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THE BOYCOTT DILEMMA

When a travel professional strongly disagrees with a government's action, is discouraging visitation a meaningful way to effect change?

TRAVEL WEEKLY

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TW illustration by Jenn Martins

Russia's invasion of Ukraine drew immediate worldwide outrage. And while governments unleashed economic sanctions on Russia, the private sector began calling for a boycott of its vodka, soccer games and travel.

Rick Steves' Europe was the first major tour operator to cancel 2022 trips that include the world's largest nation, saying, "When we bring travelers to another country, we also bring their dollars — dollars that would support Putin's aggression."

Soon after, Carnival Corp., the world's largest cruise company, tweeted, "We stand for peace" and wrote that, due to Russia's attack, it would modify its itineraries.

The invasion has thrust the question of travel boycotts — and whether they are effective — into focus, again. It recently came to the fore with Saudi Arabia's billion-dollar push to open itself to leisure tourism for the first time, presenting some potential tourists with a moral dilemma around whether travel to the kingdom implicitly supports its leaders' record on human rights.

Being the poster child for tourism boycotts is an unenviable position, one that Bermuda held a few years ago when it passed a law banning gay marriage (which was subsequently overturned), that U.S. states like North Carolina and Georgia were in due to laws targeting the LGBTQ community, and that Israel seems to always occupy.

But most organizations that promote travel, and many that are committed to protecting repressed groups, say that such boycotts not only do not help but can actually hurt both those they are meant to protect and other innocent citizens.

And, boycott opponents say, given how many countries around the world have laws on their books that outlaw being LGBTQ — around 70, including safari juggernauts Kenya and Tanzania and popular Caribbean islands Jamaica and Antigua — or have questionable human rights records, like China's systemic repression of its minority groups and the U.S.'s many instances of police brutality, can make it difficult, if not impossible, to find places with clean records.

As Lynn Minnaert, clinical associate professor at New York University's Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality, said in opposition to travel boycotts, it's difficult to find countries with "nothing objectionable about them."



Lynn Minnaert, *New York University*

Minnaert also contends that travel boycotts are not effective at achieving political change, especially in places that aren't economically dependent on tourism.

In many countries, "tourism isn't a big enough industry to really make a splash," she said. "And also, not a lot of people are really doing it. It's a small and vocal group that tends to boycott."

That was true for the U.S., she said, when Donald Trump was elected president and many of her friends abroad refused to come and see her.

"Did we notice, in America, that a couple of Belgians didn't want to come to the States? Of course we didn't," she said. "I think a lot of Europeans did not feel that they could support America at that time. And, you know, not all of us were Trump supporters. It was interesting to be on the other end of that."

Beyond that, she said, "Turning away from something doesn't necessarily make it go away."

She cited the example of Israel, which many Europeans, especially, advocate boycotting. Her response is, "You're not helping the Palestinians, either, by not traveling to Israel."

What's worse, she and others say, boycotts can create inadvertent harm to industry workers and broad sustainability efforts. For example, if people boycott Tanzania, where Human Rights Watch says authorities have orchestrated "a systematic attack on the rights of LGBT people," ordinary citizens beyond the government suffer, along with the country's natural resources and wildlife, which are often protected because they draw tourists.

"It is very difficult to separate a country into all its different constituencies," Minnaert said, "because you have governments in many places that are really corrupt, but [the corruption] has nothing to do with the day-to-day

lives of the people with whom you'd be interacting. By writing off a whole country, we're also writing off all the people who don't agree with their governments.

"It's like saying every person in Saudi Arabia is probably anti-LGBTQ. I'm sure they're not. But it's very easy for us, with a broad brush, to write off a whole country on that basis. It's a difficult balance."

Tori Emerson Barnes, executive vice president of public affairs and policy for the U.S. Travel Association, also said it's not clear that travel bans and boycotts effectively advance the agendas of their advocates. "What is clear is that boycotts have enormous potential for collateral damage and harm to the jobs of travel and tourism workers whose livelihoods depend on visitation to their region. As the travel industry emerges from two years of steep declines, this industry should not face obstructions to its recovery."



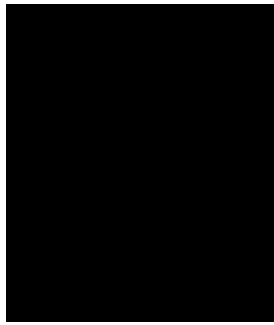
Tori Emerson Barnes, *U.S. Travel*

WHO DO BOYCOTTS HURT THE MOST?

U.S. Travel's position is that travel "should never be weaponized to advance political or social agendas when, at its core, it is an activity that builds understanding between diverse people and communities and sustains millions of people who rely on visitation for their livelihoods," Emerson Barnes said.

John Tanzella, CEO of the International

LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA), agrees and is not in favor of boycotts for various reasons, chief among them that it "shuts off all communication ... and any kind of negotiation."



John Tanzella, IGLTA

Furthermore, he said, “You really disadvantage the LGBT community there. And whether it’s Jamaica or Egypt, they have LGBT communities. They have LGBT nonprofits, organizations trying to support the community. So, we’re kind of hurting our own people when we do boycott.”

And while he understands the argument against spending money in a place where “we don’t have rights,” that would mean cutting off about 70 countries.

“We’re about travel, so you’re really limiting yourself,” he said, adding that for people who are “hardcore” on the issue, there are places “here in the U.S. you wouldn’t go to.”

He also said that countries often change from within, citing the example of Italy, which once offered no protection for LGBTQ travelers but where the IGLTA is holding its convention this year. The same could happen in a place like Saudi Arabia, he said.

“Are they going to wave a rainbow flag and say LGBT people are welcome today? No, but who knows in 10 years? It could be the next Italy, having LGBT events and festivals and choruses and whatnot in the country — and hosting LGBT conferences like ours.”

As the IGLTA is the only LGBTQ organization member of the U.N. World Tourism Association, Tanzella added, it enables him to have conversations with officials from places where the LGBTQ community is discriminated against. He cited a recent meeting with Ugandan officials, moderated by the U.N. affiliate, about diversity and acceptance, in which he was able to discuss the killings of members of the LGBTQ community in Uganda.

“It’s that communication that gets things moving,” he said. “It doesn’t happen overnight, but without those kinds of conversations, I don’t think anything will move.”

Rather than boycott, he said, people can help in those countries by volunteering with organizations that are trying to change things and supporting the entities that support those communities, such as Jamaica’s Round

Hill Hotel.

“They do a lot of training for LGBT people to work in tourism,” he said. “There are allies. I hate when people bulk all Jamaica into one basket when there are some really good people there doing some really amazing things. And they need support.”

In addition, isolating a country can worsen a situation, Intrepid Travel CEO James Thornton said in a statement against travel boycotts.

“The watchful eyes of travelers can help to keep governments and regimes in check. When this global gaze is removed, the situation often worsens.”

As with many examples of human behavior, a decision to boycott may be made to “feel good, which is perfectly fine,” Minnaert said, but is often based on biases and leads to hypocrisy around who to boycott.

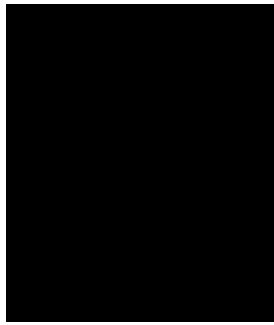
For example, Americans are more likely to express shock over travel to Saudi Arabia but not Jamaica, and Europeans are more likely to boycott Israel than Egypt.

Sometimes, Minnaert said, it’s a matter of convenience and familiarity.

“It’s so much easier to do that with Saudi Arabia, which frankly isn’t a big destination for Americans compared to Jamaica,” she said. “Jamaica’s at our back door. It’s so much more convenient for us not to treat Jamaica that way.”

WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?

Justin Francis, co-founder and CEO of Responsible Travel, a tour provider that aims to support communities and preserve nature wherever it operates, said he understands the quandary.



Justin Francis, *Responsible Travel*

“There are several countries around the world where a holiday can pose a serious dilemma for tourists. Botswana, for example, has evicted San Bushmen from their ancestral homes, Japan slaughters thousands of dolphins each year, Myanmar has virtually condoned the world’s fastest-growing refugee crisis,” he said.

Still, Responsible Travel does not support boycotts. Instead, it promotes “holidays, not whole countries,” Francis said.

“In particular, holidays that work hard to protect wildlife and provide economic stability for local people. I strongly believe that it is possible to travel responsibly in destinations with poor ethical records because, after all, can you really name anywhere in the world with a completely clean slate when it comes to the environment, animal welfare or human rights?”

When promoting its trips, Responsible Travel wants its clients to make informed choices, so it does not hide its beliefs about the places it offers, but rather, Francis says, “highlights, advises and campaigns on the issues.”

“If someone chooses to travel to somewhere controversial then we want to help them do that in a way that supports local people, not governments, and in a way that supports the people fighting oppression, sticking up for animal welfare or protecting forests from oil exploration,” Francis said.

The only time Responsible Travel ever supported a travel boycott was to Myanmar, because at the time, the military owned all the hotels.

“It was clear that money spent would go to them rather than local people, so we boycotted until privatization,” Francis said.

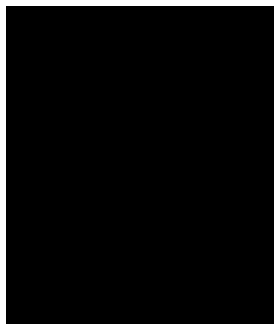
Another reason to travel to such places is that those who do so often return wanting to help the people they’ve met, Intrepid Travel’s Thornton said.

“We believe the best thing that we can do is ensure that wherever we go, we make a difference,” he said.

EFFORTS TO BOYCOTT HIT CLOSE TO HOME FOR TWO ADVISORS

Four years ago, a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., left 17 dead — most of them students. In the wake of the tragedy, some called for a boycott of spring break travel to Florida unless legislators enacted stricter gun control laws.

Alan Rosen, the president of Sand & C Travel in Parkland, was one of them.



Alan Rosen, *Sand & C Travel*

“I had very strong feelings because I live in Parkland. It was right here in my backyard,” Rosen said. “But I don’t think [calls for a boycott] had any kind of significant impact.”

That doesn’t mean Rosen is opposed to recommending clients avoid certain destinations.

The issue has taken a firm back seat because of the pandemic. Rosen said his agency is doing few international bookings, and the bigger question of the moment is just getting clients comfortable with travel in general. Yet, it’s still something he thinks about.

He met with Saudi tourism officials, he said, and told them he isn’t comfortable selling the destination to his clients because being Jewish, it concerns him that Saudi Arabia doesn’t have a peace agreement with Israel.

“Look, if you boycott every place that did something you don’t like, there’d be no place to go, including Florida, where I live. So, you have to be selective, but on the other hand, I do think that we have to also have a conscience. One of the things right now is, should we be promoting Russia? I’m not really comfortable doing that in the current environment, both from a political perspective and for the safety of the clients.”

The line between selling and dissuading clients from destinations isn't always clear for travel advisors. Rosen described it as "gray."

"To me, there are some obvious lines," he said. "If there's a war going on there, I'm not going to be recommending it to my clients. But as far as the ethics go, it's really hard."

Keith Waldon, founder and director of Departure Lounge in Austin, Texas, has been unambivalent in his feelings about travel to Saudi Arabia and said its tourism push has sparked both a personal and business reaction for him.



Keith Waldon, *Departure Lounge*

"To know that, on film, as recently as 2019, they were beheading people for being gay in the country — as a gay owner of a travel agency, I can't support tourism where human rights are so out of whack," he said. "For all we know, it's still happening."

Waldon acknowledged that positive change results from opening borders, but in the case of Saudi Arabia, he said he believes clients would be unsafe there. "I feel like there's a big liability issue," he said.

In fact, Waldon, a member of Virtuoso, has canceled any Virtuoso marketing containing promotions to Saudi Arabia that would have gone to Departure Lounge clients. Although no client of his has yet expressed interest in wanting to travel to the kingdom, he said he would not want to be associated with the booking if one were.

Similarly, Waldon said, he would not promote travel to North Korea; no clients have asked for travel there, either.

Other countries often come on a case-by-case basis depending on travelers. For instance, he said, there are Middle Eastern countries where gay travelers might not be culturally accepted, but they aren't at risk of being persecuted or jailed. Jamaica also falls into that category, and gay clients visit there frequently.

"There's not a huge list of the absolute no-gos from a liability standpoint," he said.

Still, he said he believes there is value in speaking up against some destinations.

“I think that, as the travel industry, we really need to make some decisions,” Waldon said. “Is the money worth it? Do you need that money so much that you’re willing to turn your brain off on the issues that are serious issues in that country?”

—J.B.

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