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commentary

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## The rise of Dark Tourism around the World

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A relative increase of tourist visits related to macabre tourist sites, is observed from year to year. What does that mean and what are these sites so popular? Obviously, we don't refer to sites like Eiffel Tower, the British Museum or even the Parthenon, but, let's start from the beginning.

Certainly, hearing the term "*Dark Tourism*" one doesn't think of anything pleasant. "It's a new phenomenon" argues J. John Lennon, Professor of Tourism at the Glasgow Caledonian University of Scotland. "There is historical evidence indicating that the phenomenon began after the great Battle of Waterloo in June, 18<sup>th</sup> 1815 where the locals watched the fierce battle from their carriages" he added. The phenomenon is encountered with many names, with the most characteristic ones being the following: "*thanatourism*" (derivative of the Greek word for death "*Thanatos*"), "*dark tourism*", "*blackspots*" and "*sensation sites*". The first two are the most prevalent and the last two refer to locations where great disasters took place resulting violent deaths (e.g. siege/genocide, etc.). However, there are many different forms of *dark tourism*, such as *Disaster Tourism*, *War Tourism*, *Surnatural-Macabre Tourism* and the *Necrotourism*.

Accordingly some of the most "famous" dark tourist attractions to consider are: Chernobyl (Ukraine) which has been long considered a flagship due to the extend

of the transnational disaster caused, the Auschwitz Nazi Concentration Camp (Poland) due to the systematic extermination of human life; as a blackspot could also be considered Pompeii in Southern Italy, where the devastating results of natural phenomena (eruption of the nearby Vesuvio Volcano) can be (astounding clearly) observed; finally the legendary high security Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary located on the eponymous island in San Francisco Bay is another major tourist attraction due to the isolation created by the cold, strong currents of the waters.



Prison of Alcatraz. (Google image)

Greece is also included in the dark history list with Spinalonga island located in the Gulf of Elounda in North-Eastern Crete, which has been used as a leper colony isolating the lepers from the rest of the world and providing to the leprosy patients the care they needed.

On these grounds old battlefields and generally war theaters are primarily eligible for dark tourism lists. In that sense places like the embattled eastern and northeastern provinces of Ukraine are possible future dark tourism destinations after the end of the hostilities due to the Russian invasion March 2022.



Chernobyl. Image from National Geographic.

As mentioned Professor J. John Lennon argued that “all these dark tourist spots prove to us what means to be human”. Indeed, the visitor of such places is being easily introduced to the atmosphere and the psycho-synthesis of the people present at the time of the tragedy and enters the process of putting himself in the historical background. Therefore, he doesn't perceive the space as alien territory and tries to identify himself with the time and place of the event.

*Dark tourism affects how cultural heritage and the memory it embodies remains vital for individuals, groups and communities in forming or maintaining collective identities*

Given the emotionality of the experience, one might point out the positive contribution of dark tourism in the creation of a renewable memory heritage contrary to negative perceived content of the term “Dark”. Beyond the pure economic benefits on regional and even on national level we cannot ignore the social and personal dimension, in terms of social coherence, the consideration the historicity of these sites and the memories conveyed to the viewer.

Dark tourism affects how cultural heritage and the memory it embodies remains vital for individuals, groups and communities in forming or maintaining collective identities. It also highlights how the elimination of individual and group memory is an important underlying cause of cultural heritage destruction. The destruction of cultural memory through destruction of the material culture of the past and present has been used to oppress individuals, groups and communities in order to maintain power. This has been a common tool in many undemocratic nation-states that aim to establish hegemony over minority groups; it is frequently seen during conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, during genocides, sectarian conflict and in wartime.

Dark tourism is a way on the one hand, to alert the tourist of the cultural background of a country, a race, a community or a person and on the other hand, to make him think critical and elaborate ways to avoid a repetition. Obviously, it is not in the intentions of this commentary to try to identify or normalize types or forms of tragedy, but merely to remind of a window of engagement in remembrance of all those that “We do not want to forget”. -

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