

# Five pound pint

news engage connect influence

## Views

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## Tourism is it the 'new' driver for regeneration?

As the economic crisis deepens, policymakers are looking beyond the trinity of financial services, retail and creative industries to secure futures for our towns and cities. Tourism is now being lauded as an income stream for regeneration with the weak pound attracting overseas visitors and the fear of the European 'five pound pint' convincing Brits to explore their own borders in 2009.

Tourism can drive regeneration. It can diversify economies, creating new jobs and sustaining businesses in secondary services such as catering and retail. Tourism has lower barriers to entry than many other industries; it is structured around SMEs and micro-enterprises and offers employment to those with basic skills, providing opportunities for personal development and professional advancement. As overseas workers who have been the mainstay of tourism services like catering and accommodation leave the country, real employment opportunities are opening up for young people entering the workforce and others being forced to seek new work.

Yet tourism is also a particularly voracious form of capitalism. Recent years have seen growth in industrial heritage tourism, cultural tourism, dark tourism, urban tourism, culinary tourism

and other forms of 'adjectival- tourism' suggesting that, for any form of local distinctiveness, a market can be found. Everywhere has its own cultural heritage or contemporary niche that can be packaged by entrepreneurial tourism businesses, but should we let them? Should we be aiming to commodify our disadvantaged areas or transform them? Can we do both?

Tourism trades on the spectacle of difference. It doesn't necessarily promote change and development; it might sometimes have an interest in hindering it. Township tourism in South Africa is a growing industry. Western tourists, keen to experience the reality of black, urban South Africa can take part in a variety of township tours, witness 'authentic' street culture and visit 'genuine' local homes. Although there are positive impacts of this tourism, it appears uncomfortably voyeuristic and tourists' desire to consume these landscapes of urban disadvantage provides strong disincentives for social change.

In Rotterdam, the local state has promoted 'City Safaris' where tourists tour the city, taking in a halal butcher, local mosques and an asylum centre. This postcolonial safari derives its sense of adventure from the widening social gap between hosts and recently arrived immigrants. Is this the tourism that will contribute to the regeneration of Britain's poorest areas? In case you think this couldn't happen here, spare a thought for residents of Brick Lane in East London. A book, a film and high-profile marketing campaigns have contributed to tourism development that has attracted complaints over congestion, the squeezing out of local businesses, displacement of low income residents and social exclusion.



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Yet tourism can also breathe life into local heritage, draw on the experience and knowledge of local people and provide opportunities for sustainable development. For evidence, look at heritage tourism to the former industrial areas of the Welsh valleys or to the seaside town of Margate where significant investments in tourism development are accelerating the regeneration of areas with a unique cultural heritage. In Margate, new developments will complement restored seaside glories, producing a distinctive tourism offer inspiring local communities and attracting elusive high-spending cultural tourists.

There is a social role that tourism can play in regeneration. Volun-tourism is growing, providing streams of volunteers to work on community and environmental projects. Could this form of tourism be harnessed for regeneration? Could volun-tourists be persuaded to swap their usually rural and often exotic destinations for disadvantaged urban areas in the UK? The 'social tourism' concept is also on the fringes of mainstream community development. This seeks to extend the individual and social benefits of tourism to marginalised groups. If we allow the tourism industry to take a greater role in regeneration, we must convince it to invest some of its profits in such initiatives.

The possibility of Britain becoming a low cost tourism destination for stag parties and drinking tours is not so remote. Like the former Soviet states ten years ago, we offer that heady combination of a weak currency, an attractive cultural heritage and an indigenous brewing industry. In this context, tourism will damage our communities rather than support them. We can avoid this by deepening the engagement of the tourism industry in regeneration, not as a quick fix, but as a long term strategy that captures local distinctiveness, involves communities and sees the social power of tourism as well as the economic.