

WAR TOURISM ATTRACTS VISITORS TO THE BALKANS



War tourism may seem unethical to many people but in the Balkans, it is a popular activity. One of the most famous sites is the Stari Most in Mostar, the cultural capital of Herzegovina. Every year, dozens of people visit the city greatly affected by the wars in the Balkans –Italians, Germans, Turks, and Iranians – they all come to explore the

historical place.

In the past, war tourism destinations were mainly the object of interest of photojournalists. Today, they no longer appear exclusively on pages of crime and foreign affairs journals, but also on those of the Lonely Planet.

For example, in Bosnia Herzegovina alone there was an impressive growth in the number of visitors. **In August 2010, there were just over 60,000 tourists. Seven years later there is an increase of at least 100,000.**

This trend is a bit of a contrast to Croatia, a traditionally sun and sea destination. Many are exploring the darker corners of the state born after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. The most popular places in Croatia are Dubrovnik, the Bay of Kotor, the Plitvice lakes. In Serbia it is the Guca Festival, in Macedonia the monasteries of Lake Ohrid, while in Bosnia war tourism sites are the most popular.

Travelers are attracted to the dark places for various reasons: landscapes, patches of authenticity, extinct post-war scenarios, and accessible prices. The Balkans, as it seems, is capable of satisfying all these demands, with the addition of somewhat exotic tones.

War tourism, or also called dark tourism, calls into question more contradictory dimensions. It would be foolish to conceal the differences, the tumultuous past. It would be unjust to hide the still visible wounds of war and put them in the drawer of the uncomfortable past.

The consequence, however, of over-admiration of these signs of the past, can be counterproductive and dangerous, for different reasons. For example, in Mostar, in the medieval center, you can see banquets selling pens made from Kalashnikov shells and toy-helicopters built from grenades. Ethical questions thus arise.

The war product obviously sells. It is difficult to find official numbers, but only the fact of its existence is representative. In Sarajevo, many guides organize tours around the places of war, with the testimonies of those who lived during the years of the siege.

For the more adventurous, there is also the Sarajevo War Hostel. It is a structure that offers rooms with pitted walls and Kalashnikov instead of paintings and much more to try to create an atmosphere of living in a siege. Tours to Srebrenica, a town famous for massacres on the Bosniak population, are also equally popular.

There is probably no univocal way of treating one's past and personal experiences. For many it is still impossible to deal with, while others choose to use it to monetize, in the face of a bad economic situation. Bosnia is the second case, as the country has the highest youth unemployment rate in Europe – 62%.

War tourism, however, is not only a Bosnian trend. **Even the city of Vukovar in Croatia offers its visitors a tour “In the footsteps of the defenders of Vukovar”.**

On the other hand, the dark tourism in Serbia or Kosovo, remains more contained. There are just few visitors in the hunt for ruins and improvised mausoleums in this part of the Balkans.

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