

Tourism Companies against Child Exploitation

As visitors depart the baggage claim area of the San José, Costa Rica airport, they see a sign warning them that child (sexual) exploitation is a crime punishable by prison in Costa Rica. The sign is a symbol that Costa Rica does not tolerate sexual exploitation of minors. The sign also symbolizes that such exploitation exists. Indeed, one of the great shames of modern tourism is the social phenomenon of visitors coming to a country for the primary or secondary purpose of sexually exploitation, especially the exploitation of children.



As noted in the sign at the San Jose airport, tourism, police, and government officials are well aware that these crimes occur and that the consequences are both long lasting and far reaching. The tragedy of child sexual exploitation, be that exploitation committed by locals or by visitors, is one of tourism's most difficult problems. Although we know that there are especially men from many of the wealthier nations who travel to poor nations for the expressed purpose of taking advantage of children, there is a great deal that we do not know. From a criminal perspective the problem becomes even more complicated because there is no one universally accepted definition of the word "child". Thus the UN defines a child as one who is under 18 years of age, but many countries use another number as their legal age of sexual consent.

In an article in the Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (Vol. 94; No. 2) Sara Andrews points out that not all child abusers are pedophiles. She states: “Although it is true that pedophiles contribute to the problem, the majority of customers who pay money to sexually exploit children are first and foremost prostitute users”

To make matters even more difficult there are several routes by which children may end up in an exploitative situation. For example some children are “sold” into sexual servitude by uncaring or desperate relatives and other children are simply picked-up off the streets. No matter how a child ends up in an exploitative situation this sexual exploitation undermines a society. On the micro level child sexual exploitation robs the child of his/her personal dignity and sense of self. On a macro level the exploitation produces citizens who live their lives in a state of psychological and physical hurt. Thus, visitors who come to a place to exploit children not only hurt the child but also rob their host society of its greatest asset: its future.



The tourism industry is well aware of this abuse and is coming together to fight this problem. For example the on-line journal “travelmarket report” headlined the following article of its December (3rd) 2012 edition: “Tourism Groups Unite to Fight Global Child Exploitation”. The article notes that: “Four prominent travel companies are lending their support to a project designed to advance the work of The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism . TUI Travel, Accor, Kuoni Group and ITB are working to ensure that companies signing The Code implement the criteria and report on their work”.

Tourism professionals and industry leaders are well-aware of the problem. Their issue then is not one of willingness, disagreement, or lack of awareness, but rather the question what the best techniques to halt or at least diminish the rate of child sexual exploitation in tourism are.

The following is a listing of some potential steps that the tourism industry may consider so as to slow down and erase this stain on the tourism industry.

1) Legal accords and public policy are clearly one way to slow the exploitation of children. For example, this year the “Assmblée Parlementaire” of the Council of Europe declared: “Council of Europe member states should protect children against all forms of sexual exploitation, both within their borders and beyond. With a view to fighting effectively against child sex tourism, further signature of regional and international standards regarding the sexual exploitation of children is required, as well as strengthening of national legislation by ensuring compliance with these standards (including by providing for extra-territorial jurisdiction).”

The council suggested such measures as: (1) Preventing high risk child molesters from traveling abroad, (2) the encouragement of ethical tourism practices, (3) stronger national legislation and cooperation between states.



2) Shaming is a second method that may serve to slow the rate of child exploitation. By publically naming those who would “sell” children and those who would purchase their sexuality, there is the potential to lower the number of people willing to engage in such activities. Shaming methods may include the publication of names and photos of those involved in exploitation both in the host and home

country

3) The enforcement of a policy of zero tolerance for anyone in tourism who aids or turns a blind eye on the exploitation of children. Often people in the tourism industry may not actively aid in the exploitation but the non-reporting of an event is a covert form of approval. Tourism businesses such as hotels and restaurants must have a zero tolerance level for any form of exploitation and should be required by both the law and the industry to report any suspicious activity.

4) Use of educational marketing efforts aimed at both the local populations and at the tourism population is another way that tourism may become part of the problem's solution. For example the organization: Terre des Homes runs ads and public service announcements on airplanes reminding passengers that the exploitation of children is illegal and immoral.

Unfortunately there is no one magic bullet that can put an end to one of humanity's greatest shames. If articles such as this one help to raise awareness and create productive dialogue than perhaps it is a way to reduce the problem and save at least a few children from one of the greatest shames of modern tourism.

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