

Tourism and Peace, Peace and Tourism – An Inseparable Union

There are many ways to look at the relation between tourism and peace. From a perspective that seems to be purely economic only at first sight, it is clear that tourism is intrinsically linked to affluence, to affluent societies, to leisure time: tourism means travel for fun, for relaxation, out of pure personal will – in contrast to other forms of travel that are linked to work or even survival, like migration, the search for a better life elsewhere.



Only someone who does not have to worry about her or his immediate economic future can afford to spend money on short-time fun travel, which is the essence of tourism, no matter how fun is defined personally. The poor do not travel for fun, they usually cannot afford the luxurious experience to be carefree tourists from time to time. Of course, this statement only holds true if we exclude more recent and complex western phenomena like cheap tourism offers to mass resorts for the “working poor” of the industrialized nations.

Perception of “peaceful conditions”

Societies whose citizens are generally well-off in economic turns (not only a tiny “upper crust” of the society) can only become so under peaceful conditions. Therefore, tourists usually are citizens of peaceful, economically more or less stable states – and they usually wish or even expect to visit likewise states or regions.

Peaceful conditions in their travel destinations are expected by tourists – but what exactly are these peaceful conditions? Peaceful for whom? Foremost, of course, for the tourists themselves – they expect peaceful surroundings, surroundings that are not dangerous for their own well-being.

How far these peaceful surroundings are expected to go, is a highly subjective matter. More sensitive types of travellers will probably expect the whole country or wider region they visit to offer peaceful conditions not only for themselves during their stay or journey, but also for the permanent inhabitants. Others seem to be more immune to the human environment they encounter. Otherwise, constant news in the wake of long-term conflicts which say that “visiting tourists or other outsiders have never been

harmed” cannot be explained.

An important question arises: Is peace just the absence of physical violence? Can a country stricken by well-known political strife, undemocratic conditions and bad governance, and, along with this, the obvious poverty of most of its citizens be perceived as peaceful? Obviously so – otherwise raving accounts by tourists about their visits to, for example, “Golden” Burma would be unthinkable.

Not many interesting places left to go, if ...

But what of tourism from the perspective of countries experiencing ongoing violent conflict? Iraq is not on the list of top tourist attractions, but these days some more adventuresome tourists are once again taking in the archaeological sites of Ur, the Arch of Ctesiphon and the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala. What a welcome sight they must be to the local hotel staff and even the people on the street. A long awaited sign of some return to normality.

Despite the fighting in the North of Sri Lanka, the sunset on the beaches of Kalutara and the ancient Sigiriya frescoes are no less spectacular or worthy of a visit. There are wonderfully rewarding experiences and sights to be had in these regions on the less beaten track. And if countries with violent conflicts are somewhat more risky, Sri Lanka (for example) is for the most part probably more dangerous in terms of its roads and local driving environment, than in terms of the direct violence which exists in the country. So if you go, do yourself a favour and get a professional driver to take you around.



Being aware of the surroundings

At the end of the day, if we avoid every conflict-affected country, it is a sad fact that there are not many interesting places left to go to. Goodbye India and Sri Lanka, Mexico and Brazil, Morocco and Algeria, Israel and Palestine, Thailand and the Philippines, and many more of the world’s most fascinating places. Welcome to Club Med. It is up to the traveller to decide what kind of experience they want to have.

For some, the Club Med experience is exactly what they are looking for in a vacation. For the rest of us, it is important to keep in mind that risk is manageable in most situations. Just as there are some neighbourhoods to be avoided in and around Paris, there are areas which should be avoided in countries in conflict. One must be aware of one’s surroundings. The payoff can be an unforgettable and wonderful experience in a new and captivating culture.

Impact of tourism

The more interesting questions may be ethical in nature. What is the relationship between the tourist and the local country and society? What is the impact on the conflict itself, on the local society? What is the impact if tourists stop going to such places? What is, in the end, better for the people who have to live year-round in these countries? The short answer is, “it depends”.

Countries in conflict tend to have serious economic problems, with high levels of inequality and poverty. When tourists stop coming, there is little that can replace the lost income. Suffering increases. And this must be the measure of ethical tourism – not only in areas of conflict, but everywhere.

Ethical tourism in a conflict area reduces suffering. It increases the wellbeing of the local population. Beyond the economic dimensions, it increases the visibility of their plight, exposing the internal situation to the outside world. It brings in new perspectives from the outside. It is therefore rare that a complete boycott of a country may contribute to an improvement in the conditions of the host society.



The strongest candidate for this kind of boycott could be Apartheid-era South Africa. But such boycotts based on an ethical or moral objection to a political system only work when those most affected are those who have the power, as was the case in South Africa. More often, those affected are from among the poorer segments of society, who already face hardships imposed by an unjust political, economic or social system.

The result is the same when there is a drop in tourism due to internal conflicts. Many are dependent on tourists for earning their living. Without this income, many are faced with greater poverty and misery. Tourists cannot bring peace to a country. But we can bring resources in terms of economic stimulation, as witnesses to the conditions and realities on the ground, and in terms of sharing our own knowledge and experience with our hosts. The presence of tourists, which is often vital for governments' budgets, also tends to have a moderating impact on internal repression. It is easier to do dirty work with no witnesses around.

Good guests contribute to peace

Most of all, we should remember that when we travel to another country, we are guests of that host society. And guests have the responsibility of behaving well. Our presence will have a positive effect on a larger scale, as long as we make sure to be good guests. We are good guests when we limit our

impact on the local environment, when we do not take advantage of poverty to engage in sex tourism, when we treat the local population with dignity and respect.

When our interaction is that of one human being with another human being, recognizing our common humanity and celebrating our diversity, we make that small personal contribution to peace. And most of all, we may find that on our return home, we continue on this path, making our own society just that much more peaceful.

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