

# Natural Disasters Attracting Tourists to Japan, New Zealand and USA

The concept of “dark tourism”, also known as disaster tourism, really is ghoulish fad – with its focus on recent disaster zones and the chance for firsthand experience of the devastation and anguish of those that still suffer from the repercussions – but it is the field that is increasingly popular with tourists and generates an interesting mixed reaction from locals.

This style of tourism is one that can take visitors with a morbid curiosity anywhere that the forces of nature dare to strike – as is clear from three of the key dark tourism hotspots of recent years.



## Rikuzentakata, Christchurch and New Orleans

The Japanese area of Tohoku, once inviting to regular tourists because of its beautiful beaches and forest trails, is one of the more recent examples of an area experiencing an influx of dark tourists. Here, foreigners come to Rikuzentakata to see the power and scale of the 2011 tsunami – which claimed more than 18,000 lives and left the region unfarmable – through what little remains and try to fully appreciate what happened to the local residents.

Just a month before this tragedy, Christchurch in New Zealand was hit by a deadly earthquake that destroyed city landmarks and killed 185 people. As a result, bus-loads of tourists came to see the aftermath and the ruins, giving the former tourist highlight of the Anglican cathedral a whole new meaning.

Of course the most infamous example of this type of tourism is found in New Orleans, USA. As residents continue to try and rebuild their community and move on, all these years after Hurricane Katrina, tour operators still take tourists around the worst affected areas.

## The Bright Side of Dark Tourism

There are many positive reactions in each of these communities as locals see the benefits of welcoming these tourists, which mostly relate to the revenue and their continual need for money in order to move on and rebuild.



In New Orleans, this attitude of positivity was encouraged, with the tourism board urging people to portray the city as a place that has survived and is thriving rather than a disaster zone. Over in Christchurch, some people are adopting a different mindset by seeing the presence of dark tourists as a healthy reminder of what the area has endured and a cathartic way for locals to confront their pain and loss.

Some residents of Rikuzentakata, meanwhile, are taking a similar approach by using tours to stop the world from forgetting the tragedy, welcoming this new breed of tourists – who are essentially replacing the old visitors – and putting the money they spend to good use. As local businessman, Akira Oikawa, says, “we are grateful for tourists visiting here and buying local products.”

### **The Darker Side**

For every positive resident there is another that sees the problems of this tourism craze and the aforementioned Oikawa shows a great example of this divide, highlighting the nature of these visitors and saying “we appreciate a little bit of empathy”.

The same can be said for New Orleans and Christchurch. In Christchurch, there was a sense of hypocrisy and uncertain boundaries when tourists were criticized for visiting a suburban area where homes were being rebuilt yet welcomed to the business district to take photos of a site where hundreds died.



Over in New Orleans, the angered residents were a little more outspoken, leaving messages to the continual flow of tourists that called shame upon them for “paying to see our pain” and lobbying for a ban on tour buses.

The fact that tourists continue to flock to the latest disaster zone to immerse themselves in the reality of the tragedy and desolation, and the fact that researchers studying the concept at Otago University in New Zealand found that the locals accepted this “inevitable” outside interest, suggest that dark tourism

could continue for a long time. As it does so, it will also continue to be a divisive issue, with affected residents making equally good cases for encouraging the source of revenue and controlling numbers to ease the suffering of grieving communities.

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