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Shades of dark tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island

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Abstract

Former sites of punishment and incarceration have become a popular tourist experience as defunct prisons are converted into museums or heritage sites. Among the most prominent are Alcatraz in the United States, and Robben Island in South Africa. While some theorists might categorize such practices as “dark tourism,” this paper argues for an analysis that accounts for the multiple shades of penal history marketing and interpretation. Drawing on policy documents, onsite observations, tourist surveys, and interviews with museum staff, the paper explores how multi-hued forms of interpretation have been produced, not only through shifting priorities of memory managers, but also the expectations of tourists and the agendas of external interest groups.

RÃ©sumÃ©

Les teintes du tourisme sombre : Alcatraz et Robben Island. Les anciens sites de

châtiment et de l'incarcération sont devenus des lieux populaires de l'expérience touristique, et les prisons désaffectées deviennent des musées ou des sites patrimoniaux. Alcatraz aux États-Unis et Robben Island en Afrique du Sud figurent parmi les exemples les plus importants. Tandis que certains théoriciens pourraient classer ce genre de tourisme comme du « tourisme sombre », cet article témoigne en faveur d'une analyse qui rend compte des multiples nuances dans le marketing et l'interprétation de l'histoire nationale. En se basant sur des documents de politique, des observations sur place, des enquêtes de touristes et des interviews avec le personnel des musées, l'article examine comment les divers tons dans les formes d'interprétation ont été produits, non seulement à travers les priorités changeantes des gestionnaires de la mémoire mais aussi selon les attentes des touristes et les idées des groupes internationaux.



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Keywords

prison; dark tourism; heritage; Alcatraz; Robben Island

Mots-clés

prison; tourisme sombre; patrimoine; Alcatraz; Robben Island

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Michael Kempa is a doctoral candidate at the Australian National University. With others, he conducted the fieldwork at Robben Island Museum.

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