

# Macabre tourism in Japan:

## Case study Aokigahara Forest and Nagoro Village

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### Abstract

*The following research reveals macabre tourism and the characteristics that define the concept, as well as the motivation of tourists who like to visit such strange places. In this context, there is an exemplification that over the years have left irreparable events and others somewhat strange and bizarre. The research is of a documentary approach, that is, it is the investigative method based on the revision of texts, articles, bibliographies, videos, films, among others, already existing on a topic and that can be used to start or bring up a topic. already discussed, the objective is based on two guidelines; The first is to know the concept of macabre tourism and the affection on the part of tourists in practicing this activity, and second, the central element of the study, the presentation of the places considered as dark tourism in Japan: The Aokigahara Suicide Forest and the village of the dolls: Nagoro. Finally, characteristics, antecedents, among other relevant aspects, in addition to the geographical location of the places, which are considered macabre tourist attractions, are disclosed. It follows that the popularity of these sites has aroused the interest of foreign and local tourists to explore these places in Japan.*

### Keywords

*Aokigahara, culture, macabre, Nagoro, tourism*

### 1. Introduction

Visits to places of death may have existed both in ancient cultures and today, what is relatively recent is the generation of a mega tourism industry around the aforementioned sites and many others that have to do, in a sense or another, with death [Broeck and López, 2018].

In this sense, it is understood that at present the practice of macabre tourism is aimed at knowing and rediscovering places where there was death, natural disasters and atrocities created by man and among others that give meaning to this type of tourism. Without a doubt, macabre tourism makes known a part of the cultural heritage that history has left us, with society being the protagonist of the events that occurred and trying to promote historical knowledge through the tourist resources that exist today. Therefore, the motivation to travel for this type of tourism is to know a material heritage such as buildings, mausoleums or intangible such as customs [Dancausa, 2019].

Naturally, the country of the rising sun is so ingrained in its customs, funeral rites, legends and nature, that it simply makes it a candidate to offer macabre tourism to the same society and to foreign tourists, with Japan being a symbol of the expression of your culture.

Obviously, it is important to define macabre tourism as a new trend, where tourists are attracted by spaces of mass death, suffering or genocides that have happened beyond the limits of history, and that for this reason attract our attention. These practices not only challenge human fragility, but also remind us how life should be lived [Korstanje, 2017].

From this perspective of macabre tourism, the following pages reveal how complex the human being can be in matters of tourist pleasures, that is, this type of tourism has become

popular around the world, having thousands of people passionate about discover new places with strange and bizarre attractions.

As we see, the need to perceive new emotions is given by macabre tourism, a way of having contact with sinister events caused by man and others by the same nature, places where there was death, anguish, loneliness, fear, etc.

Perhaps, then, Japan being such a developed country, has places to offer tourism, in the same way, it has dark places for an audience of risky and reckless tourists when exploring roads that have had death, destruction and curse, knowing their own and unusual stories of every place has to offer.

### 2. Macabre tourism concept

The concept of macabre tourism, along with its definition, was created in 1996 by Scottish university professors Malcolm Foley and John Lennon. The phenomenon that includes the presentation and consumption, by visitors, of places related to death or disaster, both real and recreated [Molina, 2020]. Thus, macabre tourism is the act of traveling and visiting places, attractions and exhibits that are real or recreations of death, truly or apparently, suffered and whose main theme is macabre [Barón, 2017].

The term Macabre Tourism or Dark Tourism is relatively new, it did not appear until the 20th century, and since then several researchers have given it their own interpretations and there have been countless names that try to explain the same phenomenon and introduce it as a new type of tourism [Hernández, 2019]. Since, all the definitions have similarities, but at the same time they have been perfected and evolved as tourists have different values and mentalities that in turn change the fundamentals when visiting these places [Georgiev, 2020].

**2.1 Macabre tourism classification**

It should be noted that this concept of macabre tourism is not limited to this singular term, that is, the concept is relatively interchangeable within societies and is known in different ways, as shown in Figure 1.

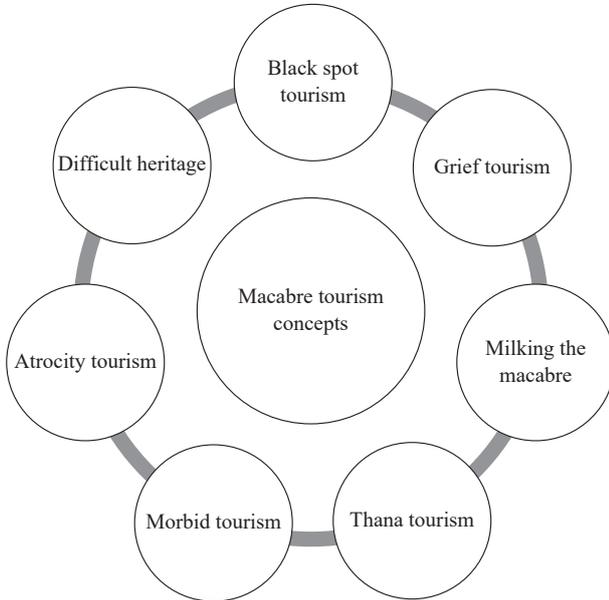


Figure 1: Concepts of Macabre tourism

Source: Created by the author based on Stone and Sharpley [2008].

This tourism contains a large number of places worldwide with different characteristics in which different events have occurred that allow it to be part of this type of tourist offer. For this reason, throughout all these years various classifications were established in order to differentiate them [Ramos and Romani, 2018].

**2.2 Tourists and sympathy for macabre tourism**

In accordance with the sympathy that exists among tourists who practice this type of tourism, the following definition is considered, which would be an approximation to such motivation for visiting this type of place.

Every day more tourists arrive, attracted for various reasons, such as the desire to be in the place where their hero died or

is buried, to deepen their knowledge of the event, or even for a sense of social and moral responsibility, so that they never return. To occur those tragic events. Visiting the sites of death may be motivated by general interest, by curiosity, or simply because that tourist attraction was located on the route of the journey [Broeck and López, 2018: 29].

Likewise, this new tourism trend owes its boom in large part to the development of the media, since bad news, whether about a crime, accident or catastrophe, generates a disturbance that paradoxically cannot be ignored [Serrano, 2019]. The global audience seems particularly sensitive to grasping themes associated with genocide, terrorism, and indiscriminate killing, a fact that has led to the number of destinations that offer macabre tourism multiplied in recent years [Korstanje, 2015].

The reasons for visiting these macabre destinations are very varied, some more understandable and others more manic, here we can list some of the reasons that have prompted people to visit certain places (see Table 1).

Table 1: Motivations of tourists

- The desire to understand how the events happened
- The need to see death or the reflection with their own eyes
- Tribute and commemoration of dead people
- Preserve the heritage of the place of the events
- Learn and correct disasters that have occurred
- Curiosity
- Dangerous or risk tourism

Source: Created from data in Georgiev [2020].

**3. Methodology**

The following research is of a documentary approach, that is, it is the investigative method based on the review of texts, articles, bibliographies, videos, films, among others, already existing on a subject and that can be used to start or bring to life a topic already covered [Restrepo, n.d.]. Likewise, in order to carry out a more precise documentary investigation, the following phases are described, as shown in Figure 2.

Now, documentary research is understood to be the study of

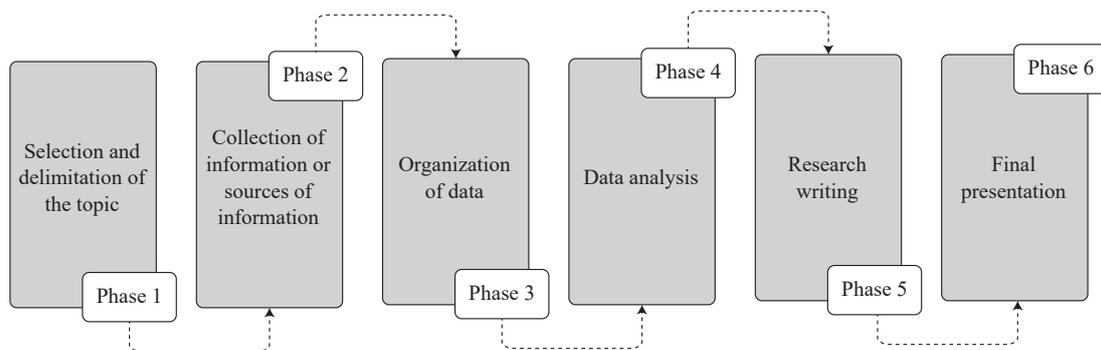


Figure 2: Phases of documentary research

Source: Created by the author based on Espinoza and Rincón [2006].

problems with the purpose of broadening and deepening the knowledge of their nature, with support mainly in previous works, information and data disclosed by printed, audiovisual or electronic media [Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, 2016: 240].

### 3.1 Research objective

The objective of the research is based on two guidelines; The first is to know the concept of macabre tourism and the inclination on the part of tourists to practice this activity, and second, the central element of the study, the presentation and location of the places considered as macabre tourism in Japan, such is the case, from Aokigahara suicide forest and Nagoro doll village.

### 3.2 Information gathering

For the collection of information, the destinations presented as macabre tourism were selected, revealing characteristics, antecedents, among other aspects, in addition to the geographical location of said places.

For the selection of destinations, it was done through the importance and because they are places frequented by tourists, it is worth mentioning that the availability of the information consulted for the study of these tourist centers also plays a very important role [Molina, 2020].

### 3.3 Study area

Next, the geographical location of the macabre tourist destinations to be investigated is disclosed.

#### 3.3.1 Suicide forest or Aokigahara forest (Tokyo)

It is located between Yamanashi and Shizuoka prefectures and has about 30 km<sup>2</sup> of trees (see Figure 3). Various types of mushrooms grow wildly in its mossy caves and above it, rises the immaculate figure of Mount Fuji, the most famous and sacred mountain in Japan [Farré, 2019].

On the contrary, Aokigahara already had a certain popularity

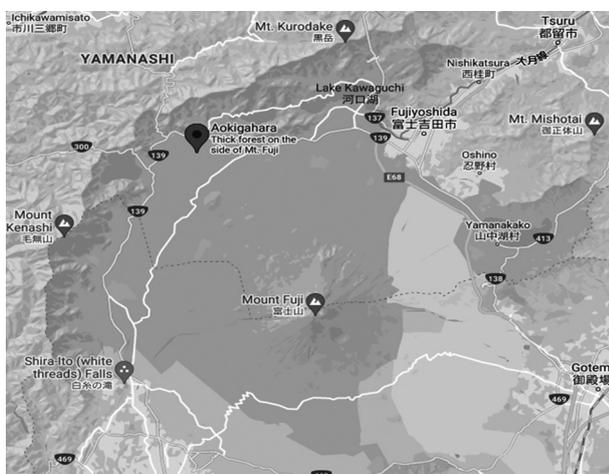


Figure 3: Geographical location of the Aokigahara forest

Source: Created from data in Google Maps.

associated with death, since there would be evidence that suggests that during the 19th century it would have been a place where *ubasute*, a practice of geronticide, was practiced [Leiva, 2021]. From this it can be inferred that the Aokigahara forest, where in 2010 more than 200 people tried to commit suicide, 54 of them succeeding [Valdiviezo, 2013].

#### 3.3.2 The terrifying doll village: Nagoro

Nagoro is a small town with difficult access, lost in the middle of the mountains of the Iya Valley (see Figure 4), just 10 kilometers from Tsurugi Mountain, 1,954 meters high [Jiménez, 2017].

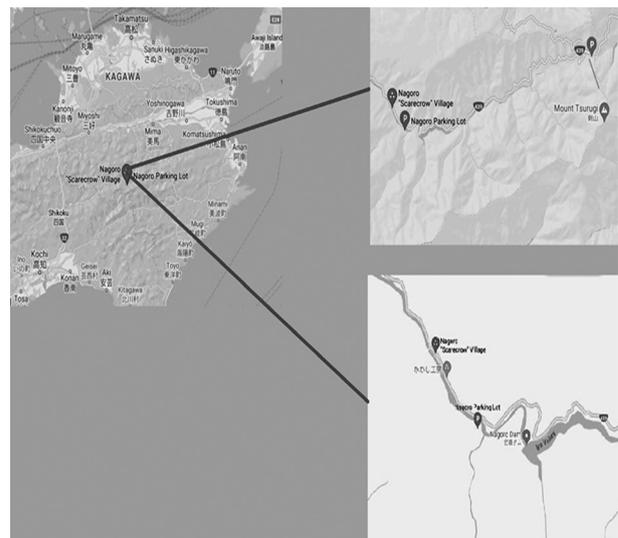


Figure 4: Geographical location of Nagoro village

Source: Created from data in Google Maps.

To get to Nagoro it is necessary to circumvent a series of narrow roads over the mountains and next to dangerous gorges, which hundreds of years ago served as a hiding place for the Taiga clan, a group of samurai who took advantage of the geography of the place to protect themselves from the clan. Minamoto, one of the predominant clans in Japan [Esquivel, 2019].

## 4. Results and discussion

The Aokigahara Forest is today one of the most popular places in the world to commit suicide, along with the Nanking Bridge over the Yangtze River, China, the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco, USA and the Viaduct Prince Edward, Canada [Farré, 2019].

The entrance to Aokigahara is lined with posters claiming to help potential suicide bombers. In addition to that, the formidable trees that surround the forest are tied with ropes, since the locals believe that this way they drive away the demons [Berríos, 2020].

For this reason, the entrance of the Aokigahara forest welcomes us with an explicit and reflective sign that give the last chance to the person's own decision (see Figure 5), it is a thin line towards death:



Figure 5: Warning sign

Source: <https://heraldodemexico.com/mundo/2020/5/28/asi-es-el-bosque-de-aokigahara-el-lugar-donde-los-japoneses-se-suicidan-179984.html>.

“Your life is valuable and has been given to you by your parents. Please think of them, your siblings and your children. Don’t go through this place alone”

Indeed, the forest has had a great popularity in the last 10 years due to the large number of horror movies that have been created. In Aokigahara about 100 people commit suicide a year; this forest has stories of more than 1000 years old in them all tell that it is a cursed forest associated with demons and sinister Japanese mythology [Georgiev, 2020]. The first historical record of a suicide in Aokigahara dates back to 1340, when a Shokkai Buddhist monk performed the Nyujoh, a Buddhist ritual by which fasting purifies you and awaits death. This monk believed that in this way, he would save the world from sin [Daruma Travelers, 2020]. Obviously, Japanese traditions and rituals have a great religious influence, specifically, it is understood that since immemorial times suicide is represented as a ritual of great importance within societies, reaching spiritual degrees connected with the element of one’s own nature. Likewise, in 1960, *Nami no Tou* was published, a novel written by the prolific Japanese author Seichō Matsumoto, in which two lovers commit suicide in said forest [Leiva, 2021].

Traveler testimonials suggest there is something special



Figure 6: Aokigahara forest suicide manual

Source: Rincones en el mundo’s HP from <https://rinconesenelmundo.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/bosque-suicida5.jpg>.

about the place, but this need not be unsettling. The images of cars that spend days and days in the parking lot are famous until the guards realize that their owners will never return [Barnés, 2018]. It is deduced that the popularity of this site has aroused the interest of foreign and local tourists to explore said place, discovering sinister events are part of the motivations that tourists find (see Figure 6), in addition to relating to stories of beings mythological and demons of Japanese culture.

#### 4.1 The terrifying doll village: Nagoro

The story goes that this scene of thick forests and huge cliffs served 800 years ago as a hideout for the samurai of the Taiga clan, after the conflict with the Minamoto clan. The town, despite the unknown, has been transformed into a particular tourist attraction; many of the people who come to the place do so by chance [Jiménez, 2017].

As is known, Nagoro is a mountainous village in western Japan, more than 500 kilometers from Tokyo, the capital. It is a town that would have been forgotten if it weren’t for the overflowing imagination of Tsukimi Ayano, who was placing creatures the size of people. The town had about 300 people, both residents and workers, and little by little people left or died [El Universal, 2019].

In parallel, these dolls have caused some of the travelers to have no choice but to stop to portray this rare find (see Figure 7), while it has prompted others to visit Nagoro conscientiously, putting it back on the map [Esquivel, 2019].



Figure 7: Dolls in Nagoro village

Source: Created from data in Google maps.

In the absence of inhabitants, the Nagoro dolls (see Figure 8) attract flesh and blood tourists and some come mainly from the United States or Europe [El Universal, 2019]. There the dolls hide the depopulation with names and surnames, representing people who have lived in the town and some are even dressed in the same clothes [Anonymous, n.d.].

As a result, this small village hidden in the mountains has gained ground, making the village a popular tourist attraction in a bizarre setting. Thus, the village achieves its mission, among the inhabitants themselves and the foreigners, which is undoubtedly a mandatory stop to get to know such a strange town.



Figure 8: Dolls in the village  
Source: Created from data in Google maps.

## 5. Conclusion

Summarizing what has been raised, we have that macabre tourism offers tourists different options within this strange plane, the possibility of encountering death and human suffering, having the need to experience new emotions, which is what attracts the macabre tourist.

On the other hand, Japan offers places for macabre tourism, of course there are two iconic places within the country of the rising sun, and we refer firstly to the suicide forest known as the Aokigahara forest, without a doubt it is a reference that has considerably gained the attention of western and local tourists, of course this place does not go unnoticed as this place offers an atmosphere of death and fear for tourists who venture into the depths of the forest, having encounters with real stories of human pain.

Indeed, this place hides dark stories, typical of local residents and for being one of the places with the highest ranking in committing suicides, this is how this beautiful forest settled on the slopes of Mount Fuji, reflects a sinister tourist attraction.

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