

# Watching Our Borders: Tourism, Brexit and Covid-19

***By Dr. Hazel Andrews, Reader Tourism, Culture & Society,  
School of Doctoral Management Studies, Faculty of Business  
and Law, Liverpool John Moores University***

A central theme of the campaign to leave the EU by Vote Leave was the notion of ‘taking back control.’ This idea was closely linked to control of the UK’s national borders and the end of the free movement of people for work, lifestyle choices or holidays between the UK and other EU countries.

Before COVID-19 and the pandemic the global travel and tourism sector was among the world’s largest economic activities. The World Travel and Tourism Council report that in 2019 travel and tourism contributed \$8.9 trillion to global GDP and accounted for 330 million jobs [world-wide](#).

The success of international tourism, in part, relies on people’s ability to move, relatively freely, across international borders. Following the UK’s decision to leave the EU the extent of freedom of movement across UK-EU borders was brought into question.

Membership of the EU had various advantages for the facilitation of tourism. Apart from visa-free travel, other benefits included for example the EU negotiated Open Skies Agreement, cross border consumer protection and the use of the European Health Insurance Card.

Before the referendum a joint report by ABTA and Deloitte had noted that the cross-border traffic between the UK and EU for tourism was strong and that the other EU member countries were one of the main markets of tourists to the [UK](#).

The report also raised concerns about the lack of clarity regarding the way forward in terms of issues such as free movement. The associated uncertainty also raised concerns about impacts on the value of sterling and the overall costs of travel.

Since the delivery of the referendum result the uncertainty has remained. And, even with the final departure date enacted, the government's on-going negotiations with the EU about the future trading relationship has not ameliorated the situation.

Nevertheless, it is possible to say that both the campaign and the outcome of the referendum has impacted the business of tourism. Prior to the 2016 vote the holiday booking company Lowcost Travelgroup went into administration linking its demise to Brexit uncertainty and associated fall in the value of the pound. In the aftermath of the referendum, airlines Monarch and Flybmi also collapsed in 2017 and 2019, both attributing their ruin, in part, to Brexit.

The decision to leave the EU had other implications. Tourism is not just about holidays. As an export it is a way in which a country projects an image of itself to the wider world.

A tourism destination image often references ideas of welcome, which is among the basic tenets of hospitality. The practices of hospitality and tourism are informed by each other and are interlinked economic sectors.

The image of the UK as a hospitable place for overseas visitors also took a hit in the aftermath of the decision to leave the EU. In 2018 the UK's reputation for being a welcoming country fell in ranking for the second consecutive [year](#).

The welcome is not just about that which is extended to visitors but also how residents living in, but from outside the UK, were made to feel. For many there was a general sense of no longer being welcome, which coupled with uncertainties over status, led to many non-UK citizens returning to their countries of origin in the EU. In so doing they also took a proportion of potential inbound tourists with them in the form of the Visiting Friends and Relatives market for international tourists.

The focus that Brexit has brought to the UK's international borders not only has implications for tourism but also focuses attention on questions of identity and belonging.

A focus on identity resulting from the Brexit debate is not only about national borders, but other forms of understandings about who we are. The campaign drew a simple division between being a Remainer or a Leaver. The analysis of the voting patterns showed further schisms between the countries that make-up the UK, as well as along lines of class, age, education and regional identities.

The decision to remain or leave the EU in 2016 could be understood as a concern only for the British people. However, the consequences of leaving will be felt beyond the UK's borders. Leaving will have repercussions for the Commonwealth and British Overseas Territories, for the countries welcoming those who have decided to leave the UK, whether they be members of an expatriate community or UK citizens choosing to live elsewhere. It will also have an impact on those who work in overseas holiday destinations, often reliant on British tourists for an income.

The UK's departure from the EU has consequences both in the UK and overseas. When this is coupled with on-going debates about the future of the UK-EU relationship Brexit should be in the spotlight. Until March 2020 Brexit was invariably the lead headline for news media outlets as debates in Parliament, and among friends, family and colleagues continued apace.

What shifted the focus in March 2020 was coronavirus, the ensuing global pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions. Given the threat to life and the catastrophic impact on livelihoods, businesses (of which travel, tourism and hospitality have been particularly hard hit) and national economies it is not surprising that Brexit appears less important.

However, in September 2020 Brexit was once again a lead story. This was because of the Government's [Internal Market Bill](#), which would in effect 're-write' parts of the Withdrawal Deal negotiated between the EU and UK by Boris Johnson. Further, the bill was seen as undermining the powers of the UK's devolved governments because they would not be able, for example, to set their own food standards in the UK's internal market. Once again divisions within the UK, which the referendum result had highlighted, came into sharp relief.

The Internal Market Bill was widely criticised both in the UK and abroad primarily because it would lead to a breach in international law. Such a breach raises questions about whether any other government in the world would ever again be able to trust the UK.

Campaigns to leave the EU and Johnson's response to the coronavirus crisis in the UK have both made appeals to a sense of national character. Among such characteristics is the idea of fair play which is inextricably linked to justice, honour and integrity. It appears ironic, therefore, that one of the qualities that is supposed to define a national sense of self could be so readily discarded. Perhaps decisions in the future about whether to visit the UK as a tourist will not only be based on perceptions of welcome, but also on questions of trust.

Arguably, Covid-19 has also highlighted issues of trust, especially in our political leaders. The reported breaking of lockdown rules in March 2020 by some of those who made the rules, the U-turns and lack of clarity around Boris Johnson's handling of the pandemic have been [reported](#) as undermining the public's trust in central government.

Like Brexit, Covid-19 has drawn attention to regional differences and disparities in England, perhaps most notably in terms of the north-south divide. For example, the categorisation of places within a tier system, and, for Greater Manchester, arguments between Mayor Andy Burnham and Westminster about funding.

The Brexit vote showed the UK is not as united as the name suggests. Covid-19 has drawn more attention not only to divisions of, for example, class, race and age, but also to the nation's internal borders. The different rules in Wales compared to England have highlighted the English-Welsh border in ways not experienced in recent [times](#).

Border-watching seems ever more important, whether this be in the safeguarding of the boundaries of our bodies against Covid-19, or the need to watch both the external and internal borders of the UK as the country enters a new era on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021.

***Dr Hazel Andrews is Reader in Tourism, Culture & Society at Liverpool John Moores University. As a social anthropologist***

*Hazel is interested in issues of identity, self-hood and the body, principally in relation to tourism and travel. Hazel's PhD thesis was the first full length ethnographic study of British charter tourists which involved periods of participant observation in the resorts of Palmanova and Magaluf on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. She is the author of the monograph [The British on Holiday. Charter Tourism Identity and Consumption](#) published by Channel View in 2011 and the editor of several books including [Tourism and Violence](#) (Routledge, 2014) and most recently [Tourism & Brexit. Travel, Borders and Identity](#) (Channel View, 2021).*