

Attractions - The Beating Heart of The Tourism Industry, Are You Ready For More Change?

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In 2003 I had the very great privilege of conducting research for my doctoral dissertation on the challenges facing private sector attractions in Barbados, West Indies. This research was predicated on the belief that attractions and especially heritage and cultural attractions, are the very motivation for travel. They are responsible for the uniqueness of place and as noted tourism researcher John Swarbrooke [1] is quoted as having written "attractions are arguably the most important component in the tourism system. They are the main motivators for tourist trips and are the core of the tourism product. Without attractions there would be no need for other tourism services. Indeed tourism as such would cease to exist if it were not for attractions" [1]. If attractions are so important, what are the challenges that they might face and how might such challenges be overcome?

The research identified the need for financial support mechanisms which included access to capital at attractive terms and conditions, the need for technical support in developing appropriate organizational and management structures, along with the need for more extensive marketing to increase the revenue base of the operation. While it is not appropriate to generalize with regard to all attractions and their challenges, discussions at the 2008 CARIFORUM workshop on Perspectives and Challenges of Heritage Tourism Development, confirmed that the challenges identified in 2003 still existed five years later and were evident in all the representative countries.

Having lived in the USA for the past 12 years and now in Michigan, recent discussions and research has suggested that the smaller cultural and heritage attractions are encountering similar challenges to those in Barbados [2] and the Caribbean. Such challenges have been exacerbated by the recent economic recession. Where persons have been retrenched, unemployment rates have risen significantly and there is a general lack of economic security. The results for many attractions have been declined in visitor levels and reductions in visitor spending. For the USA, many persons have opted to stay at home and to enjoy a domestic vacation with the family and friends.

The increases in oil prices has resulted in increased transportation costs and produced even high vacation costs. The result is that vacation packages have increased in cost and long haul destinations have felt the impact. Cruise line schedules have been reconfigured taking into consideration the increased fuel costs thereby reducing the number of cruise ship calls and the number of passengers disembarking. Yet another negative impact on those businesses that rely on cruise tourism.

What are the attractions in developing countries and in the quaint destinations of the peripheral areas of the developed countries to do? New and different strategies to share costs, expand marketing through greater cooperation and more focused marketing using the new technology will help to ensure that these attractions survive. Should they go back to basics and leverage their strengths, building on their loyal customers? Added to this is the increasing competition for market share and visitor spending as exemplified by the enactment of the US Travel Promotion Act 2010. This may be a positive for US destinations as these promises to create a positive global image for the USA. It is timely as the US economy seems to be emerging from the recession.

But the implications for non-USA destinations might be the subject of interesting research.

In the midst of the economic turmoil, the physical environment, through the impacts of climate change has been having further negative effects on tourism. More frequent and more intense weather phenomena, winters those are not as cold and not as long as previous years have had their impact on the immediate tourism experiences. In the longer term such weather phenomena are having and will have impacts on reefs and their fish communities, as well as parasites and disease vectors. High magnitude storm events are causing more and greater devastation as are the tsunamis triggered by the tectonic forces of the earth's crust. For small island communities the challenges are great. Case in point being the Maldives, where it has been reported that the government is seeking to purchase land for the relocation of their country [3]!

So much has changed in economic, political, socio-cultural and physical environments that it would be interesting to investigate the changes over the past 10 years. What are the priorities for private sector attractions in 2013 and what are their current challenges? Although many things will have changed and continue to change in the operating environment one constant will be the importance of cultural and heritage attractions in the motivation for travel.

Charles Darwin is quoted as saying "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change". What is therefore required is an understanding of the forces of change, the formulation of intelligent responses to these likely impacts and how best we become the most responsive to this change.

References

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