

REPORT URBAN MINORITIES III
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THE DEAD SEA AS A TOURISTIC ATTRACTION

„Without a doubt the world's most amazing place, the Jordan Rift Valley is a dramatic, beautiful landscape, which at the Dead Sea, is over 400m below sea level.“ (Jordanian Tourism Board: <http://international.visitjordan.com/Wheretogo/thedeadsea.aspx>)

This salt lake is regarded to be the lowest point on earth's surface, and also its saltiest water body. The concentration of minerals increases continuously and reaches nowadays more than 30%. The name Dead Sea refers to its adverse biological conditions. Though no apparent life can be seen in the waters, eleven species of bacteria succeeded to survive. The water level of the lake continuously descends - almost one meter per year - as the Jordan river and other small influxes are running dry. Israel, Palestine and Jordan need them as important sources of fresh water. Thus the concentration of salt is rising and you can see the precipitate of salt crystals.

From the high concentration of minerals follows an increased ability of swimming also for human bodies. One is floating on the water surface like a piece of wood. A comfortable position of couching is possible which even allows reading a newspaper (or nowadays use a smartphone or tablet). For many people pictures of this activity are very important souvenirs from a journey to one of the surrounding countries.

A visit to the Dead Sea was also a (voluntary and self-arranged) part of our schedule for the workshop *urban minorities* in march 2014 in Jordan. After a one hour bus ride and an entrance fee of about 10 euro (only for Non-Arabs of course) arriving to the bathing beach made us behold two things: On the one hand the wonderful meager landscape of the desert and the blue-silvery shiny salt lake which due to its sleek surface remembered a huge slab of ice put in this desert landscape. On the other hand the beach which was decorated with all kinds of beach furniture, other amusement possibilities and a lot of plastic garbage. More than that, this day, the fresh water supply seemed to be broken which complicated the changing in the bathrooms (no changing rooms), mainly because of

the smell! The exalted feeling of weightlessly floating on the water is modified very rapidly as soon as the somehow oily skin starts to itch heavily. Now one is sitting at one of the most hostile places on earth, the skin itches, the swimwear does not really dry and the notion of changing is also not very tempting (the smell!). Only the fresh water helped which dripped out of the showers after some time. After a shower, the stay at the beach was far more comfortable and we were rewarded with a breathtaking sunset. In the end, our trip to the Dead Sea was far more than a trip to some deep pit in the middle of the desert. It was an experience of nature and culture and for all of us a memorable short trip - also thanks to the pictures (sadly without newspaper).

While sitting and drying i was wondering: we are situated in one of the most barren spots on earth. Desert, a salt lake, heat, no life, no shelter. What happened, that this place became location of touristic cult, a place of pilgrimage for people suffering from skin diseases, a place regarded to be the *biggest natural spa* in the world? A coup of the israeli and jordanian tourism boards together with hand lotion and bath salt producing industries using perfectly manufactured images of reading newspaper on the water or bikini beauties rubbed in Dead Sea mud? Or is it confusion of tourists not knowing what else to do in the desert than bobbing up and down in the heat? I found answer only later: the Dead Sea is certainly advertised and fostered as a touristic attraction (which probably applies to almost all impressing natural spectacles in the world). There are so many spots in the world without a classical aesthetic quality, which attract both touristic fascination and touristic marketing, what leads to the question: What was first? The attraction or the marketing? I realized that the Dead Sea promotes a very special attraction to everyone being there and probably to a lot of people seeing the picture. In my opinion, it should be protected as natural heritage, should be open to everyone and also everyone visiting there should take care for the cleanliness of the beaches and the water. So the Dead Sea can be preserved as one of the most fascinating meager and hostile places in the world.

