
Paul F. WilkinsonProfessor, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University

A Book Review: Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*

When discussing this book over lunch with a group of academic colleagues who are not involved in tourism research, I was greeted by expressions of surprise and shock. The initial general consensus was that tourists who deliberately visit places of death and suffering must be sick. I responded that our family had at various times visited the Tower of London, Dachau, the Berlin Wall, Pompeii, Alcatraz, the battlefield on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, and cremations in Bali, among other “dark” places. That opened up the more than slightly surprised floodgates of admission for my colleagues: the Alamo in San Antonio, the volcano-ravaged site of Saint-Pierre in Martinique, Gettysburg National Military Park, Battle of the Little Bighorn, Knossos, Auschwitz, funerals in Tanja Toraja, Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum, Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris (Jim Morrison’s grave being the top attraction there), and so on. As a result, every day for the next several days, people at lunch who had not been present originally were asked the same question and nearly all responded with similar examples. A number of people, however, expressed personal embarrassment at having to admit their experiences. Clearly, dark tourism is a larger phenomenon than most people think.

The Darker Side of Travel seeks to go beyond the study of dark tourism as merely one more attempt “to subdivide tourism into niche products and markets” or as being “an example of media hype responding to ... presumed fascination in death and dying” (p. 7). The editors argue that the numerous and varying sites or attractions for dark tourism require “effective and appropriate development, management, interpretation, and promotion. These in turn require a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of dark tourism within social, cultural, historical and political contexts” (p. 7).

Dark tourism has numerous other labels, e.g., thanatourism,¹ morbid tourism, Black Spot tourism, grief tourism, fright tourism, milking the macabre, dicing with death, holidays in hell, holocaust tourism, atrocity tourism, prison tourism, slave-heritage tourism. This book

¹*Thànatos* (Θάνατος) is the Greek word for “death.”

adopts Stone's (2006) definition of dark tourism as "the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre." Because such a definition covers a wide variety of places and experiences – not all of which, the editors note, are covered in this book – Dann's (1998) alliterative and "post-modernistically playful inventory" (Seaton and Lennon 2004) is presented to summarize the broad scope of dark tourism:

- *perilous places*: dangerous destinations from the past and the present
- *houses of horror*: buildings associated with death and horror, either actual or represented
- *fields of fatality*: areas/land commemorating death, fear, fame or infamy
- *tours of torment*: tours/visits to attractions associated with death, murder, and mayhem
- *themed thanatos*: collections/museums themed around death and suffering.

Noting that the growing literature on dark tourism tends to be descriptive and supply-side comment and analysis, the editors state that this book will focus on a number demand-side questions that have received little attention to date. These questions include:

- is dark tourism tourist-demand or attraction-driven?
- has there been a measurable increase in interest in dark tourism or is there simply an ever-increasing supply of sites and attractions?
- are there degrees or "shades" of darkness that can be related to either the nature of the attraction or the intensity of interest on the part of tourists?
- what management or ethical issues are raised?
- does the popularity of "dark" sites result from a basic, voyeuristic interest or fascination with death or are there more powerful motivating factors?

These and other questions are examined in the book's three parts. Part 1, "Theories and Concepts," contains four chapters focussing on an introduction, consuming dark tourism in contemporary society, mediating between the dead and the living, and morality and new moral spaces. Part 2, "Management Implications," has four chapters on management, interpretation, ethics, and a governance model. Finally, Part 3, "Practice," has five chapters on a lighter side of dark tourism, battlefield tourism, genocide tourism, slavery, and future research directions and concluding comments.

The most interesting of the editors' conclusions is that, in some ways, "dark tourism" is an un-helpful term because it has "negative connotations hinting at ghoulish interest in the macabre" and it is "a label attached to the supply or production of attractions, events, and experiences" (p. 248). They conclude that "the significance of dark tourism may not lie in the relationship between sites and tourists per se, but in what it might reveal more generally about the relationship between the living, the dead and society's institutions for mediating in that relationship" (p. 250). They call for "empirical research into the ways in which dark sites are consumed, both in terms of tourists' motivations and experience and more generally in terms of the function of dark sites as one of the many social institutions that mediate between life and death" (p. 250).

The 13 chapters by the eight authors, most of whom are well-known tourism researchers, are uniformly extremely well-written and informative; unlike many edited books with uneven bibliographies at the end of each chapter, this book refreshingly provides an integrated bibliography. The choice of the editors or the publisher not to include page numbers in references that are direct quotations is, however, unhelpful to readers. The book would be a fine edition to any tourism library and would be of interest to heritage planners and managers, tourism researchers, and graduate or senior undergraduate tourism students.

* Sharpley, Richard and Philip R. Stone (eds.). (2009). *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*. Bristol: Channel View Publications. (x + 275 pp.; references; index; ISBN-13: 978-1-84541-115-2 [hbk]; ISBN-13: 978-1-84541-114-5 [pbk])

Bibliography

Dann, G. (1998). The dark side of tourism, *Etudes et Rapports, Série L, Sociology/Psychology/Philosophy/Anthropology* (Vol. 14). Aix-en-Provence: Centre International de Recherches et d'Etudes Touristiques.

Seaton, A. and J. Lennon. (2004). Moral panics, ulterior motives and ulterior desires: thanatourism in the early 21st century. In T. Singh (ed.), *New Horizons in Tourism: Strange Experiences and Stranger Practices*. Wallingford: CABI Publishing, 63-82.

Stone, P. (2006). A dark tourism spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions, *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal*, 54, 2, 145-160.