

INDIGENOUS TOURISM: THE
HEARTBEAT OF EXPERIENCE
AUTHENTICITY

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CONNECTING THE DOTS

With one single dot of paint gently placed on a canvas, one dot beside another, and another, and another, the tradition of a people centuries old is passed on. Bright red, yellow, orange, black and white dots, all the same size, all in line, all coming together, one after the other, as they have one generation after the other. From respected elders to watchful youngsters, the teachings of ancestors are passed on. Dot, after dot, after dot, forming patterns and images that take on an ages old language.

The end result is so much greater than a work of art of the Aboriginals. It is a work of preservation of the people now recognized as the heartbeat of a destination, a place down under which ranks amongst the world's most visited places for traveler adventure, exploration, relaxation and anticipation across the globe.

They represent one of the world's largest communities – the indigenous people.

Worldwide, indigenous peoples are 370 million strong – almost 5% of the world's population. Living in over 70 countries across the globe, they cover over 20% of the surface of the Earth. They reach across over 5000 different groups of peoples, and speak approximately 4000 different languages. This global community, which embraces peoples from the Aboriginals to the Zulu, the Masai, the Mayan, the Karen, the Mohican, and the Maori, the Bedouin, the Bushmen, and thousands of other communities – are the heartbeat of a nation.

Reason being, they are the truest guardians of the history, folklore, traditions, arts, culture, natural environments, ideology, spirituality and sensibilities.

And for the global tourism community – a community of people committed to the growth and development of nations, they are invaluable. In so many ways, it is the indigenous community that has become the litmus test of the industry's ability to '*keep it real*', keeping the future in balance with the past, independence with integration, progress in balance with tradition, and experiences in a place in balance with the honour of the place.

It is the indigenous people who are ensuring that one of the tenets of successful destination development is honoured – authenticity.

Because each and every day, travellers the world over dream of, invest in, and travel to places that enchant their imaginations and inspire their curiosity far beyond the picture-perfect arrival point. More and more, it is not just the place. No matter how beautifully constructed, the resorts feel empty without the sense of their presence. Regardless of the majesty of the view, the bush feels as though something is missing without the sound of their drums.

It is the indigenous people that are being increasingly recognised and appreciated as the source of meaning and feeling so valued by travelers wanting more than sunshine, suntans, star-ranked hotels, and simple souvenirs. Indigenous tourism – genuine interaction with local people, culture and traditions - is a growing demand of travelers seeking something beyond the brochure.

As demand is increasing, so too is supply. Global travel & tourism, a sector which prides itself on stimulating socio-economic wellbeing for people of nations in the places where they live, thus enabling sustainability of communities and cultures, is looking more closely

and seriously at not just the WHAT and WHERE of indigenous tourism, but the WHY and HOW.

INTEGRATION WITH INTEGRITY

The fundamental value of indigenous tourism as a vehicle for expanding participation and benefits of the sector, while strengthening destination offering, is clearly understood by leaders of the sector. As stated by Sujit Banerjee, Former Secretary of Tourism of India,

" Tourism contributes substantially to sustainable economic development and intercultural dialogue. Culture is integral and essential to tourism as the cultural heritage of a region/country spurs the development of a local or regional identity, attracts tourists and thereby helps in the development of sustainable, high-quality tourism. Tourism can weave together rich regional history, cultural diversities and common values."

With 1 billion travelers crossing international borders in 2012, the responsibility of destinations to ensure responsible experience development only increases.

This message was emphasized at the first Pacific Asia Indigenous Tourism Conference recently held in the Northern Territory of Australia, where tourism leaders from 19 nations came together to discuss this growing sector, and the need to ensure its healthy growth for both travellers and local, indigenous communities.

As stated by the Honourable Martin Ferguson, Minister of Tourism of Australia,:

" Some of our greatest tourism assets were formed more than 375 million years ago. The richness of these attractions, along with our vast desert lands, lush rainforests, white sand beaches, and rugged mountain ranges - lie not only in their striking appearance but also in the stories we tell about them. Stories that are often best told to visitors by a culture whose inhabitancy of this continent dates back at least 50 thousand years.

(Our visitors) are seeking experiences, which will not only entertain but also educate them and let them feel a part of the place they are visiting. They want Australian stories, images, experiences and memories to take home and share with family and friends – and for us that is both a huge opportunity and an enormous challenge."

Ultimately, it is the indigenous people who are a reflection of how the global travel and tourism industry is making it possible for people to be true to their roots, while creating a life that enables present and future stability, security, pride and participation.

TESTING THE VALUES OF TOURISM

The fact remains, however, as there are examples across the globe of where indigenous tourism has been a force for good, uplifting communities with pride and promise, there are as many examples of indigenous tourism where fear is growing around the sustainable, positive impact. Opening the doors of the communities and lives of indigenous people can cross lines that cross core values of respectful, responsible tourism development. Regardless of the potential economic benefits that indigenous tourism can bring to a village, no one wants to feel 'on show' as strangers step into their homes.

As a result, for tourism leaders across the globe, especially those who have a direct responsibility for indigenous peoples as part of their nation's population, the subject of indigenous tourism can provoke a highly protective instinct.

Indigenous tourism is not simply a niche sector within a tourism strategy. For destinations venturing into this area of tourism experience development, it is not just about tourism doing things right, it is about making sure that tourism is doing the right thing. Gut instinct becomes an important compass for guiding decision making.

Importantly, 'authenticity' of tourism experience creation is not only about the WHAT – the creation of traveler offerings that showcase traditional art, dance, music, cuisine, language, storytelling, homes and other features of the lives of indigenous people through the indigenous people. It is about the HOW, ensuring that all involved feel a sense of pride and purpose in what they are doing, sharing and impacting.

How is tourism helping to build indigenous communities as indigenous communities help to build tourism?

There must be a sense of worth.

W – Willingness: a genuine desire of indigenous people to participate in the tourism sector by sharing aspects of their lives and lifestyles that they hold dear as a part of their identity, motivated by a sense of pride and dignity, not purely earnings.

O – Ownership: active, overt ownership of experience creation and execution by indigenous communities, working hand in hand with the tourism sector, as partners.

R – Revenues: sustainable revenue creation for indigenous communities, enabling ongoing lifeworld upliftment and fulfillment.

T – Transfer: two-way sharing of knowledge between travellers and the indigenous people being visited, amplifying cross-cultural understanding and respect through each and every interaction, increasing the meaningfulness of the time shared for all involved.

H - Holistic: establishing tourism as a means of creating sustainable, meaningful social and economic stability for indigenous communities.

It is the responsibility of tourism leaders worldwide to ensure that, through their efforts to expand the positive impact of the sector at both global and grass roots levels, the industry's efforts are building:

- Understanding
- Dignity
- Economic activity



COMPASS – Insights into Tourism Branding

- Skills
- The next generation

It is our fundamental responsibility to build worth as we build tourism. That is the bottom line.

- ENDS -