Review: The 25 Best World War II Sites: European Theatre. The ultimate traveller’s guide to battlefields, monuments and museums

Philip R. Stone, University of Central Lancashire
Book Review

The 25 Best World War II Sites: The Ultimate Traveller’s Guide to Battlefields, Monuments & Museums (European Theatre)

Chuck Thompson
Greenline Historic Travel Series; San Francisco; 2004; ISBN 0-9729150-7-9; 256pp; US$19.95

‘This is not a book for war buffs. It’s a book for travellers,’ proclaims author Chuck Thompson, as he clearly sets parameters for the intended readership of his travel guide on World War II battlefields and monuments (p.xiv). Whilst battle statistics and weaponry facts and figures act as a framework for this book, the author is undoubtedly more interested in the beaches, battlefields, cities, artefacts, museums and monuments which the war left behind. What transpires is a travel guidebook which attempts to provide a comprehensive list of World War II sites, and which ‘presents details in a way that might lead the casual traveller to places both historically significant and intrinsically fascinating’ (p.xiv).

Providing general travelling instructions and overall directions, in addition to a brief war chronology in the introduction, the book is essentially divided into twenty-five main sections, each offering a wealth of information and commentary on key World War II sites. Ranging from Norway in the north to Rome in the South; and from Volgograd (Stalingrad) in the East to Washington DC in the West (despite the subtitle of the text being ‘European Theatre’), the book offers a broad geographical coverage of more than 500 war sites or as the author has termed them - ‘Points of Interest’. These are then subsequently graded for touristic consumption, and include strategically important battlefields, monuments and other war-related visitor attractions, each grouped under geographical locations. The book adopts a user-friendly format; with all sections including a brief historical narrative entitled ‘The War Years’. Here the author outlines the relevantly of the location to the war, for example Berlin (p.79) or Pas de Calais (p.69) and highlights key historical facts and figures. With a plethora of judiciously selected maps, all of which add to the clarity of writing that is evident throughout the book, the author also provides suggested further readings, which will no doubt be useful for the traveller-cum-historian who wishes to learn more about a particular site/location. Furthermore, in each section the reader is
provided with a brief commentary about the particular location in the present-day, in addition to specific transport guidance and accommodation recommendations.

This is a well researched, if not biased, analysis of war sites which the author suggest act as ‘an entry point into American as well as European and world history’ (p.xi). The author goes on to state that ‘most of the globe was consumed and then refashioned by World War II…. [thus] this book seeks to guide travellers in Europe to those places of its greatest importance and interest’ (p.ix). However, it is the actual grading and ranking of the ‘Points of Interest’ that is at most contention with this text. With each ‘Point of Interest’ site/attraction rated from five stars, which are referred to as ‘major sites, must visit’ to two stars, which are described as ‘interesting, not vital’ or one star, which are sites to be visited ‘only if you have time or a special interest’, one must raise the question of validity of such ratings and the criteria used. The author readily admits that in a book called the ‘25 Best World War II Sites’ (which is a rather garish title for such a subject), final rankings are subjective. Hence, the book suggests sites were judged on the basis of three equally weighted qualities. Firstly, the apparent historic significance of the site (with the level of significance seemingly arbitrated by the author); secondly, the amount and quality of relics or points of interest remaining at a given site; and finally, excluding any association with the war, each site was considered ‘purely on its merits as a travel destination, its services, natural beauty and general desirability’ (p.xii). Consequently, more astute travellers (and critical readers) will no doubt cast some scepticism on the rather suspect guidelines employed to rate particular war sites, attractions and monuments.

Quite wisely, the author excludes Holocaust sites from any ratings, probably upon the premise that the Holocaust still haunts contemporary imagination as a period which witnessed a systematic genocide of millions of people. Interestingly though, and perhaps controversially, the author does provide a three-star rating (out of a maximum of five) for the House of the Wannsee Conference (p.87), the venue in southwest Berlin where the plan for ‘The Final Solution to the Jewish Question’, the so-called Wannsee Protocol was first laid out and which ultimately resulted in the Holocaust. ‘The juxtaposition of cold-blooded inhumanity amid such a gorgeous setting adds a surreal edge to visits’ suggests the author, as he also notes that the number 114 bus
from Wannsee railway station to the ‘Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz’ is a ten-minute journey (p.87-88).

Less controversial, but equally interesting in terms of how the author ‘ranks’ particular sites and attractions is the description of the purpose-built ‘Winston Churchill’s Britain at War Experience’ (p.34), located in Tooley Street in London (just down the road from the London Dungeons Visitor Attraction). Here the author suggests that ‘this less-than-authentic re-creation of London civilian life during wartime has some interesting objects… but exhibits are marred by such ghoulish and amateur additions as random, plastic mannequin limbs are meant to represent Blitz carnage’ (p.34). The author goes on to suggest that the attraction is a pricey tourist trap, and only worth it as a school field-trip destination. Accordingly, the author affords this attraction only a one star! However, on the opposite page, the RAF Uxbridge Battle of Britain Operations Room, which can be accessed by appointment only and by giving at least days notice to the curator, is given a top five star rating for its relics, photographs and mementos, and is prized as ‘one of the great sites from the war’ (p.35). Clearly, perceived authenticity plays an important role in the construct of quality for this author, and as such, perhaps drives his guiding criteria for ranking these sites.

Despite the inherent difficulties in ranking such sites, and the problematic way in which rankings are presented, the author does accept some reservations about any treatment of the war that might be interpreted as less than respectful to the memory of the millions who suffered. Subsequently, the author quite rightly points out that ‘a battlefield where thousands died isn’t necessarily a good place, but it’s often an important one’ (p.xii). Thus, according to the author, the ‘five-star rating system was devised simply as a tool to help travellers prioritize schedules’ (pxii). However, the result is grading mechanisms that may well help time-pressed visitors ascertain which sites to visit, but consequently, also implicitly ranks one site against another in terms of importance and status.

Finally, one must place the notion of battlefield tourism, the subject of this pragmatic text, within the wider context of the act of travel to sites of death, disaster and the seemingly macabre; namely, dark tourism. Whilst the author does not place his
findings within the broader conceptual framework of dark tourism, nor is he expected to considering the target market of this book, it is interesting to seek out the rationale of why such a book was written (and subsequently marketed). A potential answer lies within the authors’ introductory remarks, where he outlines the time when he was standing in the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, the venue in which Adolph Hitler gave some of his most vitriolic speeches. Whilst within the infamous Rally Grounds, the author was approached by a fellow tourist, a lady from Tasmania, who wanted him to take a photograph of her against such a historical backdrop. ‘I feel vaguely criminal’ she reportedly said, ‘but this is a historic spot and I’d like to record the moment, so if you’d temporarily suspend moral judgement, snap a photo and then forget that I ever made such an unseemly request, I’d be forever grateful’ (p.xi).

Consequently, the author apparently explained to the tourist from Tasmania that he was researching and cataloging sites for inclusion in a book that might help people to further understand and appreciate sites of historical interest. However, the question remains for travellers who, on the recommendation and guidance of this book, consume experiences that bring organised political violence back to life, whether they too must temporality suspend moral judgement as they gaze upon the darker side of tourism.

Philip R. Stone
Senior Lecturer / Editor: The Dark Tourism Forum
University Of Central Lancashire
UK