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London's Homeless Tours: Slumming or Social Tourism?

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Title: London's Homeless Tours: Slumming or Social Tourism?

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the work of 'Unseen Tours,' a not for profit social enterprise in London, which offers a source of income to homeless, formerly homeless and vulnerably housed Londoners by employing them as tour guides. By putting the work of Unseen Tours into the context of slum tourism (Freire-Medeiros 2013; Frenzel and Koens 2012) and societal change through tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles 2006; Paddison and McCann 2014), this paper debates the fine line between selling and commodifying poverty and making a social contribution to poor people's lives. This paper calls not only for an inclusion of homeless tour guiding in the debates over the tourism-poverty nexus, but also for increased research efforts into this recent social phenomenon.

By drawing on the relevant literature as well as personal conversations with the team of Unseen Tours, this paper debates the extent to which the tours could possibly be seen as a new kind of 'western' slum tourism, selling poverty as an attraction (Freire-Medeiros 2009), or whether they challenge prevalent perceptions of homelessness and create an awareness of a marginalised group of society. Although the aims of slum tourism products vary, this kind of tourism has faced major criticism in recent years, with commentators questioning the ethics of tourism consumption based on poverty (Meschkank 2011; Rolfes 2010; Freire-Medeiros 2013). By comparing Unseen Tours to other examples of homeless tour guiding, this paper argues that the project has the potential to contribute to positive social change in line with the ideals of social tourism (McCabe et al. 2012). While it needs to be acknowledged that Unseen Tours cannot solve the homelessness problem in London, the organisation does have the power to create new opportunities and visibility for those experiencing homelessness whilst enabling them to play a role in London's tourism sector. At the same time, the tours fulfil tourists' ever-present demands for encountering the 'authentic' and help to diversify the tourism offer in London, distributing benefits beyond the traditional tourist centres to more 'edgy' urban destinations (Smith and Pappalepore, 2015), in line with the territorial expansion of tourism in the city.

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