

Worth the gamble? Tourism and the embeddedness of gambling in seaside resorts (1880's-1930's)

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Seaside resorts played a crucial role in the historical development of tourism into a cornerstone of modern society during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Besides a healthy environment, coastal towns developed infrastructure and entertainment within a permissive atmosphere favoring encounters. Away from home, these liminal places offered a regime of exception, not least for gambling. To better understand the historical process that shaped seaside resorts and tourism as a whole, this joint PhD-project uncovers how gambling acquired an essential place in seaside resorts and became embedded within the tourist industry. As the recent opening of the brand-new casino Silt in Middelkerke illustrates, gambling continues to play a central but contested role at the Belgian coast.

Inspired by global microhistory, this project takes Ostend, a prominent European tourist resort at the end of the 19th century, as a ideal case to analyze in particular (transnational) mobilities generated by gambling, a popular part of the leisure activities offered for the booming public in the so-called 'Queen of the Seaside Resorts.' This research first aims to map out the wide range of gambling activities from the card games on the "trains de plaisir" bringing in common laborers to the coast, to the highly publicized horse races at Ostend's Wellington racetrack or the roulette in the Kursaal. Secondly, it will link these activities to different infrastructures and look at how they shaped social encounters among players of all classes but also with people sustaining the gambling industry, from the entrepreneurs running the business to the croupiers dealing the cards. This will help to identify the many actors involved in these activities and the great variety of contexts in which they took place. The seasonality of the tourism industry, which relied heavily on migrant labor and highly mobile tourists added to the difficulties of controlling gambling activities in resorts, which constitutes a third level of analysis. By mapping out the mobility and variety of these actors the research uncovers how they (dis)connect and developed into an important stakeholder influencing the legal framework. Restrictionists were gaining the upper hand in social and parliamentary debates at the turn of the twentieth century with new laws curtailing gambling nationwide. Yet seaside resorts managed to obtain regimes of exception most of the time up until today. By zooming on the period 1880's-1930's when gambling was unrestricted at first, restricted in part and banned completely temporarily, the research seeks to capture the full scope of different legal settings in which gambling activities took place in seaside resorts and measure their different impact on the tourism.

By addressing the lacunae and challenges left by gambling studies, global and tourism historians, and combining original sources from different historiographical traditions, this innovating cross-disciplinary research contributes to our understanding of the impact of leisure activities such as gambling on the historical development of tourist resorts and tourism as a major of the Blue Economy.

Keywords

Seaside Resorts; Ostend; Mobility And Leisure Travel; Tourism History; Global Microhistory