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Former *New York Times* correspondent Elizabeth Becker has strong opinions about the cruise industry because of pollution and its low-wage jobs. But, she says, there are some cruise lines out there that follow environmental rules and pay good wages.

# On holiday

Former economics correspondent Elizabeth Becker looks at the impact of our roving hearts

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Politically conscious Americans have an ambivalent relationship to tourism. On the one hand, many of us love to travel to foreign countries — if we can afford it. We deplore the fear of strangers that keeps some Americans at home. On the other hand, many of us seek out places that have been unspoiled — unspoiled by tourists, that is — and complain about the effects of tourism on the places we visit, as well as on our own communities.

Elizabeth Becker, a former economics correspondent for *The New York Times*, has one clear message: The tourism industry is important, whether for good or for bad, and people need to start paying attention to it. She points out that there's been an explosion in travel and tourism over the past 40 years — the number of foreign trips in the world has quadrupled; there were a billion such trips in 2012. At least 10 percent of jobs worldwide are associated with the tourist industry.

Becker is by no means opposed to tourism. However, the way it's structured will determine whether it has negative or positive effects on the places tourists go. She holds up France as a positive example since France has been particularly mindful in producing a "good" tourist experience that is about French culture and has resisted dissolving that culture into the global melting pot of cheap souvenirs and unvarying package tours.

Similarly, Costa Rica has made a point of keeping local control of its tourism industry, with the result that the country's natural beauty and wildlife areas have been preserved and enhanced rather than degraded by the tourists they attract.

Becker's negative examples include the cruise ship industry, which sells an

experience of heavy consumption rather than of travel: Cruise passengers generally see very little of the countries they visit and are enticed into spending much more than the price of their tickets.

Workers' wages are usually kept extremely low; most cruise workers' incomes come from tips. Similarly, the country of Dubai provides a kind of tourism oriented almost entirely to consumption — not only of goods, but water and energy — with very little cultural experience to it.

Most of the money from tourism in Cambodia goes either to feed local corruption or to multinationals, while World Heritage sites like Angkor Watt are degraded by surrounding development and unsupervised visitors.

Venice, which now has more tourists on an average day than residents, is becoming unaffordable for Venetians.

Becker clearly believes that "good" tourism is what we traditionally think of as "travel" — going places to meet people and see how they live, rather than going somewhere simply to spend money. However, Becker also emphasizes the money a country can make from tourism. She believes that tourism can be an economic engine for a locality and that, if done mindfully, can help to foster a consciousness of local identity rather than creating a kind of fake culture that's geared to tourists.

Her examples of good tourism, though, tend to sound costly: trips that I would consider more or less unaffordable for run-of-the-mill travelers. Furthermore, although she deplores tourist developments that displace the poor in urban neighborhoods or companies that don't provide decent wages and working conditions, she doesn't talk much about how tourism can be designed to help rather than hurt the poor.

In a short phone conversation, Elizabeth Becker answered a few questions to expand on some of these issues.

**Mike Wold:** *There's often a tension between the poor and homeless in a locality and the tourist industry. Even granting that tourism brings more money into a locality, what can be done to benefit the poor as well as the middle class and wealthy?*

**Elizabeth Becker:** You (have to) look at tourism from a citizen's point of view, not just a consumer's point of view. Most people, when they read my book, say, "How can I be a better tourist when I travel?" The first way to do that is to be a better citizen in your own community. How do you want tourism to help your community? A lot of people who do no volunteer work in their own community will go overseas and volunteer. They spend a lot of money to send their kids overseas to be a volunteer, but they don't volunteer in their own neighborhood.

So, look at tourism and travel as a citizen. I had breakfast with the World Affairs Council the other day: lovely people. One woman asked how we can get more support behind our tourism industry, and my suggestion was, broaden the scope. Invite community members to be part of your board. Invite arts people. Invite the environmental community. The people who advocate for the homeless and the poor should be part of it as well. Tourism can benefit whoever the locality wants to benefit. You can figure out what in your locality benefits the poor. Maybe the poor can be bus drivers or guides.

**M.W.:** *Your book is pretty negative about*

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Elizabeth Becker

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