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Your Travel Destination Has Suffered a Disaster. Should You Still Go?

We often write off a country or region in the wake of a government upheaval or natural disaster—like the earthquake in Turkey or recent protests in Peru. Turns out that may be the best time to go.



Jen Murphy

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During a trip to Nicaragua in September of 2019, I saw the words “Pray for Surfers” graffitied across a boarded-up restaurant like a desperate plea. The year before that, I’d shared the waves with crowds of adventure tourists from around the world. Now I paddled out with just a couple of locals. The message was clear: Nicaraguans needed foreign surfers—and their tourism dollars—to return.



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During the previous decade, the country had pushed aside its war-torn reputation, acquired in the 1970s and '80s, and was touted as the next “it” destination for adventure travelers. Then, in April 2018, president Daniel Ortega ordered police to silence peaceful urban protests over social-security cuts. Reports of deaths and violence made international headlines, and Nicaragua’s tourism boom went bust almost overnight.

By early 2019, the U.S. State Department was urging Americans not to head there, “due to civil unrest and arbitrary enforcement of laws.” As a travel writer who frequently explores far corners of the world, I chose to go anyway. I knew from speaking to my contacts on the ground that the political violence wasn’t aimed at visitors, nor was it taking place in every part of the country. Friends and family, however, questioned my decision. “What’s wrong with the waves in Costa Rica?” asked my mom. Scolded a friend: “Your travel dollars are supporting an unjust dictatorship.”

But it’s my belief that, at the time, local businesses in Nicaragua—surf instructors, taco shops, and small hotels, among others—needed my tourism dollars more than others elsewhere did. Writing about travel provides me access to a global community of guides and outfitters, and I’m aware just how much tourism can positively impact destinations that have weathered political unrest or natural disasters. Tourism dollars really do improve the lives of locals.

This assertion starkly contrasts with conventional thought, which is to steer clear of such places. Tourists often fear that visiting an afflicted area will impede recovery efforts and further burden resources and infrastructure. (This may be true in some cases, like immediately after a natural disaster, so doing the research before traveling to such areas is crucial. More on this later.) There is also the ethical quandary of sitting on a beach enjoying yourself while locals rebuild their lives. But Jack Ezon, founder of the travel agency Embark Beyond, told me that the period following a calamitous event is often when local communities need tourism dollars most.

“By visiting, you are literally keeping food on people’s table. You are giving them the dignity of having a job and helping them get back on their feet,” says Ezon, a 20-year veteran of the adventure-travel industry.



After the 2011 Arab Spring, travelers avoided Egypt for years. (Photo: Ahmed Gomaa/Xinhua/Getty)




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Recent political unrest in Peru illustrates how local communities suffer when tourists stop coming. After former president Pedro Castillo was arrested on December 7, 2022, the nation devolved into rioting. Protesters impeded the trains that ferry visitors to Machu Picchu, cutting off the town of Aguas Calientes from its supply of food and fuel. On January 21, Peru's Ministry of Culture closed the ancient citadel, citing danger to tourists. The destination generates tens of millions of dollars for Peru each year.

The closure devastated area businesses. Enrique Umbert, CEO of the outfitter Mountain Lodges of Peru, estimates that thousands of tourism professionals were put out of work in a single month. "It feels like COVID again," he says. "We lost two months of our key booking season. We typically project \$1 million of bookings in a month, and as of mid-February we're only selling \$100,000." Umbert had to furlough employees and temporarily reduce salaries—up to 50 percent for some of his workers. He also deferred his own paycheck. "My heart goes out to our indirect staff, like our guides, drivers, and community partners," he says. "They're really struggling."

Prior to the unrest, longtime backpacker Jamie Thomas booked a trip to Peru through Condor Travel. In the months leading up to her February departure, she read that more than 50 people had died in battles with police. She also scanned Peruvian-travel Facebook groups and learned that visitors weren't being targeted by cops or protestors. Thomas, who lives in Omaha, Nebraska, decided to go ahead with her trip, even though the country's main attraction was closed. Her tour operator learned that there was a chance Machu Picchu would reopen February 15, the day Thomas and the rest of her group were scheduled to fly home. Everyone voted to extend the trip.

The decision paid off. The group was one of the first to climb the citadel's magnificent stone terraces once it reopened. Thomas admits that the large police and army presence in the streets of Lima and Cuzco could be unnerving, but she never felt unsafe. Her group arrived by train in Aguas Calientes, Machu Picchu's typically overrun gateway town, and found it deserted. "To take in those landscapes and ruins without the selfie sticks and other tour groups is a memory that lasts forever," she says.

Perhaps even more memorable was the welcome Thomas and her group received from locals in Aguas Calientes. Owners of the eco-tourism company Inkaterra gave them a special deal at their top hotel, and staff seemed overjoyed to have visitors—and revenue. "Their gratefulness is something I'll never forget," Thomas says. "The media scared off so many travelers. It felt good to take a chance and know we were helping show the world Peru was ready to welcome back tourists."



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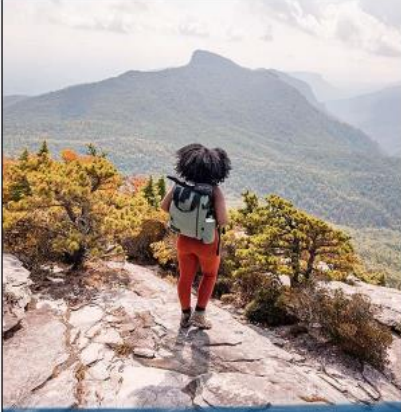
—Jamie Thomas, backpacker

Of course, journeying to unstable regions can invite danger, and travelers should educate themselves and prepare prior to leaving. Melissa Biggs Bradley, founder of the tourism firm Indagare, extensively researches destinations in advance, digging into matters such as: How did local governments and services prioritize traveler safety during past major events, like the pandemic? Are groups targeting tourists? Is the disaster or unrest happening in the region she plans to travel to, or is it in a different part of the country? Biggs Bradley also recommends investing in a membership with Global Rescue or Global Guardian—companies that provide up-to-date alerts and evacuation services during natural disasters and civil unrest.

The media’s portrayal of destinations affected by hurricanes, earthquakes, political unrest, war, and other hardship is often what deters tourists from visiting. But Biggs Bradley knows that news reports don’t always provide the whole picture.

There’s another benefit of traveling to crisis areas: human-to-human exchanges can lead to a better understanding of locals and a more thoughtful perspective on other countries. “Travel gives us the power to make up our own mind about a situation,” says Biggs Bradley. While she doesn’t support the government policies in Iran, Cuba, or Zimbabwe, she believes that it’s important to visit those countries. “People are not their government,” she says. “I’m glad people don’t judge me based on America’s politics. I think it’s important to have an open dialogue with vulnerable communities.”

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Nicaragua, a popular surfing destination, suffered a serious drop in tourism following unrest in 2018. (Photo: Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis/Getty)

Despite my confidence as a traveler, I've pulled the plug on adventures because of scary headlines. Political unrest forced me to scotch a trip to the Middle East following the Arab Spring in 2011. In the year after the protests, the region saw an 8 percent drop in visitation, according to the UN World Tourism Organization.

Then, in 2017, the Adventure Travel Trade Association invited me to join other journalists on a trek in Jordan, from the city of Dana to the archeological site of Petra along a portion of the new 420-mile [Jordan Trail](#). Prior to accepting, I reached out to Shannon Stowell, the organization's CEO, for reassurance. During the 2011 uprising, Stowell was in Egypt, one of the two countries whose governments were toppled in the wave of protest. He told me that the Western perception of Egypt's safety didn't jibe with reality.

Stowell says he toured Tahrir Square the same day CNN published a story on Egypt featuring years-old images of tanks and soldiers. "I remember thinking, You've got to be kidding me. This just set the country back again," Stowell told me. He saw no violence or weapons of war in Egypt; instead, he toured the pyramids with dozens, rather than thousands, of visitors and never once felt a sense of threat. During a meeting with Margaret Scobey, the U.S. ambassador to Egypt at the time, Stowell urged her to ask the State Department to downgrade its current level-four travel advisory (the most severe). "It wasn't even on her radar," he says. "It was adjusted within a month. That one change can have a very direct impact on a region." (While travelers should check State Department levels, keep in mind that the agency is overly cautious and broad when issuing travel advisories.)

Stowell told me that Jordan—which had been mostly peaceful—was enduring a halo effect from years of violence in surrounding countries. He explained that journalists like me had the power to pierce the veil of misconception. I agreed to join the trip. Weeks later I met a Bedouin staffer at an eco-lodge in Dana. We climbed up to the hotel's roof to view the full moon, and he hesitantly asked: "Are you scared of me? Americans see the news and so they are afraid."

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—Jack Ezon, founder of the travel company Embark Beyond



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I'm not alone in having written off an entire region of the world because of isolated events. If you're on the fence about traveling to or near a destination that has been plagued by crisis, I urge you to look closely at a map and investigate the proximity of the conflict or disaster in relation to where you plan to go. News coverage of Australia's apocalyptic bushfires in 2019 and 2020 created a perception that the entire continent had burned to the ground. Scores of international tourists canceled their trips. In reality, the blazes affected an area the size of Wisconsin. (Australia is approximately the same size as the contiguous United States.)

Turkey is currently experiencing a precipitous drop in tourism following catastrophic earthquakes in February. Earlier this year the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, announced a three-month state of emergency in ten provinces. After the quake, images of crumbling cities and bodies immersed in rubble circulated the globe. The quakes did devastate huge swaths of southeast Turkey, but most of the rest of the country received little or no damage.

In 2022, 51.4 million tourists visited Turkey, pumping \$46.3 billion into the economy, according to tourism board estimates. The country is likely to take a financial hit in 2023 as more travelers decide to stay away. Biggs Bradley told me that she's encouraging travelers not to abandon their plans to visit, because it needs that income more than ever. "[Turkey is a huge country](#)," she says. "You can still visit many beautiful parts—Istanbul, Bodrum, Cappadocia—that were unaffected, and support the rebuilding efforts."

She also believes that visitors should seek out area charities. You can give at local donation spots, such as mosques, nonprofits, or clinics across the country. Ask tourism operators whether communities are in need of specific goods that you can bring from the U.S., or which organizations are doing work that you can support. As the country continues to recover, even small gestures from visitors can have positive ripple effects.

My advice is to do your homework before canceling a trip to a troubled region. Talk to the person who manages the hotel where you're scheduled to stay. Ask local guides or other connections you have in a country to advise you on what the situation is like. Reach out to locals via Twitter or other social media. Plan your trip with reputable outfitter, since it will track safety information constantly. Weigh all that beta in light of State Department warnings and news headlines. There may be times when it's necessary to postpone. But if you decide that it's OK to go, your tourism dollars can provide a huge benefit, and the trip may be even more meaningful as a result.

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