

The logo for Geographic Expeditions features a blue curved line above the text. The word "Geographic" is in a gold-colored serif font, and "EXPEDITIONS" is in a gold-colored sans-serif font.

Geographic  
EXPEDITIONS

**Should We\You Travel to Countries  
with Despotic Governments?**

Or, to intensify the question: Should we *encourage* you to travel to such countries? We think so, but we've given the question much thought, and have respect for those who disagree. Since this question most often arises in reference to Tibet, Myanmar, and Cuba, we'll concentrate on those countries (though a number of others come to mind--Indonesia, China's Xinjiang Province, and North Korea, for example. Here's the gist of our thinking.

First, we want you to know that we don't advocate going to these places because we're cultural relativists. That argument holds that no nation is morally or intellectually competent to urge another nation to change its ways. This is especially true, the argument continues, for the so-called "advanced" nations, whose legacy of imperialism and ethnocentricity invalidates their moral posturing. After all, China and Cuba's recent history is one of enforced respect and kow-towing to authority, the crushing of opposition/terrorism and Burma, or Myanmar, well, they have different cultural norms, don't you know. Who are we to tell them what to do?

We think this is well-intentioned but woozy thinking. There is a higher law than mere, hands-off "respect" for other cultures. Despotism is a crime, no matter what its cultural trappings. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the Universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

The better argument for boycotts against repressive regimes holds that by traveling to oppressed countries one somehow encourages the oppressors. Or that one becomes a kind of collaborator in the oppression.

On a strict dollars and cents basis, there is some truth in this. We'll stipulate that it's a problem (though we're happy to say that we try to work with locally-owned companies whenever possible. In Cuba, Myanmar and Tibet, for instance, we deal solely with either locally-owned companies or off shore companies which direct the vast majority of funds to locally-owned enterprises (e.g., the central component of our trips in Cuba utilizes home-stays).

No, the reason we believe in taking clients to Cuba, Tibet and Myanmar (or China itself, for that matter) is that we're convinced, *by the Tibetans, Cubans and Burmese themselves*, that they want us to. We ask, "Would it be better if the Chinese were the only foreigners in Tibet?" That's the way it was for nearly 30 years, and what good did it do the Tibetans, or the cause of Tibetan independence? Answer: nothing. *Minus* nothing, in fact. The same is roughly true for Cuba, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Iran. Despotic regimes work best in secrecy, in isolation from the world. The Dalai Lama, knowing this too well, encourages responsible tourism to Tibet. John Healey of Amnesty International agrees. "We're aware that human contact is one of the most powerful weapons against abuse. Renegade governments often clean up their act when they know the outside world is watching. Victims of oppression crave contact."

In short, we think, with all due respect and sympathy, that our bottom line goes deeper than money and moral outrage. We're not in the business of sheltering our travelers from reality, good or bad. So, GeoEx travelers do not go to these wonderful places, do not come into contact with the resilient, bright, eager Tibetan, Cuban and Burmese people, and return thinking that they've visited paradise. They know that they've had the paradoxical, and very modern and all too common, experience of traveling to magnificent destinations, seeing magnificent sights, meeting magnificent people, *who are in trouble*. And they almost invariably come home eager to help, not forget, those people. We think that follows the long arc of justice.

