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The Attraction of Thanatourism

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The Attraction of Thanatourism

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Introduction/Hypothesis

From the emotional messages, the memorials, to the graphic images and memories evoked at the 9/11 Memorial, Holocaust Museum, and display of the Enola Gay, dark tourism exhibits a far reaching impact on the human race. It has the energy and influence to bring people together emotionally and unite them in remembrance of a people, place, and event. Dark tourism is an attraction of its own.

In this study we have taken a random sampling of individuals from around the United States centering on their eagerness to visit three places of interest thanatourism. These places are the 9/11 Memorial, the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., and the Enola Gay in the annex of the Air and Space Museum near a airport in the D.C. area.

Prior to taking a random sampling our group hypothesized that there is a certain connection and curiosity that accompanies places that rely on thanatourism and that this sampling would show there is an industry in thanatourism.

Ground Zero, Manhattan

Today, Ground Zero stands as one of New York City’s most popular tourist attractions. For Americans, September 11, 2001, means many different things. For those who were old enough to witness the horrific images on the news, 9/11 will forever remain ingrained in their memory as a major event in history. Almost 10 years later, Ground Zero has become a pilgrimage site for many; a place to mourn for the lives that were lost and possibly find come to terms with the event. However, Ground Zero still remains under construction without a proper memorial. Still, that has not stopped tourists from flocking to the site to see for themselves the very spot where terrorists attacked. Following them are the street hawkers selling their bootleg DVDs and knock-off purses. Ground Zero has become not the actual occurrence of the Holocaust, it is the sense of moral obligation, the identification card serves to realize the Holocaust in the visitors’ minds. The piles of shoes, the clothes, the facts, even the replicas have more meaning when associated with an actual person. The onlookers become that victim for just a moment, feeling the load of working in a concentration camp. There is no accompanying feeling of joy, ecstasy, or relaxation in attending such a museum. Why, then, do tourists find it worthwhile to use their vacation time to visit these reminders of the tragedy that left a black scar on the twentieth century? In the past twenty years, as the world has been fighting over terrorism or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives” (Marcet). Media plays an important role in the popularity of dark tourism, as movies and television use historical events to create drama. Tours flock to places portrayed in movies, books, and television. Another theory presents nostalgia as a psychological pull that brings people to these dark places. Dark tourism may be a form of virtual nostalgia in which the traveler vicariously visits the tragedy’s scene, experience the tragedy’s place (Tarlow). It may be that people desire to experience these tragedies in an artificial way, knowing that they are safe from the horrors that occurred, but still trying to get as close as possible. The reasons for dark tourism are varied, and can include: A pretext to understand our own age, romanticism, barbarism, national identity, decadence, a mystical experience, and a spiritual experience (Tarlow). Today, dark tourism has become a business as well. Not every place of tragedy is a dark tourism hot spot; only those that have been able to stage and market the experience have succeeded.

What Theorists Say

Dark Tourism, technically called thanatourism, has been defined in many ways. Some see the roof of dark tourism as the attraction to events that cause the tourist to question modernity, while others define it more broadly as “visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives” (Marcet). Media plays an important role in the popularity of dark tourism, as movies and television use historical events to create drama. Tours flock to places portrayed in movies, books, and television. Another theory presents nostalgia as a psychological pull that brings people to these dark places. Dark tourism may be a form of virtual nostalgia in which the traveler vicariously visits the tragedy’s scene, experience the tragedy’s place (Tarlow). It may be that people desire to experience these tragedies in an artificial way, knowing that they are safe from the horrors that occurred, but still trying to get as close as possible. The reasons for dark tourism are varied, and can include: A pretext to understand our own age, romanticism, barbarism, national identity, decadence, a mystical experience, and a spiritual experience (Tarlow). Today, dark tourism has become a business as well. Not every place of tragedy is a dark tourism hot spot; only those that have been able to stage and market the experience have succeeded.

Conclusion

Based on theory, research and surveys, the evidence reveals that most people are intrigued by thanatourism because of its appeal to events in history, such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the attack on the World Trade Centers in New York City. The emotional connection to these events transcends generations and helps define us as a Nation. Thanatourism is an industry that plays to the sentiment of the people who have been affected, or seek a connection to an event in history.