

The coronavirus crisis shows that accurate, expert-driven analysis is crucial. Our newsletter is full of it.

Sign up now

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



© Mikhail Makarenko, CC BY-SA

Are dark tourism performances of gulag life educational – or voyeuristic?

November 13, 2019 11.59am GMT

Dark tourism – involving travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy – is on the rise worldwide. Increasingly, this does not involve only visiting such places, but also witnessing certain performances of dark pasts.

Visitors can observe mock trials and prisoners receiving their sentences at prison museums, experience overnight stays in prison walls and watch historical reenactments of dark historical periods. In Kazakhstan, for example, on which my research has focused of late, visitors to gulag museums can witness scenes showcasing hard labour, bullying and violence, emotional and physical abuse.

Author



Guillaume Tiberghien

Lecturer in Tourism
(Management/Marketing), University of
Glasgow

across the Soviet Union ... In an era of fake news and revisionism, such sites are hugely important.

This is good news. But as places of memory and commemoration, these museum practices are controversial to some historians and specialists of the gulag. The historian Steven Barnes, for example, has argued that they raise “significant moral questions about the acceptable limits in the portrayal of atrocity”. Museums that showcase these dark historical pasts are caught between the moral duty to offer tourism experiences that are historically accurate and the commercial desire to entertain visitors.



Alzhir Memorial Museum. www.haaijk.nl/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

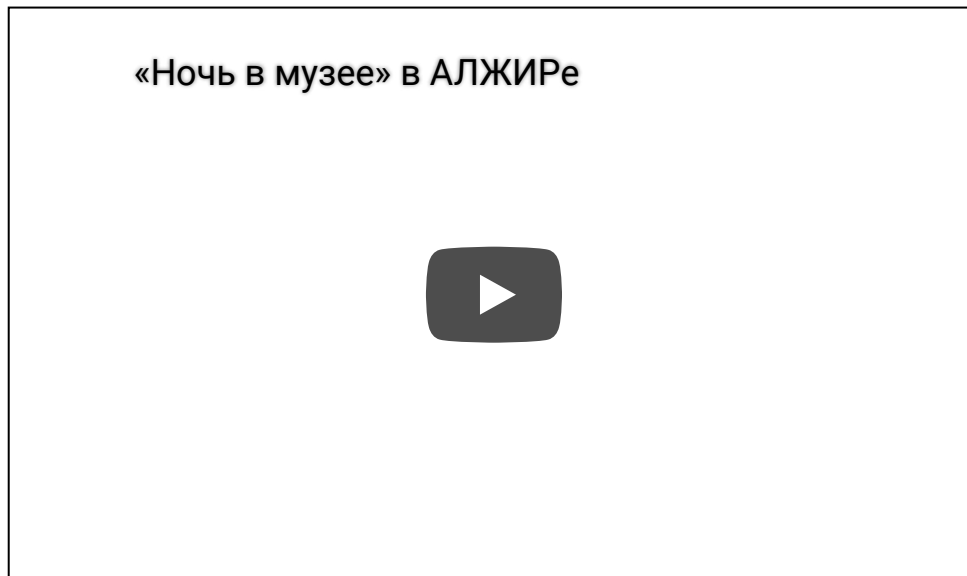
Such performances attempt to immerse visitors into the dark atmosphere of the epoch. By doing so, the museums hope to create a more personal connection to the tragedy. But such performances can be viewed as exploitative of victims, which can upset local communities and the descendants of victims. Some descendants of the victims told me that they experienced feelings of shame and guilt on witnessing these performances.

What some people see as historical accuracy, others read as voyeuristic curiosity. Personally, I think it's great that performances might increase visitation to the sites – but they will nonetheless remain contentious and voyeuristic if they only serve tourism purposes.

These dark tourism practises – and similar ones around the world – certainly present a major challenge in terms of remembering and selectively interpreting a dark and difficult historical past.

During Soviet times, women in Alzhir were forced to work ten or more hours a day and were often subject to mistreatment, including beating and rape. Those who had infants experienced the trauma of having their children taken from them at the age of four and sent to orphanages – if they did not die from hunger beforehand – driving women to despair and, for some of them, madness.

In line with this history, performances at Alzhir’s museum portray the arrival of women on the wagon that carried them to the camp, the removal of their children, and scenes of physical mistreatments inflicted by the camp guards. The performances are run by dozens of actors, including the museum management.



In Karlag, meanwhile, the annual “night at the museum” event is attended by 500-1,000 visitors. It involves a nighttime tour of the museum, with staff staging dramatic scenes from the history of the gulag. This can involve mock interrogation scenes and performances involving inmates hanging by their hands and being otherwise mistreated by the camp guards. Visitors are additionally offered “gulag-type meals”, and “volunteer” prisoners are asked not to sleep to mimic supposed life conditions.

Senior management of Karlag museum believe that such events mean visitors “can keep these memories of the museum for a long time”.

Voyeuristic curiosity?

These museums mostly attract local visitors. But tourism expert John Lennon – who coined the term dark tourism in the 1990s – believes that the sites could attract many Western visitors in the future:

*There is plenty of evidence that people are interested and there is an important story there ...
They are places where visitors can learn about the enormous evil that was perpetrated*