

Three conversations on the new-style Responsible Tourism stand at WTM London 2016 offered an illuminating first-hand insight into how the involvement and participation of local communities in developing and offering the tourism experience can enhance the experience of their guests. Two sessions were destination-focused with speakers from India and across Africa, with the final Responsible Tourism programme event – packed out even in the last slot on the last day of WTM – celebrating the way that local guides can enrich the tourist experience. Underlying all three conversations was the question of how the communities in which tourists are seeking more active, experiential holidays can benefit economically, socially and culturally.

Some clear Dos and Don'ts emerged from all three sessions – encouragingly, more on the positive side than the negative. These are perhaps principles we as Responsible Tourism practitioners and operators are well aware of theoretically, but it was good to hear first-hand of the challenges and rewards of putting them into practice.

- **Don't** make assumptions that guests know what we are talking about when we talk about Responsible Tourism – it is not a given. Consciously and actively invest in building awareness and understanding;
- **Don't** preach to the converted – work with mainstream operators as well as on the community level – educate them about what their clients want rather than leaving them to make assumptions;
- **Don't** develop community-based tourism products without the community's permission – access is theirs to offer. Carefully plan how the experience will develop; once problems arise they are difficult to resolve;
- **Don't** raise communities' expectations unreasonably about what tourism can offer – be realistic and pragmatic about what will work. This means educating other stakeholders too;
- **Don't** impose value judgments about communities – let them decide what is important;
- **Don't** try and develop anything artificial: tourists are quick to spot anything that doesn't feel natural or that is put on for show;
- **Don't** mislead guests about what they will experience: manage their expectations well.

“One of our challenges is to educate our guests. We have people arriving in the Kalahari hoping to see the Bushmen as they lived a hundred years ago, and we sadly have to explain to them that they've arrived a hundred years too late – because these are people who are trying to earn a living in a modern economy ...”. Glynn O'Leary, Transfrontier Parks Destinations

- **Do** work with communities which are open to receiving visitors and welcoming them;
- **Do** respect and understand what it means for communities to be hosting – get them involved in thinking about what guests want;
- **Do** commit to and invest time in communities – some operators have been working with the communities they visit for years and developed their trust, as well as helped them understand the tourism industry. This ensures continuity of income too;
- **Do** get the balance right – offer experience but not at the cost of exploitation. Offer guests access to communities but on those communities' terms;
- **Do** make sure it's not only about economic gains – traditional activities, cultural traditions and community lifestyles should flourish through tourism, not be threatened by it;
- **Do** look for what already exists in the community and which with good training and industry expertise could be developed into a new, authentic, experiential product;

- **Do** let communities decide whether they want tourism and if so, what they want from it, so that they can manage who they allow to visit;
- **Do** integrate traditional activities into the tourist experience – a way of keeping cultural heritage alive;
- **Do** give tourists the chance to do something they've never done before – particularly activities not just in, but with, the community. In Kerala tourists are able to climb up the coconut trees (where they inevitably take a selfie ...) – this follows tourist trends but also offers a unique experience based on a traditional local livelihood;
- **Do** develop ways for local people to supply the tourism industry with products and services that will enhance the tourist experience such as authentic local food, art, handicrafts and cultural performances. Work with suppliers to help them understand and meet pricing, quality and continuity requirements. Help communities to become entrepreneurs in the best way possible;
- **Do** make sure the right people are running tourism businesses. Find the local entrepreneurs and work with them;
- **Do** help visitors to respect the communities they are visiting as tourism entrepreneurs and providers of an experience, rather than objects of charity;
- **Do** address the relationship between local people and visitors from the start to address communities' fears and avoid antagonism developing from the community perspective and so that guests feel comfortable and welcome, not awkward or embarrassed. Respect between hosts and guests is essential;
- **Do** promote Responsible Tourism as a positive model to reassure communities fearful about tourism and its potential negative impacts;
- **Do** offer communities education, capacity-building and training to help them understand tourism and to decide how they want to use its potential for their benefit;
- **Do** ensure a broad base in terms of sharing the economic benefit and proactively ensure that all sectors of the community are able to participate, such as helping develop and support women-owned enterprises and including marginalised groups. Multi-stakeholder collaboration works best;
- **Do** prioritise long-term sustenance over short-term profit;
- **Do** invest in educating tourists – including the domestic market – in how to behave when visiting communities and manage their expectations;
- **Do** be transparent with guests – back up your claims of sustainability – help them to know exactly who's benefiting from their trip and how much they are receiving;
- **Do** work with good local guides who are able to open up the destination for their guests and help them discover places and meet people they wouldn't otherwise have access to. Make sure those guests are representative of the local community. Guides are the key to positive interaction, add the personal touch and are one of the most important ways to manage and improve the experience of tourists and the local community by bridging the two cultures and helping each understand the other;
- **Do** help guests connect to all the local narratives, not just the dominant one – encourage guests to ask questions rather than make assumptions, and develop a real and deep understanding of the places they are visiting;

“A common word our clients use is ‘privilege’. They feel they get a unique and special experience when they travel with us. Ordinary agricultural villagers make superb hosts, and once they learn exactly what is required in terms of the guests, they are able to deliver it in bucket loads”. Richard Hearn, Village Ways