

# MYTH VS. FACT: AN EXPLORATION OF FRIGHT TOURISM

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the new phenomena called "Fright Tourism." Fright Tourism occurs when a tourist seeks a scary opportunity for pleasure at a destination that may have a sinister history or may be promoted to have one. This research explores this topic by comparing and contrasting two sites in the world that have a reputation of sinister activity. Salem, Massachusetts and Transylvania, Romania are excellent examples of sites that promote fright tourism.

Keywords: Tourism planning, Dracula, Salem witches

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## 1.0 Introduction

What is it that attracts humans to witness events associated with death and crisis? What draws tourists to visit sites of historic catastrophes? And how has popular media influenced tourist's interest in a bizarre history? Dark tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000) and thanatourism (Seaton 1996) are terms that came to the forefront as planners noticed an increase of tourists drawn to macabre attractions. This basic concept describes the phenomena associated with the tourist attraction to sites with a history of war, genocide, assassination and other tragic events.

This paper explores a variation of dark tourism we coin fright tourism, since individuals may seek a thrill or shock from the experience. In particular the tourist will seek a scary opportunity at a destination that may have sinister history or may be promoted to have one. Fright tourism is typically associated with the Halloween season, although it may occur for any frightful place explored for "recreation" or entertainment reasons. Here an exploration of two unique sites in the world will be compared and contrasted. Salem has an established infrastructure promoting the events of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. In Transylvania, we find recent attention to the Dracula moniker as local Romanians attempt to preserve a cultural heritage in a newly founded

market economy. Each site has a similar history while the differences may have been influenced by different political and economic factors.

The next section of this paper will provide the site and situation of the two case studies. In particular, the historical evolution of the fundamental attraction will be described and the current conditions will be explored. These case studies will be evaluated by the Butler (1980) model of the tourist area cycle of evolution. Future plans for both sites will be found next with a discussion of the implications to heritage tourism planning.

## 2.0 Background

Fright tourism has its roots in Dark Tourism or Thanatourism. In either case, tourists are attracted to sites that have a history of death or some disaster. Typical destinations include prisons (Strange, n.d.) or museums (Kazalarska 2002). In some cases the destination may already be managed as a heritage site such as Gettysburg National Military Park (National Park Service 2000). But other sites become unofficial attractions soon after some event. For example, the crash of United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001 created an impromptu memorial and later an official attraction for morning tourists (<http://www.flt93memorial.org/>). Here, a more whimsical definition is employed for Fright Tourism to reflect the leisure aspect of travel. People see these opportunities to be frightened and socialize with other like-minded travelers. Numerous tours cater to fright tourists. In the U.S., one can engage the services of a Connecticut Tour Operator to travel abroad to frightful attractions (Figure 1).

In America, Fright Tourism is big business. While generally timed around Halloween, fright attractions may be found year-round at amusement parks and museums. Since museum are typically associated with heritage tourism, professionals of the industry are concerned by the in-authenticity of theme park attractions and note that mass tourism will trivialize the factual events (Strange & Kempa 2003). In either case, tourist's interest in fright deserves additional attention.

## 3.0 Case Study

The two case studies may be separated by an ocean, but share a reputation that attracts fright tourists from



Figure 1.—An advertisement for Fright Tourism.  
(<http://toursandevents.com/>)

around the world. The first, Salem, Massachusetts has a long history of tourism associated with the frightful events of 1692, while Transylvania, Romania is experiencing a more recent influx of tourism despite an even earlier history of events.

### 3.1 Salem

Salem is a seaside community 25 km north of Boston. Its history is founded on it being the first major port in the United States. Of the 46.7 km<sup>2</sup> of area, only 20.9 km<sup>2</sup> are land. It is a densely populated town of 40,401 souls. Despite the important role in commerce and trade, the community admits that most visitors know about the “well-known blemish” centered on in the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692, more than the rich history of sea faring days (Massachusetts DHCD 2004).

Today tourism in Salem has capitalized on the historic events surrounding the Salem Witch Trials, especially during the Halloween season. While slightly geographically removed, the Salem Witch Trials remain a factual event in the region. Hysteria spread throughout the region in 1692 when the bizarre behavior of two young girls, the daughter and niece of the Salem Village minister, Reverend Samuel Parris, caused local citizens to be alarmed. Fueled by religious intolerance and unfair taxation, the Salem Witch Trails became one of the world’s most infamous events.

Today, visitors will find six museums dedicated to the witch story (see the list in Appendix A). Generally clustered downtown, the community celebrates a month long event called Salem Haunted Happenings. The museum and shops open their doors to thousands of costumed revelers every autumn. Salem attracts about a million visitors a year, one quarter of which (pun intended) visit during the Halloween season of October (Lindsay 2004). Local tourist planners are seeking to expand the reputation of Salem beyond the annual celebration called Haunted Happenings. The campaign is centered around the theme “If you think you know Salem, think again” and is designed to promote the city as a year-round attraction and not simply based on the evolved Halloween theme of witches. As Mark Minelli, a tourism branding expert hired by Salem notes in this NPR interview “... no one is trying to take the history of the witches away from Salem. It’s always going to be a valid part of what this city is about. Salem has an opportunity... to change its perception in a broader and more compelling way about what the city is and what it can become...” (NPR 2004).

### 3.2 Romania

Romania is found in Southeastern Europe bordering the Black Sea between Bulgaria and Ukraine. The total area is 237,500 km<sup>2</sup> with a population more than 22 million. Given the location between the former Ottoman Empire and Hungary, the citizens have had to fight to protect their resources and access to markets through the Black Sea. See Figure 2 for a map of the region.

While Romania may be synonymous with Dracula, it was not until 1972 that Bram Stoker’s Dracula was linked with Vlad the Impaler. The vampire myth as we know it today is a product of Eastern and Western European history with a bit of Hollywood thrown in (Secor 2003).





Figure 2.—Romania. (CIA map found at the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection)

Is Dracula a product of Romanian history, folklore and legends, or a rather mythical vampire character invented by the writer Bram Stoker, or maybe both? Unlike many of the citizens in Salem who have capitalized on their frightful history, this is not the case in Romania. The citizens have fought for decades the misrepresentation of Vlad the Impaler under the popular name of Dracula, a name penned by Bram Stoker. Interestingly enough is the fact that Stoker's novel was not translated in Romanian until 1992, the same year Romanians saw their first vampire film (Paduraru 2004).

Paduraru, President of the Transylvanian Society of Dracula (TSD), represents an organization devoted to de-

mystifying the confusion between Dracula the vampire (myth) and Vlad Tepes (a historical figure). Paduraru and others have fought the misconception and connection of Bram Stoker's Dracula and Vlad Tepes; a connection perpetuated by the popular title authored by McNally and Florescu (1972). Thus, the dichotomy between Bram Stoker's fictional character Dracula the Vampire and the real Romanian prince Vlad Tepes needs a brief clarification.

Vlad Tepes was, indeed, a real individual. Unlike most international perceptions that depict him as a mysterious prince vampire that sucks the blood of his victims, research describes him fundamentally different. In

**Table 1.—Romania Tourism Data during the 1990s.**

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|                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A 20% decline in the number of foreign tourists, from 6.5 million to 5.2 million since 1990                            |
| A 14% drop in the total number of beds in hotels and accommodation facilities, from 328,000 in 1990 to 283,000 in 1999 |
| A drop in the accommodation occupancy rate from 57.8% to 34.5%                                                         |
| A reduction in the length of stays in accommodation by 61% for Romanian tourists and 53% for foreign tourists.         |

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(Brancusi 2001).

Romania, Vlad Tepes has always been a highly revered and respected hero praised in Romanian history. Born in 1493 in the fortress of Sighisoara, Romania, Vlad Tepes was the son of Vlad Dracul, the ruler of Wallachia. This region was between two powerful forces of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire and thus a political quagmire. Like the previous rulers of Wallachia, Vlad Tepes was forced to cope with the pressures from surrounding empires. Under his rule in the mid-fifteenth Century, Wallachia gained its relative independence and sovereignty, albeit for a short time. While known as an overall fair and brave ruler, he was also known as a harsh punisher of foreign invaders and unruly citizens by impaling them on stakes. He then displayed them publicly to frighten his enemies and warning any would be enemies of his strict moral code. It is this harsh punishment system he enforced that led to the coining of the name Vlad the Impaler.

In contrast, Dracula is the mythical vampire character, created by the Irish writer Bram Stoker whose famous work is the 1897 gothic novel titled *Dracula*. The research for this novel began in 1890, when Stoker was on holiday in the English seaside town of Whitby, North Yorkshire (Skal 1996). Furthermore, what is even more astonishing is that Bram Stoker selected Transylvania as the focus of his novel without visiting the area (Chelminski 2003). Yet, the vampire legend is not even unique to Transylvania. Most cultures have some type of vampire blood-sucking monster in their folklore. For instance, Chinese vampires are blind, not repelled by garlic and hop! See *Geung si sin sang* (Mr. Vampire, 1985 Hong Kong) for a contemporary movie about Chinese vampires. And yet, despite or maybe because of its sheer fictional nature, Bram Stoker's invented monster continues to inflame the imagination of movie productions all over the world.

Today, contemporary tourism in Romania is evolving after the fall of communism in 1989 (Light & Andone

1996; Light & Dumbraveanu 1999). In December of that year, the Ceausescu regime was violently overthrown and led Romania into a period of adjustment as the country became a market economy. Because of its geographic location and diversity of natural resources and landscapes, ranging from the Carpathian Mountains, to the Danube Delta and the Black Sea, Romania could and should perform well in terms of its overall tourism activities and revenues. However, despite general efforts to privatize and revitalize Romania's old tourism infrastructure, in the past decade, the tourism industry has undergone a general decline. Table 1 summarizes some of the recent travel data for Romania.

Optimism prevails since the revenue forecasts are expected to improve from \$2,894.4 million in 2000, to \$5,613.6 million by 2010 (WTTC 2000). Future expansion of the Predeal-Azuga Ski Area as a four-season attraction is expected to attract tourists (Brancusi, 2001). And tourism along the seacoasts remains a viable attraction, although Light (2000) contends that communism is a primary dark attractant in post-communist Europe, despite the fact that governmental leaders would prefer otherwise.

But a recent proposal by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism to develop a theme park has brought up some concerns. Given the promotion of tourism by the Romanian government, a consortium of planners proposed the first Dracula Theme Park in Transylvania. The former Minister of Tourism, Mr. Matei Agathon Dan, devised the Dracula Park idea after he attended the first Transylvania Society of Dracula (TSD) World Dracula Congress in 1995. A highly publicized event, the minister attracted world wide attention on Romania in general and the myth of Dracula in particular. Soliciting support from local interests, Dan inquired about a location for the proposed park and the TSD suggested that the whole country could be explored for the Dracula

assets. The TSD suggested that if a park was to be built, the logical choice would be in northern Romania, in Transylvania, the region promoted in Bram Stoker's novel.

Sighisoara, Vlad Tepes' birthplace, was promoted by the Town Council and the Romanian Ministry of Tourism to be the park location (Tagliabue 2004). Sighisoara is a small medieval town found between Brasov and Tirgu Mures in central Romania (Figure 2). After all, proponents stated that the best location for the site should be somewhere where Vlad had been born (Tagliabue 2004)

Despite governmental support, the world denounced Sighisoara as the selected site for a variety of reasons. One of the primary objections to this site was the recent declaration of Sighisoara as a World Heritage Site in 1999 (UNESCO 2004). Local planners should have anticipated this conflict. This poor planning is amplified when one hears about the planting of tropical palm trees along the beaches of the Black Sea, only to die from the harsh winters in central Europe (Mcaleer 2003). Likewise, as Turnock (2002) has found, the interior of Romania is plagued with the difficulties associated by remoteness and poor tourist infrastructure. Another site had to be located.

Dracula Park has died in central Romania, only to be reborn further south in the town of Snagov 40 km north of Bucharest (de Quetteville 2003). It is believed that Vlad the Impaler was buried nearby. And by ironic coincidence, the proposed site is found on a state-owned farm, once the residence of Mr. Ceaușescu!

At present (May 2004), the project has been postponed to generate additional funding. It is expected that work at Snagov will begin in the summer of 2004 with support from Coca Cola Hellenic Bottling and Brau-Union AG (Austria). The cost of the project has expanded to \$70 million and includes a golf course, horse racing and water sports facilities (Paduraru 2004).

#### 4.0 Model

This research will explore the Tourist Area Life Cycle theory (Butler 1980) to the two sites. Expanding on the work of Christaller (1963), Butler proposed a hypothetical cycle of area evolution. Similar to a product cycle concept with a basic asymptotic curve, Butler

proposed that the Exploration Stage is characteristic of a small number of tourists restricted by the lack of awareness and limited infrastructure. Tourists are attracted to the region because of the unique cultural and natural landmarks. Contemporary examples, notes Butler (1980), include the Canadian Arctic and Latin America.

Next the destination may evolve into the Exploration Stage. Here with an increase of tourists and the establishment of related infrastructure, we see local establishments catering specifically to tourists. This leads into the Development Stage, where a level of organization is begun and a well-defined tourist market becomes apparent. But during this Stage, outside interests begin to take over the management of the tourist resources and extensive commercialization is found. Tourist population will often exceed local numbers.

During the Consolidation Stage, the rate of increase in numbers of visitors will decline, although total numbers will still increase. A distinct recreation business district will be found. Conflicts, if not addressed in earlier stages, will begin to fester. A Stagnation Stage occurs at the peak of visitation. The carrying capacity will be exceeded, with all the associated environmental, economic and social problems. Artificial attractions replace local natural and cultural landmarks. Ownership of properties will frequently change hands. The future may be pessimistic or optimistic. In the Decline Stage, problems from the previous ones "boil-over" and the resort area may disappear completely or perhaps become a slum. Optimistically, the Rejuvenation Stage may take place. This may be the result of an addition of a major artificial attraction (e.g., casino) or expanding access to some natural resource (e.g., spa). In either case, partnerships between public and private interests must take place for the resort area to become rejuvenated (Butler 1980).

#### 4.1 Comparison

Since the Salem case study may be in the "Consolidation" stage of the cycle and Romania is in the "Exploration" stage, several lessons may be applied to the proposed project in Europe.

Although the heritage industry may denounce the exploitation of a historic event in a theme park, one cannot underestimate how dark places may be marketable (Strange and Kempa 2003). The decision is not when to plan and manage such an attractions, but rather how.



While tourist fads may come and go, the desire for fright tourism is one that may continue to expand as access becomes easier to visit interesting and macabre sites.

Salem's willingness to exploit their history is explained by the factual nature of the events of 1692. The commercialization in America also defends a region's acceptance of the inevitable, that is, if locals do not capitalize on the phenomena, someone else will. Local tourist planners want to develop a sustainable tourist industry and by encouraging year-round visitation, they may be successful.

For Romania, the last 15 years have seen a tremendous change in the socio-political environment. Results in an early stage of development for Romania could be explained by the post-communist economy. To bring foreign capital into the country, it is better to provide something the tourist demands, rather than try to promote the existing and truthful history. But the Romanian Ministry of Tourism is wise to propose a multifaceted plan to expand tourism opportunities. And the Dracula Park is just one element of the plan. A planned upgrade of infrastructure should help tremendously.

## 5.0 Discussion

Fright tourism is a natural extension of risk recreation or adventure tourism. In those cases, individuals seek an opportunity that may be life threatening for the adrenaline rush. Likewise, fright tourism provides a similar rush, but hopefully not life threatening. Whether the depiction of reality is stretched or not is really the issue. Fantasy experiences are sought by tourists to fulfill some unmet need.

The fantasy afforded by Salem or the one proposed in Romania is basically harmless to the visitor, yet may degrade the quality of life for the local population. The tourism industry always faces this fact. So the issue becomes one of sustainability, that is, can the fright attraction continue to bring in tourists and help the local citizens? The challenge at hand is one where the heritage industry and museums must collaborate with the attraction sectors. Thus we can blend fact and fiction to one that holds values in high regard.

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#### **Appendix A. Related Websites**

- The Transylvanian Society of Dracula  
<http://www.benecke.com/tsd.html>
- Museums & Attractions: Salem Witch Trials of 1692  
<http://www.cryinnocent.com>
- Salem Wax Museum of Witches & Seafarers  
<http://www.salemwaxmuseum.com>
- Salem Witch Village  
<http://www.salemwitchvillage.net>
- The Salem Witch Museum  
<http://www.salemwitchmuseum.com>
- Witch Dungeon  
<http://www.witchdungeon.com>
- Witch History Museum  
<http://www.witchhistorymuseum.com>