

The magazine of the National Association for Interpretation  
January/February 2008, Volume 19, Number 1

# legacy



Changes in  
World  
Tourism



# the CHANGING face of HERITAGE TOURISM

"The Changing Face of Heritage Tourism"

Legacy, the magazine of the National Association for Interpretation, January–February 2008, Vol. 19, No. 1

Travel and tourism, the world's largest industry—Involving one out of every 11 people—is changing rapidly. How will these changes affect our connection with special places and what we can do to ensure nature and cultural heritage tourism is sustainable?

While there are many tourism trends, the seven outlined here will have the greatest effect on how natural and cultural heritage sites are visited and interpreted in the future.

#### *Trend #1: Global Climate Change... See It While You Can*

Changes in global climate and deforestation are creating a demand for visiting endangered destinations and experiencing their unique attractions before it's too late. Examples include polar regions for their charismatic animals, Africa's wild herds, coral reefs, tropical rainforests, glaciers, and even Japan's famed cherry blossoms. Coastal destinations such as Venice, the Everglades, and many low islands are already seriously affected.

*How the industry will react:* This increased interest will put a premium on professional guides and managers to help visitors understand and appreciate what they are experiencing and avoid further impacts. It will also be important for visitors to avoid overuse and to cultivate personal connections, appreciation, and conservation of these sensitive places.

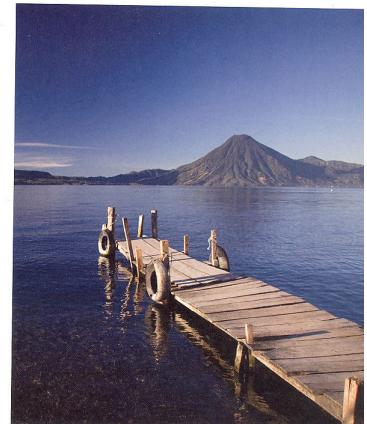
#### *Trend #2: Carbon-Neutral Travel... Going Green*

Concern about climate change has also spawned new travel programs that calculate and mitigate emissions generated during a trip. Visitors can purchase "offsets" by investing in tree planting, recycling, or renewable

energy projects offered by a wide range of environmental organizations. The voluntary offset market has revenues in the billions and is expected to quadruple in size over the next few years.

Sounds like a great idea, right? However, critics note a lack of standards and baseline information to measure improvements, as well as rich travelers buying absolution of their "sinful behavior" rather than changing their lifestyle or travel choices.

*How the industry will react:* As travel and tourism continue to increase, it is vitally important that we understand the connections between travel behavior and the environment and see how a particular offset program or tour can make a real difference. Some destinations are taking advantage of the opportunity to develop new value-added experiences for visitors to participate directly in offset activities like recycling, human-powered travel, using alternative energy, tree planting, or adopting a mature tree, which saves more carbon dioxide than a young tree produces. This trend is also important because it is broader than the nature travel niche market and can apply to all forms of mass travel.



JERRY WYLIE & JERRY BAUER

Opposite: A young Embera girl in typical dress interprets her culture through dance for tourists in Panama.

Above: Beautiful early-morning views over Lake Atitlan in Guatemala attract tourists.

*Trend #3: Travelers' Philanthropy... VolunTourism Anyone?*

Another way for socially and environmentally conscious travelers and businesses to respond to local problems is to invest their money, expertise, and time in the destinations they visit. According to the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, this new source of international development aid promotes "increasing support for human and economic development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation where the need is great."

Programs exist in every sector of the travel and tourism industry. Initiatives have been created by small and medium-sized tour operators, lodging companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and large multinational corporations. These opportunities range from work trips repairing trails in the backcountry to upscale safaris and scuba diving at four-star resorts that fundraise for community projects in exchange for indigenous peoples agreeing to protect local resources.

Benefits from these projects include a new stream of cash, goods, and volunteer services, face-to-face connections between people of different cultures, and new partnerships between local businesses and nonprofit organizations.

VolunTourism itself is an interpretive experience, facilitating the immersion into a particular culture, where visitors can learn and spend time with the people and places they visit in a more meaningful way than the typical tourist experience.

*How the industry will react:* To motivate travelers to become destination philanthropists and stewards, research is needed on consumer interests and target markets to determine the demographics and size of key market segments and their motivations for giving, and to develop data on actual donor giving patterns.

*Trend #4 – Experiential Travel... Sense, Feel, Engage, and Be Transformed*

Experiential travel covers a wide range



Maura Antonia Santiago and Liza González of PasoPacifico, a Nicaraguan conservation not-for-profit organization, show co-author Jerry Bauer seedlings grown in a community nursery for the "Return to Forest Restoration" project.

According to the Association of Travel Marketing Executives, boomers consider travel a necessity and not a luxury, are more experienced travelers, tend to act much younger than their chronological age, love to have fun, demand immediate gratification and luxury and are willing to pay for it, don't like group tours but do like to be in charge of their travel experience, prefer active rather than passive activities (including volunteerism and self-improvement), are skeptical of authority and organizations, and love to associate with those who share their values.

of travel products and destinations, as well as a methodology that creates highly personalized and interactive trips emphasizing all five senses and fully engaging the visitor. It can be as simple day trip to a historic theme park like Colonial Williamsburg or a week-long "Vocation Vacation" to test-drive a dream job. At a minimum, participants have a memorable experience, increase their knowledge, or develop new skills through direct experience. The richest experiential travel programs combine education, fun, soft adventure, and aesthetics.

However, experiences aren't the ultimate objective. Through a carefully staged set of memorable experiences, and perhaps multiple encounters, the final result is "transformation" or permanent beneficial change to the participant. In other words, the transformed individual is the final product.

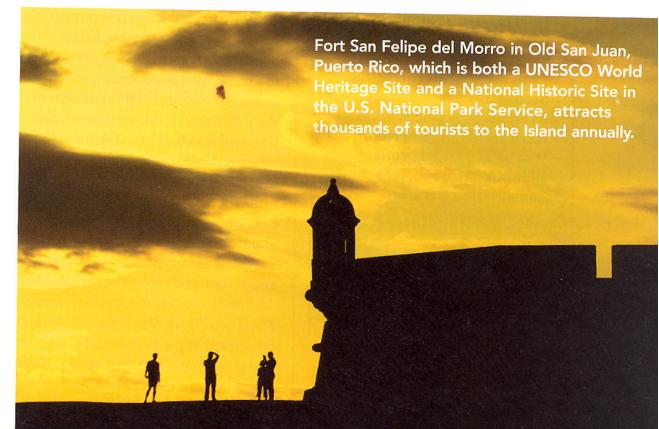
*How the industry will react:* This trend will challenge site managers and travel companies who focus on infrastructure (attractions) or on traditional visitor services (activities). Producing desired experiences and outcomes requires an understanding of the wants and needs of each participant. It also involves careful consideration of all phases of the travel experience beyond planning for the site or individual activities to planning the total experience package. In addition, a

central concept, message, or story should be developed as a foundation for the package.

*Trend #5: Demographics... Here Come the Boomers*

The 78 million baby boomers in the USA—the biggest, wealthiest, and most important age set in the history of travel marketing—are in their peak earning years and reaching the prime age for travel. Because of their sheer numbers, and the fact that they are different travel consumers than their parents or younger generations, boomers will transform tourism.

However, there are significant differences between older and younger boomers. Those born between 1946 and 1955 caught the wave of economic prosperity and are in a better position financially than younger boomers. While all are good candidates for heritage travel, older boomers have the highest interest in cultural attractions and visiting historic sites. Younger boomers seek less expensive trips, more physical



Fort San Felipe del Morro in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, which is both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Historic Site in the U.S. National Park Service, attracts thousands of tourists to the Island annually.

activity, and fewer hands-on educational experiences.

*How the industry will react:* Heritage tourism experts suggest travel products or destinations be sold as a story instead of presenting facts. This approach allows boomers to maintain control, assess credibility, and determine if a tour is relevant to them.

**Trend #6: Emerging Source Markets...  
Here Comes Asia**

Millions of newly affluent Chinese and Indians are dusting off their passports and preparing to join what, up until now, has largely been a European and North American middle-class right-of-passage: international travel. Only a trickle has reached the United States, but the first wave will likely hit popular mass tourism destinations such as New York City, Disney World, and Las Vegas. Subsequent visits will probably be for more authentic American experiences, involving historic sites, museums, and rural areas and parks.

Chinese tourists may be interested in visiting Chinatowns to see how their overseas cousins live. This may also carry over to historic Chinese sites throughout the USA, especially on public lands in the West, where they can learn about the overseas Chinese experience in historic mining towns and railroad construction camps. Indian tourists have better English skills and more familiarity with American culture and places. Both may be attracted to places with name recognition or made popular by American movies.

*How the industry will react:* Given the difference in the market, tourism sites will develop information using international icons and materials rich in self-explanatory images. Tourist professionals will train to be ready to deal with cultural misinformation and misunderstanding for those with scant knowledge of local customs and traditions.

**Trend #7: Travel Technology... Being Wired and Staying Connected**

Travel is the number one online retail



As more hotels provide wireless connections to the Internet, travelers use computers, digital cameras, and MP3 players to stay connected.

category. More Americans are using the Internet to find travel information and purchase travel every year. The goal has shifted from "finding the cheapest price" to "finding the perfect trip" by doing research in ways not previously possible, such as social networking sites edited by travelers themselves and "mashups" that combine maps and various types of digital travel information.

To stay connected while "getting away," cell phones and digital cameras are the most popular tech-

nologies used; however, travelers are increasingly taking their laptops, iPods, GPS devices, and MP3 players. As travel-related podcasts and downloadable music and video become available, portable devices will allow travelers to access the Internet as wireless networks expand (see the September/October 2006 *Legacy* issue on "How Technology Enhances the Interpretive Experience").

Travel technology will customize the visitor experience and revolutionize the way we obtain and share travel information. It will also change how visitors relate to sites at all stages of the travel experience, from pre-trip planning and decision making, to travel, entry, interaction, exit, and post-travel memories.

The new techno-tourist spends

less time reading traditional displays and listening to tour guides and more time connected to personal electronic media. They won't wait until returning home to start sharing trip photos and memories with their friends and family through cell phones and social networking websites.

*How the industry will react:* Customized experiences will become more prevalent to meet individual preferences that enhance the visitor experience, including special language needs of foreign visitors. Tourist sites will embrace new technologies that help connect heritage sites to technology-savvy visitors and may even partner with social networking websites to get their message out to potential visitors.

**Sustainability**

Sustainable tourism is accomplished by minimizing impacts while producing benefits for the environment, local communities, and visitors. Environmental payoffs include conservation of cultural diversity and bio-diversity, historic preservation, and support for the agencies and NGOs that manage these resources. Communities and businesses are enhanced through jobs, profits, economic diversification, and preservation of cultural traditions. And visitors benefit from having a high-quality experience that produces the personal results they seek. (See the model on this page.)

It is important that benefits reinforce each other. A healthy environment or intact historic site provides the high-quality setting and attraction for visitors and the product base for tour providers, as well as the "neighborhood" for local residents. Successful businesses provide quality services and infrastructure for visitors as well as locals, and can provide financial support for conservation projects and political support for managing agencies. Quality visitor experiences not only ensure economic success, but support the environment through entrance fees, sales, donations, and volunteerism.



Communities use the Sustainable Tourism Model to help protect their environment and improve their tourism product

### Sustainable Tourism in the Rainforest

The traditional village of Embera Drua in Panama illustrates how this model can work. It's a good example because of its simplicity and the fact that results are obvious and affect the entire community. It also shows how far-reaching some of the seven trends are.

Visitors are shuttled an hour from Panama City, where they board motorized dugout canoes for a breathtaking 40-minute ride up the historic Rio Chagres, the principle water source for the Panama Canal. Passing through the heart of the Chagres National Park, they are immersed in a near-pristine tropical rainforest filled with exotic birds and butterflies and the sounds of howler monkeys. Arriving at the community, they are welcomed by villagers wearing colorful traditional dress and playing drums, flute, and a turtle-shell gong. After a formal welcome, they enjoy a short presentation about the culture and history of the village, followed by dancing.

Optional activities include hiking and bird watching, ethnobotany tours, body painting, swimming, observing

traditional crafts, village tours, and fishing. After a lunch of fresh-caught fish, rice, and patacones (fried plantains), all served on a banana leaf, a wide range of traditional handicrafts are available for sale. The entire trip is about five hours. But for those who wish to stay overnight, a traditional tambo or elevated hut with thatched roof and hammocks is available.

When the Chagres National Park was established, hunting and subsistence farming were prohibited, forcing villagers to move or to find alternatives to maintain their traditional lifestyle. Some found jobs elsewhere, but most decided to try tourism. With hard work, experimentation, and assistance from outside agencies, they developed a very successful tourism program, but only because of a unique symbiotic relationship among the community, the park, and tourists, in which all three benefit.

The village is sustained by tourism and the natural resources of the park. This includes jobs and improved communication, transportation, and buildings, as well as intangibles of pride, independence, and preservation of cultural traditions. Visitors receive a unique, high-quality—some

**Residents of the Embera Drua village in Panama use dugout canoes to transport tourists to their site.**



**Co-author Jerry Bauer discusses marketing materials with village members from Embera Drua, Panama.**

would say transformative—experience. The park receives the majority of its visitors and tourism revenues (entrance fees) from village tours, and the park's resources are protected by the villagers themselves.

Interpretive planners and trainers have played a critical role. They not only helped develop traditional visitor information and environmental interpretation, they planned nature trails and developed souvenirs, fostered environmental appreciation with residents, managers, and tour operators, provided guide training that raised standards and created competitive advantages, and they developed materials that promoted the area as a

tourism destination, with accurate information that set appropriate expectations.

The villagers and their business partners are currently developing Internet connections with the growing boomer and nature/culture niche markets and continue to refine their experiential tour product.

### Are We Ready For The Future?

In the year 2020, will leisure travel be dominated by seniors and Asians? Will the hottest trips fully immerse and transform participants or take them to destinations threatened by climate change and species extinction? Will personal media devices be as impor-

tant as cameras? And will “green” travelers volunteer or donate billions of dollars for carbon-offset and local environmental and social programs where they visit? Perhaps.

We can't predict the future. But it is clear that interest in cultural and natural sites will continue to expand and evolve, and the *speed* of change will accelerate. As travel and tourism grow and become more interconnected globally, some trends will converge to reinforce each other. In particular, the Internet/technology and baby boomers are supercharging all other trends, and climate change may soon join them to become a major factor in global tourism.

So whether in a remote jungle or a bustling urban setting, tourists, community members, and interpreters must be aware of these trends and work to ensure the “triple bottom line” of sustainability for visitors, local communities, and the environment.

*Jerry Wylie is an international ecotourism consultant, Certified Interpretive Trainer, owner of a sea kayak tourism business in Connecticut, and former US Forest Service archeologist. He can be reached at wylie\_jerry@hotmail.com.*

*Jerry Bauer is assistant director for International Programs, US Forest Service International Institute for Tropical Forestry, Certified Interpretive Guide, and Forestry/Environmental Advisor to USAID/Nicaragua. He can be reached at jerrybauer1@mac.com.*