

CHARLES WOOLEY



A protest placard on La Barceloneta beach reveals the discontent among Barcelona locals who have seen their city overrun by tourists. Picture: JOSEP LAGO

I agree with the growing number of local people around the world who want tourists to "stay home". Tourism in my state does nothing for me and never has. I earn not a cent from it but am greatly inconvenienced by it. I cannot think of much advantage gained by the majority of people, who are in neither the hospitality nor the accommodation business.

On the other hand, there are so many obvious disadvantages for ordinary Tasmanians trying to enjoy the once simple pleasures of their own state.

From this time of year on, I struggle to get to my favourite places. I didn't come home after many years in the Big Smoke for traffic snarls and the impossibility of finding a parking space. Nor do I enjoy the milling, elbowing throng of rude and pushy (not all of them) tourists. I'd rather stay home, though I must concede that Nespresso pods alone on the balcony among the trees in High Dudgeon, are not the same as a convivial coffee down at Salamanca. But in the tourist season, rustication is certainly a lot less aggravating.

Let me assure those of you who dare to doubt the universal benefits of tourism to humanity: you are not selfish, nor are you alone. Around the world, people have had enough. Venice, Barcelona, Budapest, Berlin, Rome, Machu Picchu and even Everest - those are just a few of hundreds

of popular destinations across the globe where tourists are now not so welcome.

Reports from Barcelona in Spain ring a strange familiarity with the situation developing here. Ada Colau is the young reformist mayor and her city is inundated every year by almost eight million tourists.

Like Tasmania, Spain in the northern hemisphere is considered a cheap travel destination. Like us, they favoured numbers over quality, and for a time it seemed good as the visitors put €12 billion a year into the economy and supported 100,000 jobs.

What could be wrong with that?

Well, we can see it coming, can't we? Holiday rentals, illegal tourist flats and rising real estate prices in Barcelona have driven up the numbers of homeless while many permanent residents now struggle to pay the rent, the power bills and the rising cost of living.

Cooks, dishwashers and waiters don't earn much in any tourist paradise. Nor do cheap tourists tip generously.

In Barcelona, while some people do of course make lots of money from tourism, many others are losers.

Colau says tourism has widened the economic divide. "In the past four years the difference between the rich and poor has increased by 40 per cent," she says.

Symptomatic of this trend is the increasing number of evictions and

power disconnections, which she warns will turn Barcelona into "a broken city".

On the other side of the world, at almost the same latitude as Hobart, Barcelona is strikingly a distant mirror. In the Catalonian capital there have been demonstrations against the construction of new hotels in its historical heart. Angry protesters have occupied heritage buildings earmarked for redevelopment as tourist hotels.

La Barceloneta, a famous seaside dining and bar district much like Salamanca, once regarded by locals as the city's living room, is now so crowded it has become a no-go area for Barcelonians.

The warnings you have already heard from some of the more prescient leaders of our burgeoning tourism industry have become a reality in Barcelona.

"More and more tourists are disappointed that in the centre of Barcelona they find a theme park," Colau says.

"Everyone wants to see the real city, but if the centre fills up with multinationals and big stores that you can find in any other city, it doesn't work."

I always tell you not to bother writing in because I've been writing long enough to spot my own hypocrisy, even as the words spill on to the page. I mightn't have profited from tourism, but I have made a living from travel. And, of course, in the age of vulgar mass tourism don't we all want to be regarded as travellers rather than tourists? Tourists are those awful people who clog up marketplaces, point cameras in the faces of traders (guilty again) and never spend a penny. They mill around indecisively and annoyingly in entrances to shops and restaurants and waddle down the middle of the street as if the place were Disneyland.

It is reported that on the door of the mayoral office in Barcelona is a notice that reads: "Let us never forget who we are and why we are here". Implicit in that statement is the notion that our civic leaders should serve the interests of the people who live here before they serve the interests of people who don't. It's a simple idea.

I wonder if there's a similar notice in the mayor's office in our city.

I understand we might soon have a mayoral vacancy here in River City. If we could secure a 457 visa for Colau (based on the fact there's no one else to do the job) I wonder if we could attract Barcelona's astute young mayor to spend a few years in a nice city at exactly the opposite end of the Earth. I think Colau would find the climate familiar here (in all respects), and she might help us stop making the same old mistakes before it's too late to correct them.