

# Local involvement in tourism

by Dr Auliana Poon\*

Warm weather, spectacular scenery, secluded beaches, accessible wildlife, cultural attractions, a wide range of quality accommodation and good value for money: just some of the ingredients that make a successful tourism destination. Other man-made factors – safety and security, a warm welcome and good service – are also vital.

Indeed, successful destinations are those where visitors feel a complete sense of welcome – where the locals that smile are not only those paid to do so. Yet, so little energy is spent on creating the reasons for locals to smile. Much of the effort of tourist authorities goes into awareness and 'smile training'. They do not realise that unless local people feel tourism in their pockets and on their tables, all the smile training will not help. It is not surprising that when a journalist asked a Johannesburg resident why he stole a handbag from a tourist, he replied: 'They say we should benefit from tourism, so I am just benefiting.' According to *Sabelo Mahlalela*, head of Mpumalanga Tourism Development in South Africa, 'you do not teach people to eat; you just give them the food'. Similarly, you do not teach locals to smile at tourists, you give them the reason to do so!

There is a belief that responsibility for involving local communities in tourism lies with the government. Many private operators give little thought to the relationship they should be building with their neighbours. Yet, they expect their guests to be safe, with everyone smiling at them. The evidence suggests that far-sighted entrepreneurs, who build up local links, are most successful. A good example of this is *Umgazi River Bungalows* in Eastern Cape, South Africa. This facility has an annual average occupancy rate of about 85% – one of the highest in the country. The management has taken decisions designed to ensure happy workers and a happy commu-

nity. All staff are drawn from the surrounding communities, workers get a 13th month's salary and share in the annual profits, the hotel has helped financially with the building of a local school, it provides free space for locals to sell their crafts to tourists, and it is committed to buying produce locally. Every morning sees a procession of people arriving at the hotel with baskets on their heads. Continuous training and skills upgrading is also provided. Not surprisingly, the staff and community are content and a safe and happy environment is created for visitors. There is no staff turnover and 70% of Umgazi's guests are repeat visitors. This all translates into a better bottom line.

The management has a number of other ideas. It would like to support a community entrepreneur to develop a piggery (the kitchen waste makes good fodder). It aims to encourage a campsite development where one family would be responsible for taking care of each unit. Umgazi would supply the fresh water and assist with reservations. And it foresees a cultural village where guests can learn about the local culture first hand. These are the types of initiative that sustainable, responsible tourism are made of.

## Missing ingredient

Involving local people is surely one of the missing ingredients undermining the success of many tourist destinations. In South Africa, where there is an urgent need to involve previously disadvantaged communities, many initiatives have not, unfortunately, brought in the private sector. NGOs and donor agencies have tried to work with local people, identifying their needs and supplying them with what they want. But without private sector input, the sustainability of these supply-based initiatives is questionable. Associating the private sector is one of the keys to unlocking the potential of local communities in the tourism industry. It may be a good idea to set up a craft village, but if you involve an established tour operator in the project, you can help ensure that the products suit the

needs of the market, that the centre is in an optimal location, that it has the services guests are looking for, and that tour buses will stop to enable visitors to make a purchase. Where hoteliers 'buy-in' to a community project (such as horse riding), this can go a long way to ensuring its success (the hotel then advertises the attraction to its guests).

There are a number of unexplored ways in which the private sector can support community involvement in tourism. These include:

- advertising community products and services;
- sourcing goods and services from the community (e.g. eggs, bread);
- providing training and 'mentoring' for small businesses that supply the hotel;
- out-sourcing certain services (laundry, gardening, water sports);
- employing persons (e.g. nannies) as free agents, to build entrepreneurship;
- ensuring that community services are employed in building and construction;
- training and skills upgrading;
- employing people from surrounding communities;
- identifying key opportunities for local producers (e.g. fresh herbs, organic vegetables);
- introducing new services to guests (e.g. cooking classes for the preparation of local food, local language training, story-telling, traditional games, catch and release fishing, and offering local cuisine on the menu);
- identifying career opportunities for locals;
- encouraging staff and local schools to experience being a tourist at the hotel.

The key approach to local involvement in tourism should not be aid, but private sector development in the relevant communities. In other words, to paraphrase a well-worn saying, 'don't give people fish but teach them how to fish'. The future of tourism in South Africa and indeed, elsewhere in the world, will be more secure when the Umgazi experience ceases to be just a 'good example', and becomes 'best practice'. ■

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