

Indigenous Tourism: Authentic, Educational and Culturally Exciting

Over the past two decades in Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, a great deal of thought and money has been invested by governments, native communities, and individual aboriginal entrepreneurs in delivering authentic indigenous experiences to visitors from around the world. As respect for indigenous cultures continues to grow rapidly in the 21st century so too has a sincere desire by travelers to learn about the values that reflect distinctive relationships with nature, traditional and contemporary artistic expression, and a spirituality often unfamiliar to the visitor's way of thinking.

In September 2015, I had the privilege of attending the second Pacific Asia Indigenous Tourism Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Even though I have researched and written about aboriginal/indigenous tourism in different countries for a decade, I was deeply encouraged by the reported successes and dedication of the people involved in developing authentic, sustainable opportunities to share their traditional ways with travelers genuinely interested in such experiences.

According to the United Nations, there are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples spread across 70 countries worldwide. About 70% of them live in countries bordering the Pacific Ocean, retaining social, cultural, economic and political characteristics distinct from the dominant societies in which they live. While most indigenous people still remain marginalized in their societies, there are some fine examples of successful engagement enriching the tourism opportunities that foster respect for both the visitor and the host and bring economic benefit to rural communities.

In British Columbia, for instance, data show that one in four visitors are looking for an indigenous experience. Unfortunately, demand far exceeds what is presently available. Why? By definition, authentic cultural and educational experiences usually require small groups of participants and low impact sustainable tours in often remoter regions where indigenous people live on their own land and in close proximity to nature. The Aboriginal Tourism of British Columbia website showcases native-owned and -operated tourism from the Pacific Ocean east to the Rocky Mountains of this vast province.



Remoteness is not always an ingredient, of course. Vancouver is a remarkable example of diverse First Nations experiences in one city, ranging from unique native-owned accommodation (Skwachays Lodge), and a popular restaurant specializing in native dishes and beverages (Salmon and Bannock Bistro) to world-class aboriginal-focused museums and art galleries. There are also immersive land and water activities and tours (Takaya Tours) that enrich a visitor's understanding of native heritage, thriving for thousands of years before settlers arrived from other lands. Tourism Vancouver can help develop a memorable First Nations immersion itinerary for any visitor to the city.

Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia, has become a global model for richly-interpreted aboriginal tourism with educational, cultural and nature-based activities that offer something for every age, budget and interest. It hosts the greatest diversity of aboriginal peoples in North America. The goal remains clear: to honor the talents and traditions of BC's 203 First Nation (native) communities and to provide training, cultural revival and sustained employment for local communities and enterprising individuals of First Nations descent.



That said, there is steady growth in this tourism sector right across Canada as indicated by an inviting new Aboriginal Tourism Association of Canada website, showcasing indigenous festival events, attractions and experiences. Visitors may browse by region, date and culture for what is being offered by the country's three recognized indigenous cultures, that is, Métis (mixed blood), Inuit (peoples of the Canadian Arctic, formerly called Eskimos), and First Nations who are Aboriginal Canadians of neither Inuit nor Métis descent. The province of Ontario is delivering many quality experiences, including a highly recommendable visit to the largest freshwater island on the planet, Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron. Native communities there are making a pilgrimage worthwhile, presenting 17 nature-based and cultural options (Great Spirit Circle Trail).



New Zealand's well profiled Māori culture is second only to its dramatic landscapes as the main reason visitors travel there. Although the traditional aspects such as kapa haka remain important parts of Māori life and its tourism, today there is a much wider range of tourism products that incorporate a Māori element. Experiences such as hiking, white water rafting, art and cultural tours, and the opportunity to hear the unique stories behind the country's places, people and activities first-hand are very popular among international visitors. Indigenous New Zealand is the gateway to Māori culture providing a comprehensive database of Māori tourism experiences in Aotearoa, the Māori name for New Zealand.

Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council (WAITOC), is the leading organization supporting and representing authentic indigenous tourism in the vast state of Western Australia. WAITOC represents over 50 Aboriginal tourism operators ranging from accommodation, traditional dance and dreamtime stories to contemporary history, safari and bush tours and art. The goal is to allow Aboriginal people to participate at a real and meaningful level while still maintaining and valuing their cultural heritage.



Among the newest entrants, Chile is beginning to take seriously the potential for indigenous tourism. And indeed it should be encouraged to do so with nine different indigenous “nations” making up 11% of the population within its borders. Many developing opportunities to stay and learn provide the perfect excuse to visit the more unfamiliar central and northerly Atacama Desert region which has been home to indigenous people for 12,000 years! It is a 1,000 kilometer strip of land between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean consisting of the driest desert in the world. At this point, there is a lot of enthusiasm but not the collective sources of visitor information I would like to see. I recommend viewing the Chile travel project pages of Travolution and their programs.

Travelers interested in indigenous tourism are looking for authenticity while still accommodating their own needs and abilities. It is a work in progress, in many places a rough diamond that requires tolerance, but it is immensely rewarding for those with an inquiring and adventurous spirit.

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