

УДК 338.48 (045)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32589/2412-9321.30.2025.332378>

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DARK TOURISM AS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR DESTINATIONS FOR THEMATIC EXCURSIONS

Abstract

Thematic excursions play an important role in modern tourism, as they allow you to immerse yourself in a specific historical, cultural or social context. One of the areas that has been gaining popularity in recent decades is dark tourism, which involves visiting places associated with tragic events, disasters and historical tragedies. **The purpose of the article** is to study dark tourism as a popular destination for thematic excursions, to identify its key characteristics and to analyse its impact on tourists. **The research methodology** is based on an integrated approach, including analysis of scientific sources, sociological surveys, observation of tourist behaviour and content analysis of tourist reviews. The scientific novelty of the work is to identify the specifics of organising and conducting thematic excursions within the framework of dark tourism. In the course of the analysis, an extended classification of this type of tourism was formed, which takes into account not only traditional historical sites (battlefields, concentration camps), but also modern locations associated with environmental disasters or post-apocalyptic zones. **The article reveals** the socio-cultural and ethical aspects of dark tourism, which relate to the commercialisation of tragedy sites, preservation of memory and responsible attitude to such sites. The study has shown that the demand for thematic excursions within the framework of dark tourism is growing, which is due to current trends in tourism and the desire of tourists to gain a unique experience associated with deep emotional experiences. **The results of the study** show a significant impact of thematic excursions in the field of dark tourism on the cultural consciousness of society. It was found that thematic excursions allow not only to gain historical knowledge, but also form an emotional connection between tourists and the past. Such travel contributes to the preservation of historical memory, as it allows tourists to see the consequences of tragic events with their own eyes and realise their significance for future generations. In addition, such excursions can serve as an emotional catharsis, as many visitors note that visiting the sites of tragedies provokes deep reflections on the value of life and the moral aspects of historical events.

Key words: dark tourism, excursions, thematic excursions, historical memory, tourist motivation, cultural heritage.

ТЕМНИЙ ТУРИЗМ ЯК ОДИН З НАЙПОПУЛЯРНІШИХ НАПРЯМІВ ТЕМАТИЧНИХ ЕКСКУРСІЙ

Анотація

Тематичні екскурсії відіграють важливу роль у сучасному туризмі, оскільки дозволяють зануритися в певний історичний, культурний чи соціальний контекст. Одним із напрямів, що набуває популярності в останні десятиліття, є темний туризм, який передбачає відвідування місць, пов'язаних з трагічними подіями, катастрофами та історичними трагедіями. **Мета статті** – дослідити темний туризм як популярний напрямок тематичних екскурсій, визначити його ключові характеристики та проаналізувати вплив на туристів. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на комплексному підході, що включає аналіз наукових джерел, соціологічні опитування, спостереження за поведінкою туристів та контент-аналіз туристичних відгуків. **Наукова новизна** роботи полягає у виявленні специфіки організації та проведення тематичних екскурсій в рамках темного туризму. В ході аналізу сформовано розширену класифікацію цього виду туризму,

яка враховує не лише традиційні історичні місця (поля битв, концтабори), а й сучасні локації, пов'язані з екологічними катастрофами або постапокаліптичними зонами. У статті розкриваються соціокультурні та етичні аспекти темного туризму, пов'язані з комерціалізацією місць трагедій, збереженням пам'яті та відповідальним ставленням до таких місць. Дослідження показало, що попит на тематичні екскурсії в рамках темного туризму зростає, що зумовлено сучасними тенденціями в туризмі та бажанням туристів отримати унікальний досвід, пов'язаний з глибокими емоційними переживаннями. **Результати дослідження** свідчать про значний вплив тематичних екскурсій у сфері темного туризму на культурну свідомість суспільства. З'ясовано, що тематичні екскурсії дозволяють не тільки отримати історичні знання, а й формують емоційний зв'язок між туристами та минулим. Такі подорожі сприяють збереженню історичної пам'яті, оскільки дозволяють туристам на власні очі побачити наслідки трагічних подій та усвідомити їх значення для майбутніх поколінь. Крім того, такі екскурсії можуть слугувати емоційним катарсисом, оскільки багато відвідувачів відзначають, що відвідування місць трагедій провокує глибокі роздуми про цінність життя та моральні аспекти історичних подій.

Ключові слова: темний туризм, екскурсії, тематичні екскурсії, історична пам'ять, туристична мотивація, культурна спадщина.

Introduction. Thematic excursions are an important tool in the tourism sector, allowing you to immerse yourself in a specific historical, cultural or nature context. They contribute to the promotion of scientific knowledge, improve the level of education and enrich the cultural experience of tourists. Organising such excursions needs careful preparation, including developing a route, selecting information material and taking into account the interests of the target audience.

In the tourism market, dark tourism has become a popular destination among tourists in the last years. It involves visiting places associated with tragic events, mass deaths or disasters. Such excursions may include visits to concentration camps, natural disaster sites, historical battlefields and even abandoned cities. Tourists are increasingly attracted to dark tourism destinations that have a deep history, unusual legends, eerie memories and contribute to the adrenaline rush of tourists.

Analysis of the latest research and publications. Latest research in the field of tourism shows the growing popularity of thematic excursions. Research confirms that a well-structured thematic excursion contributes to a deeper understanding of a particular subject or event. The ability to use different approaches to developing routes, ways to keep the attention of tourists, as well as technologies that help make the tour more interactive, make the excursion unique and inimitable for tourists. Dark tourism has been studied by many scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology and tourism management. For example, the research of John Lennon and Philip Stone defines it as a form of tourism that includes places of death and tragedy (Alistratova, 2013). They also analyse the motivations of tourists, which may include historical curiosity, compassion or thrill seeking. The research of the Institute for Dark Tourism Studies at the University of Lancashire, which analyses the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of this phenomenon, is also important. Other studies focus on the impact of such excursions on the emotional state of tourists, the possibilities of commercialising tragic events, and the ethical issues associated with this type of tourism.

The main purpose of the study is to investigate dark tourism as a popular destination for thematic excursions, identify its key characteristics and analyse its impact on tourists.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives were set: to study the main types of dark tourism and their characteristics; to identify the factors that motivate tourists to visit places associated with tragedies; to assess the socio-cultural impact of dark tourism; to analyse current trends and prospects for the development of dark tourism; to consider possible ethical issues related to the commercialisation of dark tourist destinations.

Research methods and methodology. In this work, a comprehensive approach to the study of dark tourism is applied. The methods of literature analysis were used to identify the main scientific concepts related to this phenomenon. A comparative analysis of tourist routes helped to identify the key objects of dark tourism and their popularity among tourists. The methods of questionnaires and sociological surveys allowed us to study the motivation of visitors, while the content analysis of tourist reviews allowed us to assess the emotional impact of such trips. Besides, the research used elements of observation of tourist behaviour in dark tourism destinations.

Presentation of the main research material. An excursion is a purposeful, visual process of learning about the environment. This process is built using pre-selected objects located in natural conditions and is conducted under the guidance of a qualified excursion guide according to the approved topic.

The peculiarity of each excursion theme is that it is closely related to the objects of the show and the excursion material that enriches its content. The theme plays a crucial role in uniting the seemingly disparate parts of the tour into a single whole. The theme of the excursion should be relevant and interesting for tourists to ensure that there is a demand for the developed excursion.

Market trends show that dark tourism is an interesting topic for modern tourists. For the first time in scientific practice, the term dark tourism was used in 1996 by professors of the Caledonian University of Glasgow J. Lennon and M. Foley. After that, this area of tourism became a topic for numerous scientific studies (Alistratova, 2013). J. Lennon and M. Foley formulated a view of dark tourism as travel associated with tragic events, and developed and described their thoughts and beliefs in a joint work entitled “Dark Tourism. The attraction of death and disaster” in 2000 (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

However, it is worth noting that Lennon and Foley were not the first scholars to focus on the issue of the relationship between tourist attractions and people's interest in the horrific, gruesome, and death-related. In 1993, the scholar Rojek considered the concept of “black spots”, or in other words, “the commercial development of burial sites and places where famous people or large numbers of people met a sudden and violent death” (Stone, 2006).

Scientists R. Shapley and F. R. Stone, in 2009, in their scientific article “The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism”, noted that since people began to actively travel, they have been attracted, for unknown reasons, to sights, places and events that have a close connection with negative historical events where violence, death, suffering or disasters have played a central role (Sharpley & Stone, 2009).

The Institute for Dark Tourism Studies, established in 2012 by scholars R. Shapley and F. R. Stone at the University of Lancashire, UK, is the main centre for research on the phenomenon of dark tourism. In this institution, scientists study and investigate the motivation of tourists to visit places of suffering and death, as well as the social and moral consequences of dark tourism, their nature and strength (Alistratova, 2013). The main task of the Institute for Dark Tourism Research is to integrate theoretical knowledge about mystical and dark tourism (supply, product, demand and characteristics of potential tourists) into the already developed global tourism industry (The University of Central Lancashire).

In the 20th century, the phenomenon of dark tourism became widespread and diversified, leading to such forms of tourism as military, violent, prison, genocide and disaster tourism. In particular, dark tourism is booming in Europe and North America, with famous sites such as the Polish concentration camp Auschwitz, the Ukrainian Chernobyl Museum, British slave trade towns, and the Berlin Wall in Germany (Chen Kexin, 2022).

Scholar Smith has suggested that war-related sites or destinations, despite their horrific and destructive power, probably constitute “the largest category of tourist attractions in the world”. However, war-related sites, although diverse in their own right, are part of a set of tourist sites associated with death and suffering (Stone, 2006).

The article “Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective”, by P. Stone and R. Sharpley is a thorough study of dark tourism, which provides numerous definitions of this category of tourism from 1996 to 2008. In addition, the book presents the opinions and statements of scholars on the classification of dark tourism, motivational factors, that is, what motivates tourists to visit places of death and human pain in its various manifestations, as well as various terminological and social aspects of dark tourism research.

Table 1 shows the main research works in the field of dark tourism, which form the theoretical basis of modern research.

We will assume that dark tourism is a visit by excursionists to places associated with disasters, natural disasters and death, places of horrors, atrocities and immorality that have outraged society, but through the prism of changing the consciousness, perception and experience of tourists become interesting and popular to visit.

Table 1

Terminology of dark tourism in the world science (Lennon, J. J. & Foley, M., 2000; Stone P., Sharpley R., 2008; Rojek C., 1993; Seaton, A. V., 2007)

№	Author	Research paper	Areas of research on dark tourism
1	J. Lennon, M. Foley	“Dark Tourism. The attraction of death and disaster”, 2000 p.	Dark tourism is a visit by tourists to real places of disasters and deaths.
2	A. Seaton	“Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism”, 1996 p.	Dark tourism is a journey to a place of actual or symbolic encounter with death. He distinguishes the following categories of dark travel: observation of public death scenes; travel to places of mass or individual deaths; travel to see symbolic images of death; travel to memorials; travel to witness the reenactment of death.
3	G.Dann	“Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective”, 2008 p.	Dark tourism is a visit by tourists to places associated with natural disasters, catastrophes or death that have outraged the public consciousness and places of horror, death, atrocities and immorality become interesting and popular for perception through the experience of tourists
4	C. Rojek		He first introduced the concept of dark sites through the concept of “black spots” or “commercial” (tourist) burial sites where celebrities or large numbers of people met a sudden or violent death

To date, there is no clearly defined classification of dark tourism. The reason for this is, first of all, the impossibility of identifying clear, pure types and forms of dark tourism due to its specificity (Pankiv N. M., 2021). However, there is a widespread classification of dark tourism in science, which distinguishes the following main categories: disaster tourism, mystical tourism, necropolis tourism, and thanatological tourism (see Table 2).

Table 2

Classification of dark tourism (Bordun & Derkach, 2014; Sardak & Taran, 2018)

Nº	The dark tourism category	Description	Example
1	Catastrophe tourism	Sites of natural disasters: floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, etc. Sites of man-made (environmental) disasters. Sites of disasters caused by human negligence.	Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and Pripyat, Ukraine New Orleans, USA (Hurricane Katrina) Pompeii, Italy
2	Mystical tourism	Places with paranormal activity: castles, ancient palaces and mansions, churches and cathedrals, fortifications.	Island of Poveglia, Venice, Italy Kamynne Selo, Zhytomyr region, Ukraine Chillingham Castle, England
3	Necropolis tourism	The burial places of prominent historical and cultural figures: writers, artists, politicians, scientists, religious figures. Ancient cemeteries and cemeteries	Lychakiv Cemetery, Lviv, Ukraine Baikove Cemetery, Kyiv, Ukraine Jewish Cemetery on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem
4	Tanato tourism (death tourism)	Concentration camps during the German occupation in World War II. Places of mass executions or human deaths . Gulag camps. Places of serial killers' crimes. Former high-security prisons.	Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland Tuolseng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia Alcatraz Prison, United States of America

Dark tourism performs a number of functions that reveal its specificity, certain features and characteristics of its development to a greater extent. The main functions of dark tourism are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Functions of dark tourism (Zastavetska & Zastavetskyi T., 2021)

Nº	Function	Description
1	Research	Ancient cemeteries or mass graves can be a good resource for scholars conducting historical and cultural research or for people who want to research their family history.
2	Leisure	Dark tourism, like other types of tourism, aims to give people the opportunity to relax, but it manifests itself in a specific way. A dark tourism tourist not only receives an adrenaline rush and a wide range of emotions, but also has time to be alone with his or her thoughts, in peace, away from the noisy city, and live the experience gained during the excursion.
3	Sentimental	When visiting places of mass human deaths, executions and torture sites, or natural disasters, tourists think about the importance and value of human life and its finitude.
4	Extreme experiences	Visiting dark tourism sites, tourists seek to experience thrills, tickle their nerves and test their abilities.
5	Nostalgic	It is manifested in the desire of tourists to visit the burial places of their ancestors or places related to them, sometimes gruesome (for example, concentration camps or places of mass executions).

The dynamic prevalence of thematic dark tourism excursions can be explained by the desire of tourists to actively travel and get thrills. One of the areas of dark tourism research is the motivational factors of excursionists, what motivates them to visit disaster sites (natural or man-made), cemeteries, mystical houses and forests, concentration camps or memorials. Motivational factors are divided into socio-cultural and biological. It can be assumed that the desire to study and explore something unknown, creepy, deadly and unusual, and the adrenaline rush and emotional release from it are the factors that motivate dark tourism.

The defining components of the motivational factors for thematic dark tour excursions are:

- the search for thrill and risk, which attracts excursionists who love numerous gambling adventures;
- the incentive to visit places that hold memories of historical and mythological features (e.g. stories of haunted castles or otherworldly spirits);
- places such as cemeteries can be promising and fascinating locations for alleged spiritual or retrospective purposes;
- independent research and discovery of mystical objects, with the aim of writing and publishing an original post on social media;
- various occult or religious reasons.

The motivational factors are closely intertwined with the needs and culture of the communities around the “dark” places, which creates an authentic background for dark tourism and its growing popularity in the global market (Zarichniak & Demianenko, 2022)

Dark tourism has a positive impact on both tourists and locals. There are a number of benefits associated with dark tourism, which include increased tourism revenues, profit generation, improved infrastructure, and emotional and psychological benefits.

Socially, dark tourism brings psychological and emotional benefits to local communities. Dark tourism can be used to educate and reflect on the issues that led to the disaster, especially for future generations. “The “darkness” helps the public to raise awareness of the horrific events that took place in the past and to better understand the area in which they live (Ronald Buye, 2019).

That is, it is not only an external tourist experience of the peculiarities of a place with a terrible or catastrophic history, but also an internal reflection on important issues of human existence, anthropogenic impact, social history, and learning lessons from them in order not to repeat past mistakes in the future.

Dark tourism is mostly associated with cultural and historical heritage, as these social categories play an important role in tourism. Some people are interested in history but do not like to read about it. Instead, they prefer active ways of experiencing history, sometimes mystical, paranormal, painful and dark in all aspects and in different ways.

Tourist destinations of this kind often have a past associated with death or tragedies that make the heart sink, awaken emotions and deep feelings in tourists. This helps to stimulate human behaviour in order to motivate them to create a livable society for future generations.

The latest research shows that in 2024, dark tourism generated a profit of \$31.89 billion for the tourism industry, and this figure will continue to grow in the coming years. Profits are projected to increase to \$40.82 billion by 2034. However, these projections have a certain margin of error, as tourist preferences can change every season, let alone over a period of several years (Future Market Insights, 2025). Nevertheless, we can talk about the active interest of a certain segment of tourists who are willing to travel to “dark” places and enjoy it.

For example, recent research involving nearly 1,000 travellers was done by Passport Photo Online. The study found that despite the fact that a high percentage of tourists have already enjoyed up-close and personal danger, about 63% of people who have not tried

dark tourism are interested in it. The main motivations for travelling to places of past suffering include education (52%) and the desire to pay tribute to those who suffered in these places of sorrow (47%) (Travel Daily News, 2023).

According to this study, about 82% of respondents have visited a tourist destination associated with dark tourism at least once in their lives. 46% of tourists have positive emotions towards dark tourism, 18% are very positive, and 9% are against dark tourism. It can be explained by people's preferences, their upbringing culture, traditions and social norms, i.e. motivation depends on the tourist's environment.

Analysing the subtypes of dark tourism, we can see that the greatest preference is given to visiting places where there was a war or significant battles and disaster sites (natural or technological) – 56%, 53% of tourists visit cemeteries and burial sites, 52% – visiting places with ghosts and spirits, 50% – visiting places with radiation contamination (nuclear tourism), 49% – visiting places associated with the Holocaust or genocide, 48% – tourism in prisons and places of persecution.

From a demographic perspective, according to the aforementioned study, tourists are divided into 83% men and 81% women who have visited a dark tourism destination at least once. The majority of dark tourism users (91%) are young people (25 years old and younger), 83% are middle-aged tourists (26 to 38 years old), 80% are above average tourists (39 to 54 years old), and 71% are tourists aged 55 and older (Passport-Photo Online, 2022). Thus, it can be said that dark tourism is the most widespread and dynamically developing segment of active young people who love risk and adrenaline.

As important are the motivational factors that directly encourage tourists to visit places with a "dark" history. The main motivations were identified as follows:

- the educational and cognitive aspect provided by dark tourism (52%);
- to pay tribute to people affected by a tragic event (47%);
- to experience deep emotions at a place of tragedy (46%);
- to discover a place with history, not just see a popular location (45%) (Passport-Photo Online, 2022).

A rather important moment in the development of dark tourism and a factor that determines its place in the global economy is the relationship between tourist flows and local residents of the country or region where dark attractions are located.

Scholar Tang Huang suggested that the attitudes of tourists and local communities will differ at different stages of dark tourism development. The early stage is mostly favourable, while the middle and late stages tend to develop in a rather negative direction. Local communities and tourists lack trust and interaction, and become distant and suspicious in their independent spaces of gaze projection, which prevents dark tourism from playing a role in enhancing the value of human thinking. In dark tourism destinations, the first victims have already suffered a lot of pain, but they have to deal with constant tourist inquiries and often painful memories of the past, which often cause them emotional pain. In addition, dark tourism often reflects tragic or ugly events, which sometimes damages the image of a tourist destination and does not contribute to its improvement (Chen Kexin, 2022).

However, at the same time, it can be said that the objects of 'dark' tourism can be used in other types of tourism. For example, an ancient haunted castle is an object of both dark tourism, namely mystical and cultural tourism. That is, the presence of stories and legends about ghosts and paranormal phenomena (for example, spirits wandering the castle halls or living in its cellars) attract tourists who want to learn something mythical, secret and tickle their nerves. At the same time, if the focus is shifted from mysticism to the architectural features of the castle, the history of its construction, interior and exterior, as well as the life story of the castle owners, then this tourist attraction will be classified as cultural and educational tourism.

The same tourist attraction can be used for different tourist purposes. This increases the level of economic revenues from tourism, increases the interest of tourists in visiting the site, and invests in the development of the surrounding area and the restoration of the object of knowledge and public interest. As a result, infrastructure improvements affect the level of tourist satisfaction, which is one of the fundamental factors in the development of tourism in the region.

Conclusions. In recent years, non-standard thematic excursions have become very popular among tourist segments of consumers. Tourists prefer active recreation, little-known routes, thrills and adrenaline during a excursion. Dark tourism is a certain combination of different types of tourism, but it is full of mysticism, eerie places and scary legends. Dark tourism combines historical memory, emotional impact and commercial appeal. Although it raises ethical debates, it is growing in popularity, which confirms its importance in the modern tourism space. Despite the ethical debate, dark tourism contributes to broadening the worldview, preserving historical memory and understanding the tragedies of humanity.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools or materials were used in the manuscript.

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