

# Achieving Justice Through Tourism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

Justice tourism is one of the new labels being applied to tourism initiatives which directly aim to meet criteria of social and environmental sustainability. This paper analyses several forms of justice tourism including cases whereby historically oppressed communities have the opportunity to share with visitors their experiences of past wrongs, where tours to poverty-stricken areas aim to educate, not horrify, and where tourists from western countries come to the Third World to assist with development or conservation work. This paper will consider whether justice tourism signifies real changes in the practice of tourism and who controls tourism enterprises, or whether it is simply another attractive slogan used to package tourism experiences in a more positive light.

## Introduction

This paper examines what many would categorise as a 'new' form of tourism in the Third World: justice tourism. While the label 'justice tourism' has not been used extensively to date, authors taking a critical perspective on tourism have commonly discussed justice issues (Mowforth and Munt 1998; Britton and Clarke 1987; De Kadt 1979). Other authors equate justice tourism with alternative tourism, which has been defined as '...a process which promotes *a just form* of travel between members of different communities. It seeks to achieve mutual understanding, solidarity and equality amongst participants' (Holden 1984:15, emphasis added). This should allow for the building of relationships which are not just based on a commercial transaction. Just forms of tourism should also attempt to redress the imbalance which sees tour operators and tourists from outside of the destination area dictating the form and function of tourism at the destination.

Ideally then justice tourism means tourism which is both ethical and equitable. It has the following attributes:

- Builds solidarity between visitors and those visited.
- Promotes mutual understanding and relationships based on equality, sharing and respect.
- Supports self-sufficiency and self-determination of local communities.

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<sup>1</sup> An expanded version of the arguments presented in this paper, included detailed case studies, will be included in the chapter on Justice Tourism in Scheyvens (forthcoming).

- Maximises local economic, cultural and social benefits (Holden 1984; Lea 1993; Wenham and Wenham 1984).

The sections to follow introduce several forms of justice tourism, considering whether the label 'justice tourism' signifies any real changes in the practice of tourism and in who is controlling tourism enterprises and experiences.

### **'Hosts' telling their own story of past oppression**

In many countries indigenous peoples and other groups have been oppressed on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or beliefs. One way in which formerly oppressed peoples are engaging with the tourism sector is to offer heritage tours. Such tours can promote visitors' understanding of human rights and justice issues while simultaneously giving local people the opportunity to speak out and tell their own story of past wrongs. Such heritage tourism does not romanticise, simplify or glorify the past: it simply tells the story of what an oppressed population went through from their own perspective, and reflects on the implications this has had for their lives today. In the Caribbean, for example, there are plans to put together an educational tour package focusing on the sites of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, enabling visitors to appreciate the culture and heritage of the area (Boyd 1999). Similarly, the Chiapas area of Mexico, where the people have been in conflict with the state since the Zapatista rebellion of 1994, has become a hotbed for 'revolutionary tourism' (Ross 1999:5).

Bartis (1998) has proposed that community-controlled 'Black heritage tourism' be established in South Africa. This is tourism which brings visitors to sites of significance to the anti-apartheid movement, such as the house where Steve Biko resided, or the primary school attended by Nelson Mandela. Bartis (1998) argues that community groups running such tours could benefit significantly through the opportunity to tell the story of their struggles to a receptive audience, after years of having their voices repressed by a hostile government. The significance of such tours should not be underestimated in a country for which 'heritage' for so long has meant 'white heritage':

...South Africa's cultural infrastructure, such as monuments and museums, reflects the needs and interests of the white minority, focusing on aspects of colonial heritage rather than offering a more diverse and sensitive portrayal of South African history. By 1991, for instance, it was estimated that little more than 2% of all national monuments had been explicitly dedicated to black culture and history... (Goudie et al. 1999:24).

On a positive note, some efforts have been made to redress this obvious bias under the new regime in South Africa. Examples include museums now displaying scenes of townships and working life for black people and providing information of the work of black organisations and trade unions under apartheid, and monuments erected in the memory of people who died during uprisings against apartheid. Tours of the Robben Island Museum, for many years home to South Africa's most famous political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, attract up to 900 visitors a day and a number of former prisoners are employed as guides (Goudie et al. 1999).

There are serious challenges, however, facing those who are trying to balance the market appeal of just forms of tourism with allowing people to tell their own story of oppression:

...there is a constant and precarious balance between the need for market sustainability and the need for political integrity - the two not always being compatible. Does one, for instance, run the risk of alienating tourists in search of a wild and exotic 'African paradise' by providing them with a diet of 'unpalatable' political detail? (Goudie et al. 1999:24).

Thus while heritage tours offer the potential for visitors to gain a deeper understanding of a country's history and for local people to feel liberated by the re-telling of history, this may only appeal to small groups of visitors.

### **Improving tourists' understanding of poverty issues**

Just tours can also improve tourists' understanding of poverty issues by taking them to areas previously ignored by tour operators. It has been suggested that to exclude places like townships or shanty towns from a tour operator's schedule essentially isolates them further from a country's social and economic life, reinforcing inequalities of the past. Goudie et al. (1999) argue that if a more integrated society and economy is the aim, tourism must be promoted within formerly excluded areas:

In the light of the history of South Africa and current socio-economic/spatial inequalities, it is a serious weakness within the tourism industry that its potential as a tool for economic empowerment and social integration has not been fully realised. Black areas...have largely been *terra incognita* for the tourism industry and, consequently, black South Africans have been given little opportunity to participate as partners or leaders within this industry sector (Goudie et al. 1999:27-28).

Townships are the segregated areas devoid of normal urban services and amenities where the black population of many southern African cities were restricted to living under colonial governments. While legally the black population now has the opportunity to live wherever they choose, economically many are still restricted to township areas. In addition, some choose to continue to live in a township because of the social networks they have established.

Township tours have now become a popular activity, particularly in Johannesburg and Capetown in South Africa. In 1998 there were several official operators running tours of the most notorious township in South Africa, Soweto. Max's Maximum Tours<sup>2</sup>, are run by a long time resident of Soweto who insists that all participants disembark from the mini-coach regularly to speak with the curious Soweto residents. As noted by Else et al. (1997), 'Given the townships' recent history, the friendliness that is generally shown to white visitors is almost shocking'. The Max's Maximum tour taken by this author involved entering one woman's shack which she shared with her grandson, and hearing her story of how she had come to live in Soweto and what dreams she had for the future. Tour participants were invited to leave donations when they left her home. Max rotated his tours around different houses so as to spread the contributions the

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<sup>2</sup> The author participated in one of Max's Maximum tours of Soweto in May 1998.

tourists were making. The tour ended at a shebeen (traditional drinking house) on the street where Max lived and here again, tourists literally rubbed shoulders with the locals. The general impression of other tourists on the mini-coach was that they had learned a great deal and had a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of life in a township. This is unlike the majority of white residents of Johannesburg, who still stereotype Soweto as a crime-infested area which it would be dangerous, and foolhardy, to enter. As noted in the Lonely Planet guidebook,

Most white South Africans are completely ignorant of life in the townships and very few have ever been inside one. Their picture is of unmitigated hostility, and a nightmare environment of drugs, superstition, tribal warfare, depravity and violent crime (Else et al. 1997:522).

Such safe and informative tours of townships help to redress stereotypes of township life and people, and to overcome the legacy of social and economic exclusion which characterises township life.

Some authors have raised concerns, however, about the almost voyeuristic interest of particular categories of tourists in seeing poverty as part of their travel adventure. They suggest that tourism which seeks to bring tourists more in contact with the poor and their struggles is, in effect, commodifying poverty:

...a range of less savoury realities of some parts of the Third World today – inequality, poverty and political instability – are also there to be enjoyed as part of the tourism experience. They are called upon to both titillate and legitimate travel, to help distinguish these experiences from mere mass tourism and packaged tourists (Mowforth and Munt 1998:74).

Such concerns suggest that it is the approach of the tour operators and the attitudes of the tourists themselves to poverty which is critical to determining whether tours of poor areas provide merely a freak show experience, or deepen understanding of issues of injustice and inequity.

### **Voluntary work by tourists**

Tourists who wish to make voluntary work part of their vacation are motivated to varying degrees by a desire to do something active and worthwhile for others, or for the environment, during their travels, rather than taking a traditional 'laze around on the beach' vacation.

Tours which involve conservation work offer a responsible 'holiday with a difference' to increasing numbers of western travellers, who often pay significant sums of money for the privilege of doing this work. For example,

Earthwatch Institute puts people in the field where they can assist scientists in their field work. They are part of the action, they learn new skills, and develop a deeper understanding of their role in building a sustainable future (<http://www.earthwatch.org/>).

Organisations offering voluntary development work vary considerably. Some have arisen in response to a direct need for assistance in a Third World country. Others are

simply travel agencies with a conscience, which seek to both open the eyes of affluent westerners to global problems but also, perhaps idealistically, make these people part of the solution to these problems. Others again, are more focused on building relationships between people from different parts of the globe so while some transference of skills may occur; it is more cross-cultural understanding that they are promoting. Many emphasise the importance of working side by side with locals and empowering, not pitying, local people.

While travel with a development or conservation focus may appear to have much to recommend it, travel involving voluntary work can actually be understood in several different ways:

- ♦ as 'harmless', giving vent to the altruistic tendencies of a small group of tourists;
- ♦ as 'educational', providing for a richer cultural exchange and opportunities for cross-cultural understanding that would not be available on conventional trips;
- ♦ as 'helpful', offering constructive assistance to Third World peoples through transference of skills, or through helping to protect vulnerable ecosystems, flora and fauna;
- ♦ as 'harmful': entrenching inequitable relationships which see the west as having the answers to the developmental problems of the Third World, while failing to acknowledge the place of the west in creating/entrenching such problems and failing to highlight the skills, resources and knowledge of Third World peoples.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has touched on several potential forms of justice tourism, from black heritage tours which allow hosts to tell their own stories of past oppression to empathetic visitors, to tours of townships which help to increase tourists' understanding of poverty issues, and on to voluntary conservation or development work by tourists. Undoubtedly such new forms of tourism should not automatically be seen as ethically and morally superior to mass, conventional tourism (Mowforth and Munt 1998:80). There are still plenty of tour operators who are just pleased to be able to exploit the interests of a segment of tourists in poverty, for example, rather than having any commitment to raising tourists' awareness of injustice and building relationships between tourists and local people as part of their tours. However, there is also ample evidence of development agencies, conservation organisations and tour operators which are increasing cross-cultural understanding and raising Westerners' understanding of poverty and justice issues through their work.

Critically, it is the process by which tourism occurs, not just the product, which signifies whether or not tourism is in fact just. It is not enough that tourism operators or individuals focus on a *subject*, such as visitation of sites of poverty or civil conflict, as such forms of tourism can be both voyeuristic and insensitive to local needs and interests. More important is the way in which the subject is approached, who controls the subject matter and how much opportunity there is for interaction between tourists and local people. Justice tourism should not be about the rights of western travellers to explore untamed, dangerous, and exotic places and peoples, and nor should it simply be about providing an outlet for the altruistic tendencies of some tourists through voluntary work. Rather, justice tourism should be about securing the human rights of people living in areas which tourists visit.

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