

Welcome to the world of dark tourism

Since the release of HBO's Chernobyl series, tour bookings to the site of the nuclear catastrophe have soared by 40%. Is it tasteless to turn a disaster site into a tourist attraction?


CHERNOBYL

ANNE FRANK'S HOUSE

AUSCHWITZ

TOWER OF LONDON

Houses of horrors: Why do millions of tourists flock to places of human suffering and tragedy?

No one has lived in **Pripyat** for 33 years. In April 1986, the Chernobyl reactor exploded two kilometres away in one of history's worst nuclear disasters.

Today, the abandoned city is a tourist hotspot. Travellers wearing **hazmat** suits follow tour guides through the overgrown streets.

In a gift shop at the edge of the exclusion zone, people queue to buy mugs and keyrings bearing yellow hazard signs. Since the release of HBO's new **drama** about the disaster, bookings are up 40%.

Welcome to the world of dark tourism, defined by the Institute for Dark Tourism Research as visiting "sites of death, disaster, or the seemingly macabre".

Although booming, dark tourism is not new. For centuries, tourists have visited Pompeii to peer at bodies perfectly **preserved** by the volcanic blast. Today, cheap flights have improved access to sites of gore, disaster or even genocide.

Historians estimate that of the 1.3 million people sent to Auschwitz concentration camp by the Nazis, 1.1 million died.

Over two million people visited the site in 2018. Despite the mass attendance, visitors describe it as a place of solemnity and reflection.

But social media has complicated matters. Officials at Auschwitz have been forced to warn tourists off taking selfies on the camp's infamous railway tracks. A similar ban has been put in place at the **9/11 memorial** in New York.

Most agree that an acceptable length of time should pass before a sensitive site can become a tourist attraction.

In the days after 72 people burned to death in Grenfell Tower, posters began to appear in the local area reading: "Grenfell: A tragedy not a tourist attraction." Tourists had been congregating to take pictures of the burned-out structure.

On the other end of the spectrum, historian Mary Beard points out, "Tragedies of the distant past tend not to move us." Few of us mourn at the Tower of London, despite centuries of executions, or empathise with the gladiators of Rome's Colosseum.

Dark tourists say the industry can help communities to rebuild after atrocity.

In the Dangrek Mountains of northern Cambodia, officials are launching a project to transform the last stronghold of the **Khmer Rouge** into a tourist spot. They hope it will attract investment to one of the country's poorest regions, and help Cambodia reckon with its past.

Haunted holiday?

Dark tourist Peter Hohenhaus says that travellers are trying to reckon with their own morality. "What we're looking at is ourselves," he explains. "That could have been us." Is this empathy, or **schadenfreude**? Are we leering at suffering for our own morbid gratification?

But tourists say they visit to educate themselves and pay respects to those who died. Wouldn't it be far worse to forget these horrors, as the Soviet Union erased the victims of the **gulags**?



Q: What do we know?

A: The final episode of Chernobyl aired on Sky Atlantic on Monday night. Since the show premiered in early May, visitor bookings to the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster have risen by

40%. The catastrophe occurred when the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear plant received a huge power increase. While around 40 people died in the initial explosion and the days immediately afterwards, thousands more are estimated to have since died from health problems caused by radiation.

Q: What do we not know?

A: If dark tourism is even a helpful term to use. The term was first coined in the 1990s. Perhaps it's a mistake to group the solemn memorial at Auschwitz with the profit-driven gift shop at Chernobyl, which attempts to thrill visitors with the threat of danger.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you like to visit any of the four sites pictured?
2. Is all tourism voyeuristic?

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of the top five places you want to travel to in the world. Do any of them have dark histories?
2. Humans are fascinated by the macabre, from gothic novels to horror films and true crime series. What is the appeal? Write half a page in response.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Bending too fixedly over hideousness, one feels queerly drawn."
George Steiner, French-American writer

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Pripyat – A city in Ukraine that had once a population of 50,000, that was evacuated following the disaster.

Hazmat – Large suits worn to protect from radioactive material. Radiation levels at Chernobyl are no longer dangerous. In fact, Cornwall is more radioactive than Pripyat.

Drama –

It has been hailed as one of the greatest shows ever made, and is the highest rated TV show ever on the IMDb website.

Preserved – The ash calcified over time, so the corpses appear as stone.

9/11 memorial – At the site of the former World Trade Centre, it commemorates the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, which killed 2,977 people.

Khmer Rouge –

The genocidal communist party that ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Up to three million died.

Schadenfreude – A German word defined as deriving pleasure from another's misfortune.

Gulags – A system of labour camps ran by the Soviet Union. Around one million people are estimated to have died there.

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 Notes

