

**COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT ON CULTURAL TOURISM: THE CASE  
OF BEIT SHE'AN VALLEY, ISRAEL**

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## Abstract

Under the Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic in Israel, almost every taken-for-granted feature of the day-to-day life was affected. This phenomenon and its derived socio-economic effects on cultural tourism have been investigated in a northern peripheral area, Beit She'an Valley, which includes a small urban municipality, Beit She'an town, and a regional council, Emek HaMaayanot (a rural municipality). The closure of heritage sites and almost every kind of public cultural venue has led to economic consequences such as absence of tourists, worker layoffs in the cultural tourism industry and a wave of collapse of businesses. In order to understand the implications of the pandemic on the area, surveys were conducted among two local groups: business owners and residents. The findings show that nine out of ten businesses have been affected, yet few have received governmental support. A large number of business owners think that under the current circumstances, their business can be sustained only for several months. Residents reported that during the pandemic, they avoided public spaces and gatherings, visiting cultural sites much less often than before the pandemic. It is clear that both groups have to readjust their perception of tourist spaces and their activities. The changes that took place in tourism activities following the pandemic have led the owners of local businesses related to cultural tourism, as well as tour guides, to think of different ways to operate their activities. Interviews with a group of business owners suggest that new initiatives and survival strategies may have far-reaching implications for cultural tourism in the region and its characteristics. The findings of this research yield several recommendations regarding how to deal with similar crises in the future so that tourism activities at heritage sites will not be harmed.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 impact; Cultural tourism; Survival strategies; Residents perception

## Introduction

The Covid-19 virus (SARS-CoV-2) has had a devastating effect on the global economy. While the economic collapse was felt across most sectors, the tourism industry suffered disproportionately.

Within the tourism industry, Covid-19 social distancing rules, travel restrictions and the banning of large gatherings were specifically challenging for cultural tourism (Flew & Kirkwood, 2021)

and according to UNWTO (2021), during 2020, international tourist arrivals worldwide declined by 74%. Against this backdrop, cultural tourism was forced to re-invent itself.

Tourism in general and cultural (and heritage) tourism specifically are considered to be catalysts for local and regional development (Graham et al., 1999; MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). Tourism provides opportunities to revitalize peripheral and rural areas through economic and social development while preserving their cultural identity (Dallen, 2014). Cultural tourism (CT) uses local cultural assets and landscapes while protecting them (Antrop, 2005). This may lead to successful and sustainable development while developing strategies that allow the local population to benefit from their valuable tangible and intangible cultural assets, (Amit-Cohen & Sofer, 2016). This article is focused on emerging trends and adaptation strategies in cultural tourism in a peripheral area in Israel during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the tourism industry and the local community mutually depend on each other in peripheral areas (Prideaux, 2002), we focus on the responses of both tourism businesses and local residents to Covid-19, as they are deeply intertwined.

The concepts of cultural tourism, cultural activities, and sites that symbolize cultural values are dynamic (Du Cros & McKercher, 2015; Richards, 2018). While the focus of CT practices remains traditional (i.e., visits to museums, art galleries, historical sites, festivals, gastronomy), its essence changes with time. Both cultural destinations and tourists transform continuously through interactions. There is increasing evidence of people seeking to experience culture rather than merely observing it. These transformations are also echoed in CT research and new fields are emerging such as cultural consumption, heritage conservation, cultural tourism economics, and the relationship with the creative economy (Prentice, 2001; Richards, 2018). Tourists are seeking more culturally immersive experiences such as riding bikes through historical tracks or hiking

along film locations; they want to experience rural life, to be involved with social, ethical, and environmental issues associated with cultural tourism.

The tourism industry was one of the industries that had to re-evaluate and adjust to changing restrictions and procedures imposed by the Covid-19 crisis. Particularly at cultural tourism venues, the sites and their employees were not prepared for this crisis. Many tourism sites quickly understood that there were only two options: transform or perish (Scambler, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, the solution was to adapt to new ways of thinking. This was also the case in Israel where tourism is a strategically important sector.

The Covid-19 crisis created a platform for countless researchers who are exploring ways to deal with the crisis and its long-term consequences, as well as raising new ideas of how to turn the crisis into an opportunity. Special attention has been given to strengthening the status of cultural tourism sites and attractions and finding ways to improve their management and the tourism experiences offered (Rech & Migliorati, 2021). We exemplify this new way of thinking using a case study of two municipalities in the northern periphery of Israel: the town of Beit She'an and the Emek HaMaayanot (Valley of the Springs) regional council. The regional council, which surrounds the town, is a local authority comprised of 24 rural settlements.<sup>1</sup> The region is known for its numerous historical and archaeological sites and contains springs, national parks, and nature reserves.

This article deals with two major questions: 1) What was the response of both local residents and cultural tourism business owners in the wake of Covid-19, distinguishing between

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<sup>1</sup> There are 54 regional councils in Israel, each one of them responsible for governing a number of rural settlements such as moshavim, kibbutzim, and other rural localities. The settlements are usually spread over a relatively large area within geographical vicinity of each other. Most settlements within the regional councils do not exceed 2,000 in population.

urban and rural areas? 2) What are the survival strategies business owners used to adapt to the ongoing crisis? First, we present a literature review of the impact of Covid-19 on cultural tourism, followed by a description of the case study area and the methodology. A major section of the article is dedicated to the examination of the above two questions, and the article concludes with the insights derived from our study.

### **Covid-19, cultural tourism, and adaptation strategies**

#### **The effect of Covid-19 on cultural tourism - the case of Israel**

The tourism industry is of great importance for the Israeli economy. In 2019 there were 18 million domestic overnight stays and 9.1 million visits to national parks (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The added value of tourism in 2019 was estimated at NIS 33.5 billion (€8.7 billion), about 2.5% of the GDP. The number of jobs in tourism was estimated at 150,000, 3.8% of all jobs in Israel's economy (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). On 15 March 2020, Israel experienced the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, Israel has witnessed five waves of high morbidity and three lockdowns. During the lockdowns, the government implemented stringent social distancing measures, complete closure of the education system, a complete halt of passenger flights to Israel, as well as a near-complete shuttering of the economy including all tourist sites. In December 2020, Israel initiated a national campaign to vaccinate its population that was acknowledged for its successful results. By mid-April 2021, 54% of the entire population had received two doses of the vaccine. Figure 1 shows the daily numbers of new confirmed Covid-19 cases over time, together with the daily vaccination numbers and the timing of three national lockdowns.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Covid-19 continues to be an active threat. The crisis has long-term consequences, whose impacts are still not fully realized, and will undoubtedly bear implications for the future. The impact of Covid-19 on the tourism industry in Israel has been devastating and disproportionate; foreign tourism ceased completely, and domestic tourism also declined for many months. According to the Bank of Israel's data reports from 15 March 2020 to 25 March 2021, the number of jobs in the hospitality and food services industries declined by nearly 50% in 2020, while in the overall economy declined by 10% (Bank of Israel, 2020). The tourism industry in Israel was required to adapt to a new situation that changed from day to day, while continuing to manage the tourism industry in light of the new and uncertain conditions. These include the ramifications for the status and perception of tourist attractions characterized by their tangible cultural heritage, unique landscapes – cultural landscapes, open space and nature reserves, and their suitability for cultural tourism. An example of such adaptation is the demand for tourist attractions in open space by local tourism. In July, August, and September 2020, air travel was banned, and inbound tourism was not allowed to enter Israel. When Israel re-opened for domestic tourism, many people spent time in various local tourist sites, especially at sites located in open areas.

Under these conditions, the purpose of this article is to explore a case study in Israel of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cultural tourism activities as well as the local population's perception of the impact. By researching these issues, we aim to raise new ideas about how to turn the Covid-19 crisis into economic opportunities, strengthen the status of attractions that present heritage and culture tourism, and improve methods for touring such sites and managing them.

### **Adaptation strategies – The wide perspective**

The scholar Amit-Cohen (2021) opened a gateway to a new way of thinking on cultural and heritage tourism with her research on the changes that took place in heritage sites offering cultural and educational activities that remained open for visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, research reflected on new ideas presented in various articles published since March 2020, concluding that the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis can be translated into an opportunity aimed at leveraging cultural tourism. This section reviews several ideas that were presented in Amit-Cohen's research as well as a number of other scholars. Some of these ideas are then exemplified via analysis of the data collected in this study.

A prominent example of adaptation during the Covid-19 crisis was the harnessing of virtual reality technology to enable virtual tourism to cultural heritage sites. Leveraging the advantages of digital technology, some cultural sites have continued offering virtual tours even after distance and group size restrictions were lifted, thus experiencing a boost. This has happened in museums, archaeological sites, natural reserves, to which access is allowed selectively. The virtual visits have also encouraged the site managers and tour guides to update and upgrade their programs. Creativity and innovation have been key words in the development of cultural tourism during Covid-19 (American Alliance of Museums, 2020). From a larger perspective, digital tools and digital capabilities enabled a stronger response to the Covid-19 pandemic. They helped small businesses to develop strategic, managerial, and digital skills to increase their efficiency (Kuratko et al., 2020).

Another type of adaptation strategy relates to educational activities: The closure during the Covid-19 pandemic not only popularized virtual tours; it also enabled an in-depth analysis of online teaching and its utilization to generate interest in cultural and heritage tourism. Critical discourse in favor of the increasing use of information sources during the Covid-19 period

developed along with recognition of a variety of comparison possibilities. All of these, in turn, encouraged the development of new skills to improve the cultural tourism experience (Daniel, 2020; Tarkar, 2020).

A third point is that the closure of cultural sites such as museums and galleries sharpened the distinctions between different types of cultural heritage assets. For years, outdoors cultural heritage assets were perceived as part of the open space and less useful, and hence were neglected. However, because of the emerging change in the status of open spaces during closures and the altered perception of them, as places of meeting and retreat from the closures and not only places for leisure and recreation, the assets scattered in these sites gained renewed interest. The visit experience gained intensity, the possibilities for use were reconsidered, and the sites' role in recreating cultural, industrial, and rural-agricultural landscapes was discussed.

A survey conducted in July 2020 by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) found that 30% of all American museums were unlikely to survive the Covid-19 pandemic (American Alliance of Museums, 2020). Similar data came up in surveys of the Network of European Museum Organizations (Network of European Museum Organizations, 2021). These predictions have reinforced the importance of heritage sites and museums located in open spaces. The growing interest in heritage properties in open areas also strengthens the call to stabilize and conserve them, and ensure their survival for future generations (UNESCO, 2020).

A fourth adaptation strategy has emerged with the change in visiting habits to heritage sites that took place during the closures, necessitating opening the sites at non-traditional hours and creating visiting routes that are suitable for small groups – families, couples, and individuals. This adaptation was necessary primarily in heritage assets in open areas – archaeological sites, water and road infrastructures, industrial facilities, mines, and quarries. In these cases, too, the reduced



role of tour guides and the preference for independent tours were notable and also contributed to the development of infrastructure for nighttime tourism along with new technological guiding tools.

Another opportunity created by the pandemic was savings in maintenance, employment and operating expenses, stemming from changes in visiting and touring habits. In many cases, savings are perceived as a negative phenomenon because they are the result of layoffs. However, in some instances savings are the result of increased efficiency. Covid-19 resulted in long-term savings due to several factors: the development of virtual tours which allows an increase in the number of "visitors" without additional costs; flexibility in tourist hours; and staff time freed up for creative thinking and development of unique tourism programs.

In addition, the "time-out" created by the pandemic made it possible to rehabilitate cultural and heritage sites that had suffered damage to their physical and cultural values due to mass tourism. Such projects were conducted at world heritage sites like Venice and the Antiquities of Rome as well as at the sites of Beit She'arim, Avdat, and Beit Guvrin in Israel. During this period, new assessment tools emerged that focus not only on the cultural values of the asset but also on its physical condition and the feasibility of long-term conservation. These tools will allow for accurate assessment of the "carrying capacity" (physical, economic, social, and environmental) of cultural heritage sites, alleviating stress and preventing future damage.

The decline in the number of visitors to modern galleries and museums during the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to growing concerns about their future existence (Azzahra, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). On the other hand, the outlook for historic assets museums is less bleak. The explanation given for their resilience is that neither the collections nor the assets are for sale. The sale of assets and objects in times of crisis in order to cover maintenance expenses is common, but

rare in museums where the asset itself has historical value. Many of these museums are supported or managed by public bodies and have long-term conservation programs that ensure their survival. However, in order to justify this support, those in charge need to highlight the assets' unique features and adapt their activities to crisis situations (ICOM, 2020).

The past year was characterized by a new way of thinking about the uniqueness of cultural and heritage sites. This is noted by Silberman (2020) who indicates two particular issues. Firstly, the theoretical discussion during the pandemic focused less on authenticity – a factor that was overemphasized in recent years in declaring an asset worthy of conservation, in line with the principles of ICOMOS (1994). The decreased emphasis on authenticity was accompanied by increased discussion of issues that had been previously excluded from the discourse and have now gained renewed interest. Among these are: a broad discussion of controversial heritage and its role in producing critical discourse; the role of intangible values in the process of selection, classification, characterization, and conservation of tangible cultural heritage assets; the responsibility of the present generation to conserve cultural heritage assets for the next generation; and virtual access to private collections of tangible cultural heritage assets that are on their way to extinction due to climate change and deliberate destruction.

### **Measures of adaptation by small and medium tourism business**

Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) (2022) suggest that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Britain, as well as in other countries, are adapting to what they call the 'Triple Transition.' This refers to the "combined shifts in business digitalization, adoption of net-zero practices and productivity upgrading that business are navigating." The Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged

moves towards home and hybrid working and has accelerated digital adoption by firms (Belitski et al., 2021; Priyono et al., 2020). These changes support more sustainable business models including for small and medium tourism businesses. According to the ERC research there are two main factors that drive the intensity of SMEs' engagement with net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases: owners' and managers' personal values as well as the importance of customer pressure. Research has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought human resource management issues and wellbeing of employees to the forefront. Positive wellbeing practices that have increased since 2020, along with introducing innovations to business activities, are important for productivity. Business growth and performance objectives are compatible with environmental goals and environmental innovation is linked to business growth.

The ERC research offers several insights for policymakers aiming to maximize the resilience of the UK's SME community in 2022 and beyond. It seems that "the highest percentage of firms with no cash reserves is found among micro-businesses employing 0-9 employees, a lot of which belong to the tourism sector. Late payment and rising costs are on-going problems for small businesses." In addition, "the micro-businesses and small businesses were also less likely to report that they had 'high confidence' in business survival compared to larger firms." However, this situation had changed by the end of 2021 when they reported higher confidence in their survival capacity.

### **The case study area and the methodology**

#### **The case study area**

The case study area of our research is the Beit She'an Valley. The area consists of two municipalities: The town of Beit Sh'ean (population size 18,643 in 2021) and the Emek

HaMaayanot regional council (rural municipality) (population size 14,464 in 2021) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The regional council is comprised of 24 rural settlements, most of which are kibbutz type settlements. The region is considered a peripheral area, relatively far from the core of the country and the center of economic activities. The town of Beit She'an is ranked at in cluster 4 on the socio-economic index, a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest. The Emek HaMaayanot regional council is in cluster 6.

The Beit She'an Valley is part of the Jordan River Valley in the Northern District of Israel. It is located in the tectonic axis that separates Africa, Asia and Europe and is more than 100 meters below sea level. This area is a well-known global corridor for seasonal bird migration. The large number of fishponds spread across the area serves as a source of attraction for migrating birds. Thus, bird watchers are attracted to the region during the seasonal migration. Figure 2 below illustrates the case study area including the different types of settlements in the regional council.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

The town of Beit She'an, historically known as Scythopolis, played an important role in history, during the biblical period and the Greek and Roman Empires (Negev & Gibson, 2001). The ancient city ruins are currently protected within the Beit She'an National Park. The town and its surroundings in the rural municipality, the Emek HaMaayanot regional council, contain numerous historical and archaeological sites as well as national parks and nature reserves. The recent pre-state era was characterized by the 'Tower and Stockade' settlement model (a model of fortified settlements that were raised quickly, within a day or a night, to cope the local Arab and British government resistance to Jewish settlements before 1948), in the framework of which rural

settlements such as kibbutzim and moshavim settled the area (Bein, 1976). The contemporary town of Beit She'an was established in 1949 and its population was based on new immigrants, particularly from North Africa, the Middle East and Romania, who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s.

The region offers many diversified tourism sites and activities, most of them are natural and archaeological. The area holds more than 40 natural springs, birdwatching spots, historical sites, and flora and fauna. Among the most visited sites is the Emek HaMaayanot Trail which passes through many springs, streams, groves and archaeological sites. The Gan HaShlosha national park has a restored water mill and other buildings dating back to the British Mandate Period. In 2016 the Regional Council Emek HaMaayanot initiated the Slow Tourism initiative, calling tourists to enjoy the hiking trails and natural springs with tranquility (slow tourism has become a global trend in recent years). Ten out of 24 settlements in the regional council operate B&B facilities for overnighters. As for the town of Bet-She'an, formerly known as Scythopolis, it is one of the most spectacular Greek, Roman and Byzantine sites in Israel. Based on survey by the Ministry of Tourism on visited sites by overseas tourists in Israel, the town was lagging behind most other visited sites in 2019 (Mertens-Hoffman, 2019). Although tourists have started to come to the town, the numbers are still not large and moreover, the tourists who are already coming, do not stay in the town and using accommodation in other localities. Despite the richness and uniqueness of the sites, the region has still to fulfil its potential among both incoming and domestic tourists.

### **Methodology**

Our methodology combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data was gathered based on two surveys that were distributed among business owners and residents in the

region. Local tourism businesses and residents were identified through relevant Facebook groups, referrals and lists provided by the local municipalities. Under the Covid-19 restrictions, the surveys were distributed on-line and completed by the respondents. The surveys were available on the Qualtrics XM Platform which was open to the surveyed groups. 44 completed questionnaires were obtained from the rural settlements (all of which came from business owners in the Emek HaMaayanot regional council), and 135 from residents (divided between the town and the regional council). The small number of business owners who responded may be due to the relatively small number of tourism businesses and entrepreneurs in the case study area. The on-line survey was conducted toward the end of 2020 and in early 2021.

Qualitative data was obtained through interviews conducted with officials in both municipalities and a roundtable meeting that was held with local entrepreneurs in order to obtain their wider viewpoints. While the surveys were conducted in late 2020, the roundtable meeting took place in late 2021. An additional short survey of business owners (containing two questions only) was also conducted in late 2021. The answers to this second survey were somewhat different and it seems that the additional year spent coping with the pandemic expanded the potential solutions for coping with the pandemic's effects.

## **Results**

### **The impact of Covid-19 on participation in cultural tourism in the area**

#### *The impact on businesses and business owners*

In Israel, the period from 2015 until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was characterized by a trend of growth in tourism revenue streams. During this period, government support for tourism development increased, which led to the development and expansion of tourist infrastructure and

attractions. In line with this general trend in Israel, the respondents to the business owners' survey reported an increase in their performance over the period 2015-2020. However, since the second quarter of 2020, the situation has completely reversed.

About 70% of survey participants are visitor attractions, sites, or activity providers (see Table 1 for the distribution of business type). This appropriately represents the distribution of tourism business in the area, which consists of a limited number of accommodation services, and a high share of activities and attractions as well as tour guides. According to the information on the website of Emek HaMaayanot there are about 80 attractions, tourist sites and tourist services in the regional council and about 70 in the town of Beit She'an. It should be noted that due to the privatization process on the kibbutzim, involvement in managing local attractions became relatively popular among kibbutz members who were not already entrepreneurs and did not find employment outside the kibbutz. Most businesses in our sample are privately owned (57%). Public sector businesses (32% of the sample) include sites owned by either a government authority (e.g.- Israel Antiquities Authorities, National Parks Authority, etc.) or the cooperative association of a kibbutz. Family businesses are not very common, and the majority of businesses were established during the last 20 years.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In terms of labor, prior to Covid-19 most businesses had less than 5 workers per season; however, during the crisis this figure declined. A portion of our sample are tour guides; most of them work alone throughout the year. By comparison, the four public sector businesses that operate in the region employ 15-40 workers per season. Respondents in our sample heavily rely on domestic

tourists, with more than 50% of respondents reporting 70% or more of their income generated from local tourists, even pre-pandemic.

Businesses in our sample stated that the most important themes in their businesses are Heritage, History, Artwork, and Gastronomy. In terms of future development, they placed great emphasis on Gastronomy, Archaeology and Folklore to be developed in the region. All but three respondents reported being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned in section 2.1, during the 2020 lockdowns in Israel, very strict restrictions were imposed, including travel distance limitations, prevention of crowding and face to face meetings, which led to devastating effects on the tourism industry as a whole. The outcome was a lack of incoming tourists from abroad and a limited number of domestic tourists.

A major effect of the pandemic was on the number of full-time workers employed by the businesses. The number of employees declined, and the majority of respondents work either alone, or with 1-2 other employees. This was clearly already typical for a large number of independent tour guides. However, this decline was consistent throughout the year 2020 and remained so also in the perceived busiest time for most businesses – the spring. The business owners were asked to specify the ways in which their businesses had been affected by Covid-19 on a scale from 1 (no impact) to 5 (strong impact). The sample in this case contained 35 business owners (Figure 3). (Since only a handful of respondents replied in the ‘Other’ category, this item was disregarded in the analysis.)

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

It is clear that businesses in our sample were heavily affected in all aspects mentioned in the questionnaire, as most of them had been shut down for long periods of time since March 2020.



Reduced international and national visitor numbers were affected more than other aspects. Third on the list was the aspect of low levels of bookings (Figure 3). Correlations between all items, with the exception of items 1 and 7, are positive, and relatively strong. In particular, the correlation between cancellation and reduced booking, and national visitors, is in line with the general effect of Covid-19 on all tourism-related businesses in Israel, since the lockdown policy included restricted movement between cities, and was announced abruptly each time. In addition, incoming tourism was completely halted for significant periods.

It is clear that business owners had to develop survival strategies to cope with the economic situation and its effect. One of the new measures is concerned with those employed by the businesses. These measures appear in Table 2. Since most respondents in our survey are self-employed, 34% of businesses sampled chose 'Other' in this question and elaborated on the fact that they did not have employees to begin with. Others responded by putting employees on furlough. While employees who were put on furlough during the Covid-19 crisis in Israel were eligible for government unemployment benefits, furloughed employees receiving benefits are not allowed to work part-time, a policy that encouraged some employees to stop working completely for a period of time (Achdut, 2020). Another measure most frequently reported by respondents in our sample was maintaining connections with existing customers, followed by advertising as usual.

Regarding sustaining the businesses, about half of the owners reported that they have enough financial reserves to last for 3 months or less. These results are in line with their responses that most of the businesses received no support from the government. About a quarter reported that their business would be able to survive one year or more. It is worth noting that some businesses are owned by the public sector (e.g. – National Parks Authority, The Antiquities Authority, etc.), and therefore are eligible for consistent financial support even during long

shutdown periods. The findings relating to Covid-19 mean that many businesses may collapse and thus may close down their activities and it will take time for the situation to return to normal.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

In addition to the survey, we had a roundtable discussion with six business owners and three office holders in the Emek HaMaayanot regional council. We also sent to a list of business owners two focused questions about Covid-19 impacts and the strategies they used to keep their business running. In total, we received 19 responses. The answers on the question “What are the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on your business?” were divided into four groups: closing, losses, dealing with cancellations and "no effects". While a few of the respondents reported that they had closed their businesses, taken unpaid vacation, or accumulated losses, the majority of the business owners reported that they had to deal with massive cancellations. Business owners who chose to keep their business open despite the financial losses used terminology like: "unstable visitor traffic", "catastrophe" and "fear."

Cancellations were received from both foreign and Israeli tourists. Most of the cancelled reservations were from organized groups, either foreign tourists or local groups such as retirees and workers' unions. The cancellations included all tourism sectors: accommodations, food and beverage, museums, organized tours and more. Some cancellations were made at the last minute, so the business owners could not find alternative clients. As one of the business owners declared: 'People cancelled at the last minute ... it creates an economic loss without being able to put someone else in place.'

### **Business owners' survival strategies**

This section is largely derived from the roundtable discussion and interviews with site managers and officials in both municipalities. Regarding the survival strategies and measures adopted in the course of business activities, flexibility and “thinking outside the box” were the mottos. As one of the business owners said: "you must always keep your finger on the pulse." The business owners emphasized the need to develop and update their working methods whether in pricing, working space (tending to shift the activities outdoors as much as possible), or dividing large groups into several small groups with a small number of participants in accordance with the Covid-19 instructions issued by the Health Ministry. Other examples of flexible and adaptive thinking were reported by the owner of an accommodation business who rented rooms long-term to companies' workers and by one of the museums where the managers had left a mobile number for calling and reservations and opened the site accordingly rather than keeping set hours.

Changing or developing new products according to the changing audience or situations was reported. Some examples mentioned were picnic baskets that could be used in-house or at nature reserves, home craft or DIY (do it yourself) kits and online products, and services that send food to quarantined families. It seems that the act of doing something for others provided a kind of comfort to the entrepreneurs and provided their activity value during their "survival mode" along with "some livelihood," as one of them expressed.

The business owners had to change their marketing methods. Many of them increased their business visibility on social media and other platforms in order to get more exposure and to retain customers. An additional important strategy was collaborations with other business owners. At the same time, some business owners took advantage of the closures for renovations. The two last

reported behaviours reflected opposite attitudes when it comes to dealing with crises for the self-employed: the first group shared deep concerns and a need to take another side job. For example, one respondent wrote: 'I hold a part-time job elsewhere, accumulate debts and worries. I constantly examine other options but feel trapped and stuck.' On the opposite end of the spectrum, some respondents declared that they have not changed anything in their business and that they 'believe that everything is for the best.'

### **The impact on resident's activities**

The residents' questionnaire was focused on cultural tourism and the effects of Covid-19. The analysis is based on a relatively small sample, 73 respondents from the town of Beit She'an and 62 from the Emek HaMaayanot regional council; therefore, the results should be viewed with caution. The analysis suggests that while the town residents focus primarily on the archaeological sites within the town and the springs in the surrounding area, residents of the regional council also elaborate on the specific natural parks and nature attractions in the area and are more aware of the cultural attractions in the area.

It is clear that during the pandemic, the majority of respondents visited most cultural attractions (much) less than before. Respondents reported a decrease in participation in all categories of cultural tourism in the area during the Covid-19 period (Figure 4). It should be noted that when the survey was conducted, restrictions in Israel included a partial ban on visiting natural reserves, and a travel distance limit; therefore, it is of little surprise that respondents could not participate in a lot of the activities. Figure 4 shows that both populations were affected by the pandemic. However, compared to the residents of the rural settlements in Emek HaMaayanot, residents of Beit-She'an were somewhat more affected by the Covid-19 crisis and limited their

cultural activities to a larger extent than compliance with Covid-19 restrictions obliged. However, this is less the case for cultural attractions in national parks and archaeological sites.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Regarding the perception of the number of tourists visiting the area, about 60% of Beit She'an residents thought that the number of tourists was too low during the pandemic period. By comparison, only a third of the residents of Emek HaMaayanot thought that the annual number of visitors was very small. Almost 30% of the regional council residents believed that the number of visitors was relatively large, twice as many as the town residents.

This perception may stem from the differences between the visitor populations in the two municipalities. While Beit She'an relies on inbound tourism which experienced a sharp decline, a high percentage of hikers and visitors to the Emek HaMaayanot are residents of the valley itself and the surrounding area who have continued to hike in the areas in the vicinity of their place of residence. The differences may also lie in the characteristics of the residents of Beit She'an as an urban population and of Emek HaMaayanot, which consists of rural population, mainly living in kibbutz type settlements. One may argue that there is relationship between income and education level and the perception of the effect of Covid-19 on the regional economy. In the case study, there is a strong correlation between respondent's income and level of education and place of residency. In the case of the town, a higher share of the respondents is characterized with lower income levels, whereas for Emek HaMaayanot the opposite is true. Similarly, there is variation in educational levels; in the regional council's settlements there are more individuals attaining 15 years of education or more, while blue-collar occupations are more common in the town.

Looking forward, the surveyed residents were asked about their perception of the kind of impact that an increase of cultural tourism could have on the area (e.g., infrastructure, jobs, income, quality of life). 73% of Beit She'an residents believe that if there is an increase in the number of cultural tourists to the area, the impact will be very positive. In contrast, only 47% of the residents of Emek HaMaayanot think so. The difference between those two groups may be due to the expectation of the residents of Beit She'an that tourism will serve as major economic leverage for the region.

### **Insights: The Israeli case study and a wider view**

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, a growing body of literature has addressed the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry on micro, meso, and macro-scales (see Bennett et al., 2020; Kergassner et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). Many of these studies point to “thinking outside the box” initiatives. In Israel, a successful initiative was demonstrated in the southern city of Eilat. The ‘Green Islands’ plan approved in November 2020 by Israel’s government was the result of a major proactive stance taken by the local municipality to convince the government to greenlight a unique program in which Eilat is a controlled area where most tourism activities were allowed to continue to operate. This initiative was well-adapted to the ‘new normal’ created by Covid-19 (Gafer et al., 2022). In contrast, the government response to the Omicron variant which offers financial support for training of tourism industry employees who opt to switch to another vocation is less adaptive.

While a lot of attention has been devoted to tourism in general and to tourism-based destinations, our study focuses on cultural tourism in a peripheral area, where cultural tourism had started to gain momentum prior to the pandemic outbreak. The area does not enjoy powerful local governance which can lobby for a government rescue. Despite its peripherality, the area of our

case study is abundant with important cultural sites including archaeological sites, historic and heritage landscapes of the process of establishment of new settlements in the pre-state period, museums, and galleries and more. Our case study area is peripheral, and the area is not homogenous. It consists of an urban area (a town) and a rural area (regional council) offering a new perspective in the extensive literature on the tourism- Covid-19 nexus, in particular with regards to adaptation and survival strategies. Although the sampled cultural businesses were not affected equally by Covid-19, it is clear that most businesses were affected in all aspects measured in the survey, and a high proportion of them were shut down for long periods of time beginning in March 2020. Business owners reported that they received partial or no assistance from the government, and many were constrained from hiring staff, or forced to furlough their employees, with some laying off employees completely. Most businesses owners reported that their financial ability to withstand the crisis is only for a few months. This means that many businesses are in danger of collapsing and closing down their activities, and it may take time for the situation to return to normal.

In order to decrease the negative effects of the pandemic, business owners (entrepreneurs) developed a variety of survival strategies with the leading mottos “thinking outside the box”, “flexibility” and “new initiatives.” They revitalized their working methods and demonstrated flexibility in different components of their business activities. Their strategies included, among others, shifting to new products or services, changing marketing methods, increasing their business visibility on social media platforms, and collaborations with other business owners.

At the same time residents in both municipalities showed a decrease in participation in all categories of cultural tourism in the area during the Covid-19 period. The residents of the town of Beit She’an were more affected compared with their neighbours from the Emek HaMaayanot

regional council. It appears that the residents of the rural settlements adapted themselves better to the Covid-19 effects. A partial explanation lies in the fact that the customers of cultural tourism in the rural space are residents of the valley itself and the surrounding regions and they were more motivated to visit cultural attractions and sites within their own surroundings during the pandemic. The relatively short distance encouraged them to continue to hike in the vicinity of their place of residence. It is also assumed that the differences also lie in the dissimilarity in the characteristics between the urban and rural populations, wherein rural populations from the surrounding regional councils regarded their visit to cultural sites and attractions in the neighbouring rural settlements a form of economic and social support for the population and their businesses.

A major recommendation at the regional level is to improve the links between enterprises and administrative and policy-making bodies at different levels: local, neighbouring settlements (urban-rural relations in our case study), regional and even national. Clearly, linkages between governance structures of culture-related enterprises and administrative and policy making structures or processes within a region and even on national levels are important assets: they can help improve cooperation even during a major pandemic. Benefits to the participating regions may include a more supportive environment for public and private businesses and more resources for sustainable outcomes of cultural tourism projects.

An additional recommendation, at the business level, is to strengthen the innovative character of enterprises, based on learning from business owners' pandemic experiences. There is an opportunity to capitalize on the experiences gained during the Covid-19 period. In this context, it could be helpful if the bodies that support business and entrepreneurship would develop programming for current and future entrepreneurs that highlights successful evaluation, monitoring and developing marketing tools' created by (cultural) tourism-related projects. As



Peter Drucker noted, 'the best way to predict the future is to create it.' (Dzodin, 2021). In the future, the current situation and its effects and experience can serve as important lessons for potential entrepreneurs.

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Table 1. Type of business – frequency table

Type	Frequency	Percent
Visitor attractions, site or activity provider	31	70
Other	6	14
Restaurant/café/bar	6	14
Accommodation	1	2

Table 2. New measures regarding employees – frequency table

Measure	Frequency	Percent
Other	16	34
Not hired	11	23
Furloughed with partial pay	7	15
Furloughed with pay	6	13
Laid off	3	6
Kept on the books with zero hours contracts	2	4
Redirected to other tasks	2	4

Figure 1. COVID-19 in Israel. Source: Ram et al. (2022)

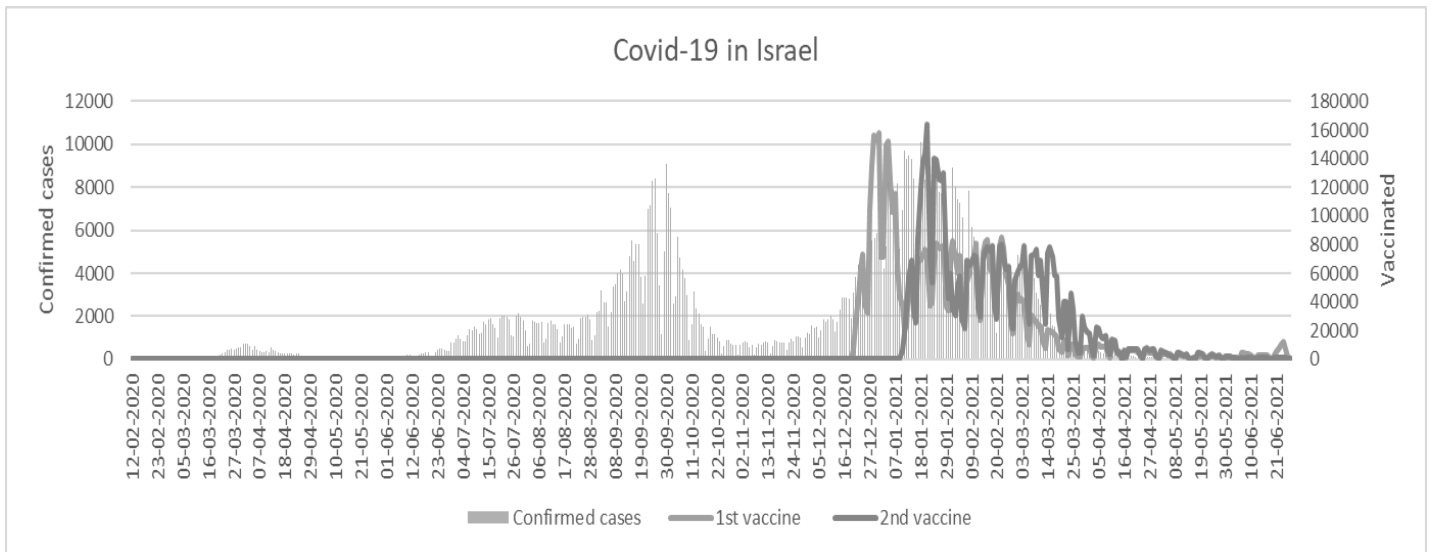


Figure 2. Location map of the case study area

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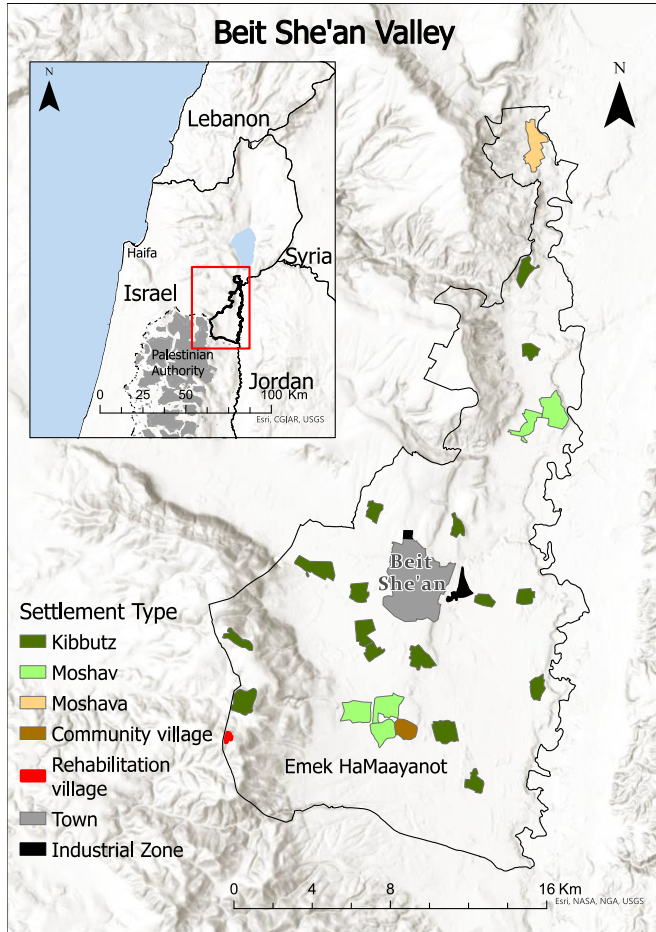


Figure 3. The impact of COVID-19 on the activities of the business (N = 35) [1 (no impact) to 5 (strong impact)]

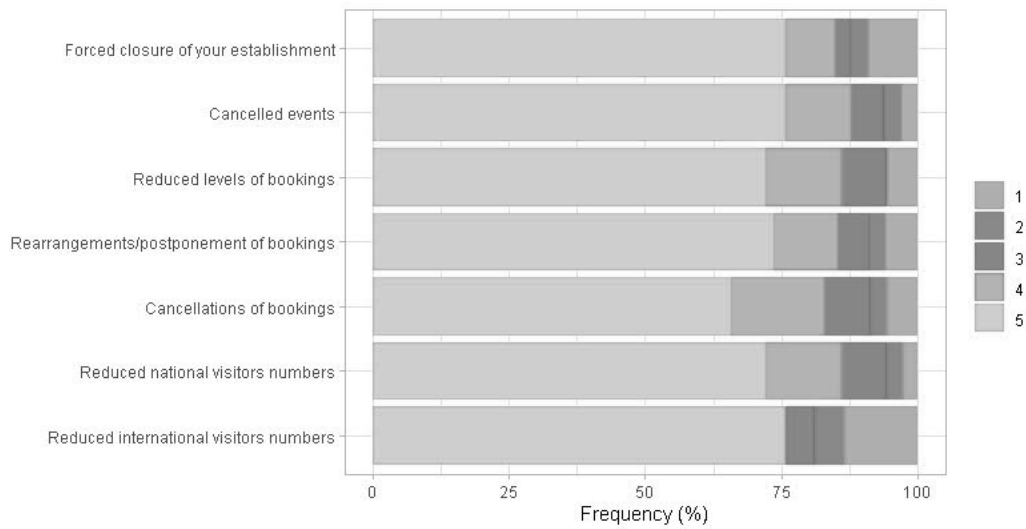
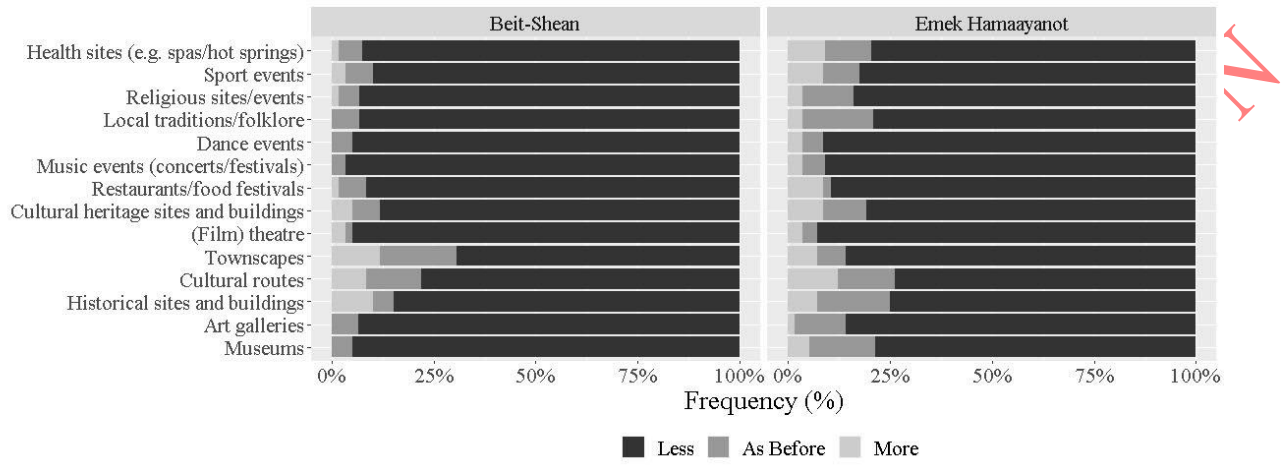




Figure 4. The impact of COVID-19 on the residents' cultural tourism activities



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