

RECOVERY OF TOURISM CITIES – BUILDING BACK BRAVER

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Every city in the world fears it, yet braces for it.

In a single flash of bad fortune, a city and country can be brought to its knees. The event is often beyond fiction, the reasons beyond economics, politics, scientific facts, and even faith.

Why did it happen? Because Mother Nature said she could.

Natural disasters. They inflict trauma across the globe. They move in with literally lightening speed, leaving behind a trail of destruction. Homes and hopes fall in tandem, leaving little but loud cries for help. The global community suddenly becomes familiar with the sight of tears falling as rows of palm trees are ripped from the earth, street poles aggressively pulled from roadsides as easily as daisies gently tugged from soil, communities burning bright until all that is left is ash and anguish.

Magnifying the feeling of fiery personality in the storm's presence, names are given to these terrifying shocks when, in the form of Typhoons or Hurricanes, they soak the earth's surface: Sandy, Yolanda, Rita, and most recently, Goni, to name but a few.

To rebuild lives after such loss is one of the greatest challenges a community can face. This challenge is made exponentially more daunting when the place in the line of fire, literally or figuratively, is a tourism destination. Building back requires not only rebuilding of infrastructure, but rebuilding of image.

Sadly, for so many, returning to livelihoods is made even more difficult as visitors feel it too early and/or too insensitive to return. When is a destination ready? What time is the right time?

A critical question to be asked, by both the people of the destination and tourists, especially when at the heart of a community's healing and a destination's return to economic health is welcoming the world back into their homes.

BRINGING THE BIG EASY BACK TO LIFE

The marking of the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's viscous visit to the southern Gulf Coast region at the end of August put the spotlight back on a region dependent on tourism for economic stability and social cohesion. Since that dreaded day on 2005, the southern, sultry city of New Orleans became the iconic focal point of Katrina's impact and harsh legacy, not only as a result of its being massively hit by the storm and suffering chilling aftershocks with the breach of levees that caused 80% of the city to be flooded.

Focus was also on the city as it has always stood tall as one of the USA's most loved tourism destinations – a city famous for its being a soulful, musical and cultural decompression to New York City, 'the Big Apple'. So goes the 1970s legend behind the city's acquisition of the affectionate signature name of 'the Big Easy'.

Best known as the home of Mardi Gras in the USA, the city of New Orleans was first established in 1718, with the city's French lineage bringing to life the spirit of Mardi Gras celebrations in 1781. Year after year, the intoxicating cocktail of history, culture, cuisine, arts, architecture, booze, beads, big parades and even bigger festive energy turned New Orleans into the place to be, year-round, for a seriously good time with great people. Reaching a high of 10.1 million, and enjoying over US\$ 4.9 billion injection into the New Orleans economy through tourists spending, both leisure and business tourism formed the backbone of New Orleans' economy, not just image.

And then Katrina happened – the worst storm in the history of the USA. Suddenly, shockingly, images of parties on Bourbon Street were replaced with people desperate for rescue on flooded streets across the city. Survival became the symbol of the city, and the coast. Lives – an estimated 1833 souls lost, and livelihoods – millions left homeless as damages across the region topped US\$ 150 billion, were left behind. For those surviving, having to pick up the pieces of their lives was beyond what their spirits were thought to be able to handle.

And so New Orleans, and the coast went about rebuilding, better, bolder, braver.

It took time, it took unprecedented tenacity and prayer, but today, New Orleans has risen once more as a tourism city full of spirit, full of soul, full of hope. In the year proceeding Katrina, tourism numbers did not decline, they near-evaporated, with visitor numbers reducing by over 63%.

As reported by the AP:

“New Orleans had just 3.7 million visitors in 2006, the first full year after Katrina. Last year, there were 9.5 million visitors. The city has 600 more restaurants than 10 years ago. And hotel occupancy rates are higher than they were before the levees broke Aug. 29, 2005, flooding 80 percent of the city and killing hundreds. Ten years after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the city's tourism has not only rebounded. It's practically been reinvented.”

What was it that enabled this tourism city to bring its numbers back up to levels near where they left off a decade ago? Having dug deep into its resources of not just funding and feisty spirit, but invitation to visitors to return.

REACHING OUT TO LEAD THE RETURN

While still working to move forward, rebuilding a city still surrounded by reminders of that heart-stopping night a decade ago, New Orleans offers the global tourism community invaluable learnings around bringing the tourism industry, and tourists, back to a destination recovering from crisis.

At the forefront of the lessons that New Orleans have lived, and courageously taught: OWN IMAGE RECOVERY.

Activating signature spirit of the Big Easy, New Orleans picked up and moved forward with bold, borderline brash, determination. The people of the Big Easy knew absolutely that recovery of the city's vital tourism sector, a pillar of the economy, would not be easy, but knew it was possible. And they knew it was in their hands.

With post-Katrina awareness of the city at a high, and levels of goodwill and hope for recovery at comparable levels, the city's tourism authorities took the lead in embedding the recovery of the nation's beloved city of celebration. Investment into image matched investment into infrastructure, the spirit of the city as important to visitor return as the structures that they would visit. With verve and vigour, the calling of New Orleans grew louder and louder, the numbers of visitors stronger and stronger. Few moments represented a symbol of the new spirit of New Orleans like the remarkable, soul-restoring win of the 2009 Superbowl by the New Orleans Saints. Just four years later, the war cry of the city was loud and clear: *"We're back!"*

Working tireless to maintain growth momentum, building back even better than before, in 2014, the city saw over US\$ 6.8 billion return to the tourism economy earnings. Not to mention the peace of mind of the return of over 80,000 jobs.

As New Orleans, and other cities around the globe struck by crisis of one sort or another, continue to work to recover their tourism invitation and industry, the lessons of New Orleans' heroism, as a city, as a community, and as a tourism industry, leave the world with invaluable example of what is possible, even when faced with incomprehensible crisis. Even before infrastructure is fully ready to welcome visitors, invitation of *"We are ready to welcome you back"* is the first step to recovery, of image, and of industry.

Because whatever the situation, whatever the phase of a destination's life cycle, tourism is a sector that is fueled by people from other places wanting to be somewhere else – a place where they can learn, grow, and give. Following crisis, there could be no better compass for *'must visit'* destinations than those whose economies, and spirits, are built on tourism.

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