overtourism" is gaining attention, as it further complicates the management of space, resources, and safety capacities, especially during peak tourist seasons [15].

Experiences from European destinations indicate that there is no universal model for addressing the challenges of unbalanced or crisis-affected tourism. Instead, a contextualized, multidimensional, and participatory approach is required. Local communities, in collaboration with the tourism industry, state institutions, and tourists themselves, must take part in shaping policies that balance development, protection, and sustainability [3].

To improve safety and resilience in the tourism sector, it is necessary to develop an integrated system encompassing various aspects of tourist protection and effective crisis response [10]. It is essential to implement internationally recognized safety standards in tourist facilities, including hygiene and sanitation conditions, food safety, fire prevention, environmental protection, and access control at tourist sites. Additionally, national and local crisis management strategies should be developed with clearly defined action protocols for situations such as natural disasters, epidemics, terrorist threats, and other emergencies.

Information about the safety conditions at destinations must be accessible, clear, and distributed through multiple channels such as educational digital platforms, mobile applications, and multilingual travel guides with emphasis on emergency contacts and recommended actions in crisis situations [18]. At the same time, it is necessary to introduce systematic training for tourism sector employees in crisis communication and safety procedures, so they can respond efficiently, professionally, and calmly in critical moments.

Sustainable tourism development also entails empowering local communities, which should be actively involved in planning and implementing crisis mitigation measures, thereby strengthening the sector's resilience and promoting broader societal inclusion. Finally, it is imperative to enhance the legal framework for consumer protection by clearly defining the responsibilities of travel organizers, improving refund mechanisms, and ensuring easier access to healthcare and consular services. Only through a comprehensive approach combining prevention, information, education, and legal protection can long-term, safe, and sustainable tourism development be achieved [14].

Tourism in the post-pandemic era requires new foundations of trust, with safety as its essential pillar. It is not merely a technical or legal matter, but deeply connected to the perception of security, the sense of control, and transparent risk management. By establishing a comprehensive and integrated safety system, tourist destinations can achieve not only greater resilience but also strengthen their competitive position amid growing global uncertainty.

Conclusion

Tourism safety, as a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, health, legal, and informational aspects of tourist protection, has become a foundational element in planning sustainable tourism development. **Theoretical frameworks and practical experience confirm** that tourist vulnerability stems not only from natural factors but also from human behavior, institutional gaps, and socio-cultural misunderstandings. This underscores the need for a comprehensive, anticipatory, and participatory approach to risk management.

In this context, **safety should no longer be viewed as a peripheral issue**, but rather as a central strategic priority, one that directly influences trust, competitiveness, and long-term resilience in the tourism sector. All actors involved from governments and industry professionals to local communities and tourists themselves share responsibility for ensuring a safe and stable tourism environment**. The travel experience must be protected at every stage**, from planning and departure, through stay and service use, to return requiring a holistic chain of responsibility and coordinated response.To that end, it is crucial to develop an integrated system of tourist protection, incorporating internationally recognized safety standards related to hygiene, food safety, fire prevention, environmental sustainability, and access control at tourism sites. National and local authorities must adopt clearly defined crisis management strategies, with action protocols tailored to specific threats such as natural disasters, epidemics, or acts of terrorism. Equally important is the **accessibility, clarity, and dissemination** of safety-related information. Destinations must ensure that tourists receive timely and reliable guidance via digital platforms, mobile applications, and multilingual materials, especially regarding emergency contacts and recommended actions during crises. Moreover, tourism workers should undergo systematic training in safety and crisis communication procedures, enabling them to respond calmly, competently, and effectively in emergency situations.

Sustainable development in tourism also requires the **active engagement of local communities**, not only as service providers but as full participants in decision-making processes. Their involvement enhances destination resilience, ensures a fairer distribution of benefits, and fosters greater public acceptance of tourism. Consumer protection frameworks must also be improved, particularly by clearly defining the responsibilities of travel organizers, strengthening refund mechanisms, and ensuring prompt access to medical and consular services.

In light of these imperatives, it is evident that tourism in the post-pandemic era must rest on new foundations of trust, with safety as its essential pillar. It is not merely a technical or legal issue, but one deeply rooted in the perception of control, transparency, and preparedness. Establishing a comprehensive and well-integrated safety architecture will not only strengthen resilience but also enhance the global competitiveness of

destinations in an increasingly uncertain world. Long-term, safe, and sustainable tourism development can only be achieved through a combined commitment to prevention, information, education, community engagement, and legal protection.

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