

## Dark tourism and cities

Sites associated with death and disaster appear to exert a dark fascination for visitors and tourists. Death, suffering, visitation and tourism have been interrelated for many centuries but the phenomena of dark tourism was identified as such and categorised by Lennon and Foley (1996, 2000). However, as early as 1993, Rojek had referred to “Black spots” and “Fatal Attractions” to highlight sites of fatality which he identified as a feature of the post-modern condition (p. 136). However, such a definitional framework was considered too narrow and Lennon and Foley (1996, 2000) hypothesised that there are aspects of the ancient, modern and post-modern to be identified within the spectrum of dark tourism. The phenomena developed included:

- visits to death sites and disaster scenes;
- visits to sites of mass or individual death;
- visits to sites of incarceration;
- visits to representations or simulations associated with death; and
- visits to re-enactments and human interpretation of death.

Critical here is the language and the use of the word “dark” as a predominantly pejorative term that intimates that events or locations are negative, transgressive or dubious. Other forms of visitation which Seaton (1996, 2009) refers to as “Thanatourism” have either limited or no sinister connotations, such as; literary pilgrimages to the graves of famous authors or visiting battlefields with family associations. However, the urban or city context frequently features.

Heritage is contested concept and the pursuit of historical “accuracy” is invariably compromised by competing ideologies, interpretation, funding and a host of other factors. For some, such as Lowenthal (1998) valuably highlighted defining heritage let alone agreeing a verifiable truth will invariably remain elusive. In tourist attraction sites, visitor centres and those locations explored in this submission such issues are continually confronted. This complexity becomes acute in the case of “dark” sites at what has been referred to as dissonant heritage (Ashworth and Hartmann, 2005; Seaton, 2001). Dark tourism then is an inclusive term incorporating the extensive and identifiable phenomena of visitation to sites associated with our shared dark past; mass killing, extermination, death, incarceration, war crimes, dictatorship, etc.

Dark tourism has generated much more than purely academic interest. The term has entered the mainstream and is a popular subject of media attention. In the city of New York, the Ground Zero site within 12 months of 9/11 was attracting significantly greater numbers of visitors than prior to the terrorist attacks (Blair, 2002). From a management and operations perspective issues of ethical presentation, visitor behaviour, site management, revenue generation, marketing and promotion, all create areas that are fraught with difficulties and are frequently the subject of criticism and debate. Education and the nature of the learning experience and the preservation of historical record are frequently used to justify and explain motivation for development and visitation. Interpretation of the unimaginable as an educational experience is often cited as the motivation but in truth the reasons for visitation to such sites is more complex and multifaceted.

Such sites are defined by a heritage that has changed over time. Many factors imbue the meanings and content of place. This is a function of a plethora of competing influences and agendas: political, economic, cultural, demographic and historical. These sites have potential to influence the historical, social and cultural meanings represented (Smith, 2006). The selection,

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interpretation and conservation of elements of the past of this place are critical in understanding what is considered.

Interpretation is used to articulate heritage through objects, artefacts, audio recording, place or imagery. They have potential reconstructed and re-represent the past. Historical memorialization remains embedded in interests that are global, commercial, ideological but rarely neutral.

This Special Edition seeks to present papers which reflect the fact that dark tourism is of increasing interest and importance, both for academic study and for gaining an insight into how the tourism industry may best meet the needs of tourists and visitors. Dark tourism is of growing significance, as many authors here would attest, and often matters such as commemoration and heritage overlap in such a way as to challenge our, perhaps, negative associations with sites of death, disaster and tragedy.

This Special Edition explores the best of current thinking about dark tourism from a number of perspectives, but each has the common thread of “darkness” at the heart of their thinking. Often it is possible to reconsider tourism in a new light, or is that a new darkness?

There are papers which explore the way in which dark tourism offers opportunities to consider new tourism products, offering opportunities to develop or enhance visitation. Powell *et al.* explore the idea that dark tourism is not fully understood, and as such European cities do not always promote the dark features of cities in ways which maximise the potential of a rich historical environment with an awareness of how tourism works, although one of the main ideas running through all the papers presented here is that dark tourism is a real phenomenon and as such has real potential to be part of the planning for tourism process, be it in developing new attractions or showcasing existing ones.

This is clearly shown in the paper by Mileva which explores the potential for the development of dark tourism in Bulgaria. A number of factors are considered and the reader is left to reflect on the fact that opportunities are there, waiting to be developed.

Similarly, Kuznik investigates the wealth of dark stories abounding in the cities of Brežice and Krško in Slovenia as being a good starting point to develop a touristic offering based on dark history and heritage. Azevedo takes an established (albeit niche) tourism product: lighthouse visitation, and wonders if there is in actual fact a dark side to consider as well. Tan also considers how the “Pearl of the Orient” may further enhance tourism in Malaysia. Mirasee offers insight into how post-war tourism may be employed as an important part of reconstruction efforts post-conflict in Khorramshahr, Iran. All these papers amply illustrate some of the ways the current awareness of dark tourism in academic circles may prove to provide useful and practical lessons which inform the practice of tourism in cities and contribute to the many positives tourism can provide host communities and others.

There are also papers which use up-to date techniques to add to our understanding of dark tourism: as discussed earlier, a field which is far from being exhausted or fully understood in all its complexities and nuances. Çakar uses visitors’ comment on TripAdvisor to better understand the experience of visitors to Gallipoli, interestingly using the term “pilgrims” to denote such visitors. Battlefield tourism has exerted a pull and a fascination for a very long time, and there are many reasons why this is so. However, access to the recorded thoughts of actual visitors provides useful and useable insight. Sun uses the visitor experience also to reflect on how the embodiment of the Nanjing massacre affects visitors. The museum is, of course, famous for incorporating the mass graves of victims as a centre piece of the exhibition itself, along with innumerable and tangible artefacts. The need for the museum may be considered self-evident, but how does it provide access to such horrors without being ghoulish or sentimental? There are lessons to be learnt on how such obscenities and horrors may be usefully brought into public discourse here.

Skinner provides a tour of the Pompeii of the Caribbean, a study of Plymouth, Montserrat and its potential as an important tourist destination, as well as a fascinating archaeological resource. Exploitation of the actual Pompeii and its sister city Herculaneum further along the Italian coast provide a timely reminder of the practical issues involved in heritage preservation and conservation existing side-by-side with plentiful visitation. Take the opportunity to be at the front of the queue as our knowledge of this destination grows.

And we have a significant contribution from Professor John Lennon, an academic at the forefront of dark tourism research. In this Special Edition, he writes about disputed narratives in the interpretation of war, citing the case study of the Kanchanaburi and the Thai-Burma railway. The horrors of war considered here are a living memory for many survivors of the brutal treatment meted out by the Japanese during the building of this railway in the Second World War, but as the paper shows, even such stories have two sides to them, and often interpretation is a matter of perspective. This factor is crucial if we are to understand, truly, what dark tourism even is, and how we might make best use of it if we are so inclined to do, either as tourism professionals or as visitors ourselves.

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## Further reading

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