

The Journal for the Tourism Industry

TOURISM

Quarter 4 Issue 142
Winter 2009

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People in all the right places



Case Study: Emerging from Conflict

Tourism as a driver for economic recovery and co-operation

Having Jack Dee make fun of them on 'Have I Got News For You?' was not a specific objective of the Tourism Board of Iraq. But it was certainly a memorable result of our efforts to help the country reconnect with the world's tourism markets.

We had expected the enthusiastic response from Al-Jazeera and The Times, although the Daily Mail's scepticism was a wee bit disappointing. But Fox TV was delighted by the return of tourism to Iraq as a sign of normalisation and further evidence that Bush had been right. And having the BBC's former Baghdad correspondent Caroline Hawley in the middle of London's World Travel Market talking about the country without her trademark flak jacket was a real tonic for the Board's Chairman.

Preparing a strategy to market post-conflict destinations like Iraq is often surprising, but always rewarding.

As with any sustainable tourism strategy, it is necessary to engage with many stakeholders; but in post-conflict countries you sometimes have to dig a little deeper. Working in South Lebanon involved consultations with all the usual suspects from hoteliers and restaurant owners to journalists and town mayors. Perhaps even involving religious leaders and school teachers is not that unusual. But dropping in for a cup of tea with local UN forces, being taken on the back of a motorbike to meet the regional Hezbollah commander and sitting down with former inmates of El Khiam Prison indicated that this was rather different territory from normal tourism strategy development. And sitting around a table with Sunni, Shia, Druze, Catholic and

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Chitral, NW Pakistan

Orthodox Leaders who had all fought each other during the civil war in order to talk about visitor needs took things to a whole new level.

But when problems are great, the rewards of overcoming them can be greater still.

So, partly prompted by the commander who prayed in front of his lieutenants that his young sons would not take up arms but instead become tour guides, contact was established with Israeli tour operators to explore opportunities for cross-border tourism "when the peace comes".

I was reminded of the commander's prayers when recently the Governor of Timbuktu, Colonel Marnadou Mangara,

complained about the UK Government's advice "against all travel" to everywhere north of the River Niger.

The Governor argued that "poverty, not terrorism, is the biggest threat" and that "negative travel advice is worsening poverty". His argument is compelling, when you consider that Mali is ranked 178th (out of 182 countries) on the Human Development Index.

The challenges of tourism development in marginal and less established destinations (which post-conflict places tend to be) are the same everywhere: How can you create an environment that is supportive of tourism enterprise so that young people who have gone away to gain an education have a good reason to return? And what can be done to promote tourism as a realistic livelihood option in an area with limited recent experience of visitors?

In my experience, treating tourism as an economic opportunity and a marketing challenge achieves much better results for a destination emerging from conflict than

focusing on historic security problems. Criminality and even terrorism are often a function of social and economic disadvantage - look at piracy off the coast of Somalia.

That is why in Sierra Leone Tony Blair identified tourism as having "huge untapped potential" that provided the country with "a positive, coherent and ambitious vision for the future". He therefore believed that the country should be supported to implement its tourism strategy as one of the best ways of attracting much needed investment to the destination.

My own organisation, Dunira, has been working in Sierra Leone with a number of international agencies with the emphasis on creating enterprise opportunities for young people and marginalised communities; and then connecting with key markets in Europe and North America. One recommendation is to work towards the inscription of a new transnational UNESCO World Heritage Site to commemorate the Atlantic Slave Trade. This is not simply to acknowledge history, but also to open up new marketing channels that will support the tourism enterprise opportunities that have already been identified in West Africa.

It is often assumed that UNESCO is essentially a heritage organisation; in fact it exists to promote peace. Its 1945 Constitution, drafted in the shadow of the Second World War, declared "...since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Cultural heritage, science and education are simply tools to support this vision, much like post-conflict tourism.

All tourism is about communication, embracing national identity and celebrating heritage. In a post-conflict situation, it is also about helping to establish a common understanding and supporting sustainable livelihoods.

When I was first contacted by a representative of the Tourism Board of Iraq earlier this year, I admit that I did do some checks to ensure that it was a genuine enquiry. But it quickly became clear that this was the beginning of an extremely exciting partnership and an opportunity for us to implement a text book strategy for tourism development.

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Bird festival in south Lebanon

Whilst some progress had already been made by the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, the national tourist board in Baghdad recognised that it would be some time before Basra could regain its title of the 'Venice of the East'; and the return of regular tours by 'culture vultures' to Babylon, Nineveh, Samarra and Ur was not an immediate prospect. At the same time, officials realised that they had to start planning for the future. They had to conduct comprehensive surveys of tourist accommodation and attractions, devise training programmes for a whole new generation of tour guides and hospitality managers and build the capacity of the tourism board nationally and throughout the regions. They also had to reconnect with the markets that in recent years have inevitably lost sight of Iraq as a viable tourism destination. In this context, the Board's recent visit to the World Travel

Market was a very public start of its recovery as one of the world's great tourism destinations.

In the future, as tour operators and travellers seek out ever more unusual destinations, those emerging from conflict can be those that lead the way. Cambodia, Croatia and Nicaragua have demonstrated the economic opportunity of post-conflict tourism. Iraq, Palestine and Yemen have all been doing tourism for thousands of years; their growing confidence and pride in their own extraordinary heritage is already helping them reconnect with new markets.

Of course there are some very real security challenges to be addressed in post-conflict destinations if tourism is to become part of their economic portfolio. But here tourism has two functions: It enables responsible travellers to experience a destination that has been out of bounds for some time. It also allows entrepreneurs to put the past behind them and move on in peace, sharing their distinctive heritage and not least their often sublime food with visitors. Tourism development in post-conflict destinations is about recognising the impact of poverty and the value of heritage. What greater prospect is there for peace and prosperity in a destination emerging from conflict than sharing the pleasure of a traditional meal with a tourist?