

Succeeding in tourism

A series of practical articles by Chris Elphick, Breadfruit Consulting, aimed at tourism SMEs.

Article four – making sure tourism and culture can co-exist

Over the next few weeks I will focus on the challenges and opportunities facing small businesses working in the tourism industry.

Many countries, especially developing countries, see tourism as their economic life-line. Bring in more visitors, they will come with money, that will help local businesses survive. However, we need to ask ourselves at what cost? There are many examples in the world where the rise of tourism has led to the death or destruction of the local culture. Tourists seeking sun, sand and sex often do so at the cost of the local way of life. They dress inappropriately, drink too much, show little or no respect to local customs.

However, it doesn't have to be like this. Here in the Pacific we have strong, vibrant cultures that are virtually unknown to much of the world. People want to see them and experience what they do not have at home. Land diving in Pentecost, Vanuatu, is a great example of a unique activity that most people will never get to see. Visiting traditional villages in the Yasawa Islands, Fiji, or spending time in quiet Solomon Islands villages or lagoons untouched by Facebook or imported food is an experience of a lifetime. Sleeping in a lagoon house over the water, shopping in local markets, learning about local food, enjoying friendships and conversations in a kava bar, catching and eating huge mudcrabs, diving and snorkelling in beautifully clear water, exploring the wrecks from the World Wars, buying unique handicrafts are all available experiences in the Pacific.

The challenge is to ensure that we do not allow our need for tourist dollars to damage our local cultures and environments which are priceless and can never be replaced once gone. Most visitors to the Pacific want to come here because of how special it is – we must keep it that way and at the same time use it to run profitable businesses.

Doing both does not need to be contradictory as long as we plan what we are doing. We may need to limit the number of visitors to specific areas or sites; we may need to restrict visitors to certain times of the year; we could only sell local food or handicrafts; we could voluntarily stop using plastic and other non-biodegradable materials.

If you are running a small tourism business think about what is special that you have to offer – do you need to serve imported white rice or chips when you can use local vegetables; can you take your guests out fishing, then help them cook their catch for dinner; take them for a walk through the village and tell local stories. And explain why you want to encourage visitors but not too many at any one time. Set your prices at a level that will attract people with money who also want to experience something different without the crowds.

Tourism and local culture can co-exist as long as we put in place strategies to ensure that happens. Local businesses need support and assistance – we need to help each other. We need to proactively market our Pacific islands as tourism and local culture friendly places.

Our local cultures are economic assets to be protected for generations to come while supporting our lives today. They are priceless and sought after by others. If we run tourism businesses we have a responsibility to protect our local cultures while at the same time ensuring that we run profitable enterprises. We do have to exploit one to favour the other.

If you have any tourism issues you would like me to cover during this series, please contact me.

Coming next, sustainable tourism and new ideas.

Chris Elphick is Partner in Breadfruit Consulting, supporting the development of a range of businesses and organisations in Melanesia and other parts of the Pacific. He is an experienced trainer, coach and business mentor and has years of experience of working with Small & Medium Enterprises. He and his partner Hazel Kirkham live in Vanuatu and are involved with tourism operators and their businesses in several Pacific countries.

Breadfruit Consulting have partnered with Fiji Entrepreneur to develop mentoring services for new and young entrepreneurs.

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