

# How dark is Day of the Dead tourism? The case of Huaquechula, Mexico



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## Abstract

Although Day of the Dead tourism falls within the purview of dark tourism, no one has approached it from this perspective before. Based on a semi-structured questionnaire administered to tourists and visitors and in-depth interviews conducted with bereaved families, this article addresses the question of how “dark” Day of the Dead tourism is in Huaquechula, Mexico. The results suggest that Day of the Dead tourism does not fit easily within the spectra of a supply and demand framework of dark tourism as proposed in the literature. It is argued that the terms dark tourism and even thanatourism have limited applicability to Day of the Dead tourism.

**KEYWORDS:** Huaquechula, Day of the Dead, pale tourism, gray tourism supply, pale tourism demand.

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# ¿Qué tan oscuro es el turismo de Día de Muertos? El caso de Huaquechula, México

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## Resumen

Si bien el turismo asociado al Día de Muertos puede antojarse como una modalidad de turismo oscuro, hasta hoy nadie lo ha abordado desde esta perspectiva. Este artículo explora la cuestión de qué tan “oscuro” es el turismo de Día de Muertos en Huaquechula, México. La aplicación de un cuestionario semiestructurado a turistas y visitantes, y la realización de entrevistas a profundidad con los familiares de los difuntos, permitieron comprobar que el turismo de Día del Muertos difícilmente encaja en la categoría de turismo oscuro, por lo que el uso de este término (como el otro de tanatoturismo) debe tomarse con reservas al referirse a él.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Huaquechula, Día de Muertos, turismo pálido, oferta turística gris, demanda turística pálida.

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## Introduction

Every autumn, thousands of tourists, both Mexican and foreign, descend on cities and towns in Mexico to attend Day of the Dead celebrations during All Saints and All Souls days, when the souls of the deceased are said to return. Obviously, Day of the Dead tourism can be classified as a form of dark tourism. To date, however, no works have approached it from this perspective (Ochoa Zazueta, 1973; Nutini, 1988; Carmichael and Sayer, 1991; Norget, 2005; Brandes, 2006; Lomnitz, 2008), although Morales Cano and Mysyk (2004) consider the possibility that Day of the Dead tourism is a form of thanatourism. Based on a semi-structured questionnaire administered to tourists (both Mexican and foreign) and visitors (those who have family and friends in Huaquechula) and in-depth interviews conducted with bereaved family members who construct altars to honour their recently deceased, the purpose of this article is to address the question of how “dark” Day of the Dead tourism is in Huaquechula, located in the State of Puebla, Mexico.

Although Day of the Dead tourism falls within the purview of dark tourism, its characteristics do not fit easily within the spectra of a supply and demand framework --specifically, within Stone’s (2006:151) “spectrum of dark tourism product features”, Seaton’s (1996:240) “continuum of intensity” of tourist motivation, and Sharpley’s (2005:222) “continuum of shades of darkness” of tourist consumption. On the supply side, Day of the Dead tourism exhibits both dark and ambiguous product features. On the demand side, it exhibits ambiguous elements of both tourist motivation and tourism consumption. On a matrix of “shades of dark tourism” (Sharpley, 2005:225), the supply and demand elements of Day of the Dead seem to be a variation of “pale” tourism and to conform to “gray” tourism supply and “pale” tourism demand. Thus, it is argued that the term “dark tourism” and even its sister term, “thanatourism,” have limited applicability to Day of the Dead tourism.

The article begins by identifying the characteristics of dark tourism that are relevant to the topic of study, and by briefly describing Day of the Dead. Then data collection methods are outlined before moving on to present the findings by locating the characteristics of Day of the Dead tourism along the supply and demand spectra of shades of darkness proposed in the literature. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and addressing the question of how dark Day of the Dead tourism is in Huaquechula, Mexico.



### What is dark tourism?

A relatively recent area of scholarly interest, dark tourism is defined as “the act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre” (Stone, 2013:307). Its “awkward, if not more precise sister term”, thanatourism (Stone, 2006:146), is defined as “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death” (Seaton, 1996:240). The increase in global media attention to such sites and locations is thought to be related to the increase in the popularity of dark tourism (Seaton, 1996; Lennon and Foley, 2000).

On the supply side, Stone (2006) identifies various “perceived product features” on the dark tourism spectrum: higher versus lower political influence; education versus entertainment orientation; history-centric versus heritage-centric; authentic versus inauthentic product interpretation; location versus non-location authenticity; shorter versus longer time scale to event; non-purposeful versus purposeful sites; and lower versus higher tourism infrastructure (151). On the demand side, Seaton (1996) suggests that tourist motivation exists on a “continuum of intensity” from “single motivation” to “other motivations”, and from a “generalized” interest in death to a “person-centred” interest in death (240). According to Seaton (1996), if the dead “are both known to, and valued by, the visitor...the weaker is the purely thanatouristic element” (240).

Drawing on both Stone (2006) and Seaton (1996), Sharpley (2005) proposes four “metaphors of [tourism] consumption” that suggest a “continuum of ‘shades of darkness’” (223-224). Three of those metaphors potentially relate to Day of the Dead tourism: dark tourism as classification (“paler”) or a marker of social status rather than any fascination with death *per se*; as experience (“darker”) or a fascination, not with the manner, but with the *meaning* of death; and as play (“paler”) or annual, collective celebrations of mourning or remembrance. Because supply and demand are interrelated, Sharpley (2005) suggests that “shades” of dark tourism can be identified by locating them on a matrix composed of “pale tourism”, “grey tourism demand”, “grey tourism supply” and “black tourism” (225-226). He also suggests that his proposed typology demonstrates that a fascination with or an interest in death –the defining feature of dark tourism– may not always be the main reason for the consumption of such sites or attractions.



Two of Stone's (2006) seven dark tourism products –“dark resting places” and “dark shrines” (154-156)– and one of Seaton's (1996) five distinct travel activities –“travel to internment sites of, and memorials to, the dead” (241-242)– most closely pertain to Day of the Dead tourism. According to Stone (2006), dark resting places are more history-centric than heritage-centric, while dark shrines are often constructed very close to the site of death soon after the death has occurred. Because the events dominate the media agenda for relatively short periods of time, there is a higher level of political influence and ideology but, if the sites are non-purposeful and temporary, they possess very little tourism infrastructure.

### **What is Day of the Dead?**

Day of the Dead (known throughout Mexico as *Día de Muertos*) is “[the] Mexican version of a pan-Roman Catholic holiday, All Saints [November 1] and All Souls [November 2] days” (Brandes 2006:6). The origins of the Day of the Dead –whether pre-Hispanic, medieval European, or some combination of the two– have been the subject of much debate. Nonetheless, almost all scholarly sources mention several common characteristics of Day of the Dead as it is celebrated today. It is a harvest festival during which the souls of the deceased, sometimes said to be in purgatory, are thought to return. Not only do they mediate between humans and the supernatural, but they partake of the essence or the aroma of the food offerings that are placed on home altars.

Although the specifics of Day of the Dead –which souls arrive, at what time, and on which days– vary slightly throughout Mexico, the following dates and types of souls of individuals who died within the past year have traditionally been celebrated in Huaquechula. On October 28, the souls of those who died in accidents return; on October 31, those of children return; and, on November 1, those of adults return. On November 2, the souls of all others return.

In rural Tlaxcala (Nutini, 1988), Tzintzuntzan (Brandes, 2006), Mixquic (Ochoa Zazueta, 1973), Colonia San Juan, Oaxaca (Norget, 2005) and Huaquechula, the home altars that bereaved families construct to honour the souls of their recently deceased range from the simple to the elaborate. In Huaquechula, by far the greatest tourist attraction is its multi-tiered home altars. On the first



tier is placed the offering –an abundance of flowers, food, and drink– along with a photograph of the deceased, often reflected in a mirror. On the second tier are placed a Communion chalice and Host. The topmost tier is adorned with a crucifix. When the bells of the parish church begin to ring at 2:00 pm on November 1, bereaved families go outside to receive the souls with incense and a path of flower petals that lead to the altar. Only then are tourists and visitors alike allowed to enter and view the altars, and invited to share in a traditional meal. Until November 8, all who arrive are offered hot chocolate and bread. In 2015, not all families who lost loved ones within the past year constructed an altar and placed an offering, some because they could not afford to –the costs can be as much as 100 thousand pesos (more than US \$5 thousand)– and others because they were not Catholic (Castillo, 2015).

In some parts of Mexico, such as rural Tlaxcala (Nutini, 1988) and Tzintzuntzan (Brandes, 2006), dusk-to-dawn vigils are held in the cemeteries on November 1, and in Mixquic (Ochoa Zazueta, 1973), an evening vigil on November 2. In others, such as Colonia San Juan (Norget, 2005) and Huaquechula, visits to the cemeteries occur in the daytime on November 2. After morning mass, families and friends make their way to one or both of Huaquechula's cemeteries to adorn the graves of their loved ones with flowers, candles, and incense. Only very recently, however, has November 2 been promoted as a tourist attraction in Huaquechula (Guzmán Montiel, 2015).

But, as Carmichael and Sayer (1991:14) point out, “there is nothing sombre or macabre” about Day of the Dead:

[The] returning souls do not bring the odour of death and the grave with them, but come as spirits who have returned from another world...very much like this one. These worlds of the living and the dead exist in a state of permanent [harmony].

According to Stone and Sharpley (2008), “dark tourism may have more to do with life and living, rather than the dead and dying” (590), a sentiment echoed in both the scholarly literature and media coverage of Day of the Dead (Norget, 2005; Brandes, 2006; Marín de Hoyos, n.d.). And, unlike in rural Tlaxcala where, since 1960, most of the components of Day of the Dead have become “secularized and even perfunctory” (Nutini, 1988:359), in other parts of Mexico, such as in Huaquechula, they have undergone a resurgence due, in large part, to the promotion of tourism.



## Methods

Because the Day of the Dead is celebrated only once a year, a pilot study was conducted in the fall of 2014 to determine the feasibility of conducting the main study in the fall of 2015. Both studies consisted of a semi-structured questionnaire administered to tourists and visitors and in-depth interviews carried out with bereaved family members. In advance of data collection, informed consent was attained orally from all participants.

In 2015, the questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 50 respondents (five on October 28, five on October 31, 35 on November 1, and five on November 2) in their language of preference (either Spanish or English) as they exited those homes with altars and in the atrium of the ex-Franciscan convent. The questionnaire consisted of a combination of closed- and open-ended questions related to both dark tourism (supply) and thanatourism (demand). Among the questions were why the respondents were visiting Huaquechula and attending Day of the Dead celebrations, how they found out about them, what places –aside from the homes in which new altars had been constructed– they visited or planned to visit in Huaquechula, and what other places they had visited in Mexico that were related to Day of the Dead celebrations. The responses to the closed-ended questions were entered into Excel, transferred to SPSS to record their frequencies, and cross tabulated for “tourists” (Mexican and foreign) and “visitors” (those who have family or friends in Huaquechula).

To supplement the questionnaire responses, Spanish-language interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of five families that had constructed new altars to inquire into their knowledge of or ideas about tourist motivation, and to elicit their thoughts on the meaning or significance of Day of the Dead. On October 31 and November 1, Morales Cano visited each of their homes to ask if she could photograph the altar and return on a later date to conduct an audio-recorded interview. If they agreed, she gave them a laminated booklet of prints of the photographs when she returned to interview them (one family on November 2, two on November 5, and two on November 7). The responses to both the open-ended questionnaire questions and the open-ended interview questions were transcribed and coded according to common themes.



## Results

### *Dark Tourism Supply*

Like many developing countries, Mexico relies heavily on tourism as an economic development strategy (Harrison, 2001). In fact, Mexico's debt crisis in 1982, its inclusion in the North America Free Trade Agreement in 1994, and its stock market crash in 1995 (Green, 2003) likely contributed to an increase in tourism promotion. Within this wider context, the following dates are relevant to the topic of this article. In 1980, the Government of the State of Puebla began to promote a competition for the quality of the Day of the Dead altars; in 1997, it officially declared the "Monumental Altars of Huaquechula" to be part of the Cultural Patrimony of the State of Puebla; in 2003, UNESCO declared Día de muertos to be part of Mexico's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; and, by 2013, the Municipal Government of Huaquechula was preparing to apply to become a Pueblo Mágico (Magic Town).

Huaquechula meets most of the criteria to become a Magic Town (see Armenta, 2015). It is less than 60 km (37 miles) from the city of Puebla by way of the Vía Atlixcáyotl or the Puebla-Atlixco Federal Highway, and it prides itself on the presence of pre-Hispanic sculptures and an ex-Franciscan convent. In 2015, Huaquechula's municipal president claimed that, between October 28 and November 2, the estimated 120,000 visitors who would arrive would spend around one million pesos (more than US \$50 thousand) (*Unión Puebla*, 2015). Originally a "non-purposeful" attraction, Day of the Dead in Huaquechula has, for political and economic reasons, become a "purposeful" one (Stone, 2006:148) but offers little in the way of tourism infrastructure.

Because there is no evidence that speaks directly to how the dead were honoured in Huaquechula, either in pre-Hispanic times or during the Colonial period, Day of the Dead is promoted as less history-centric than heritage-centric (according to Timothy (2011), "history is the *past*, whereas heritage is the modern-day *use* of the past" (3, emphasis added) for purposes such as tourism). In 2014, Huaquechula's municipal president described Day of the Dead as a "fusion" of pre-Hispanic and Colonial beliefs (*Unión Puebla*, 2014), but added several dates and types of souls that arrive –on October 29, the souls of those who drowned, froze to death, or were struck by lightning and, on October 30,



the souls of children older than three are said to return (*Azteca Noticias*, 2014; *Unión Puebla*, 2014). In 2015, he explained that, because the altars “revive the tradition and culture of our 16th-century ancestors” tourists would be “spectators to an extraordinary pre-Hispanic custom” (Estado de Puebla, 2015). The altars, he said, are not “an exhibition or museums” (*Unión Puebla*, 2015). Among the events scheduled for Day of the Dead were, on October 31, a *Festival del Trueque* (Festival of Exchange of altar offerings), the “Aztec ritual” of choosing a Marigold Queen, a culinary competition, and an old photographs competition; on November 1, the Marigold Queen procession; and, on November 2, the decoration of the cemeteries (Guzmán Montiel, 2015).

Although there has never been an “authentic” Day of the Dead (Brandes, 2006:15), the random selection of events that promoters hoped would appeal to tourists clearly lends itself to “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Nonetheless, apart from the fact that the souls of the deceased are said to return, Day of the Dead in Huaquechula is rarely promoted as in any way “dark”.

### *Dark Tourism Demand*

The sample of 50 respondents (30 men and 20 women) was composed of 38 Mexican tourists, seven foreign tourists, and five visitors, two of whom were originally from Huaquechula. The average age of the Mexican tourists was 39, of the foreign tourists 44, and of the visitors 38. Most of Mexican tourists were from the state of Puebla (18 from the city of Puebla and eight from other cities and towns), eight from other states in Mexico, and four from Mexico City. Foreign tourists were from Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the US, Germany, Spain, and Australia. The visitors were from Nexatengo, Puebla (1), Mexico City (2), the State of Mexico (1), and Guadalajara (1). The occupations of all respondents ranged from “student” to “housewife” to “employed” in a wide range of capacities, including managers and professionals.

By far the majority of tourists (32 Mexican and four foreign) but no visitors had the “single motivation” (Seaton, 1996:240) of visiting Huaquechula to attend Day of the Dead. Only nine (five Mexican tourists, three foreign tourists, and one visitor) visited Huaquechula for entertainment. As one foreign tourist commented: “It’s very delicious to drink *micheladas* [spiced beer] in the ex-convent”. Although no Mexican or foreign tourists went to visit family or friends, all five visitors did (Table 1).



Table 1. Visiting Huaquechula (Frequencies)

Why are you visiting Huaquechula?	Mexican tourists (n = 38)	Foreign tourists (n = 7)	Visitors (n = 5)
To attend Day of the Dead	35	7	3
For entertainment	5	3	1
Out of curiosity	2	0	0
To conduct a school project	2	0	0
To visit family, friends, or acquaintances	0	0	5

Of those respondents who visited because of Day of the Dead celebrations, by far the majority attended to view the altars (49) and to learn about Huaquechula’s culture and customs (45) (Table 2). Many learned about the symbolism of the altars (the three levels, the colours, the mirror) and the behaviour expected of them (presenting a candle upon entering the home, accepting the offer of food). Overall, the responses suggest that Day of the Dead has more of an “education” than an “entertainment” orientation (Stone, 2006:151).

Table 2. Reasons for attending Day of the Dead celebrations in Huaquechula (Frequencies)

If you came because of Day of the Dead, what are your reasons for attending?	Mexican tourists (n = 38)	Foreign tourists (n = 7)	Visitors (n = 5)
To view the altars	38	6	5
To learn about Huaquechula’s culture and customs	34	7	4
To think about human mortality	25	3	3
To experience something new	23	6	1
To think about death and dying	18	3	2
To pay respects to the deceased	17	2	2

Based mainly on the offerings of flowers, candles, incense, and food, most of respondents (30 Mexican tourists, six foreign tourists, and four visitors) thought that Day of the Dead had pre-Hispanic origins; three Mexican tourists said it did



not, and one visitor did not know. Three Mexican tourists and one foreign tourist thought that it was a combination of pre-Hispanic and Catholic traits (see Nutini, 1988 and Brandes, 2006 for discussions of Spanish-Catholic analogues). Regardless of how respondents perceived the interpretation of the celebration, their opinions of the altars themselves were overwhelmingly positive –they were “beautiful”, “creative”, “impressive”, “traditional”.

Of the 47 respondents who had viewed one or more altars, 31 agreed that they attended Day of the Dead celebrations “to think about human mortality” and 23 agreed that they attended “to think about death and dying”. Twenty-one respondents also agreed that they attended “to pay respects to the deceased”. That so many tourists –both Mexican and foreign– chose these three options suggests that they were motivated, at least in part, to attend by a desire for “symbolic encounters” (Seaton, 1996:240) with death.

Many tourists –both Mexican and foreign– found out about Day of the Dead in Huaquechula from family or friends. Fewer found out about it by way of the Internet, TV or radio, or travel guides or brochures. All five visitors learned about it exclusively from family or friends (Table 3). Thus, although media communication –including the Internet– was a fairly important source of information about Day of the Dead in Huaquechula, word of mouth was the most common way that respondents found out about it.

Table 3. Finding out about Day of the Dead in Huaquechula (Frequencies)

From whom or how did you find out about Day of the Dead in Huaquechula?	Mexican tourists (n = 38)	Foreign tourists (n = 7)	Visitors (n = 5)
Family/friends	20	5	5
Internet	12	1	0
TV/radio	11	1	0
Travel guide/brochure	1	2	0

Although many respondents visited or planned to visit the ex-Franciscan convent, the parish church, and/or the pre-Hispanic sculptures in the central plaza, only six Mexican tourists and two foreign tourists visited or planned to visit either of Huaquechula’s two cemeteries. Apart from one visitor who had never attended Day of the Dead celebrations in Huaquechula before, four of the

five planned to visit one of its cemeteries (Table 4) to lay flowers on the graves of deceased family members, which suggests a “person-centred” interest in death (Seaton, 1996:240).

Table 4. Visiting other places in Huaquechula (Frequencies)

What other places did you, or do you plan to, visit in Huaquechula?	Mexican tourists (n = 38)	Foreign tourists (n = 7)	Visitors (n = 5)
Ex-Franciscan convent	29	7	4
Parish church	16	3	4
Pre-Hispanic sculptures in the central plaza	14	2	3
Cemetery	6	2	4

Thirty-three respondents had visited other places in Mexico during Day of the Dead –either well-known places in Michoacán and Oaxaca, or other places in Puebla, especially those who were from the state. None, however, implied that they did so because of a “generalized” interest in death (Seaton, 1996:240).

Although none of the questions dealt specifically with the metaphors of tourism consumption –classification, experience and play– certain inferences can be made about them from the responses of tourists, visitors and, even, bereaved family members. With regard to classification, little evidence was found that attending Day of the Dead celebrations was a “marker of social status” for tourists except, perhaps, for “emulating” the travel experiences (Sharpley, 2005:224) of family and friends or, as three did, for comparing Huaquechula –favourably or unfavourably– to other places they had visited.

With regard to experience –which was the most variable– no foreign tourists elaborated on their choice of the options “to think about human mortality”, “to think about death and dying”, and “to pay respects to the deceased”, perhaps due to the “sequestration” of death in the West (Stone and Sharpley, 2008:583; cf. Seaton, 2009:536). Mexican tourists, however, did elaborate. Day of the Dead celebrations are a “beautiful way” for families to remember their loved ones; because death is “natural” and “inevitable”, there is no reason to view it as “something negative”; life is “finite”. One claimed that, “as Mexicans,

yes, we think about and make fun of death [but] we have to live for today –we don't know [what] will happen tomorrow". One visitor also elaborated on his choice of the option, "to think about human mortality". "One day", he said, "we all will die". Their responses suggest if not a fascination with, then, at least, an interest in the "meaning" of death (Sharpley, 2005:223).

Although many respondents also attended Day of the Dead celebrations to experience something new –that is, they were "chasing change"– no evidence was found that either Mexican or foreign tourists were "yearning for yesterday" or buying into the idea of "present progress" (Dann, 1998:25). Nor was evidence found that, for foreign tourists, Day of the Dead was a "low-cost window into [the] exotic" (Brandes, 2006:193). For Mexican tourists, however, Day of the Dead celebrations seemed to offer a "vision of their supposed past" (Brandes, 2006:193) –if not of their "history," then of their "heritage" (Stone, 2006:150). One commented, "it's very important to continue with our tradition". Several others suggested that "the tradition should be preserved for the children", "for the young people". Another noted that Day of the Dead is "something characteristic of Mexicans; it's a very beautiful tradition". Still another said, "I feel very proud of my traditions. I'm one hundred percent national" –an allusion to Day of the Dead as a "symbol" (Brandes, 2006:7) or a "marker" of national identity (Lomnitz, 2008:457).

With regard to play, all five visitors went to Huaquechula to visit family or friends, and three had gone more than once. One said that, because he used to live in Huaquechula, he "always" visits and that, this time, he brought his family with him. As mentioned above, four planned to visit one of the cemeteries to leave flowers on the graves of their loved ones. One bereaved family member captured the "shared, communal consumption" (Sharpley, 2005:223) of Day of the Dead when he said that it was a time "when family comes together... The relatives who haven't come around [arrive] in time to get together with their family, to be more united, closer". If, to borrow from Sharpley (2005:223), Day of the Dead is a "pilgrimage", it is so only for visitors, not for tourists.

### *A Word on Bereaved Family Members*

Bereaved family members confirmed the results of the questionnaire with regard to those who attend Day of the Dead celebrations –family members and



friends (visitors), groups of students, Mexican tourists, and foreign tourists. They also confirmed that visitors and tourists are either local or regional, from various states in Mexico, and from countries other than Mexico. All said that those who attend Day of the Dead find out about it by way of television or radio; two suggested by way of the Internet; only one added by word-of-mouth.

All knew or thought that tourists attend Day of the Dead celebrations mainly to view the altars and to learn about Huaquechula's traditions. Because some tourists are "misinformed" about the kind of celebration they are attending, bereaved family members take the opportunity to educate them about Day of the Dead. "They think that the altars are a museum, a competition, a fiesta. They don't know the schedule [for the arrival of the souls and the time they can enter our homes]", said one family member. "Tourists still don't understand what the altar means to us, and that the soul is here with us", said another. A third said:

When we await our deceased, it's not to spend [money] like crazy, but a tradition, a belief that we have. Every human being has a memory of his/her family --and, for us, it's important that tourists learn to respect our deceased, too.

Although all bereaved families mentioned the importance of tradition, only one mentioned -in terms of how "they say"- that both the offerings and the pyramidal shape of the altars come "from the pre-Hispanic period, from our ancestors, from the Aztecs".

When asked if they knew or thought that tourists attend Day of the Dead celebrations to think about "death and dying" or about "human mortality", most either said no, or else said that they did not know. One family member said that tourists come to reflect on Huaquechula's customs, not on death. But, "[if anyone starts to reflect on death, ...I say that's very good, ...I'd like to hear that, everywhere, they had the same awareness of awaiting a loved one". Another observed that, although tourists do not attend Day of the Dead celebrations because it makes them think about death, "many people look very sad...[It's] a combination of happiness and sadness". She had heard many positive comments from those "who put themselves in our situation, who tell us, 'we're very sorry [for your loss]. This offering has moved us a lot because...". One young man had told her, "You've made me appreciate my mother more. From now on, I'm going to appreciate her a lot". The tourists were "very moved because it's a combination of feelings". Another said, "Tourists think it's beautiful that, even



after a person dies, he/she continues to be remembered in this way...It's a new experience for them to come to pay respects to our deceased”.

In short, the suggestion that Day of the Dead is “dark” or even “thanatouristic” does not particularly resonate with bereaved family members.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

So how dark is Day of the Dead tourism in Huaquechula? Although its cemeteries (dark resting places) have only recently been promoted as a tourist attraction, its home altars conform to the characteristics of dark shrines. They are dedicated to those who died within the past year and are constructed close to the site of death, but no tourists who attend the celebration know the deceased. Immediately before and after, Day of the Dead dominates the attention of the media. The characteristics of the celebration itself, however, do not fit easily within the supply (dark tourism) and demand (thanatourism) spectra of shades of darkness as proposed in the literature.

On the supply side, Day of the Dead in Huaquechula exhibits dark but also ambiguous elements on the spectrum of dark tourism product features. The darkest include the following elements. As in much of Mexico, it is promoted as part of its cultural patrimony and as an economic development strategy, although Huaquechula offers little in the way of tourism infrastructure. The more ambiguous elements include the following. First, although the souls of the deceased are said to return, Day of the Dead is almost never promoted as “dark”. Second, originally non-purposeful as a tourist attraction, it became purposeful after 1980. Third, because there is no direct evidence of how the dead were honoured in Huaquechula in the pre-Hispanic or the Colonial past, Day of the Dead is promoted as less history-centric than heritage-centric. Fourth, although it is intended to be education-oriented, the way in which it is promoted is also entertainment-oriented which, according to bereaved family members, means that some tourists are misinformed as to what kind of a celebration they are attending.

On the demand side, Day of the Dead celebrations exhibit ambiguous elements on the continua of both intensity of tourist motivation and shades of darkness of tourism consumption. Most of the tourists had a single motivation



for visiting Huaquechula –to attend Day of the Dead celebrations. In fact, its many “thanatopic signifiers” encourage the “contemplation of death” (Seaton, 1996:235) –many respondents agreed that they attended “to think about human mortality”, “to think about death and dying,” and “to pay respects to the deceased”. None, however, seemed to have a generalized interest in death. In fact, rather than “explicitly” attending Day of the Dead celebrations to think about death and dying, many tourists seemed to “implicitly” think about human mortality only after they had viewed the altars –in other words, meaning was “consequential” to their visit (Stone and Sharpley, 2008:588). All visitors, of course, went to visit family and friends and almost all to lay flowers on the graves of their loved ones –a person-centred interest in death that suggests weak thanatourism. Regarding to the metaphors of dark tourism consumption, both classification and play fall toward the paler end of the continuum, while experience, in some cases, falls toward the darker end. Mexican tourists, in particular, expressed an interest in the meaning of death –its “naturalness” and “inevitability”– but they also thought that Day of the Dead spoke to their “heritage” –to “tradition” and “national identity”. To borrow from Seaton (2009), thanatourism is always a “necessary”, but “not a “sufficient” condition for Day of the Dead tourism (522-523). As Sharpley (2005) suggests, “the term ‘dark tourism’...can only be applied to a limited set of tourist experiences” (217).

On a matrix of shades of dark tourism, then, Day of the Dead tourism in Huaquechula –at least since the late 1980s– is a variation of “pale” tourism –a “minimal or limited interest in death when visiting [a site *intended* to be a tourist attraction]” (Sharpley, 2005:224, emphasis added), and conforms to “gray” tourism supply and “pale” tourism demand– an attraction “intentionally established to exploit death, but attracting visitors with some, but not a dominant, interest in death” (Sharpley, 2005:226).

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