




Analysis of tourist flows and the comfort of guided tours in the Seu-Cathedral district of Valencia using participant observation and digital itinerary monitoring tools

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Abstract

One of the challenges facing tourist destinations is to increase knowledge about aspects such as security concerning its implementation, measurement and evaluation to ensure the comfort of the visit. Tourist groups, both spontaneous and organised, that pass through the historic centre of a city are a permanent and fundamental element in the development of the tourist experience.

However, it is necessary to know the routes taken by the guided groups to avoid concentrations of visitors that could impede mobility and hinder the daily lives of other residents. To obtain more information about this tourist activity, this study focuses on the study of the group's situations of insecurity and discomfort during the tour. The methodology consisted of participant observation on the routes usually followed by these guided groups applied to the Seu-Cathedral neighbourhood in Valencia. The Geo Tracker GPS tool was also used to monitor the route and detect the number of encounters and places of congestion. The results point to the need to plan the safety aspects of the visits, especially traffic and transit obstacles, the identification of congestion situations and the holding of periodic events, as well as the study of shaded areas and the incorporation of outdoor furniture to increase the number of visitors.

Keywords: *tourist flows, guided tours, digital tools, mobility, streetscape, GPS*

1. Introduction

As highlighted by the World Economic Forum (2024), tourism destinations must strive to increase their competitiveness and improve the quality of their services. This includes controlling the number of visitors, which is not always easy in open spaces, to ensure the safety of visitors and residents. However, despite the importance of safety and knowing that many tourist destinations, to a greater or lesser extent, have been affected by risks and are aware of the concentration of visitors, the study of visitor comfort is an aspect that is scarcely dealt with by the scientific community.

In this sense, the activity generated by guided tours in city centres is essential to the local economy. It brings people closer to heritage while generating undesirable situations without planning. However, these guided tours awaken the interest of other visitors to get to know the destinations and are an attractive way to better understand the past and present idiosyncrasies of these destinations. Through guided tours, visitors can understand a historic centre's past and present and imagine its magnitude through history. It can be seen how the increase in the number of visitors to a city means an increase in the number of service companies dedicated to these activities, especially group guiding companies such as free tours, which have proliferated in many cities in the last ten years (Gutiérrez & Roldán, 2020).

In any case, once the visitor is at the destination, efforts should be made to optimise the space they occupy by considering tourists and residents, who are the guarantors of a destination's identity (Wallingre, 2014). However, to offer a quality experience, focusing on developing cities that serve tourists and residents is necessary. This fact leads us to reflect on visitor flows and the comfort of guided tours from two points of view; on the one hand, it is clear that the increase in these activities caused by tourism promotion policies carried out by destinations requires visitor management where flow control or carrying capacity tools are implemented to avoid undesirable situations. On the other hand, the visitor's comfort must be ensured to guarantee the quality of the experience, and it is here where aspects of physical and psychological comfort and safety come into play. The responsibility for tourism management lies with local governments, which provide the appropriate conditions and infrastructure to ensure that the visit is satisfactory and safe. In the case of tourist group guides, the coexistence with other people (residents), as well as the overcrowding that historic centres are suffering, makes it necessary to establish control measures to ensure the comfort of the tourists and the low social impact of the visit (Dominguez & Crespi, 2021). Faced with problems that have overwhelmed the cities, specific initiatives have recently been implemented, such as controlling the number of tourists in groups. A maximum of 20 visitors per group has been established in Valencia and Bilbao. However, it is necessary to know the routes taken by the guided groups to avoid concentrations of visitors that could impede mobility and hinder the daily lives of other residents.

On the other hand, concern for visitor comfort is related to the analysis of safety, the adequacy of facilities and equipment, connectivity and accessibility (Ruiz-Sancho et al., 2021). Thus, health and cleanliness conditions are essential for visitors on a guided walking tour. They are one of the determining factors considered before arrival at the destination. Likewise, other factors that may cause risk during the visit are related to the transit of different means of transport (trams, bicycles, buses, etc.), which are included in the safety analysis.

Other aspects to consider are visitors' physical and physiological requirements during the guided tour. According to Viñals et al. (2014), physical-physiological factors influence visitor satisfaction, including bioclimatic and safety factors. Bioclimatic factors are essential in outdoor activities. In this sense, it should be borne in mind that historic centres have particular characteristics, both in terms of safety and visitor comfort, as they conform to significant urban planning patterns which give them their identity and respond to their planning adjusted to the means of centuries ago when they were built, but which were not designed to be visited. For this reason, exposure to the sun is an aspect that conditions the visit, even if we are in a Mediterranean climate.

For all these reasons and with the intent to obtain more information about this tourist activity and the observation of the flows, this work focuses on the study of the safety and comfort situations of the group during the tour. The methodology consisted of participant observation on the routes usually followed by these guided groups applied to the Seu-Cathedral neighbourhood of Valencia (Figure 1). The Geo Tracker GPS tool was also used to monitor

the route and detect the number of encounters and places of congestion. In this way, the innovation presented by this study lies in the integrated vision of the analysis of the essential components of visitor comfort and, therefore, of the tourist experience.

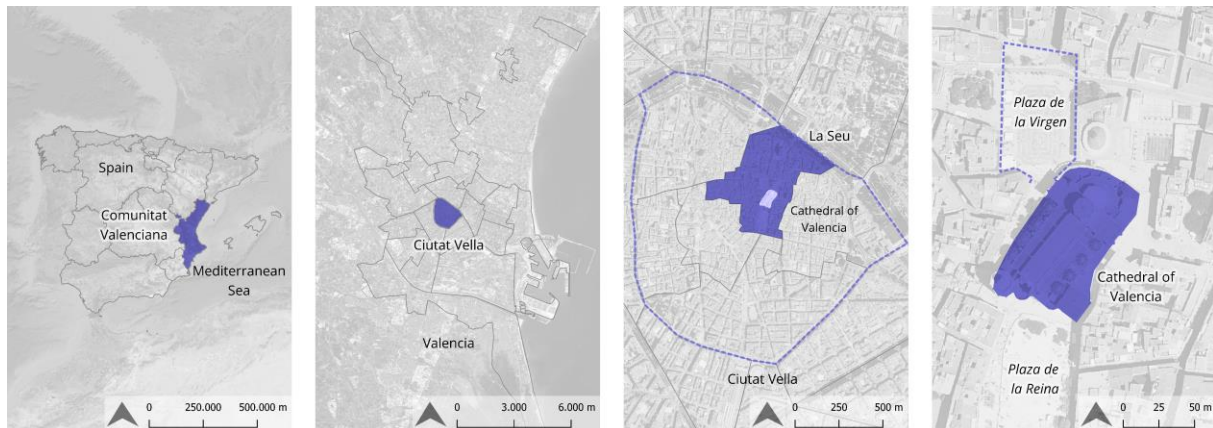


Figure 1. Location of *La Seu* neighbourhood and the Cathedral of Valencia. Source: Own elaboration

The structure of this article is as follows: after this extended introduction, the methodology and results are presented to conclude with the main findings obtained, which warn of the need to plan the safety aspects of visits, especially traffic and transit obstacles, the identification of congestion situations and the holding of periodic events, as well as the study of shaded areas or the incorporation of outdoor furniture to increase the comfort of both visitors and tour guides.

2. Methodology

The qualitative methodology began by identifying the companies that regularly offer guided tours around the cathedral. We identified and contacted by email or telephone nine tourist service companies that provide interpretative tours in the *La Seu* neighbourhood. The fieldwork was carried out from April to June 2023. The tour started in the *Plaza de la Mare de Déu* or *Plaza de la Virgen* at 10:00 am. Generally, these companies coincide in this place, in front of the basilica, which we will call the Meeting Point. All texts, figures and tables will be included within the margins of the template.

In addition, a methodological sheet was drawn up for the collection of information, which included the following aspects:

- General data: size and profile of the group
- Itinerary and points of interest, number of stops and duration of the tour
- Entrance to monuments or visit outside (Streetscape)
- Encounters between tourist and non-tourist groups (school or educational groups) - Safety aspects of the tour
- Safety aspects of the visit (traffic, situations of congestion or danger, places of exposure to the sun, pedestrian crossings, possibility of taking a seat at some point, restaurants or cafés, public toilets, universal accessibility, among others).
- Use of technological devices (audio guides, use of loudspeakers, QR codes for the guided tour).
- The guide controls bookings (this speeds up the group's reception and facilitates booking). It also incorporates an element of psychological comfort of pre-booking compared to free tours and other guided tour participants.

3. Results

The results obtained from the participant observation are shown below and distributed according to the different aspects defined in the methodological sheet.

Firstly, in relation to the profile of the demand, it was observed that the groups are heterogeneous in terms of age and gender, as well as nationality. The majority were middle-aged tourists, and only two groups corresponded to senior citizens between 60 and 75 years of age. Random guided groups are the most common, i.e. those tourists who decide to visit the city on a guided tour but do not belong to any tourist package or cruise. Also, within these homogeneous groups was a group of school visits by children and teenagers. The gender distribution is similar. The group size is identical in all cases, averaging 20-25 people.

The guide controls bookings at the meeting point, which facilitates the group's reception and booking. Most guides used an app on their mobile phones to control those visitors who had booked in advance. This element of group control provides security for the visitors who make the booking, although in the case of free tours, which are not usually booked in advance, a situation of discomfort arises due to other visitors joining the tour along the route.

About the points of interest (POI), they attended to the pattern of an angular visit that starts at the Plaza de la Virgen, which was established as the meeting point. The Turia fountain is usually a meeting point, the centre of the square and the access stairs to the Basilica of the Virgin. Once here, the group continues to the Valencia Cathedral. On some tours, the guide briefly explains at the meeting point and invites the group to enter the Basilica of the Virgin, as it is easy to pass through the main altar and out onto the Plaza de la Almoina. A second option is to pass directly through the right side of the Basilica to reach the Cathedral. This route is used when entering the Cathedral of Valencia to visit the interior of the Cathedral. This visit is usually brief (maximum 20 minutes), and it includes seeing the high altar, walking through the ambulatory, and finishing in the Chapel of the Holy Chalice. It should be noted that, in general, guided tours do not allow time to contemplate the interior of the Cathedral on their own. Audio guides provided by the Cathedral are used for the autonomous visit.

The visit continues through the Taperia neighbourhood to the *Lonja de la Seda*. The entrance to this building is at the back, although it is skirted to contemplate and explain its main façade, placing the group in the middle of the *Plaza de los Santos Juanes*. Once at the back of the building, you can enter directly into the famous column room or the garden. In this case, most of the tour started with a visit to the garden to give an initial explanation and access to the interior. One aspect to note here is that the group's visibility was lost. This stop lasted 20 minutes. After the visit to the *Lonja de la Seda*, the group moved to the outside of the square, where the guide introduced the buildings that make up the Central Market, leaving the group free time to visit the market on their own, enjoy the cafeteria, fast food and souvenir shops, among others. The visit to the interior of the Central Market cannot be done in groups to avoid crowding and distorting the market's own commercial activity and that of the residents. Figure 2 shows the coincidences in the route followed by these guided tours.

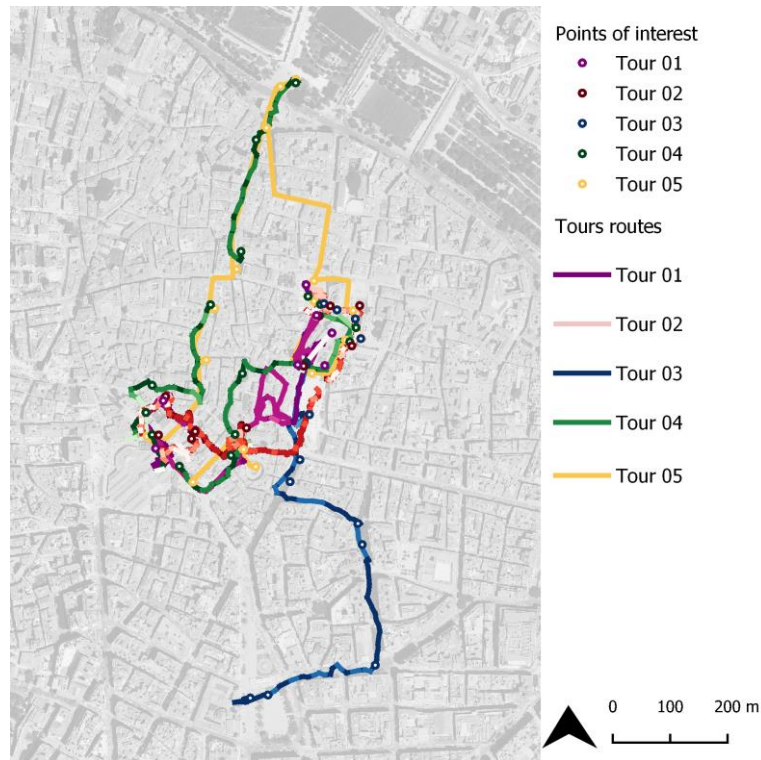


Figure 2. Guided tour routes and points of interest. Source: Own elaboration from Geo Tracker GPS

The meetings with other groups occurred in the most traffic squares, such as the *Plaza de la Virgen* and the *Plaza del Mercado*. Figure 3 shows the five models of itinerary followed by the groups. In the former, more than ten groups were starting the visits. Inside the Cathedral were two groups with guides; the rest were individual visitors. The encounters with different groups on bicycles were highlighted as discomfort. This hinders the normal dynamics of the city.

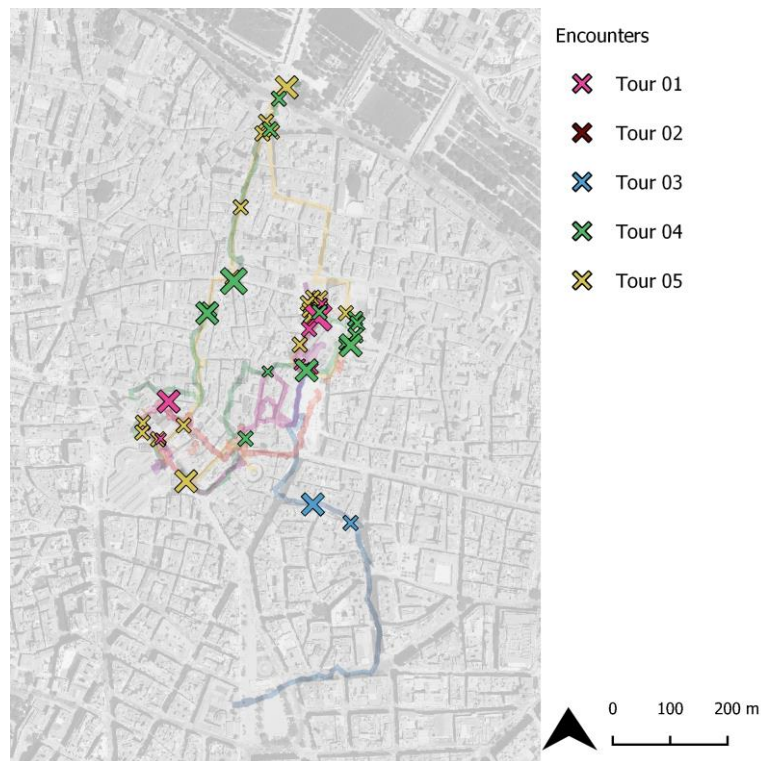


Figure 3. Itinerary and encounters for the five itineraries of the visitor flows. Source: Own elaboration from Geo Tracker GPS

Concerning the safety aspects of the visit, it was observed that, in general, the streets in the La Seu district of Valencia are safe. Road traffic speed is restricted to vehicles for delivering goods and residents. Therefore, even though most visits occur outdoors, there are no significant safety problems in vehicle traffic situations. The Central Market Square would be the most congested with traffic due to the distribution of goods. In addition, the guides know the areas well and try to lead the group through traffic-free streets. However, other aspects of physical comfort for the visitor still need to be resolved. There are very few areas to protect oneself from the sun, which is a problem for the normal development of the visit, considering that many of the explanations take place at times of the day when it is hot. There is no possibility to protect oneself. Visitors find very few shadows in the buildings or trees.

During the visit, there is also a need for more seating and rest facilities (Figure 4). This aspect is of the utmost importance, especially when visiting with children or elderly people. Throughout the tour, only two places to take a seat were identified, in the Plaza de los Santos Juanes and the Plaza de la Reina, although this point is not usually used as the visit starts in the adjacent square and is therefore not necessary. Finally, they also recorded where people sat, not necessarily on benches. People sat, not necessarily on benches, but they also counted bollards, floors or bleachers.

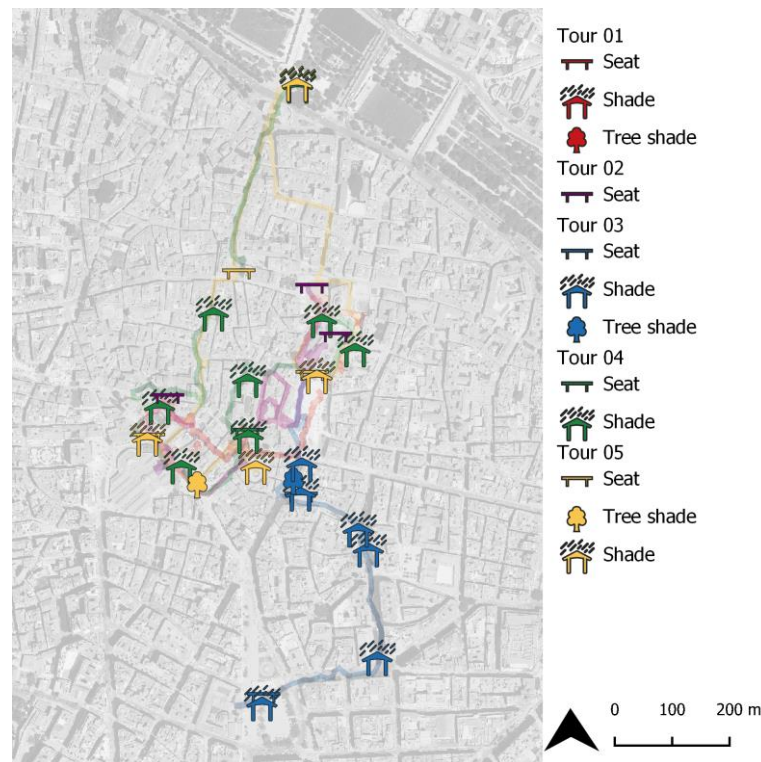


Figure 4. Urban facilities at the five visitor flows. Source: Own elaboration from Geo Tracker GPS

The offer of cafeterias and restaurants along the entire route, especially at those points of interest along the itinerary where visitors spend more time, increases the comfort of the visit. Another aspect linked to comfort is the use of closed audio circuits between the guide and the visitors, which minimises the volume of the explanations in such a way as to keep the group under control while avoiding unnecessary noise pollution.

The results warn of the need to plan the safety aspects of the visits, especially traffic and traffic obstacles, the identification of congestion situations and the holding of periodic events, as well as the study of shaded areas or the incorporation of outdoor furniture to increase the comfort of both visitors and tour guides.

4. Conclusions

The conclusions of this work respond to the objective of obtaining more information about the group guiding activity from the visitor's perspective and the compatibility of the residents' daily lives. The methodology allowed this research to be carried out, and the results were oriented towards analysis. Secondly, the study of the situations of safety and comfort of the group during the tour makes it possible to affirm that to prevent groups of such a large size from disturbing the historic centre, and some streets should be avoided, offering such large groups a route adapted to their size. The entrance to some monuments causes them to flood the room, which disturbs the regular transit of spontaneous and organised visitors. The visit should be better planned so that the narrowest and busiest streets are avoided to make the group comfortable and, at the same time, not disturb the residents' daily activity.

Among the proposals that could be implemented is limiting the size of the group, which is already a recent initiative being carried out in some cities in Spain, and Valencia appears to be a pioneer in this sense. In this way, the acoustic comfort of the place is better controlled, massive concentrations of visitors are avoided, and the tourist experience is improved. Regarding the physical comfort of visitors, it is noted that there are no shaded areas, nor is there any urban furniture that allows visitors to sit down during the tour, which, as mentioned above, lasts two hours. Visits during the very hot months in Valencia are being rescheduled to take place in the early hours of the morning and in the afternoon-evening to avoid exposure to the sun, given the lack of shaded areas throughout the tour. It should be noted that the planning of the visit includes free time to allow the group to use the services of cafés and traditional shops, which contributes to boosting the local economy.

5. Funding

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