

It's a far cry from the catwalks of Paris or Rome—although one could argue that snagging front-row seats at coveted designer shows packs in the essential elements of war, too. It goes against the stereotypical notion of vacations as sunsets and spas. Still, 'war tourism' harks back to the original purpose of travel: to go where few have gone before; to find places that awaken tired spirits. In this hyper-connected world where a student in Mumbai can participate in classes at MIT or watch (virtually) falcons fly over the deserts of Arabia, it takes a lot to jolt the jaded mind. For many, war tourism seems to work.

The phrase 'war tourism' was reportedly first used on the American television show *Frontline*, to describe American troops in Iraq, who used to go out into the city during the day and return to heavily armed bases at night. Since then, war tourists—mostly journalists, artists and the armed forces—have consistently visited areas of active combat to report, film and be inspired.

IN SEARCH OF MEANING

Although I wouldn't call myself a war tourist, I do seek out troubling destinations. I classify vacations in four buckets: pleasurable, fun, adventurous and meaningful. Staying at the Amandari resort in Bali or the Tawaraya Ryokan in Kyoto was pleasurable. Shopping in London and hobnobbing with celebrities in Cannes and Cap d'Antibes was fun. Going on safari in Kruger National Park or swimming with the dolphins in New Zealand was adventurous. But none of these were *meaningful*. For me, meaningful vacations require that you open your mind and heart, embrace discomfort and live on edge. For that, I had to visit war-torn lands: Egypt, Israel, Poland, Russia, Cambodia.

On a cold, grey day in Auschwitz, I stood outside the gas chambers where thousands of Jews were murdered by the Nazis and I confronted the extent of human depravity. In Cambo-

dia's Killing Fields, where Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge slaughtered millions of innocent civilians, I confronted the limits of civilisation. I felt ashamed as I walked through Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum with its chilling photographs of the dead. That same shame would recur when I watched news footage of the Bosnian War or the Rwanda genocide, although I have not visited these places. This is what travel does, doesn't it? It makes you empathise with people who are different from you, with issues outside your bandwidth. Memories of one land and one experience allow you to relate to another.

War tourism also makes catchphrases come to life. Although I had heard about the 'Middle Eastern conflict', visiting the Israel-Palestine border made it real. In 2001, I had coffee with Israeli friends at a café in downtown Jerusalem. The following day, the Hamas carried out a suicide bombing at the Sbarro pizzeria just yards from where we sat. It gave me my first brush with mortality. To this day, I cannot eat za'atar, Israel's ubiquitous spice, without feeling a chill run down my spine. I stood at the Palestine border and watched a young hijab-wearing Muslim girl play in the sand. She was a few yards away, but she might as well have been a continent away, thanks to the omnipresent Israeli Defense Forces.

These trips—including one to Russia where I sat all night at Moscow's airport to make sure that an American colleague who used to be with the CIA wasn't jailed but instead deported—were not pleasant trips. But they

were memorable; and they were definitely meaningful.

In their book *Dark Tourism*, authors John Lennon (no relation to the musician) and Malcolm Foley posit that tourists are attracted to places where inhuman acts occurred (and are occurring) for a variety of reasons: to make sense of their world; to witness the extent of human failing; and to come back with a greater sense of gratitude about their normal lives. Mass graves offer a huge perspective on the mundane, something that Oscar-nominated film-maker Ashvin Kumar knows well. Kumar is attracted to borders, ergo his fascination with Kashmir, a state he has repeatedly filmed in. He talks with insight and compassion about the ravages of the border conflict and its toll on Kashmiris. "It is in the interest of the tourism industry to project normalcy in Kashmir," he says. "But terrible dichotomies still exist: mass graves, false encounters, torture." To pull the skin off the scenic beauty of this land and go into its conflict-laden depths, Kumar suggests talking to Kashmiris: taxi drivers, shopkeepers and NGO workers. "Talk to Parveena Ahangar, who founded the Association of the Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). There is an entire populace of women in Kashmir who are called half-widows because their husbands have just disappeared. They cannot remarry, their children are destitute, they have no closure."

Such access doesn't come easily to the average tourist. You may not be able to set up meetings with NGOs and journalists; indeed, you may not want to. After all, you are on vacation. Still, you can encounter war-like circumstances even in the most staid or sophisticated cities. Every city has grey areas, such as New York's strife-torn Harlem or the suburbs of Paris. Those who seek to combine comfort with discomfort can finish dinner at Manhattan's upscale Per Se and take a subway into Spanish Harlem at midnight. They can experience the adrenaline rush of danger, and return to cosy rooms and



Stone heads in Mauthausen, Austria, at the site of a Nazi concentration camp