Slum Tourism: Is it a good development?

Lisandra Torres Hechavarría

April, 2014
Introduction

The aim of this report is to discuss whether slum tourism is a good development or not. There have been some studies on this topic but it is still considered a young subject of research in tourism (Frenzel & Koens 2012).

"Poverty tourism", "poorism", "slum tourism", "favela tours", "township tours" and "reality tours" are some of the names given to a product that focuses in taking tourists to get in different levels of contact with informal settlements or “slums” in urban areas (Tourism Concern 2013). It has also been described as a tourist experience that involves visiting urban areas characterized by poverty, squalor and violence (Dürr & Jaffe 2012)

The focus of the concern related to this topic has been around whether the community of the slum really benefits from tourism or if it is just another way of exploiting this places for the benefit of tour operators.

In order to accomplish the aim of this paper it has been carried out a literature review and several case studies in slum tours products have been used to illustrate and better support the arguments made. The main sources of information are journal articles, news and travellers reviews on Trip Advisor and Lonely Planet website, as well as private tour operators and Non-Governmental Organizations websites. This allowed to describe the development of this type of tourism and discuss some of its issues.

Visits to slums as a practice occurring for centuries.

When Frenzel and Koens (2012) say that slum tourism is a product that has re-emerged in recent years, is probably because it has been a practice or an idea of wealthy classes for centuries but it never was classified as a form of tourism, probably also because the term did not exist nor was studied at the time.

This can be argued if some recreational literature is analysed. For example in the book One thousand and one nights, a compilation of folk tales of Middle East and China that was published for the first time in the IX century, there are stories talking about sultans, caliphs and other royalty members disguising in order to mingle with the peasants and study the ways they lived and behaved. In more recent literature there is the case of the fiction story of Mark Twain, The Prince and the Pauper, where it is made obvious the interest of the young prince for the different ways of the pauper.

Nevertheless these ideas referred by fictional literature are not acknowledged by researchers in tourism. In the first international conference on slum tourism, which took place at the University of Bristol in 2010, it seems that participants agreed that the beginnings of this practice are placed in the Victorian London of the XIX century (Frenzel et al. 2012, Frenzel & Koens 2012).

Steinbrink (2012) made a timeline of the changes in this product in the last 150 years. This author refers that ‘slumming’ has described a particular social practice where members of wealthy social status in their leisure time visit residential zones of poor urban groups, and places its origins in the metropolises of the North, especially in Britain and the USA, where modern (urban) tourism also evolved. In this activity century ‘adventurers’ in the UK would leave their safe, comfortable elite spaces to explore underprivileged urban districts, which were perceived as dangerous and morally dubious
This practice spread to cities in the USA, where slumming included trips to so-called ‘ethnic’ and ‘exotic’ neighbourhoods, such as ‘Little Italy’, ‘China Town’ and African-American districts (Heap 2009, cited by Steinbrink 2012).

The main reason for this phenomena, was the growth in number of the population in the metropolis of these countries and also the growth in the difference between social classes which were also geographically separated due to urbanization and industrialization. This made that for some people parts of the city seemed completely alien and then a voyeuristic interest for “the other” arouse (Steinbrink, 2012).

In this first years it was clear that the motivation of the “tourists” was mainly curiosity, voyeurism, the need for the thrill of being in an alien, dark and considered dangerous environment and research, related to anthropology, politics and philanthropy.

As example of this kind of activity can be mentioned the studies of Friedrich Engels in the first half of the XIX century during his visit to Manchester, where he had the opportunity of observing the wages and living conditions of the working class. In the book resulting of his observations *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, he analyses the effects of industrial Revolution in the lives of the poorest classes. There is also the study carried out by 24 women in the period 1860 – 1920 and published by Ellen Ross about the life in the slums under the name *Slum Travellers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920*. These women relate detailed stories about life in London slums. It is very interesting the fact that they used three different approaches: total immersion (some of them actually lived like slum people for a while), unobtrusive observation and interviews with the dwellers of the London slums. (Wise, 2009).

The political reasons for presidents, heads of state, royalty or just senators, congressmen etc., in order to better know the living conditions of their country, city or state, has always been present and is a common practice throughout the world to get a direct input of the needs of the people or maybe only to gain their sympathy or votes. One of the more recent examples of an organized trip for political reasons was the visit realized by a group of heads of state to slums (favelas) in Rio de Janeiro during the Earth Summit in 1992, in order to sensitize them with the situation of people living in favelas and gain a higher response to the agenda related to the eradication of poverty.

From this moment it can be said that a philanthropic movement to eradicate and get in touch with poverty conditions has increased. For example for political reasons presidents as Barack Obama while he was still a Senator visited the slums on Kenya and has also visited the favelas in Rio de Janeiro. The same has done his Vice President Biden and other presidents in Latin America as the Chilean Dilma Rousseff. This kind of publicity of an altruistic perspective to visit slums, was also encouraged as a tourist activity in Rio de Janeiro in 2010 by former resident of Brazil Luis Inacio Lula Da Silva, who promoted it as a way to change the image of favelas, experience the city in a different way and give back to the community. It can be considered as one of the first community initiatives to make of slums a tourist destination where locals would be trained to deliver the product and signs in English were placed.

Other more recent motivation to visit slums has emerged in the last 50 to 60 years and this has been the will to “really” experience the culture of places by visiting slums that
are supposed to be where culture is intact. To this kind of romantic image of favelas have contributed films like *Black Orpheus*, 1959, *Girl from Rio*, 2001, *City of God*, 2002, several Brazilian soap operas and music videos. In the case of Indian slums several are related to the development of Bollywood and its romantic representation of colourful and musical life in the slums of Dehli and other parts of the country (Diekmann & Hannam 2012). According to Dyson (2012) ‘the slum’ is positioned as space more authentic and realistic than the artifice of the concrete cityscape, as demonstrated by the recent fascination surrounding the film ‘Slumdog Millionaire’.

From the motivation of the tourist perspective, travellers procure interaction with locals as a means of distinguishing themselves from stereotypical tourists. While travel in India is infused with notions of picturesque poverty, beggars disrupt this voyeuristic conception and draw travellers into fleeting relationships that are clearly marked by structural inequalities of wealth and mobility.

**Recent practices in slum tourism**

All the development in motivations, practices and promotion done to this product have led to the current practices in slum tourism.

In the literature it is said that the most popular destinations for slum tourism are Brazil, Kenya, South Africa and India, although there are other Asian, African and Latin American destinations (Dürr & Jaffe 2012, Steinbrink 2012, Lozanski 2013). Estimates suggest an annual 300,000 or so tourists were already consuming organised slum tours in Cape Town (AP 2007, cited by Lozanski 2013) and approximately 40,000 in Rio (Freire-Medeiros 2009, cited by Lozanski 2013). These figures indicate that slum tourism is already a highly professionalized business in South Africa and Brazil. Also if the feedback from travellers’ reviews in the websites Trip Advisor and Lonely Planet are studied one can arrive to the same conclusion about Kenya and India, where there has been an increasing interest in other countries of the Global South, both among tourists and providers, who see a huge growth potential in this branch of tourism. For example, organized slum tours are executed, in the poor areas of Manila (Philippines), Jakarta (Indonesia), Cairo (Egypt), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Nairobi (Kenya), Mazatl´án (Mexico), Bangkok (Thailand) and Windhoek (Namibia) (Lozanski 2013).

Now, what was considered as an individual more adventurous or philanthropic travel practice has moved to a commodification of the slums, in which tourists participate in organized groups.

It was carried out an analysis of the top ranked activities to do according to trip advisor in the most important slum tourism destinations, Dehli, Rio de Janeiro and Kibera and township or slum tours were always among the first ranked activities, were the tourist describe it as a means of getting to know the real people and their culture, and most of them are catalogued as a most do in these cities. For example the number one thing to do in Dehli with an award from Trip Advisor is the Old Dehli Bazaar Walk. It is organized by a private company that charges 50 dollars for a 2 to 3 hours tour around the bazaar where women get their hands painted, they can enjoy traditional food and art performances in the streets. It is a successful tourist product that brings business to the
community by selling it as a package product that benefits the direct participants in the tourist encounters and the organizing company.

Following the case of Dehli, according to Trip Advisor and Lonely Planet, there are more than 10 operators that offer slum tours, but the product, prices and organisers differ from one to the other. There is the example of other private operators like Art of Heart tour that fusions a 45 minute-walk through the slums and storytelling, afterwards a music street performance where the tourist can also learn some dance steps.

There are also of course tours organized by Non-Governmental Organizations and non-profit organizations like Slum Walk by Pete and Wahoe commune day trip. In the case of the first one the tour lasts 2 to 3 hours and costs 500 rupees (approximately 8 euros) where tourists interact with inhabitants that share their stories, ways of survival and sell their handicrafts and produce dance and singing for the tourist. It is advertised that all the money received from this product is invested in schools for children in the community, vocational schools for women living in the slums and other charity causes. There is also the case of Balaak Trust City Walks that is organised by the trust but operated by young men that grew in the slum, are familiarized with it and share their stories from before they entered the trust. It is a free one hour - tour, based on contribution only and it is to offer the guides an opportunity of developing communication, presentation and marketing skills.

As can be concluded from the operation of other tours also in Kenya and Brazil, tours are often organized by NGO and governments in order to gather funding for social projects, but not always earnings of this activity are shared by the community, and often are taken by the operators and locals feel that is a new way of exploitation. There is an organization called Tourism Concern that carried in 2010 a study about the impact of slum tourism in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas and one of the results was that even though locals recognized the potentiality of tourism for the development of the community, they have not seen changes because the way tours are designed tourists only pass by but leave no money in the community directly because they do not consume anything. This study also showed that most of the private tour operators were advertising their tours as contributing to develop local community when it was not true.

There are some cases of successful and beneficial for the community slum tourism management in the cases of Medellin, Colombia (Hernández-García 2013) and in Cairo, Egypt (Mekawy 2012). The study of Hernández-García reveals that the policy of social urbanism applied in Medellin has contributed to change the positioning of the city as a dangerous place and has had a positive effect in the city branding that now helps differentiating the city as a more authentic experience. Also, based on findings of Mekawy, authorities should develop appropriate slum tourism products and typologies, as a planning threshold, to enhance living conditions of dwellers.

Conclusions

The visits to slum areas is a practice that has occur for centuries but only in more recent times it has been organized as a tourist offer.

It can be perceived a change in the motivations for visiting this “destinations” from a political, philanthropic, or research motivation to a more related to enjoying the real
culture and distinguishing from regular tourists with a back sentiment of supporting financially the community by doing these trips.

There are several concerns about the ethical and moral implications of this voyeuristic practice but in general studies have proved that slum dwellers do not reject tourism and see it as a possibility to improve the community economy. Therefor the discussion has moved to the way of managing slum tourism in a way that communities can receive benefits from it.

The positive or negative, right or wrong development of slum tourism is strongly related to the way the tourist experience is designed as a product that involves the whole community and institutional will is required in order to compel private tour operators to better contribute to the development of slum areas instead of only advertising this for their own benefits.
Bibliography


Combining the art of relaxation with the competencies needed to manage the tourist industry, tourism is a popular applied science profession. Typically, academic degrees in tourism, hospitality and leisure offer in depth management understanding, implementation strategies and even different languages. Examples of study programmes include: international tourism management and consultancy, attractions and theme parks management and leisure and event planning. The Master in International Tourism at Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) responds to this need by Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) Switzerland. M.Sc. Hospitality and Tourism Management Dual Degree. Masters degrees in Tourism train postgraduates to understand the impact and development of the tourism industries, including their management and economic impact. Course range from taught MA and MSc degrees, to research oriented MRes and MPhil programmes. Entry requirements normally include an undergraduate degree, and relevant work experience in some cases. Why study a Masters in Tourism? As travel becomes accessible to more social and cultural groups, the tourism industry is developing to cater to offer new opportunities and experiences. A Masters in Tourism will equip you to understand the. Graduates of the Sustainable Tourism Master's degree program find employment opportunities as sustainability officers, analysts and directors, working in government, private sectors, and consultant firms. The Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure Management Program. This program places graduates at the intersection of two growing, exciting, and globally significant areas of theory and practice: leisure and sustainability. Students will engage in coursework delivered in a non-traditional, international educational setting where the instructional approach draws upon field experience, classroom instruction, and experiential styles of learning.