

Academic Discipline of Hospitality & Tourism Management
BA International Hotel Management
LEVEL 5

Sustainable Hospitality & Tourism Management
Report

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BMIH5006

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Word Count: 2012 words

Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use

I acknowledge the use of chatgpt.com on 01.03.2025, 02.03.2025, 03.03.2025 and 06.03.2025 to help me structure my essay and organize my ideas.

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Executive Summary

Cruise tourism plays a vital role in the UK's travel and hospitality industry, bringing economic benefits but also raising major sustainability concerns. Cruise ships contribute heavily to carbon emissions, ocean pollution, and overtourism in key port cities like Southampton, Liverpool, and Dover. This report examines these challenges and evaluates efforts to create a greener cruise sector.

While cruise lines such as P&O Cruises and Cunard are introducing cleaner fuels, advanced waste treatment systems, and shore power technology, progress remains slow due to high costs, inconsistent regulations, and continued demand for luxury experiences. The UK's ports are also making strides in sustainability, but the industry still faces significant environmental and economic hurdles.

This report explores key solutions, including investment in alternative fuels, improved waste management, stronger environmental policies, and more responsible tourism practices. Collaboration between cruise operators, policymakers, and travelers is crucial to making UK cruise tourism more sustainable for the future.

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Introduction

Hospitality transport refers to the various modes of transportation that facilitate the movement of guests within the tourism and hospitality industry. It encompasses the entire travel experience, from arrival at a destination to mobility within and between locations. Effective hospitality transport ensures seamless connectivity, convenience, and accessibility for tourists while also aligning with sustainability goals.

An example of hospitality transport is cruise tourism, where cruise ships act as both transportation and accommodation for passengers traveling to multiple destinations. Cruise tourism is a unique and growing sector of the hospitality industry, attracting millions of travellers each year. Unlike other modes of transport, cruise ships function as both accommodation and transport, creating an all-in-one tourism experience. However, this convenience comes at a cost. Cruise ships burn massive amounts of fuel, releasing high levels of carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the air. They also contribute to ocean pollution by discharging untreated wastewater and generating large amounts of waste. On top of that, they bring thousands of tourists to already crowded cities, making overtourism an even bigger issue. According to Jauhari (2021), while cruise tourism has undeniable economic benefits, its long-term sustainability depends on finding ways to minimize its environmental and social impact. This report will examine the effects of cruise tourism and explore what can be done to make it more sustainable.

The Role of Cruise Tourism in Hospitality Transport

Cruise tourism differs from other travel sectors in that it combines transport, accommodation, dining, and entertainment into a single experience. In the UK, cruise lines such as P&O Cruises and Cunard—both headquartered in Southampton—are at the forefront of the industry, offering trips to destinations across Europe, the Caribbean, and beyond. These cruises bring in thousands of visitors, boosting local economies and creating jobs in coastal communities. However, Costa and Costa (2022) argue that while cruise tourism generates significant economic gains, it also raises sustainability concerns that must be addressed to ensure long-term viability. With increasing awareness of

climate change, more UK travellers are demanding eco-friendly options, pressuring cruise companies to adopt greener alternatives.

Environmental, Economic, and Social Impacts of Cruise Tourism

Cruise tourism's environmental impact in the UK is significant. Edgell (2020) highlights that the industry is one of the biggest contributors to air pollution in port cities such as Southampton, where docked ships burn heavy fuel oil, releasing harmful sulfur oxides and nitrogen oxides into the atmosphere. This pollution not only affects the global climate but also contributes to respiratory health issues for local residents. Additionally, cruise ships generate vast amounts of waste, from food and plastic to sewage, some of which is released into the ocean, threatening marine life and delicate ecosystems. Research by Transport & Environment (2019) found that some luxury cruise ships emit 10 times more sulfur oxides (SOx) than all the cars in Europe combined, highlighting the urgent need for stricter regulations and alternative fuel adoption.

From an economic perspective, cruise tourism provides employment and supports businesses in port cities. Southampton, as the UK's busiest cruise port, benefits from direct and indirect employment in areas such as hospitality, retail, and port operations. However, not all financial benefits remain within local communities. Cooper (2021) explains that a large percentage of passenger spending is directed back to the cruise companies rather than benefiting local businesses, a phenomenon known as economic leakage. This issue is particularly evident when cruise passengers spend limited time at ports, opting for on-board dining and entertainment rather than contributing to the local economy.

The social impact of cruise tourism is also evident in popular UK coastal destinations, where mass tourism can overwhelm infrastructure, increase property prices, and change the character of historic port cities. Sloan, Legrand, and Chen (2017) emphasize that sustainable tourism policies are needed to protect these communities while ensuring the continued economic benefits of the industry. In locations like Liverpool and Dover, large cruise arrivals can lead to congestion, putting pressure on local transport systems, while overtourism in small coastal towns can reduce quality of life for residents.

Additionally, increased tourism can lead to commercialisation, where authentic cultural elements are overshadowed by mass-market tourism experiences tailored for cruise passengers rather than local traditions.

Challenges and Barriers to Sustainable Cruise Tourism

One of the most significant challenges in making UK cruise tourism more sustainable is its heavy reliance on fossil fuels. The majority of cruise ships continue to operate on heavy fuel oil, a highly polluting and carbon-intensive energy source. Although some companies are investing in liquefied natural gas (LNG) and biofuels, the transition is slow due to the high costs of retrofitting ships and upgrading port infrastructure. According to Korstanje, George, and Nedelea (2020), alternative fuel technologies are expensive to implement and require substantial financial commitment, something many cruise companies are hesitant to undertake without regulatory pressure or financial incentives.

Another challenge is the lack of consistent environmental regulations across different regions. Cruise ships operate in international waters and multiple jurisdictions, leading to a patchwork of inconsistent regulations regarding emissions, waste disposal, and sustainability practices. This inconsistency makes it difficult to enforce universal sustainability standards, as cruise operators may comply with stricter regulations in one port but take advantage of more lenient policies elsewhere. The UK government has started implementing stricter policies for reducing emissions in ports like Southampton, but there remains a need for coordinated international agreements to ensure cruise companies are held accountable for their environmental impact (Transport & Environment, 2019).

Consumer demand also presents a major challenge. Many travelers still prioritize luxury and entertainment over sustainability, pushing cruise lines to maintain energy-intensive features such as onboard water parks, large swimming pools, 24-hour dining, and extravagant entertainment venues. Haski-Leventhal (2018) notes that passenger expectations drive high-energy consumption, as cruise companies must provide round-the-clock services that significantly increase carbon footprints. While some eco-conscious

travelers actively seek sustainable cruise options, the majority of consumers prioritize affordability and onboard experience over environmental concerns, making it difficult for companies to justify expensive green investments.

Additionally, there is the issue of port congestion and overtourism in key UK destinations. Popular cruise ports such as Dover, Liverpool, and Southampton struggle with increased tourist numbers, leading to overcrowding, traffic congestion, and pressure on local infrastructure. Many cities have limited capacity to handle the thousands of passengers arriving simultaneously, which can negatively impact public transport, waste management, and air quality. The economic benefit of cruise tourism is also debated, as much of the revenue generated goes back to the cruise operators rather than local businesses, a phenomenon known as economic leakage (Cooper, 2021). Without policies to regulate visitor numbers or ensure fair distribution of economic benefits, many local communities see limited advantages from cruise tourism while bearing the brunt of its environmental and social costs.

Another significant challenge is the slow adoption of shore power technology. While ports like Southampton have begun installing shore power facilities, many UK ports lack the necessary infrastructure to allow cruise ships to plug into the electrical grid while docked. Without this, cruise ships continue to burn fossil fuels even while stationary, worsening local air pollution and contributing to respiratory health problems in nearby communities. The high cost of installing shore power systems and the lack of incentives for cruise operators to use them further slow down progress (UK Ship Register, 2023).

Finally, waste management remains a critical issue. Cruise ships generate huge amounts of plastic waste, sewage, and food waste, much of which is disposed of at sea due to insufficient onboard waste treatment facilities. Despite international regulations like MARPOL, some cruise companies still engage in illegal dumping, harming marine ecosystems. Even those that comply with waste disposal laws face difficulties in properly sorting and processing waste due to limited onboard recycling programs (P&O Cruises, 2024). More investment is needed in circular economy practices, such as recycling, onboard composting, and partnerships with ports for better waste disposal options.

Overall, the path to sustainable cruise tourism in the UK faces numerous financial, regulatory, and operational challenges. While some progress has been made, particularly in alternative fuels, port infrastructure, and waste management, much more needs to be done to ensure that the cruise industry aligns with the UK's broader sustainability goals. Addressing these barriers requires a collaborative approach between cruise operators, government regulators, and travelers, pushing for a cruise sector that is both economically viable and environmentally responsible. One of the biggest challenges in making UK cruise tourism more sustainable is the industry's dependence on fossil fuels. The majority of cruise ships still operate on heavy fuel oil, a highly polluting energy source. While some companies are investing in liquefied natural gas (LNG) and biofuels, the transition is slow due to high costs and infrastructure requirements. Korstanje, George, and Nedelea (2020) note that inconsistent environmental regulations across different regions further complicate efforts to enforce sustainability measures. Another challenge is consumer demand. Haski-Leventhal (2018) points out that a lot of travellers still put luxury ahead of sustainability, which pushes cruise lines to keep offering high-energy-consuming features like giant swimming pools, flashy entertainment venues, and extravagant dining experiences. If more travellers start prioritising eco-friendly choices, cruise companies will have to step up and make real changes towards sustainability.

Case Studies and Industry Examples from the UK

Several UK-based cruise companies and ports have implemented sustainability measures to reduce the environmental footprint of cruise tourism. P&O Cruises, for instance, introduced the LNG-powered Iona in 2021, a ship designed to lower emissions compared to traditional diesel-powered vessels. This marks a significant step in the industry's move towards cleaner fuels. Cunard, another major UK-based cruise line, has incorporated advanced wastewater treatment systems across its fleet to prevent ocean pollution and ensure compliance with international environmental regulations.

In addition to cruise operators, UK ports are also playing a crucial role in sustainability efforts. The Port of Southampton, the busiest cruise terminal in the UK, has made strides in reducing emissions by installing shore power technology. This allows ships to switch off their engines while docked, cutting down on air pollution in the

surrounding area. Dover Port has also launched green initiatives, including investments in low-emission port infrastructure and eco-friendly waste disposal systems. These initiatives have set an example for other UK cruise hubs looking to improve their environmental performance.

Furthermore, some UK coastal destinations have started to regulate cruise arrivals to prevent overtourism. Liverpool City Council, for example, has introduced measures to better manage the influx of cruise tourists, ensuring that local businesses benefit while minimising congestion and environmental degradation. These examples highlight the growing commitment within the UK's cruise sector to adopting more sustainable practices.

Recommendations for Sustainable Cruise Tourism

To ensure the long-term sustainability of cruise tourism, several key changes are necessary. Firstly, cruise companies must increase investment in alternative fuels, including LNG, hydrogen, and biofuels, to reduce their carbon footprint. Secondly, waste management practices need to be improved. Batabyal (2018) stresses that banning single-use plastics and enforcing stricter recycling policies onboard can significantly reduce pollution. Additionally, expanding the use of shore power technology in UK ports will allow more ships to reduce their emissions while docked, cutting down on air pollution in port cities. Lastly, cruise operators should rethink itineraries to ease pressure on overcrowded destinations while promoting less-visited, sustainable travel locations. Edgell (2020) argues that collaboration between the UK government and the cruise industry is essential in developing regulations that balance economic growth with environmental protection.

Conclusion

Cruise tourism is an essential part of the UK's hospitality industry, but its environmental and social costs cannot be ignored. While the industry provides significant economic benefits, the negative impact on air quality, ocean pollution, and coastal communities must be addressed. By transitioning to cleaner fuels, improving waste management, and adopting sustainable port infrastructure, UK cruise tourism can continue to thrive while minimising its environmental footprint. Companies that lead the

way in green innovation will not only comply with increasing regulations but will also appeal to the growing number of eco-conscious travellers. The future of cruise tourism in the UK depends on immediate action towards sustainability, ensuring that both businesses and the environment benefit in the long run.

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