

Cultural/Heritage Tourism

Description

People have been travelling for thousands of years to experience the unique or simply different characteristics of another community. It can be argued that all tourism is cultural; people consistently travel to locations that are unlike their own. However, within the past decade community heritage tourism has emerged as a distinct travel product within the tourism industry. Hundreds of communities throughout North America (and thousands in Europe) have developed particular cultural and heritage tourism products that attract increasing tourist visitation each year.

Cultural tourism is big business; and studies suggest that it can be a major contributor to community economic revenues. A 1999 study by the National Tour Association in the US indicated that 20 percent of tourism revenues are based on cultural tourism. When Canadian travel consumers were asked what type of trip they would be interested in taking in the future, more than 60 percent said they were 'very interested' or 'somewhat interested' in a heritage or cultural trip. Similarly, while most Europeans tend to visit Canada because of the nature/wilderness character, cultural experiences still rate relatively high.

Cultural/heritage tourism can be defined as *purposeful travel that enables the traveller to learn about the history, heritage and lifestyles of others while contributing to the conservation and restoration of cultural resources and the economic well-being of the community.*

Community cultural tourism requires the integration of at least three essential components:

- The desire of a community to *share* its cultural legacy with tourists.
- An intact *cultural resource base* that can provide the foundation for a community cultural heritage product.
- An accessible *travel market* that is interested in visiting the community's heritage resources.

Benefits

A U.S. Department of Commerce study revealed that "for each \$44,019 spent in the United States for travel/tourism, on the average, one job was directly supported." This is an impressive statistic for any community with a reasonable mix of cultural/heritage attraction. Many of them have several hundred thousand tourists passing through each year, but not stopping. By attracting a small portion of these visitors to stay more than a day dozens of jobs

can be created. As with **Community Tourism** in general, many of these jobs will be accessible to those who are ordinarily marginal to the labour market—youth, women, minorities. Moreover, cultural tourism can expand a community's existing travel business into the shoulder season, maintaining existing jobs longer, because heritage attractions are not as dependent on weather conditions.

Cultural tourism as a specialty is particularly capable of attracting income and profits because it has a greater capacity to generate overnight, extended stay vacations and repeat visitation. As well, because the cultural tourism sector is experience based rather than facility based (such as luxury resorts or theme parks) most of the visitor expenditure stays in the community as salaries for performers, interpreters, artists, historians, etc. These local salaries will ordinarily be re-spent in the community to generate other jobs via the multiplier effect.

Again, like general community tourism, this tool for community resilience provides an option for economic diversification. Communities with a strong tourism base can be attractive to other service sectors.

Cultural tourism has put some little communities, such as, Taos, NM, Branson, MO, Stratford, ON, Kimberly, BC, on the map, so to speak, making them popular destinations for those seeking to live and work outside the large cities. Surveys indicate that residents of communities with a strong cultural tourism base are especially proud of their hometown.

Cultural/heritage tourism can be a catalyst for cultural conservation and capacity building. A community may benefit by improved preservation and architectural/landscape restoration from revenues generated by tourism revenues along with contributions from local businesses and interested residents. These restoration activities in turn can provide learning opportunities for residents.

Major challenges

The development of community-based cultural and heritage tourism faces many challenges that are not necessarily associated with other components of the industry. They include:

- Maintaining authenticity against pressures for reduced costs;
- Meeting the higher expectations of the cultural tourist who tends to be a discerning visitor; and
- Respecting the local physical and psychological 'carrying capacity' (including such routine things as trash disposal).

Practical steps

1. Execute a comprehensive inventory, classification, and analysis of *all* cultural related resources.
2. Identify a cultural tourism theme and identity.
3. Develop products that are supported by the theme and enhance it.

Resource organizations & contacts

- See the suggestions for **Community Tourism**.
- There are, of course, many specialized groups that will be relevant to the particular cultural or heritage emphases that your community might select. Consider, for example, Storytellers Foundation, a non-profit organisation based in Hazelton, B.C., which advances cultural tourism as a vehicle for the development of community capacity to exert control over economic activities on traditional lands. Contact Doug Donaldson or Anne Docharty at 250-847-6500. They have an especially useful publication: *Action 2000, A Journey into the Human and Economic Potential of the Upper Skeena*. It provides an example of one community's social and economic planning process which identifies cultural tourism as an opportunity for community economic development, cultural interaction and self-analysis.

Publications

- *Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism* is available from the National Trust for Historic Presentation (California). It focusses on finding an appropriate community fit that supports authenticity, quality, and the preservation of natural resources. Website: gocalif.ca.gov/research/order
- Martin Mowfurfurt and Ian Munt, *Tourism and Sustainability: New Tourism in the Third World* (Routledge Press, 1998).
- Alf H. Walle, *Cultural Tourism: A Strategic Focus* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998). A text that shows how communities can make sure tourism benefits them.