

IS 'DARK TOURISM' OK?

These days seems you can't go more than a few weeks without hearing about some unfortunate selfie faux pas on the Internet. Tourists posting photos of themselves giving the thumbs up in Auschwitz, for example, or smiling from a rusted-out bumper car in Pripyat, the Ukrainian city that was evacuated after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. The offending images are seen and blasted around to social media circles. Disparaging comments are made and the shares continue, rippling out to create a full-blown meme about travelers' growing predilection for "dark tourism." The truth is, visiting places associated with death and suffering has been popular a lot longer than the selfie stick.

Mark Twain devoted a full chapter to Pompeii in *Innocents Abroad*. Tourists flocked to the still-smoking fields of Gettysburg in 1863 to see the aftermath of one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War. Anton Chekhov left his successful playwriting career in 1890 to become the world's first "gulag tourist." And then there's the Taj Mahal—a selfie-central icon that's actually a tomb—which has been a staple of the world-travel circuit for half a millennium. From the September 11 Memorial and the Roman Colosseum to Rwanda's Murambi Technical School, there is no shortage of "tourist sites of death, disaster, or the seemingly macabre," as the U.K.-based Institute for Dark Tourism Research puts it. While so-called "dark tourism" isn't new, what *is* new is how some of these sites and experiences are being marketed.

Visitors to the Cu Chi tunnels near Ho Chi Minh City are promised a chance to shoot AK-47s in the famous Viet Cong guerrilla maze ... for a price. Certain tours to Israel's Golan Heights come with expectations of witnessing real-time missiles in an active war zone. You get the idea.

To me, the problem lies not with the choice of destination, but with the intention behind the choice. After all, why should we avoid the Anne Frank House just because Justin Bieber left an insensitive message in the guest book? The first thing we should ask ourselves: Are we traveling to a place to heighten our understanding, or simply to show off or indulge some morbid curiosity? Of course, intention can be a two-way street. There is a difference, obviously, between the people who go on tours and the people who develop, run, and profit from them. While some tour operators seem to have no qualms about skewing—and even fabricating—facts or ratcheting up the gore factor for dramatic effect, others approach sensitive subjects such as genocide, terrorism, and nuclear disaster with the care and gravitas they deserve. (...)

As I was thinking about this story, I did a lot of reflecting on my most memorable travel experiences. Many of the places that made my list—concentration camps, the sites of massacres and political assassinations, and battlefields—could be described as "dark." What I remember most about the time I spent in Warsaw's WWII-era Jewish ghetto is a fellow visitor, a white-haired man who, when I noticed the number tattooed on his arm, acknowledged my silent inquiry with a nod. The experience made history more real for me.

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