



Emerging Best Practices in Adventure Tourism and Volunteering



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Executive Summary

Introduction

The notion of tourists “doing good” or “giving back” as an integral part of their vacation experience is not a completely new concept. Tourists have often sought to donate some resource to destinations they visit. In specific cases, tourists have involved themselves in scientific or academic work projects, or visits to orphanages and schools while touring a new place. Tourists choosing to blend service-oriented activities with the traditional tourist diversions often come away from these experiences with what they feel has not only been a meaningful inquiry into a new place, but also an unexpected exploration of their inner selves, an opportunity to examine their lives or belief systems in a new light.

Consumer demand for this type of meaningful travel continues to grow: a 2005 Travel Industry Association survey found that one-quarter of travelers (47% of them between the ages of 35-47) said they were currently interested in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation, and according to a recent travelocity.com poll the number of people planning to spend time doing volunteer work during their vacations jumped from six percent in 2006 to eleven percent in 2007. The rapid multiplication of service oriented vacation companies and programs provides further evidence of the growing importance of this trend.

As more organizations both from the tourism industry and the realm of humanitarian and environmental aid seek to serve this demand, we find increasing numbers of organizations struggling to operate effectively at the intersection two very different disciplines. A core challenge for these organizations is how to meet the increasing demand for quality, purposeful experiences without creating tourism activities that are intrusive, exploitative and/or disruptive to local destinations. Xola Consulting and The George Washington University’s International Institute for Tourism Studies undertook this case study research in the spring of 2007 to identify operational best practices for such leading edge companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In this pilot study we identify and define emerging “best practices” by examining the work of six social entrepreneurs who have incorporated rural adventure tourism in their efforts to address important human and environmental issues. These six organizations include tour operators, NGO’s, and a new breed of donor-brokers established to help channel tourist dollars to small-scale aid programs around the world. *A key objective of this exploratory research is the advancement of a flexible, effective, model for social entrepreneurship within the tourism industry.*

Furthermore, while we commend the organizations involved in this study for their contributions to this field, we must emphasize that they were invited to participate in this study not because they have perfected their operations in this complex area, but rather because they each had some history in the area and were willing to speak of the mistakes they have made, learned from, and are continuing to address as their programs evolve.

The full report provides:

- Individual sections profiling each of the six participating organizations including key mistakes they made in developing their programs;
- Specific guidance for tour operators seeking to incorporate “give back” programs or volunteering in regions where they operate, including strategies for identifying reputable community partners with programs compatible with tourism;
- Specific guidance for NGO’s seeking to incorporate tourism into their programs to support fundraising;
- Guidance for tour operators and travelers seeking to donate money to worthy projects through small-scale tourism-based initiatives; and
- Suggestions for future research.



Participant Profiles

Providing a balanced perspective and findings relevant to both start-ups and established organizations, participants in the in-depth case study analysis include companies with long history as well as new entrants operating in adventure markets around the world. A brief overview of the participating NGOs and tour companies is provided below.

Explorandes www.explorandes.com

Explorandes, a Peruvian owned and operated company, is the first adventure company to begin operating in Peru. Established in 1975, the company is widely known to have begun operating trips along the Inca Trail before other tour companies considered its possibilities for cultural and nature explorations. As an adventure travel company operating in extremely poor and remote areas, Explorandes' management launched its social programs in an ad-hoc way: as they ventured into rural communities and saw the needs, they worked with local people to help provide small things they recognized were needed, for example taking up collections to help raise money for the community to build a new roof, or delivering school supplies. For years these programs continued without tourist involvement and without publicity. The company saw these activities as part of its social responsibility to these communities.

It was not until the past five years that tourists became interested in these activities and Explorandes realized it had an opportunity to create a new type of product offering for travelers seeking truly one-of-a-kind experiences during their journey to Peru. It now supports in aid programs in ten communities throughout the country and says that approximately ten to fifteen percent of its trips involve some kind of community aid work — whether purely financial contributions or financial contributions accompanied by physical work.

Generosity in Action www.gerosityinaction.org

Generosity in Action is a non-profit organization based in the United States. It provides tax-deductible donations for the benefit of projects in third world countries, which do not have NGO or 501c3 structures behind them. Generosity in Action validates the authenticity of small projects discovered by travelers in their journeys and provides a mechanism for travelers to give directly these local programs. As founder Duncan Beardsley says, "Generosity in Action provides the opportunity for the smallest charitable need to be funded by American generosity."

Global Sojourns www.globalsojourns.com

Global Sojourns provides customized adventure tours for small groups around the world, with a special focus in Africa. Founder Priscilla Macy's driving mission is to provide travelers with the opportunity to "go deeper" when they travel, to truly connect with the place — its history, culture, nature, and current issues.

Building on Priscilla's experiences and knowledge gained through years of development work in Africa, in 2006 Global Sojourns launched program for travelers called the Giving Circle. Travelers joining Giving Circle learn about international philanthropy and participate in the identification and vetting of projects suitable for their future financial donations and possibly hands-on volunteer labor. Through Global Sojourns the Giving Circle provides a mechanism for channeling donations and following the impact on the communities. Projects are typically located in regions in which Global Sojourns has travel itineraries to allow Giving Circle participants to visit the programs they support as part of a future holiday. Global Sojourns views Giving Circle projects as a key component for inclusion in customized trip offerings, providing an unusual opportunity for travelers to educate themselves first-hand about a region's challenges and issues, support worthwhile aid programs, and experience a truly one-of-a-kind integrated travel experience.

Los Ninos www.losninosinternational.org

For the past thirty years Los Ninos, a non-profit organization, has been working with communities in Mexico along the US/Mexico border. In the early years the focus of the work was to address immediate needs of malnourished children in the many communities stretching along the western border from Tijuana to Mexicali. Over the past 20 years the program has evolved, changing focus to a participatory development approach as the organization realized the best solution to alleviate food security is to create opportunities for families to address their situation of poverty.



In 2003 Los Niños launched a different kind of social venture, VolunTours™, a marketing and membership building social enterprise supporting the sale of volunteer vacations, team building events and additional service learning opportunities. Income generated benefits Los Niños' core community-driven development programs while offering participants new awareness, education and volunteer opportunities.

Protect the Earth, Protect Yourself (PEPY) www.pepyride.org

PEPY is a non-profit organization with an environmental education mission. It is closely linked with the adventure cycling tour company, PEPY Tours, in its operations in rural Cambodia. Since its inception PEPY's efforts have supported the construction of two schools in rural Cambodia and PEPY Tour guests may find themselves volunteering on one of these PEPY projects, or on projects managed by one of PEPY's local partners.

The Cross Cambodia PEPY Tours adventure cycle trip took place in January 2005. Since then PEPY has operated twenty-five tours for a total of 200 guests — some have blended adventure cycling and volunteering while others have focused solely on volunteer activities.

Relief Riders International www.reliefridersinternational.com

Relief Riders International is an adventure tour company providing travelers the opportunity to join a humanitarian expedition on horseback through Rajasthan's Thar Desert in India. In operation since 2004, each itinerary involves guests in the set up and operation of a medical camp and a cataract eye surgery camp to serve rural villagers. At local schools, the company provides de-worming medicine to local children as well as school supplies and distributes goats to below- poverty- level families along its route.

Key Findings

Guidance for Tour Operators

For tour operators seeking to incorporate “give back” programs or volunteering in regions where they operate there are two alternatives:

- ❶ Develop and implement programs internally to support human or environmental causes, or
- ❷ Partner with reputable community partners who have existing aid programs compatible with tourism.

This is a variation of the classic “buy vs. build” question faced by all companies when seeking to provide a new product or service. Which is the most effective and cost-efficient means of providing the product or service — building it internally or buying what another organization (possibly a competitor) has created? Partnership, although an attractive alternative, also exposes an organization to the challenges of its partner. If one partner experiences difficulties or is found to be unreliable, the other partner suffers. Risks such as these may dissuade tour operators from seeking local aid partners, especially in countries where corruption is a common problem.

The tour operators and NGOs participating in our study, however, confirm what much of the research into strategies for international development has found: despite the risks, it is more effective and cost-efficient to partner with reputable community partners who already have aid programs in place. Although it can be time consuming to identify and build the relationship necessary to put such a partnership into action, this front-end investment in time can be shown not only to save money and time in the future of the project, but also to yield stronger results for community beneficiaries.

The full report provides a strategic view of the partner selection process for tour operators and detailed criteria for selecting community partners with programs suitable for tour company partnership. Criteria address issues of corruption and sustainability, local community involvement, as well as suggestions for launching partnerships on a manageable scale.



Guidance for NGOs

NGOs have been quick to recognize the benefits of including tourists in their operations: by giving potential donors the opportunity to see and experience first-hand the organization's work, they can often more easily generate funding for their programs.

NGOs wishing to open themselves up to tourists, however, must evaluate a unique set of risk and reward factors. Although money generated from tourist donations may appear to be more quickly and easily obtained than funding generated through traditional channels such as direct mail or other standard marketing procedures, for many NGOs the effort of tailoring standard operations to allow short term volunteers, even skilled ones — may in the end prove to be too great a distraction from the organization's core activities. In addition, the added scrutiny of organization programs from well-meaning but perhaps under-informed tourists can expose the organization to questions that may require a further investment of time and money to address.

The key finding for NGOs: building an internal capability to invite and manage tourists requires a significant investment, which can easily detract from core mission work. The results of our study indicate that for NGOs seeking to include tourists, readiness to commit to a long-term investment for a tourism program development is crucial, and in many cases partnering with a tour company who already possesses these skills may be the most efficient alternative.

The full report provides a strategic view of the partner selection process for NGOs and detailed criteria for selecting tour company partners with tours and a philosophy compatible with that of the NGO. Criteria address issues of whether the NGO's core program offering can be made accessible to tourists and how to identify, approach and evaluate potential tour company partners.

Guidance for Financial Contributions

For tour operators and travelers seeking to donate money to worthy projects through small-scale tourism-based initiatives the key challenge is identifying the mechanisms through which funding can be reliably channeled. As the popularity of adventure travel continues to grow, increasing numbers of travelers may find themselves wanting reliable organizations through which they can contribute to specific projects in places that have personally inspired them.

Participants in this study voiced common concerns that travelers require not only education about "need" — because often what a western traveler perceives as need and wants to donate money for in a foreign culture may be somewhat ill informed — but also support in identifying non-profit organizations and tour companies with the requisite experience and capabilities to make use of financial contributions.

The full report provides a checklist set of criteria in three core categories:

- 1 Corruption;
- 2 Sustainability; and
- 3 Mitigating Unintended Consequences,

which travelers and tour operators may use when evaluating potential recipients of financial donations.

Future Study

In the future we expect researchers will delve further into the areas of volunteer tourism and its impacts on destinations, as well as social entrepreneurship within both the adventure and volunteer tourism niches. Furthermore, as more people choose to engage in the range of volunteer tourism experiences we expect both business and academic leaders will give increasing attention to the need for human capacity building in regions around the world where extreme needs exist, and to whether and how volunteer tourism can support development efforts of this nature.

