Dark Tourism – an old concept in a new world

Philip R. Stone, University of Central Lancashire
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There are an increasingly number of death-related visitor sites, attractions and exhibitions, often trading under the guise of remembrance, education and/or entertainment, which attract people eager to consume real and commodified death. Indeed, the act of touristic travel to sites of death, disaster and the macabre is becoming a pervasive cultural activity within contemporary society. From enjoying family picnics on battle sites of northern France or purchasing souvenirs of genocide at Ground Zero, to allowing schoolchildren to experience past lives of unfortunate inmates at the Bodmin Jail Centre, are all illustrations of the seemingly macabre. Consequently, the term ‘dark tourism’ (also know by the rather awkward label of ‘thanatourism’) has entered academic discourse and media parlance. Essentially dark tourism refers to visits, intentional or otherwise, to purposeful / non-purposeful sites which offer a presentation of death or suffering as the raison d'être. Likewise, Tarlow (2005:48) identifies dark tourism as ‘visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives’.

With increasing attention from the academic community and media alike, this article suggests dark tourism, with its roots in a pre-modern age, is an old concept but with new relevance and consequence for the society in which we reside today. Of course, travel to and experience of events associated with death, pain or suffering is not a new phenomenon. Whilst religious pilgrimages, for emotional and spiritual reasons, have attracted people to sites of death and violence for centuries, tourists have long been drawn, intentionally or otherwise, to death-related attractions. Early examples may be found in the patronage of Roman gladiatorial games. With death and suffering at the core of the gladiatorial product, and its eager consumption by raucous spectators, the Roman Colosseum may be considered one of the first dark tourist attractions.

Other precursors to dark tourism, and before the democratization of travel, may be seen in the public executions of the medieval period up until the 19th century. As public
spectacles, executions served as visible reminders of deterrence and retribution. Yet, with
the advent of more formalised arrangements to accommodate visiting voyeurs, public
executions increasingly took on the characteristics of a spectator event. Indeed, execution
sites such as Tyburn boasted specially erected grandstands to offer better vantage points
to see the condemned die. In a similar vein, this fascination with ‘other death’ may be
seen in the alleged first guided tour in England, whereby in 1838 a railway excursion in
Cornwall took in the hanging of two convicted murderers (Boorstin 1987). Other early
examples of dark tourism may be found in the guided morgue tours of the Victorian
period, the Chamber of Horrors exhibition of Madame Tussaud, or in ‘correction houses’
where galleries were built to accommodate fee-paying visitors who witnessed flogging as
a recreational activity.

Presently however, dark tourism is manifested in various forms and subsets. These
include Holocaust tourism (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Lennon and Foley 2000),
battlefield tourism (Henderson 2000), cemetery and internment sites (Seaton 2002),
slavery-heritage (Dann and Seaton 2001), celebrity death sites (Alderman 2002), and
prison tourism (Strange and Kempa 2003). However, it is only recently that dark
tourism, in all its manifestations and various shades has become widespread and
seemingly more popular. Whilst it remains unclear as to whether the proliferation of dark
tourism is due to an increased supply of attractions and sites, or whether consumers are
demanding more and more of the macabre, media inspired or otherwise, death in touristic
form is an increasing feature of the contemporary landscape.

It is this demand for the dark tourism product, and the motivation that lies behind it that is
of fundamental importance. Whilst there is clearly a need for a much fuller exploration of
motivations for dark tourism, in both general and micro-populations, some speculation
has already been made. For instance, Seaton and Lennon (2004) suggest that journeys
into the realms of death and suffering have two distinct origins. Firstly, they advocate that
the existence of schadenfreude, a secret pleasure in witnessing the misfortunes of others,
may be a prime motivator in people travelling to sites of disaster. Secondly, they suggest
thanatopsis, the contemplation of one’s own death, which also may be a factor at play
when people visit dark sites. However, personal contemplation of death in a contemporary world is often negated through a lack of mechanisms that allow confrontation of death. With increased secularisation and change in family structures, medicalization of the death process and privatization of the death industry, death has become institutionally sequestered from contemporary society. Consequently, this apparent absence of death within contemporary society proves a paradox because as mortal finite beings, as we live so we shall die, therefore death is very much present. Thus, dark tourism and its consumption may be a contemporary mechanism for confronting death, hence making absence death present in the sense it allows consumers to undertake thanatopsis in a visible and accepted manner (Stone forthcoming). However, to date the dimensions of dark tourism and its consumption have not been fully extracted or interrogated, only assumed. The task now is to reveal the extent of dark tourism, the motivations that lie behind it, and perhaps more importantly its relationship with the wider society in which we reside today.

References


**Philip R.Stone**

*Senior Lecturer*

Department of Tourism & Leisure Management
University of Central Lancashire
The world of dark tourism was recently made popular thanks to a Netflix documentary series called "Dark Tourist" where New Zealand journalist, David Farrier, dives deep into this subset of tourism. In the series eight episodes, David and the crew travel to astonishing, morbid and sometimes dangerous places around the world, highlighting these strange tourist destinations. Rusted bicycles, old sewing machines and the shells of old cars lay among the rubble of crumbling stone buildings in what was once a quaint French town. On June 10 of 1944, over 640 people, including women and children, were massacred by German soldiers. If you're in a city most restaurants will refill your bottle free of charge! - Natasha, Canada. Essentially dark tourism refers to visits, intentional or otherwise, to purposeful / non-purposeful sites which offer a presentation of death or suffering as the raison d'etre. Likewise, Tarlow (2005:48) identifies dark tourism as visits to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives when people visit dark sites. However, personal contemplation of death in a contemporary world is often negated through a lack of mechanisms that allow confrontation of death. With increased secularisation and change in family structures, medicalization of the death process and privatization of the death industry, death has become institutionally sequestered from contemporary society. Visiting old castles and dungeons is a great dark tourism activity. Many are now open to the public and by their very nature, they have a dark and bloody past. The way the history of these locations is represented varies widely, (from the Disneyfied nature of a London Dungeon tour to the authentic no-frills visit to Leap Castle in Ireland), however, they do make for an interesting trip. There are many dark tourism destinations around the world. As I have already stated, the best of them allow the visitor to explore, commemorate, and understand the tragedies that took place, in a sensitive and enlightening manner. Under these circumstances, it is no small wonder dark tourism spots are becoming increasingly popular. 2.1 An Old Concept in a New World? How far back should one go, to the days of Ancient Rome where the Colosseum would fill for the gladiatorial games? The pilgrimages that occurred to view artefacts and the remains of religious figures? (Lennon & Foley, 1999; Osbaldiston & Petray, 2011). Or to the public executions in the Middle Ages? Or even so far as the ancient pyramids of Egypt; those colossal tombs designed to signify the dead. All could be claimed as examples of dark tourism, a fascination and a significance of death has followed humanity through the ages. Dark tourism is a type of tourism that has received increasing attention in recent years. TV shows, such as Chernobyl and The Dark Tourist, have introduced the concept of dark tourism to the minds of motives of many tourists around the world. But what is dark tourism? Is dark tourism ethical? In a more recent publication, Kevin Fox Gotham defines dark tourism as the circulation of people to places characterized by distress, atrocity, or sadness and pain. As a more specific component of dark tourism, disaster tourism denotes situations where the tourism product is generated within, and from, the aftermath of a major disaster or traumatic event. Whilst other motivations stem from the desire to experience something different or new. Dark tourism documentary.