

# Battlefield tourism in the South African context

Dewald Venter

Department of Hospitality, Tourism and PR Management

Vaal University of Technology

Private Bag X021

Vanderbijlpark, 1911

Email: [dewald@vut.ac.za](mailto:dewald@vut.ac.za)

## Abstract

According to Moeller (2005:2) Battlefield tourism in South Africa has increasingly grown in the past decade, especially in Kwazulu-Natal and the Northern Cape. Rising tourist numbers at battlefield sites in Kwazulu Natal such as Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift, Blood River, Spionkop and many battlefields near Kimberley on the well marked N12 route has encouraged government to invest in these sites. Armed conflict plays an important role in any countries history and identity as it is those events that shape a countries future and mould its psyche.

Battlefields have long held a fascination for those who survived them and inspired the imagination of latter generations. Such sites are often a place of remembrance for those who fell where historically many countries future course had been decided. For many visiting such sites, curiosity plays a big role. Driving forces behind battlefield tourism is the need to understand better, to experience the sensation of the place and to stand in the shoes of those who were there.

In a utopian world battlefields would be preserved for the sake of their historic significance to a particular ethnic group or nation. Unfortunately the economic realities of limited government budgets frequently results in sites being neglected, damaged or literally erode with the passage of time. Battlefield tourism offers a commercial solution to preserving these historic sites being lost through the passage of time. It allows for the profitable use of the surrounding lands and economic empowerment of the local people as can be seen at the sites mentioned above. The particular focus of this article is the role that battlefield tourism can play in South African as a tool for understanding the past and its future development.

**Keywords:** Battlefield sites; economy; development; history; tourism; marketing; market segmentation

## INTRODUCTION

There is a wide range of cultural attractions that tourists can visit including museums, heritage sites, parks and botanical gardens (Graham and Lennon, 2002). One could argue that battlefield sites although not as well known, play an important part in South Africa's history. Furthermore the potential for domestic and international tourism generation should also be considered.

The term battlefield tourism is not clearly defined in literature. Academic searches however link the term to Dark Tourism, Blood Tourism and Red tourism. In an attempt to clarify the term battlefield tourism I would like to propose the following definition for the traditional battlefield site; "the travel to a site by a person or persons were a battle took place between opposing sides, which in some way holds a significant meaning to the tourist".

Ryan (2007) highlights the four possible patterns of interpretation by tourists or reason for visiting battlefield sites (Figure 1.1). It should be noted that a single battlefield site can be viewed or interpreted differently depending on the view of the tourist or the purpose of the site. In other words it can be experienced in more than one way and is thus multi-dimensional.

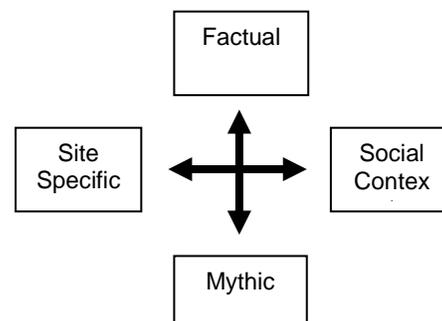


Figure 1.1: Patterns of interpretation (Ryan, 2007)

### Factual specific

Tourists view battlefield sites in a factual or objective way. This is most often practiced by scholars or historians who rely on historic and detailed facts such as military movements, unit strength and make-up, as well as strategies.

### Mythic sites specific

These are most often associated with the defence of freedom or where a participating force engaged in a fight for freedom or just cause. Acts of heroism or patriotism can often blur the factual interpretation of the events and later views can become mythical and skewed from reality. A good example is "The Alamo" which can be found in the United States.

### The Factual/Social Contextualisation

In this perceptual model the tourists attempt to not only explain what happened but also attempt to offer an academic interpretation in which they want to accommodate all views. The popularity of such battlefield sites change from time to time depending on their interpretation and usage.

### The Mythic-Social Contextualisation

In some instances battlefield sites may be used to maintain a mythic perception to sustain a socially justified status quo or cause. In other words the site has important meaning to a nation believes and values and as such is preserved with the perceived myths.

Understanding the history of a battlefield site could go a long way in understanding its importance or the reason it is visited. South Africa is a diverse country with a conflict rich colonial past. In order to contextualise battlefield sites and their role in shaping South Africa's history a quick overview of some of the most popular battlefield sites will be discussed. They were chosen based on their importance in shaping the country's future and their mythical status among South African citizens as well as international visitors.

### BACKGROUND TO SOME MAJOR BATTLEFIELD SITES

#### The Battle of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift (*Anglo Zulu War – 1879*)

The **Battle of Isandlwana** took place on 22 January 1879 and marked the first major confrontation between the British Empire and the Zulu Kingdom during the Anglo-Zulu war. Eleven days after the British invaded Zululand a Zulu Impi of some 20 000 warriors attacked a portion of the British main column left behind and camped underneath a mountain known to the Zulus as Isandlwana. The British force consisted of some 1 700 men which also included colonial and native troops. Against usual military standing practice in colonial conflict the British camp did not set up any defensive fortifications.

The Zulus were equipped mainly with the traditional Assegai (iron spears) and cow-hide shields, but also had a number of muskets and old rifles bought from local traders. The British were armed with the new Martini

Henry breech loading rifle, two 7 pounder artillery pieces as well as a rocket battery under the command of Colonel Durnford. Despite their vast disadvantage in firearms, the overwhelming Zulu force crushed the poorly led and badly deployed British force. The British lost over 1 200 troops while the Zulu Impi losses were around 1 000 killed.

The battle of Isandlwana was the greatest defeat Britain had ever suffered against a native force. It however also marked the turning point in the war as the British took a much more aggressive approach leading to a heavily reinforced second invasion and the destruction of King Cetshwayo's hopes of a negotiated peace. The battle sealed the fate of the Zulu Kingdom in South Africa (Rayner, 2006).

The **Battle of Rorke's Drift** occurred immediately following the British Army's defeat at the Battle of Isandlwana and lasted into the following day. Survivors of Isandlwana fled to the nearby garrison of Rorke's Drift. The hastily fortified position manned by just over 150 British and colonial troops successfully defended the garrison against wave after wave of Zulu Impi numbering between 3000 and 4000. The massive assault nearly broke the back of the defenders but was ultimately repelled. Following the greatest defeat in British military history by a native force at Isandlwana the highest number of decorations for bravery and valour were awarded in a single engagement at Rorke's Drift. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to the defenders, along with a number of other decorations and honours (Rayner, 2006 & McNab, 2005).

#### The Battle of Blood River (*Boer Republic\Zulu Faction vs. Zulu Kingdom- 1838*)

On 26 November 1838, Andries Potgieter a *trekker* leader was appointed as general and assigned a wagon commando to attack Dingane. The Zulu prince Mpande (Dingane's half brother and successor to the throne) and his followers fled Dingane's kraal as Dingane wanted to assassinate him. Potgieter and Mpande entered into an agreement to oust Dingane through military means. Potgieter's strategy required that Dingane's forces be lured out of their defensive emplacement of UmGungundlovu. After receiving intelligence from a friendly Zulu chieftain on 6 December 1838 Potgieter proposed a "vow to God" that should they win the coming battle they would celebrate the victory on that day for generations to come.

After crossing the Buffalo River (50 km from UmGungundlovu) Potgieter set up a defensive position (*veglaer*). Its location next to a hippo pool on the Ncome River ensured the wagon *laager* (a protective enclosure of wagons) rear position was protected. The front of the wagon *laager* offered no cover for an advancing force and a deep dry river bed protected another flank. Pre-constructed wooden barriers were set up between the wagons completing the defensive position.

On 16 December 1838 the Zulus attacked with 10 000-15 000 men. Wave after wave of attackers broke against the *laager*. A Zulu eye-witness later recollected that the charges were mowed down by the Boers. Potgieter ordered his horsemen to pursue the fleeing Zulus which further added to the death toll. Some estimated that up to 3 000 Zulus were

killed while only three Boers were wounded. Afterwards Mpande and Potgieter battled Dingane at Maqongqo and defeated him. Dingane fled and Mpande was crowned as the Zulu king. Later King Mpande became the founder of the contemporary Zulu dynasty which lasts to this day.

The Blood River clash was commemorated as a holiday on 16 December every year until 1994. It is now known as the Day of Reconciliation. The Battlefield site has also come to include the Ncome museum nearby commemorating the fallen Zulu warriors.

#### **The Battle of Spioenkop or Spionkop (The Second Boer War – 1899-1902)**

The second Boer war was only a month old when the Boers laid siege to the Natal town of Ladysmith which was a British colony. The relief of Ladysmith became a prime concern for the British but first the hills on the approach to Ladysmith needed to be secured of which *Spionkop* (spy hill) was the highest feature.

A force of 15 000 men under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Charles Warren set forth to relieve Ladysmith. On the night of 23 January a moderate force of 1700 British soldiers ascended the south western slope of Spion Kop. Reaching the top in dense fog they overpower the small force of 70 Boers, suffering only light casualties. There after the soldiers dug a shallow trench only to find after the sun came up there were three higher crests surrounding Spion Kop, all of which were manned by Boers. What followed was a slaughter the shocked the British High Command. A total of 650 British soldiers lay dead and a further 554 were wounded and 170 were taken prisoner. The remaining British forces withdrew from Spionkop which the Boers reclaimed (Rayner, 2006)

#### **IMPORTANCE OF BATTLEFIELD SITES**

Traditionally, battlefield sites are places that serve as a reminder of the past by preserving for later generations the history of what took place. Furthermore it plays a primary role in the advance and propagation of knowledge about the history of a country. Battlefield sites often offer historical documentation, interpret material evidence, guided tours and exhibits for the tourists benefit. Battlefield sites serve as vital sources of "living history" and provide tourists with insight into the violent past of a country. Tourism serves as a platform to a better understand and learn about the dynamics of globalization and expansion, thus empower tourists with knowledge in this regard. Battlefield sites are especially important as they provide lessons which resound with people from all walks of life. Battlefields shaped the history of a country and the way citizens view themselves as part of a country. Battlefield sites in South Africa offer a unique view of the events that shaped its future and that of its people. It offers tourists the opportunity to understand their past and forge their identity.

The battles that took place are part and parcel of the global dialogue, promoted by the United Nations Organization, about justice and freedom for all. Battlefield sites can improve understanding and roles various groups played in

South Africa. It is argued by Rayner (2006) that to understand a battle, one has to understand the battlefield.

Too often people accept the ramblings of uninformed politicians or those who wish to obscure the truth of the past for their own gain. People should be encouraged to learn their own history and the core lessons of war and conflict. Gunn (1988) argues that attractions such as military museums exercise a magnetic "*pulling power*" over tourists since even classical times. This could also be said about battlefield sites which offer tourists a firsthand experience as they can stand where those fell so long ago. The perceived experience of tourists to a battlefield site can be predefined. However the fascination of tourists aren't enough and factors which affect the quality of the experience such the aesthetics of tourist support services buildings, their design, its development, and the manner in which they operate should be developed. By learning about wars that have shaped South Africa's future tourists will be better able to provide for themselves a clear ethical and moral compass. Battlefield sites thus provide a rich learning environment for domestic as well as international tourists in a formal and informal way. It can be argued that battlefield sites raise the intellectual capacity of those who visit them to an extent.

Those who visit Battlefield sites, do so to gain a fresher perspective of history and come to understand the connections between histories. Battlefield sites offer tourists a firsthand experience. Battlefield tourism is also a growth industry which encourages the development of facilities and better on-site interpretation facilities. Guided tours more often than not take tourists on the same route as those that fought and died. Such an experience offers an unparalleled potential for learning and understanding. Battlefield sites play an important role in the shaping of modernity.

The Battlefield Route in Kwazulu Natal is South Africa's most important and historically significant route. The Route contains all of the above Battlefield sites and many more. The purpose of the Battlefield Route is to promote tourism and interest both locally and internationally. The support of local residents for these sites plays a critical role in their long term sustainability and also serves to boost the cultural heritage of the area.

#### **Challenges facing Battlefield sites**

There are numerous challenges facing battlefield sites today both directly and indirectly. Competition for tourists and tourists pockets by other forms of tourism is relevant. Tourists are now more knowledgeable through the use of the internet and much more value conscious. Resent economic pressure has forced tourists to count their pennies and take shorter holidays closer to home.

Rayner (2006) argues the a battlefield site's will only be preserved if it encourages development which is dependent on an increase in tourist numbers. This can be seen at the Somme (a battlefield site in France) if one compared its level of development and number of facilities from 1980 till present 2005.

Battlefield sites are not enclosed and as such vulnerable to the elements. Over time these sites will erode and change if

not properly managed and maintained. Tourists roaming freely over the battlefield can contribute to the erosion of the soil if not controlled and thus destroy that which they want to see. It should be realised that battlefield sites can only be preserved if they are economically viable investments for government or business. By increasing a sites commercial level, local/national government or even business might be encouraged to invest in its future.

The late Winston Churchill (Prime minister of Britain during World War II) was quoted as defining battlefield sites as punctuality marks in humankind's history and should be viewed as such.

### **An Effective Marketing Plan for the Battlefield sites**

The marketing of battlefield sites is unique as the roles of battlefields are to educate their tourists and become self-sustaining as government funding is sparse. This can be done by increasing their revenue through increased numbers of tourists. It is thus important that careful planning be done to ensure that tourist demands and expectations are met without sacrificing its original purpose. A market segmentation analysis would be the first step taken as it identifies those groups to whom marketing should be done. Further more such analysis will assist in identifying the needs and wants of the market and what marketing strategy should be followed. An effective marketing plan is imperative as its success will increase the number of tourists and improves revenue. Short, medium and long term planning is thus critical to a battlefield marketing strategy. If marketing is done incorrectly or to the wrong target market is chosen time and money will be wasted. A diverse market should be targeted based on the educational, historical and cultural nature of battlefields.

It is crucial that a battlefield site provide proper services that enhance the tourist's experience. Site visits by the author have revealed that some of the battlefield sites lack proper signage as well as support documents such as brochures and site maps.

### **Marketing**

Proper marketing will result in a long-term relationship with tourists and tourists. In order to accelerate growth in battlefield tourism, it is important to understand the wants and needs of the market by means of market segmentation, which plays a vital role in the tourism industry. Market segmentation can be done by means of various methods, such as correspondence analysis, cluster analysis, regression tree and discriminant analysis. Once done, a marketing campaign can take place which will result in a competitive advantage. Lubbe (2003) points out that the success of marketing is dependent not only on the push (demand side) or pull (supply side) factors. She explains that the success of a tourism destination's competitive advantage is influenced by a number of factors, namely:

- Availability and accessibility of key attractions;
- cultural links between the source and destination market;
- distance and accessibility of the destination;
- development level of destinations infrastructure;
- the level of quality and value for money offerings;

- stable and secure tourist environment;
- positive branding of destination; and
- tourism-conducive policies and enabling factors.

The above factors influence the marketing strategy undertaken in a specific target market segment and should be taken into account when undertaking marketing planning.

The tourism industry in South Africa has grown at a tremendous rate. The demand and supply of tourism offerings has increased, together with the competitiveness of the market. Battlefield sites should therefore do proper marketing planning. Another important factor influencing a sites success is the tourist experience when there. Are there sufficient staffs available to provide services such as guided tours or to answer tourist questions?

Technology also plays a crucial role in reaching the market. Online site tours or panoramic 360 degree tours can entice people to visit in person. A well constructed, presented and informative website will go a long way in drawing attention. Connections with social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook could further encourage young people to explore and thus increase the number of 'hits' a website receives.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout history, Battlefield sites have served as places of awe and inspiration, mourning and celebration, leisure and tourist destinations. Battlefield sites play an important role in a countries collective history and identity. In the modern digital age the challenge has arisen were tourists can choose between visiting battlefield sites in person or online from the comfort of their homes. The major challenge facing battlefield sites are economic in nature as they need to become self sustainable. The reality is that battlefields compete with other forms of tourism in both the domestic and international market as a destination for physical relaxation. A further consideration is that battlefield sites are very dependent on travel agencies who construct tour packages as well as tour guides who take tourists to the sites on guided tours. As such it could be suggested that battlefields market themselves with other forms of tourism as a package and not a standalone experience.

### **References**

- Gunn, C. (1988). **Vacationscape: Designing Tourist Regions**, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.
- Graham, M., & Lennon, L.J. (2002). The dilemma of operating a strategic approach to human resource management in the Scottish visitor attraction sector, **International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management**, 14(5), 213-220.
- Lubbe, B.B. (2003). **Tourism Management in Southern Africa**. Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa.
- Moeller, M. (2005), **Battlefield Tourism in South Africa with Special Reference to Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift KwaZulu-Natal**, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

McNab, C. (2005). **The World's Worst Military Disasters: Chronicling the Greatest Battlefield Catastrophes of All Time**, Grange books, Rochester.

Rayner, M. (2006). **Battlefields: Exploring the Arenas of War, 1805-1945**, Struik Publishers, Cape Town.

Ryan, C. (2007). **Battlefield Tourism: History, Place and Interpretation**, Elsevier, Amsterdam.

**Additional Sources consulted**

Lloyd, D.W. (1998). **Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939**, Berg, New York.

**Electronic Media Consulted**

Discovery Channel. (2009). **War and Civilization: War Machine**. 16\03\2011.

Cromwell Productions. (2002). **The War File: The Boer War**. Pegasus, Eagle Rock Entertainment. 16\03\2011.

Cromwell Productions. (1996). **The War File: The History of Warfare: The Zulu Wars, 1879**, Pegasus, Eagle Rock Entertainment. 16\03\2011.