

[Jason Clements](#)

First North American Serial Rights

About 1800 words

Sidebar (“Web Resources”): About 225 words

Vulture Tourism: Scavenging for the Best Travel Deals

Keeping up-to-date on world events could tell you where to take your next vacation.

by

Jason Clements

Vulture tourism. Is that when a group of ornithologists go on a tour to study scavenger birds? No. It’s what happens when avid travelers visit exotic destinations – especially after a war or health crisis – at discount prices. Vulture tourism is “travel to destinations that are cheap, safe, exotic, and unpopular because of some recent bad news,” explains Kim Clark, *U.S. News & World Report* correspondent and vulture tourism expert. The three key characteristics of a vulture tourist are that he or she: keeps up-to-date on world events, enjoys travel, and likes saving money.

Some of the places making headlines in the news today could be ideal places to visit in the near future. By keeping up with current events and doing a bit of research, you could be spending far less on your next vacation than you’d think. You can find travel costs far below normal prices because of wary travelers not wanting to visit a region soon after a crisis. Knowing where the bad news was can point to where you should travel next, when to go there, and how to find the best deals on hotels, dining, and all your desired sight-seeing activities. Recently, for

example, in Thailand, which had just come out of the economic dip in 2001, a room in a four-star resort hotel in Pattaya cost less than \$30 US per night. Proper timing and a bit of planning can ensure that you have an adventurous, and safe, trip.

While the period of recovery after a crisis is often safe for travelers, locals still have a tough time ahead. As a *vulture tourist*, you could be seen as ruthless for taking advantage of others' misfortunes; however, someone recovering from that hardship would appreciate your business. A local shop owner will appreciate you coming into his shop and not think of comparing you to the carrion-eating bird. "Locals appreciate it because tourism . . . [may be] the only sector that is creating jobs and bringing in money," explains Clark.

Don George, global travel editor of the *Lonely Planet*, experienced this on a recent trip to Jordan. "Their tourism had dropped so incredibly, their livelihoods were drying up. And they [were] hungering for international contact," states George. "A rug seller served me tea, and I told him I wasn't going to buy anything. He said 'I am just so happy to have a visitor in my shop.' I had tears in my eyes when I left."

Swooping in when it's safe, you really experience the local culture and possibly even be a part of history as the people rebuild and get back to regular life. "A memory that really stands out," recalls Marcia McLean, a frequent traveler, is that "[we] were hanging out in a park and a man approached us and talked to us in English. We asked if our clothes gave us away as foreigners. He said, 'No, I could tell that you were foreigners because you were smiling, and Russians aren't smiling these days.'"

Travelers who choose unusual, tourist-starved can even serve as economic heroes and messengers of peace. Dr. Don Slater, a leader in sociology at the London School of Economics and a writer on consumer culture, recalls that a colleague had decided to fly out to a conference

in the U.S. shortly after 9/11 as a “gesture of ethical obligation.” Vulture can be ethical travel; not just travel for the sake of *seeing the world*, but travel that can do some good for the people who have lived through a crisis and are now faced with rebuilding.

Travelers should be wary not to brag about how cheap they find things, George cautions. “A tourist spending a little money won’t be seen as a vulture unless you are really obnoxious about it. Show your enthusiasm for the local culture and the things you are buying. Say ‘I love your hotel. I’m having such a good time.’ Don’t do the air pumping kind of thing: ‘Score! I ripped off another local merchant!’”

McLean, who has traveled to Singapore, Bali, and Russia, states of her vulture travel experiences, “I do feel that money we spent helped people. However, I’m not always sure that the money went where I would have liked it to go. I think that few people in this sort of climate benefit. But we did what we could.” George suggests that you stay in a guest house owned by locals instead of a corporate-owned chain hotel, likewise for restaurants and other services. Make sure your dollars really go to help the locals. You will have a more rewarding experience dining and conversing with the people who have just lived through and survived the crises than you will if you just sit around a secluded pool at a big corporate hotel eat a Big Mac at the local McDonald’s.

Don’t swoop in until it’s safe

As with any travel, a vulture tourist should take some basic precautions while abroad to help ensure a safe, incident-free trip. You could just as likely encounter unexpected difficulties close to home as while traveling abroad. However, the difficulties caused by having your wallet or purse stolen are multiplied if it occurs while you are out of the country, especially if all of

your money, credit cards, traveler's cheques, and even your passport are among the valuables lost.

Clark takes some lessons from the carrion-eating bird: "Vulture travelers, like the birds, don't swoop in until it's safe." McLean followed this advice when she recently traveled to Singapore: "People were cautious, but the general feeling was that SARS was under control, thanks to the measures that the government had taken to contain it."

Before you make your final travel arrangements, make sure you do a bit of research. You can check your destination(s) on the U.S. Department of State's Consular Information Sheets. These are detailed information sources for a country reporting on such things as health conditions, crime and security situations, political disturbances, and areas of instability. These can be found on The Bureau of Consular Affairs website (see Web Resources). Travel warnings and public announcements can also be found on the site.

You can also refer to the Department of State's pamphlet *A Safe Trip Abroad* for ways to promote a more enjoyable travel experience. The pamphlet is available online in the travel section of the U.S. Department of State website.

General Safety Tips From A Safe Trip Abroad

- Dress conservatively; don't wear expensive looking jewelry. A flashy wardrobe or one that's too casual can mark you as a tourist.
- Don't bring unnecessary valuables. Your passport, cash and credit cards are most secure when locked in the hotel safe. When you carry them, conceal them in several places rather than all in one wallet or pouch. The safest place to carry valuables is in a pouch or money belt worn under your clothing.

- Travel light. You will be less tired and less likely to set your luggage down and leave it unattended.
- Make sure that you have insurance and that your travel insurance plan covers you for medical evacuation in the event of an accident or serious illness. Useful information on medical emergencies abroad, including overseas insurance programs, is provided in the Department Of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs brochure, *Medical Information for Americans Traveling Abroad*, which can be accessed via its website. Also find out if your personal property insurance covers you for loss or theft while traveling abroad.
- See your doctor before departing for a check up and to get the appropriate vaccinations. If you wear glasses, bring an extra pair. Keep medicines in their original, labeled containers. Bring copies of your prescriptions and the generic names for the drugs.
- Avoid public demonstrations and other civil disturbances.
- Avoid scam artists. Beware of strangers who approach you, offering bargains or to be your guide.
- Be cautious of taxis. Only take taxis clearly identified with official markings. Beware of unmarked cabs.

If you follow these general travel tips, your vulture travel experience should be safe and enjoyable (and low cost). Another tip from *A Safe Trip Abroad*, if you will be in a city or region for more than two weeks or if you have any concerns, you should register with the U.S. embassy or consulate upon arrival. This will make it easier if someone at home needs to contact you in case of an emergency, or in the unlikely event that you need to be evacuated in an emergency. This will also help with obtaining a new passport should yours be lost or stolen.

A bit of research into the local laws and customs of your planned destination can also help ensure your trip is enjoyable. In some cultures, for example, pointing your finger, such as for directions, is considered offensive. Crossing your legs can be considered hostile in places. Your local library, travel agency, embassies, consulates, or tourist bureaus of the destination country are good places to check for suggestions on common cultural courtesies. Also, keep track of what the media has reported about recent developments in the countries that you plan to visit.

Where's your next travel destination?

Afghanistan may not be at the top of the list of most desirable travel destinations right now, but perhaps in a year or so you might consider it. Right now, there are people who are finding bargains shopping in the markets. "Before the fighting in Afghanistan, there was tourism. Kabul's Chicken Street was *the* stop, and it's making a comeback with visiting troops and aid workers," states Peter Mansbridge, Chief Correspondent of CBC Television News and Anchor of *The National*, about a recent trip to Afghanistan.

Haiti is top of the list of travel warnings on The Bureau of Consular Affairs website. However, when the uprising is over it could become the destination of choice for vulture travelers looking for a warm destination to escape the frigid cold of winter.

Keep watching the news headlines; you may pick one of those places for your next travel destination when the headlines subside. "Many people travel to places and see only the traditional touristy places," exclaims Darren Ray, an adventure traveler and converted vulture tourist. "I'd rather get a feel for the actual culture and meet the 'real' people from that place . . . and on a budget? Perfect!"

You don't need to be a bird enthusiast to enjoy vulture tourism. A love of travel, and a spend thrift attitude have you part way there. Combine that with a little worldly knowledge, keeping up-to-date on world events, and you'll be traveling to exotic destinations in no time.

[SIDEBAR]

Web Resources

Government/Organizations

U.S. Department of State

Provides information for Americans traveling and living abroad, including travel warnings, U.S. embassies and consulates. (www.state.gov/travel)

CDC Traveler's Health

Traveler's health information that allows you to select specific destinations on your itinerary and see any current health concerns for that region. (www.cdc.gov/travel)

World Health Organization

WHO provides general information on countries, as well as worldwide disease surveillance data. (www.who.int)

CIA's The World Factbook

Information on countries, territories, and dependencies around the World. *The Factbook* includes geography, government, economy, and transportation information.

(www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook)

Travel Websites

Lonely Planet

Publishes a series of guidebooks and runs a useful website. A discussion board on the site, called “Thorn Tree”, provides a forum to discuss travel destinations and to read other’s feedback on a location. (www.lonelyplanet.com)

The Economist

The Economist provides its Big Mac index to find out where the dollar is strongest over the long term. (www.economist.com)

You’re Going Where?

Advice on cheap, off-the-beaten track destinations, including advice from gurus like Don George and Arthur Frommer. (www.yougoingwhere.com)

Frommer’s

A publisher of travel books. Their website contains expert advice and travel discounts.

(www.frommers.com)

Smarter Living

A free online consumer community dedicated to helping people save time and money with the latest fare sales, travel deals, and special promotions daily. (www.smarterliving.com)

Away.com

An online provider of information and inspiration about active travel and the outdoor lifestyle.

(www.away.com)

OANDA, The Currency Site

A currency converter and tracker. (www.oanda.com/channels/traveler)