

Travel boycotts: moral stance or fashion statement?



ETHICS GIRL
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China seems to be dish of the day. An increase in private enterprise and foreign investment have led to the stratospheric boom that has transformed the country into a modern, economic super-power – a force to be reckoned with.

But China isn't having it all its own way. It landed the 2008 Olympics back in 2001 on the understanding that it must improve its human rights record. But Amnesty International, though welcoming some reforms, has reported a wide range of ongoing human rights violations ranging from dissidents being jailed without trial to villages being razed to make way for Olympic facilities.

Inevitably, the ethics of travelling to China are being questioned. Should we support a regime that persecutes not only its own people, but also those in neighbouring countries?

Should you go?

If we're going to ask that question, we also have to ask whether you should go to any country you disapprove of on moral, environmental or ethical grounds. Do the benefits of independent tourism – allowing locals contact with the outside world, contributing to a grassroots



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economy, encouraging sustainable development – outweigh or at least temper the negative aspects of travelling there (ie supporting a repressive regime)?

Perhaps another way to approach the issue is to ask: if you strongly believe that a country's government is behaving in an unacceptable manner, what can you do about it? Negotiating a path through complicated and complex issues such as freedom, civil rights and economic trickle-down, it's easy to feel overwhelmed; finding a response which is appropriate and constructive can end up in the 'too hard' basket. Which is why boycotting is a popular response.

I struggle with the concept of boycotting countries: the notion that by doing nothing, we're doing something seems wrong. I can see

taking a moral stance makes us feel better – but what about the country we're shunning? Does isolation help their situation?

Take Burma. Travellers have been boycotting Burma since 1996, when the military junta used slave labour to create a tourist infrastructure for the self-aggrandising Visit Myanmar Year. But 11 years on, Burma – rich in oil and natural resources – is still the poorest country in Asia and its citizens are still being imprisoned and tortured. Staying away hasn't changed anything, other than continuing to deny locals contact with the outside world and the chance to earn from tourism.

And be honest: do we continue to boycott Burma solely because we are appalled by the junta's atrocities? Or are we also swayed by the stigma of breaking the

boycott – like crossing the picket line? And how much of a sacrifice are we making when we boycott Burma, anyway – safe in the knowledge there are plenty of other countries to visit?

Thailand, for example, where 70% of tourist expenditure drains away into overseas companies and Amnesty International has raised concerns about human rights abuses against vulnerable refugees. Or Kenya, which has forcibly evicted 100,000 indigenous people from the Mau Forest. Or Canada, where more than one million seals have been slaughtered over the past three years.

Should you go? It's a rhetorical question – a black-and-white response to the complicated grey issues – that stops you truly considering what the right course of action should be. And a decision on which countries should become the focus of a boycott can seem like the result of ethics fashion: an easy, emotional response that takes no effort but makes us feel good.

If, after considered research, you conclude that staying away from a country is the right course of action for the issues that concern you, then fair enough.

But rather than then spending that time and money travelling to an alternative country, why not donate it instead? Give the local Amnesty or Greenpeace or Oxfam your £2,000 travel money and spend two weeks in their offices, finding out more about the situation and helping them try to change it. That would be a truly ethical holiday. ■

Jennifer Cox was the spokesperson for Lonely Planet before writing the travel bestseller *Around the World in 80 Dates*