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Greg Dickinson

The nation's beauty spots have declared war on coach tours

Banning coach parties may lessen the strain of overtourism in Britain – but it will keep many from seeing the wonders of their own land, too



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Some locals argue that roads around the Birling Gap are not suitable for high volumes of coach and bus traffic. Credit: Alamy



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The National Trust has [banned coaches](#) from parking or dropping off passengers at Birling Gap, a popular beach in East Sussex, amid fears of [rising visitor numbers](#) and coastal erosion.

The news caught my eye not just because this is 12 miles away from my front door, but because it represents the latest move in a nationwide war against coach tours. A war which isn't as straightforward as it might seem.

Last year, the picturesque village of [Bourton-on-the-Water](#) banned coaches (nicknamed the “cruise ship of the Cotswolds”) after record [crowds descended on its cobbled streets](#). In a new trial, coaches will be forced to park a 10-minute walk away from the village centre. Nearby [Bibury](#) is pondering a similar coach ban after more than 50 per day arrived during peak periods.

The argument at both Birling Gap and the Cotswold villages is that they are simply not equipped for dozens of galumphing coaches descending every day, nor for the thousands of tourists who they airdrop into the thick of

things during peak months. Clearly, something needs to change. But is banning coaches the answer?



Birling Gap is among the most popular National Trust destinations with visitors. Credit: alamy

“Time and again it feels like the coach industry has been victimised or discriminated against,” argues Robert Shaw, director of Harry Shaw and Chairman of the Coach Tourism Association.

One of Shaw’s concerns is that banning coaches will negatively impact passengers with mobility requirements.

“A lot of coach passengers do have mobility issues, that’s why they’re using coaches, because they know there’s guaranteed assistance. They’re being chauffeured, effectively, so this will affect their ability to go and see places of national interest,” says Shaw. Some coach firms say they have now dropped Bourton from their itineraries entirely, for this very reason.

I am sure some locals will be celebrating the ban on coaches. But are they accidentally shouldering out the wrong tourists? It strikes me that one of the biggest challenges, whether in a chocolate-box village or on the Seven Sisters cliffs, is that people have forgotten how to behave. There is a new type of tourist who is very concerned with getting a perfect photograph or video to post on social media, rather than spending money on some local handicrafts or fudge.

In the case of Bourton, locals regularly complain of tourists gazing through residential windows. At Seven Sisters, it is people standing perilously close to the crumbling cliff-edges.

Have a quick browse online and you will find dozens of independent, London-based operators which offer “day tours” to Birling Gap or the [Cotswolds](#). Some of these use full-sized coaches, but many use small minibuses. I fear there is a scenario where these coach bans will restrict access for high-spending, culturally intrigued passengers, while continuing to welcome TikTokers who are fixated only on creating “content”.



The National Trust has banned coaches from parking or dropping off visitors at Birling Gap, East Sussex Credit: Alamy

As to where the coaches will go instead? I saw one coach operator changing its itinerary to include Stow-on-the-Wold instead of Bourton.

“Coach operators will provide alternative destinations,” muses Shaw. “But it’s nice not to be forced to do so, it’s nice to do it by choice. And how long until they’re complaining about overtourism as well, if everyone moves to the same places?”

The problem with coaches is that they are big. They are cumbersome. Like cruise ships, they are amongst the most visually straightforward ways for news outlets to depict overtourism (even if the scale – 5,000 passengers versus 50 – is slightly different). But the truth is that coaches produce far lower emissions per passenger than cars. And, as a bonus, drivers or tour leaders can educate passengers en route on the local sore points and behavioural issues they should avoid when they arrive.

The war on coaches will reduce visitor numbers, and will remove a fleet of very large vehicles from often rural locations. Maybe that, in itself, is all that needs to be said on the matter. But I refuse to believe that banning coaches is a cure-all for the myriad overtourism concerns at the UK’s beauty spots. And – whisper it – the coach passengers might just be missed by the businesses who depend on them.

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