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*Silhouette of the camel caravan at sunrise in Merzouga, Morocco.
Photo by Grace Shawah*

Drawing The Line As A Tourist: Are Our Actions Promoting Animal Mistreatment? – OpEd

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By Sushant Sareen The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designated terrori

For our three day weekend, the University of Virginia interns at the High Atlas Foundation and myself decided that—being in northern Africa—we must take advantage of its close proximity and adventure to the Sahara desert. To satisfy this goal, we booked our excursion and set off in our tourist van early Friday morning. By Saturday evening, we had made it to the dunes of Merzouga and were eager to explore.

However, the realization quickly dawned that the idea of touring around the dunes on camelback is a bit more romanticized than the actual experience. We were met by our caravan of nine camels who were not enthused by our presence, and were quite vocal about it. The first camel stood up after some pained grunts and a bit of fighting with our tour guide — his discontent very evident. The rest seemed to be in similar discomfort, although not as expressive about it.

It is safe to say that animal mistreatment—in any form—is unacceptable, and this first encounter with the camels made it clear that these creatures did not enjoy what they were doing. As published in the [Athens Journal of Tourism](#), “many tourists are unaware of how their daily decisions impact both animals and local residents in tourist destinations.” But a few facts have to be considered before whether or not the overworking of the animals would qualify as cruelty: 1) Were all animals treated in the same manner? 2) Was just one camel in particular having a bad day? 3) Would I be taking away someone’s livelihood if I didn’t buy into this part of the tourist industry? The latter is the crux of my moral dilemma.

While it felt like I was compromising a fair amount of my beliefs by voluntarily participating and financially contributing to what appeared to be animal mistreatment, what was the alternative if we —as tourists visiting a country who depends heavily on foreigners buying into a “desert adventure”—boycotted the industry altogether? Data from the OECD iLibrary shows that the fallout on a decision like this would impact over half a million Moroccan people employed in this industry, subsequently [affecting over 7% of the country’s GDP](#). So as a human who is

st Masood Azhar and his organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are once again emerging



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strongly against animal abuse of any kind and volunteering for a company that advocates for sustainable practices, but is now living in a different country for two months, what should protocol be when it comes to a decision like this?

First, I had to think back to the precedents I set for myself at home. When I visit Central Park in New York City, for example, I vowed to never engage in riding in a horse-and-carriage, knowing that those animals are severely overworked and underfed, as shown in a [New York Times article](#) published last year of recent occurrences of horses collapsing while working. With that being said, I practice this knowing that my lack of participation will help shoulder some of the weight that will most likely be replaced by visitors who aren't in agreement. Same idea applies to circuses who elicit abusive practices towards animals, such as the Barnum and Bailey Corporation ([which has subsequently shut down](#)) that used elephants and tigers as the main attraction in their shows. I never attended a show, but opted for non-animal performances such as Cirque du Soleil instead. So while those employed in the circus industry were able to find suitable alternatives upon Barnum and Bailey's termination, the repercussions would be far more severe with halting of camel use in a desert-oriented tourist industry in Morocco.

So where do I draw the personal line for myself? If my priorities are clear back at home, why do they become muddled here? Maybe I let my lack of awareness and desire to have the "full experience" blind my morals for a second, or maybe I was able to justify my actions knowing that those in these low-populated areas depended on me making this decision to keep them afloat. And it seems I'm not the only one experiencing this dilemma, as [National Geographic writes on wildlife tourism](#) succeeding "partly because tourists—in unfamiliar settings and eager to have a positive experience—typically don't consider the possibility that they're helping to hurt animals."

The moral conflict still weighs heavy even after our return from the desert almost a week ago. It doesn't sit well with me that I sat atop and photographed these animals when it felt as though they



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were in pain and not properly cared for. Do I get a ‘pass’ because I am a partial tourist, or am I just as responsible in endorsing this behavior? Clearly these are questions that I don’t have a direct answer to, but I find that juggling the potential justifications has made me feel better than just ignoring the fact altogether.

I speak for myself when I say that although I was grateful for the once-in-a-lifetime experience, I hope to never feel that guilty again, and will strive to uphold my beliefs towards animal cruelty by withholding participation of any kind in industries such as these. I hope that my actions—albeit small in isolation—will have a ripple effect in ending the suffering of animals used for these practices, and force those with livelihoods dependent on this industry to transition to another occupation that will still meet their financial needs.

Grace Shawah

Grace Shawah is a student intern at the High Atlas Foundation in Marrakech, Morocco.

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