

Understanding Community Tourism

Stimulated by the sight of tourists and growing support from government offices, development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities are developing the infrastructure and services required for tourism.



Until recently, international banks and national tourism ministries have promoted development of traditional tourism operations, such as all-inclusive megaresorts that cater to the *sol y playa* crowd. If locals or communities are involved in the process, it was usually as contracted labor.

Now the monies are flowing to grassroots efforts, community-based tourism operations are increasing around the globe. New synergies have arisen that connect localities with regional and international tourism partners.

One of the obligatory components of responsible travel and ecotourism is local participation. 'Community ecotourism' is therefore redundant.

Community Tourism in Mexico

When we speak of community-based tourism, the most popular image tends to be a rural village far from the beaten path, and for good reason. Most are. Examples include Mexico's Ocho Venado and communities in the Sierra Juarez. There are several projects in Costa Rica featured on the New Key website.

Rural community tourism in Costa Rica, for example, is a showcase of conservation of large tracts of virgin rainforest, reforestation work and organic agriculture. Travelers can support this work through their visits.

In Mexico, urban-community ties are strengthened via the Oaxaca Options speaker series. The city is one of the most popular destinations on the tourist trail and the speaker series – co-hosted by Planeta.com and Instituto Amigos del Sol Language School – offers an opportunity for locals to discuss the pros and cons of tourism with travelers and vice-versa.

While it's a romantic notion to limit one's idea of community tourism to rural settlements, the concept of 'community' can easily be linked to urban populations. Settlements such as San Nicolas or Axosco are

located in Mexico City, the world's largest metropolis.

What Travelers Can Do

Successful community tourism is mutually beneficial – for the communities and for the travelers. The big question is where to go?

Independent travelers seeking experiences with communities have numerous resources to help plan their trips. Specialized websites – such as Transitions Abroad – provide great tips.



Also of note was the 2002 publication of *The Good Alternative Travel Guide*, compiled by Mark Mann for Tourism Concern. The book lists hundreds of tours and guesthouses to help you arrange a responsible and fun vacation. This book has been updated twice.

Understanding Failure

Community tourism is not always successful, and perhaps we could begin to look at failures as pathways to success. Rural community tourism takes place in already marginalized areas. Created with good intentions, community-based tourism projects are abandoned when political pressures rise, jealousies intensify or the heralded ecotourists don't arrive.

Developers may talk of 'integrating communities into tourism,' but rarely do they visit a community and ask what it is locals want. Instead, operations are imposed in an all too familiar top-down fashion.



Likewise, many travelers may say they want to experience community tourism, but within three days they begin to complain that the services are not up to their standards. Suggestion – take the time to get to know your hosts. It pays off with richer experiences for all concerned.

Marketing and Promotion

Development agencies and foundations have until recently been ill-equipped with the development or promotion of community tourism initiatives. Too often marketing experts advise a community to raise their prices to rates that tourists just don't want to pay.

Information is crucial, as many of the community projects lack a simple presence in the local tourist office.

A good deal of the information we have is outdated rather quickly. A travel agent once told me of her interest in receiving press releases and prices from community projects. "But they only contact me once a year, if then. How am I supposed to send these projects tourists if they don't provide me with current packages and prices?"

By Ron Mader

Ron Mader is the ecotourism and responsible travel correspondent for Transitions Abroad and host of the award-winning Planeta.com website.

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