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Pandora's Box - Unlocking the Hidden Treasure of Community Based Travel Experiences



The Masakala Guesthouse & Mehloping Adventure Trail

In the southern Drakensberg mountains towards the kingdom of Lesotho is the Ukhahlamba National Park, a World Heritage Site. Here you will find the Masakala guest house and its tourism business partner The Mehloping Adventure Trail. Both ventures are 100% community owned and FT TSA certified. The hiking trail in the mountains with our local guide was not for the faint hearted. The terrain can be a little arduous and requires a good level of fitness. However, the vivid and spectacular landscapes, and the bright, contrasting colours of the wild flowers are worth every ounce of effort. The trail takes in ancient San rock art sites, indigenous forests and an incredible bird life. It really is biodiversity at its best. And the most enjoyable part of the day was returning to the tasty Xhosa and Sotho food with the big hearted hospitality that went with it, before calling it a day and very happy to retire to a comfortable bed.

www.mehloping.co.za



Tourism Intelligence International presented some interesting findings at the recent ITB in Berlin. The disclosure and discussion was entitled: "From Sun, Sand and Sea to Culture and Content", forecasting developing travel trends up to 2015. The research revealed unprecedented growth predicted in future travel sectors focused on history, culture and heritage.

It is perhaps somewhat fortuitous then, that Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FT TSA) and South Africa's National Development Agency (NDA) are currently working together in a process to support and develop a cluster of six community based tourism experiences. This evolving partnership began in 2007 and will conclude in 2010, with FT TSA playing a facilitation role to strengthen carefully selected community based tourism experiences in the Eastern and southern Cape. And by way of this interface, encourage transformation and positive economic development for these extra special small enterprises.

Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FT TSA) is a respected certification organization, indicating an assurance that certified products promote the well being of local people, take cognisance of their environmental impacts and contribute positively to socio-economic development.

The aim of the NDA-funded project is to work with community tourism initiatives situated in three viable and established tourism corridors, as a way of stimulating sustainable local economic development. The six beneficiaries operate on different business models: some are owned or co-owned by community trusts, while others are comprised of private entrepreneurs operating under a common brand or route.

The idea behind the project was to create a practical platform that would help the community tourism initiatives with assisted developmental support, and facilitating access to markets. Many of the projects are in areas where few other economic opportunities exist, thus job creation and capacity building is key. Each is however in reasonable proximity to other attractions and, with its unique features and personality, has the potential to attract custom if marketed effectively.

It is well known that the ideals of tourism have changed over the last few years, and for various reasons travellers are seeking out opportunities to immerse themselves in heritage and cultural offerings. There is a lot of interest in finding ones roots, and learning about local customs. Another defining factor is a recognition of 'slow travel' and its benefits, which include enjoying the moment and exploring off the beaten track places that might otherwise be missed on a 'let's see the whole country in one week' type of holiday.

As the demands of living in today's fast paced world and the associated stress increases, travellers are more inclined to want to take things easy. They want to have a more meaningful interaction with the places they visit. Gone are the days when the height of luxury was staying in the biggest, most anonymous multi storey hotel. There is now real interest in authentic tours, community based home stays, visiting small establishments

where there is good local food, and getting to know the essence of the people. This complements the new challenges that have come from the economic changes in the last year, not in terms of choosing a cheaper accommodation option, but the dawning realisation of how the holiday spend can make a positive difference to the lives of those living in the destination.

There are enriching and exciting opportunities awaiting those who surrender themselves to these wonderful and genuine community based travel experiences as I did. Getting close to nature and finding an almost spiritual connection with the local people is a completely unexpected and emotional discovery. This is just one of the many positive spin offs.

Come - let me share with you a fascinating journey that will take you out of your comfort zone and into the very heart of 'Ubuntu' (humanity). As we say in Africa - 'we are because you are'.



Coffee Shack Backpackers

Probably the most popular destination in Coffee Bay is the Coffee Shack Backpackers. Quoted in 'Lonely Planet' as a genuine and unaffected mecca for fun-loving travellers."

Coffee Shack is a backpackers that offers a taste of rural Africa, in its own tropical paradise located right on the beach at the Bomvu River mouth at the Wild Coast. It is a deeply traditional area, where you will experience a way of life far removed from Western culture and values. At the same time though, it's good times all the way. The activities are mostly water based, with surfing lessons the most popular. It reminded me in some ways of the Caribbean, before mass tourism, but at a fraction of the cost. The property is FTSA-certified, and has a reputation of being a 'must do' destination on every back packer route. A pilgrimage to 'Coffee Shack' is well worth it. It's a good-value hostel in a magical setting.

www.coffeeshack.co.za



Pondoland Hiking Trail & Lodges

Scattered along the beaches of the Wild Coast, and well off the beaten track of most tourists are six camps located between the Mkambati reserve and Port St Johns. The business is owned by five community trusts. The camps range from twin-bedded log cabin accommodation to self catering chalets. It's a hike and bike trail, a distance of 85km and six days in duration. Horses are also around to help out when the going gets tough! The scenery is memorable, and so are your hosts as the leisurely pace of the programme encourages natural camaraderie. Porters are available at a small fee, and so are private guides if you prefer to be accompanied.

It is almost like stepping back in time. The Pondoland region was formerly part of the Transkei, which, largely due to lack of infrastructure and past neglect, has ensured that the well over 200 kilometer coastline is virtually inaccessible to all but those prepared to hike it, or venture forth on horseback. The beauty of the coastline is interfered with by few, and aside from the odd collection of thatched rondavel huts, is virtually uninhabited. Due to the remoteness of the region, strong Xhosa and Pondo cultures have been maintained. It is not uncommon to come across a Sangoma, or women wearing traditional face paint. It is rugged, unadulterated beauty and a great way to get away from it all.

www.drifters.co.za



Photographer: Mike Cohen

Bulungula Lodge

It is the rocket showers and solar power that are legendary at Bulungula. The lodge's 10 brightly painted huts have been positioned for the best sea and forest views.

The Nqileni Trust owns 40% of the business and its members are an integral part of daily life at the lodge. There is no need for boundary fences, no crime, no beggars and no hassles. The occupants of the village are engaging and friendly. Take a walk at any time of the day and night and you are more than likely to be invited into the mud huts for a drink and a chat.

The great thing about Bulungula is that you can do as much or as little as you want. Laze in the hammocks or on the beach, while listening to local music, or head off to the village with the women for a crazy day of face painting, brick making, maize stamping, traditional food preparation, beer brewing and firewood collecting.

The community also offers canoe trips up the beautiful Xhora River where kamikaze fish may spontaneously jump into your boat and Malachite kingfishers hunt in the forested cliffs upstream.

Bulungula has encouraged a number of local entrepreneurs that offer community related activities to visitors, including horse riding, canoeing, fishing, guiding, baking, sewing, cooking, wood-carving and environmental protection projects. These linkages have created jobs and income for 33 families over and above those employed directly at the lodge. No one in the village had any experience of tourism prior to 2004. But everyone invests heart and soul into their new ventures and as a result there is a unique, fresh edge to these activities.

There is a community-owned and irrigated, organic vegetable farm which supplies the lodge with much of its fresh veggies. Some local women have started the now legendary 'iLanga Fire Restaurant', where you will find the best sweet and savoury pancakes in Africa. And look out for the brand new bicycle powered blender producing the ultimate eco-smoothies.

Bulungula is also FTSA-certified, and just one look at this organizations and its broad economic reach, shows the sheer power and momentum of 'responsible tourism' when it is done properly.

It is certainly an example of a community based tourism business that can be an inspiration to others.

www.bulungula.com





The Mothers of Creation Homestays & Tourism Route

Located in the southern Cape, and including 11 rural communities in the Garden Route and Klein Karoo area, the route consists of home and farm stay experiences in a rustic rural setting.

It is an initiative inspired by women, who invite you to appreciate the natural beauty of the lovely countryside surrounding them. All the "mothers" on the route offer basic accommodation and, by supporting this project, you have the opportunity to experience their way of living and to contribute directly to local rural communities.

The 'Mothers' have an insight and understanding of organic food production, cultural crafts and alternative building methods, and this is a particularly good example of responsible tourist interaction with the local community. The authenticity of the experience more than makes up for the fact some of the accommodation is very basic. On this tour you meet the rocks of our nation - her women. You will feast on local, healthy foods all grown and prepared by your hosts, rest and relax in homes built and decorated by the women themselves.

You will dance, laugh, cry and sing with the emotions of Africa as well be amazed by her beauty and silence; You will walk, canoe, cycle, sightsee, ride in donkey carts and rock in taxis. "YOU WILL BE CHANGED FOREVER!" www.knysnalivinglocal.co.za

Kwam e-Makana Township Home Stays

The Grahamstown festival is an annual arts event held each July that draws local and international crowds. The Kwam e-Makana (My Place) home stays offer basic single or double accommodation and traditional meals upon request in the homes of local families. The service and rooms available vary a little from house to house, but most have running water and electricity.

There are currently 55 branded Kwam home stay owners, 54 of whom are women with an average of age over 50. There are also 12 branded Kwam taxis for getting around, four Kwam taverns to frequent - after which you would need a Kwam taxi to get home after sampling the local brew! All Kwam home stay owners have developed House Rules and Codes of Conduct and each year before the Festival, a quality check and audit on all the home stays is carried out. It is all credit to these homeowner entrepreneurs that in 2005, the audit results showed that most of the participating establishments had managed to improve their homes either by building on another room or by buying furniture, adding value to their home stay. A great way to see both worlds.

www.grahamstown.co.za



FTTSA is the world's first and still only tourism Fair Trade certification programme. The FTTSA label is awarded to tourism businesses that adhere to Fair Trade criteria:

- Fair wages and working conditions
 - Fair operations, purchasing and distribution of benefits
 - Ethical business practice
 - Respect for human rights culture and the environment
- Fair Trade in Tourism is about ensuring that people whose land, natural resources, labor knowledge and culture are used for tourism activities, actually benefit from tourism
- www.fttsacertification.org.za
www.fairtourismsa.org.za



Fair Trade South Africa is the national umbrella organisation for Fair Trade. The fair trade movement aims to enhance trading conditions for small scale businesses, improve labour conditions for employees and empower communities through ethical and sustainable trade. We work on behalf of all stakeholders of fair trade including producers, traders, retail, support organisations and of course consumers of fair trade products.

<http://www.fairtrade.org.za/>

The National Development Agency's primary mandate is to eradicate poverty by granting funds to civil society organisations that implement developmental projects of poor communities. Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa and NDA are working together to strengthen community-based tourism in South Africa.

www.nda.org.za

