Dark Tourism Comes Out of the Shadows

Dark Tourism is throwing a new light on grim, sinister and sombre places around the world. Pablo Escobar's Medellin, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, Auschwitz, Jack the Ripper's back streets of London, the slavery and apartheid jail cells in Africa, all now attract visitors from afar.

Dark Tourism is defined as any travel associated with death, suffering, murder, pain, disaster or the macabre. The increase in such trips and organised tours has led to the establishment of an Institute for Dark Tourism Research. It studies the ethics and complex challenges of a gloomy travel phenomenon that is gathering pace.

Not everyone likes the trend. The citizens of Medellin initially didn't want to be reminded of their murderous narcotic past. Survivors and historians of Auschwitz, seeing tourists take selfies at a genocide site, raised fears that Dark Tourism was trivialising tragedy.

So should you allow Dark Tourism? And if you do, how do you manage to overcome such concerns?

"Firstly and most importantly, the community including victims and survivors must be consulted from the beginning and throughout the project," says Carolyn Childs a travel industry specialist who confronts Dark Tourism challenges in her blog piece, Developing and Managing Dark Tourism.

After assessing Dark Tourism sites around the world, Childs says that the quality of interpretation is vital. The story needs to be brought to life and personalised, such as at the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg where visitors are randomly assigned a white or non-white tag and enter the museum through different corridors, all the while visible to one and other. The experience is visceral and disconcerting.

There is a tendency for local authorities where infamy occurred to avoid creating a physical focal point in case it inspires the wrong type of emotions.

The Fuhrerbunker in Berlin (where Hitler lived his final days and died) was initially concealed and no commemoration placed there. At the suggestion of Berliner Unterwelten (Berlin Underworlds) a panel was finally erected there to put a stop to invented stories and myth making about the last days of Hitler. The moral for local authorities: acknowledging the grim past is usually better than doing nothing.

While selfie and travel tick list trivialisation is unfortunate, and perhaps inevitable, says Childs, Dark Tourism can be firmly defended if it promotes solemn learning and personal growth.

"Visiting sites such as Auschwitz are occasions for profound reflection and learning," she says. "Particularly, if you combine them with visiting Kazimierz and Podgorze [the persecuted Jewish areas in WWII Krakow]. If you are visiting Krakow and only see the positives of this beautiful city, you aren't seeing the whole picture."

She believes a Walt Whitman quote comes close to the heart of Dark Tourism. "Only the dark, dark night shows to our eyes the stars."

Childs' full blog on Dark Tourism with links to related research and insights is available on the MyTravelResearch.com website at http://www.mytravelresearch.com/developing-and-managing-dark-tourism/.

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* Businesses make more informed decisions. (It is like having your own research and/or marketing team)

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