

DARK TOURISM – A NICHE SEGMENT FOR THE ROMANIAN TOURISM

Patrichi Ioana Cristiana¹

Abstract

In the last decades dark tourism has become a significant niche segment of world tourism. Locations marked by the occurrence of catastrophic natural events have attracted a large number of tourists, as well as different sites related to the production of mass massacres or genocide. The human mind is complex. Why tourists are attracted to these places is still a subject of intense discussion by experts in the field of tourism. It may be a feature of the current period or it might have reasons related to local history, or with the lost of loved ones etc.

In Romania there are a few such places that may be included in package tours and have enough potential to attract a greater number of tourists. Such places are Merry Cemetery in Sapanta, Bellu Cemetery in Bucharest or Sigetel Marmatiei Prison, one of the dark prisons of communism, especially used for the extermination of the Romanian elites, both cultural and national and religious. Tourists are more attracted to such places mostly out of curiosity, although for most of these places stir up bad memories.

This paper aims to analyze the potential for development of dark tourism in Romania and which are the possible destinations for this. Is there a market for this segment of tourism in Romania? Who could be potential tourists?

Keywords: dark tourism, dark places, Romanian potential, dark destinations.

1. Introduction

Dark tourism is also known in academia as Thanatourism, which derives from the ancient Greek word thanatos, or the personification of death. Of course, tourists' fascination with death is nothing new. Since ancient time people turn their attention to places related to violence or death. Perhaps the first signs of black tourism are related to the organization of gladiators fighting in the Colosseum in Rome or the onlookers at the sacrificial religious rites of the Maya.

Just like the Romans and Jews, Egyptians and many other cultures of that time included torture in their systems of justice. If the Romans had crucifixion, Jews had stoning (hitting rocks) and Egyptians had exposure to the scorching sun of the desert, which ultimately lead to death. All these public torture were considered necessary to discourage and punish immorality sins.

Later in the medieval period, people were attracted to public executions. For them it was a special event, attended with pleasure and that in some cases people were coming from miles away. Whether it was a witch burned at the stake or a thief beheaded or

¹ Lector univ.dr., Universitatea Romano Americana, patrichi.ioana.cristina@profesor.rau.ro

hanged, the interest of the people was the same. Let's not forget that in France, Queen Marie Antoinette was guillotined on 16 October 1793, and her death represented an important event for the population of those times.

People's interest in death intensified during the Romantic period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries with attractions like Waterloo and the ruins of Pompeii. This was considered by Tony Seaton, an early dark-tourism researcher, the greatest thanatopic travel destination of the Romantic period.

In the nineteenth century in England correction houses were built for visitors paying special galleries those perpetrators of torture as an entertainment activity (Stone, 2006).

Today people are looking for this type of dark spots, but there is a big difference between what happened hundred of years ago and the reality of present days. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, a significant number of tourists headed to Ground Zero in New York with different motivations. Also, Thailand and Indonesia have been a place of pilgrimage after the passage of the 2004 tsunami. In the same context, the death of Princess Diana has attracted a large number of tourists in London, arrived in sign of respect and to pay homage to it.

2. About dark tourism

Since when the concept of dark tourism started being used?

In 1996 the dark tourism concept was defined by Lennon & Foley, as "...the phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites". They also try to refine this definition even further by noting what actions do and do not constitute dark tourism. In their opinion friends and family visiting sites of dark tourism is not categorized as dark tourism.

Stone, 2011 said "... there is no universal typology of dark tourism, or even a universally accepted definition, there has been an increasing trend amongst scholars to use dark tourism to scrutinise broader socio-cultural considerations, managerial and political consequences, or ethical dilemmas".

Tarlow (2005, p.48) defines dark tourism as "visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives" – a characterisation that aligns dark tourism somewhat narrowly to certain sites and that, perhaps, hints at particular motives. This is not a complete definition (Stone, 2011) because it excludes many "shades" of sites and attractions related to, but not necessarily the site of, death and disaster (Miles, 2002; Stone, 2006).

Regarding the main types of dark places, in the international literature references are frequently either to destinations such as the Sixth Floor in Dallas, Texas (Foley and Lennon, 1996) or visits to cemeteries around the world, either because members of family were buried there or because there are graves of celebrities (Seaton 2002, Alderman 2002), about the Holocaust (Ashworth 1996), a famous prison (Strange and Kempa 2003), or places related to the practice of slavery (Dann and Seaton 2001). The diversity of these places is so high that it is quite difficult to cataloging them.

According to Stone, 2006, there are seven types of "Dark Suppliers":

- Dark Fun Factories – Dungeon concepts by Merlin Entertainment Ltd.;

- Dark Exhibitions – with educational opportunities, such as Human Body Exhibitions;
- Dark Dungeons – like Galleries of Justice in London;
- Dark Resting Places – with examples like Père-Lachaise in Paris or Bellu Cemetery in Bucharest;
- Dark Shrines – this are often constructed close to the site of death and within a very short time period of the death occurring; Michel Jackson`s house, Pont d`Alma in Paris, the place where Lady Diana had the accident, the hotel where Whitney Houston died are good examples of Dark Shrines.
- Dark Conflicts Sites – different battlefields, like Waterloo in Belgium.
- Dark Camps of Genocide - like Auschwitz- Birkenau in Poland or Sighet Prison in Romania.

The international literature indicates that a number of individuals visit sites of dark tourism for personal reasons (Yuill, 2003). “Some visit such sites as a socially feasible way of expressing interest in death and disaster” says Yuill. Other people come to learn about the history behind an event or about the history of that place. There are some who travel to commemorate family, friends or their own experience (for examples the veterans and their families or the survivors of September 11 or 2004 tsunami catastrophe in Thailand or Indonesia). Some other people visits different places because of feelings of guilt, and finally, some may come to simply out of morbid curiosity.

3.Auschwitz – the most representative place for European dark tourism

Known as the largest Nazi death camp, Auschwitz has become emblematic place for the implementation of the final solution, a major element in the implementation of the Holocaust, and it is estimated that at least 1.1 million people were killed there, over 90% of them were Jewish. Auschwitz is the symbol of terror, genocide, and the Holocaust. According to Auschwitz.org (the official webpage), the place was established by Germans in 1940, in the suburbs of Oswiecim, a Polish city that was annexed to the Third Reich by the Nazis. Its name was changed to Auschwitz, which also became the name of Konzentrationslager Auschwitz.

The three main camps were:

- Auschwitz I, the original concentration camp which was established on the grounds and in the buildings of pre-war Polish barracks; It was used as the administrative center for the whole complex, was the site of executions of about 70,000 people, mostly Poles and Soviet prisoners of war (the number of prisoners fluctuated around 15,000, sometimes rising above 20,000).
- Auschwitz II (Birkenau) extermination camp was the largest part of the Auschwitz complex. It was the place where at least 1.1 million Hebrew, about 75,000 Poles and 19,000 Gypsies were killed. (which held over 90,000 prisoners in 1944)
- Auschwitz III (Monowitz), which was used as a labor camp for the Buna-Werke factory belonging to IG Farben concern.

The story behind Auschwitz it is deeply sad. We can only imagine the terrors that have been going on between the prison walls. Children sentenced to death without any

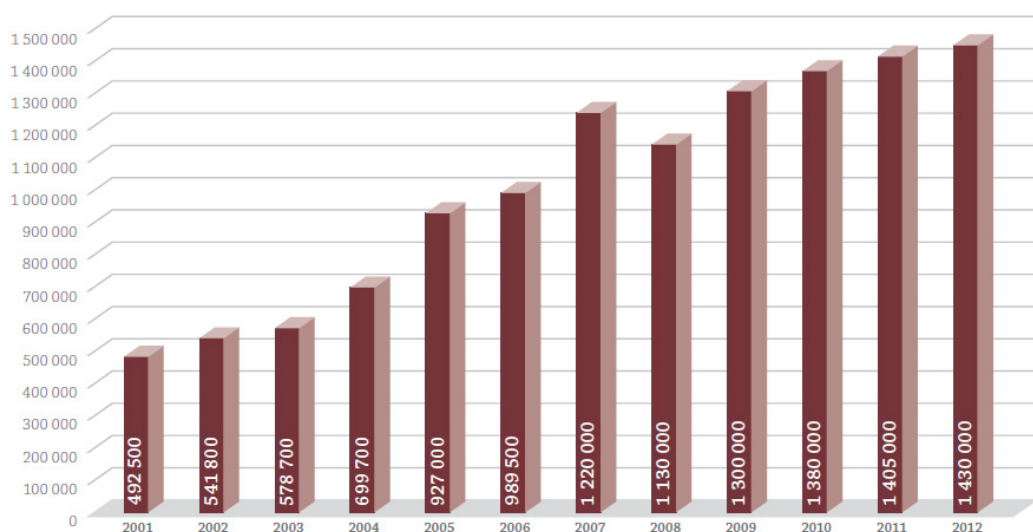
chance to grow up, women and elders sent directly to the gas chamber, adults put to work to exhaustion. It was a tough and black period for humanity.

Auschwitz functioned until 27 January 1945, when the last prisoners were liberated.

Poland founded a museum on the site of Auschwitz I and II which was officially opened on 14 June 1947 and in 1979, it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Since its opening, the world's interest in the Memorial showed no signs of dwindling. In 2012 it was establish a record with 1.43 million people who visited the site of the former Auschwitz camp. According Sprawozdanie Report the past six years the number of visitors was over a million each year.

Tabel 1. Evolution of number of visitors at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Source: Sprawozdanie Report, 2013)



As it can be seen in the previous table, the number of visitors at Auschwitz-Birkenau has grown with almost a million in the past ten years. This shows the growing interest of the people for dark history.

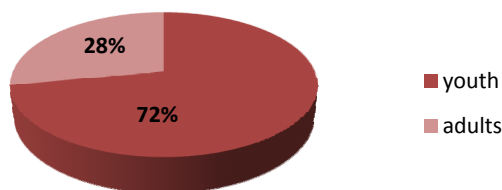


Figure 1. Distribution of tourists by age, 2012 (Source: Sprawozdanie Report, 2013)

The fact that the history books are presenting the Holocaust and its consequences led to a higher interest among young people in history. The statistics are showing a high percentage of young people visiting the place.

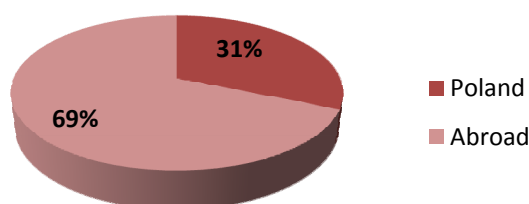


Figure 2. Distribution of tourist- national or foreigner, 2012 (Source: *Sprawozdanie Report, 2013*)

As it can be seen in the previous figure, in 2012 the number of foreign tourists who visited Auschwitz exceeded the number of Polish tourists. The top 10 visitors by country includes European countries like United Kingdom, Italy, Germany Israel etc., and people from outside Europe (United States and South Korea).

Table 2. Visitation Statistics at Auschwitz-Birkenau by country, 2012 (Source: *Sprawozdanie Report, 2013*)

1	Poland	446300
2	United Kingdom	149200
3	United States	96900
4	Italy	84500
5	Germany	74500
6	Israel	68000
7	France	62000
8	Spain	54300
9	Czech Republic	48100
10	South Korea	46500

According to *Sprawozdanie Report* (2013), in comparison with 2011, the attendance rose most among visitors from Canada - up 200 percent and the U.S.A.-up 85 percent. There were also significant rises in visitors from the U.K., Italy, Israel, Germany, and Spain.

4. Dark resources in Romania – Sighetul Marmatiei Prison

In 1897, when the area was part of the Austro-Hungaria Empire, the prison in Sighetu Marmatiei was built as a prison for criminal offenders. By 1945, at the end of

World War II the Sighet prison was chosen to be the place where the repatriated Romanians who had been prisoners of war and deportees in the Soviet Union will stay imprisons. After that, in August 1948, once communist power had been consolidated in Romania, Sighet prison was reserved for political opponents of the communist regime.

At the beginning, it held a group of students, pupils and peasants from the Maramureş region and it must be mentioned that many of the surviving prisoners are still living in Sighet today.

In 1950, on May 5 and 6 over one hundred former dignitaries from the whole country were brought to the Sighet penitentiary (former ministers and other politicians, as well as academics, economists, military officers, historians, and journalists), some of them sentenced to heavy punishments, and others held without any form of trial. It should be mentioned that the majority of them were over 60 years old.

Many important figures of inter-war Romania died in custody, including the leader of the National Peasants' Party and former Prime Minister of Romania, Iuliu Maniu.

Sighet Prison was considered "work unit", known as "colony Danube" but was, in reality, a place of extermination for the elite of the country and at the same time a safe place where they could not flee, Soviet border being located less than two kilometres (adevarul.ro). In addition to constant abuse, detainees were held in Sighet prison in unsanitary conditions, were miserable fed and laying on the bad was forbidden during the day (in non heating cells).

The Sighet prison it is known as a special place not only for the living but for the dead, considering that during 1950-1955 there weren't made death certificates for the deceased and their families weren't notified on their death. It was only after 1957 that death certificates began to be written.

In 1977 the prison was decommissioned and became broom factory, salt and finally, an abandoned ruin.

Later, Sighet Prison was decommissioned and turned into a museum (1992). Today it houses the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance Museum, but stories about how the prisoners were treated there, tortured to death, are still present in the memory of the Romanians.

Tourists who visited the prison and found out about the terrors endured by prisoners said they remained marked for life. There aren't official statistics published regarding the number of visitors and this is a negative aspect. Unfortunately, the number of visitors is still a rather small one. Regarding the nationality, the majority of tourists are Romanians, extremely few foreign tourists come to visit this area and this dark tourist attraction.

Auschwitz is certainly the most dramatic place on the map of dark places in Europe and the world, but also Sighet prison can be placed on such a map.

With a more pronounced promotion, tourists can learn about this place and can include it in tourist circuits that are in the area.

5. Dracula Myth – a source for dark fun factories

Vlad Dracula, nicknamed Vlad Tepes (*Vlad the Impaler*), was the ruler of Walachia at various times from 1456-1462. He was born in 1431 in Sighisoara, he resided all his adult

life in Walachia, except for periods of imprisonment at Pest and Visegrad (in Hungary). Somehow, his name inspired a lot of writers, but it was Bram Stoker in his book *Dracula* that introduced the story of Count Dracula to the entire world.

There are people saying that Transylvania sits on one of Earth's strongest magnetic fields and that its people have extra-sensory perception. Transylvania is also home to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and it's easy to get caught up in the tale while driving along winding roads through dense, dark, ancient forests and over mountain passes. In the Romanian folklore, tales of the supernatural had been circulating for centuries when Stoker picked up the thread and spun it into a golden tale of ghoulishness that has never been out of print since its first publication in 1897. To research his immortal tale, Stoker immersed himself in the history, lore and legends of Transylvania, which he called a “whirlpool for the imagination.”

Stoker has never been to Romania, but he crammed his book with descriptions of many real locations that can still be visited in present-day Romania. Sighisoara, **Old Princely Court** (*Palatul Curtea Veche*) in Bucharest, **Snagov Monastery** (the legend says that Vlad's remains were buried here), the ruins of the **Poenari Fortress**, considered to be the authentic Dracula's Castle, the village of **Arefu** where Dracula legends are still told and, of course, **Bran Castle**.

Some tourism agencies are offering different types of Dracula theme tours but they are not very well promoted. It was also a project called “Dracula Park”, an amusement park based on the story of Bram Stoker (it could have been included in the Dark Fun Factories Stone's category), but the project never came to reality. Tourist are visiting mostly Bran Castle, listening to stories about Vlad the Impaler at that is all they can do.

6. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to construct a conceptual framework of the dark tourism and also to see if Romania has resources for this type of tourism. Unfortunately Romania did not exploited the dark spot so good until know. Tourists do not know very well (except for Bran Castle, linked to Dracula's name) this dark spots available in our country. Also, there are no statistics on the number of tourists visiting the dark sights. We think that it is important to start with a good promotion of these objectives, then creating complex touristic packages and then introducing other dark spots into sightseeing tours.

References:

Alderman D. H., *Writing on the Graceland wall: on the importance of authorship in pilgrimage landscapes*. Tourism Recreation Research, 27 (2), 27-35, 2002.

Ashworth G., *Holocaust tourism and Jewish culture: The lessons of Krakow-Kazimierz*, In M.Robinson, N.Evans and P.Callaghan (eds) *Tourism and Culutral Change* (pp.1-12), Suderland:Business Education Publishers.

Dann G. M. S. and Seaton A.V. (eds), *Slavery, Contested Heritage and Thanatourism*. New York: Haworth Hospitality Press., 2001.

Johanson M., *Dark Tourism: Understanding The Attraction Of Death And Disaster*, published at <http://www.ibtimes.com/dark-tourism-understanding-attraction-death-and-disaster-696604>, 2013.

Lennon J., Foley M., *Dark Tourism. The attraction of death and disaster*, Edit. Thomson, 2000.

Miles W. F. S., *Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism*. Annals of Tourism Research, 29 (4), 1175-1178, 2002.

Seaton A.V., *Thanatourism's final frontiers? Visits to cemeteries, churchyards and funerary sites as sacred and*

secular pilgrimage. Tourism Recreation Research, 27 (2), 73-82, 2002.

Stone Ph., *A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions*, Vol. 54, No. 2/ 2006/ 145-160 •UDC: 338.482:130.2.

Stone, P.R. *Dark Tourism and the Cadaveric Carnival: Mediating Life and Death Narratives at Gunter von Hagens' Body Worlds*. *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol 14, Issue 7, pp.685-701, 2011.

Strange C. and Kempa M., *Shades of dark tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island*. Annals of Tourism Research, 30 (2);386-405, 2003.

Tarlow P. E., *Dark Tourism: The appealing 'dark side' of tourism and more*. In: Novelli M. (ed) *Niche Tourism –Contemporary Issues, Trends and Cases*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann. 47-58, 2005.

Yuill S.M., *Dark tourism: understanding visitor motivation at sites of death and disaster*, Thesis, 2003.

*** *Închisoarea din Sighet, iadul elitei românești*, http://adevarul.ro/locale/baia-mare/foto-Inchisoarea-sighet-iadul-elitei-romanesti-1_5136e5fb00f5182b85d4861c/index.html

*** *Sprawozdanie Report, 2013*, <http://en.auschwitz.org/>

*** *Dracula – beyond the legend*, <http://www.romaniatourism.com/dracula-legend.html>