Language, Cultural Immersion, and Volunteering – Off the Beaten Path

Ocotal, Nicaragua
Tom LeaMond

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

People in economically underdeveloped but culturally rich communities welcome visitors in their language, culture, and community as part of an equal exchange that provides a source of income and meaningful cultural exchange for families, teachers, program staff, neighbors, and the greater community.

Participants learn local language and culture, as well as adaptation and leadership skills in the classroom, home, neighborhoods, and volunteer work projects. Language and culture are taught in daily classes by local teachers. Local families reinforce language and culture through daily, first-hand interaction. Organizations hosting volunteers learn from the experience of some, help ...
Website
http://www.travelalive.com

Email address
tom@travelalive.com

Alternative email address
info@travelalive.com

---

Your idea

This will be the address used to plot your entry on the map.

Street Address
un cuadro y media al sur de radio segovia

City
Ocotal

State/Province
Nueva Segovia

Postal/Zip Code
11111

Country

Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant

Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists, Quality of benefit to residents for the destination, Quality of tourism management by destination leadership, Quality of stewardship of the destination.

Organization size
Small (1 to 100 employees)

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Tourism-related business

Year innovation began
2005

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Living culture.

Place your video embed code here from YouTube, Google Video and other video sharing websites. How to embed a video from YouTube.

Paste your code here

---

Innovation

What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

To provide meaningful travel experiences for volunteers and language students in exchange programs that greatly benefit both travelers and hosts.

Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.

People in economically underdeveloped but culturally rich communities welcome visitors in their language, culture, and community as part of an equal exchange that provides a source of income and meaningful cultural exchange for families, teachers, program staff, neighbors, and the greater community.

Participants learn local language and culture, as well as adaptation and leadership skills in the classroom, home, neighborhoods, and volunteer work projects. Language and culture are taught in daily classes by local teachers. Local families reinforce language and culture through daily, first-hand interaction. Organizations hosting volunteers learn from the experience of some, help others gain experience, and enjoy mutually beneficial cross-cultural interaction. The community as a whole benefits from an inclusive form of tourism, without walls, fences, and private property, where locals and travelers study, live, and work together without sacrificing the character of the community.

Each community develops and manages the program based on its qualities and resources. Travel Alive recruits participants and provides pre-departure, in-program, and post-program support, and international health insurance. We also support the community by managing program registration and pre-program orientation, aiding with emergency situations involving participants and their families, providing program development consultation, making suggestions, and providing participant feedback.
Instead of thinking of the community as “in need” and “recipients of aid” we treat the community as a partner. Under principles of socially responsible entrepreneurship, Travel Alive and local partners develop a meaningful and sustainable tourism flow that thrives on maintaining the cultural integrity of the community and markets the local language, culture, history, and traditions.

Planning involves collaboration with local individuals and families. The strength of the program is the involvement of the community and emphasizing what makes the community special. It is managed by community leaders, families, and teachers who see cultural tourism as a way to educate, highlight their strengths, and improve conditions in the community.

Travel Alive provides services that are not available in the community: recruitment, consultation from the perspective of participants, feedback and keeping alumni involved, program registration, hard-to-find resources, health and accident insurance, and pre-program orientation; describing hardships and joys one may experience better preparing them for life in a third world culture.

The result – a mutually beneficial experience for the traveler and the community that maintains the integrity and character of the community and provides an international exchange forum in a region that may be left out of traditional tourism activities.
Visitors are naturally curious and absorb the lessons of their hosts learning about the community, the culture, and history.

Environmental issues such as depletion of natural resources, interruptions in electrical service and running water, pollution, and a crumbling infrastructure are everyday realities for locals and are learned about first-hand by visitors.

---

**Sustainability**

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

With an annual operating budget of around $35,000 we are still reaching towards sustainability. Our total revenue for 2008 was $65,000 and comes from program fees paid by participants. In February of 2009 we have already matched our 2008 revenue. All local staff and families are paid based on the number of program participants and there are currently three volunteer staff members in the U.S. We hope to start paying U.S. staff in 2009. We are a for-profit company working with for-profit local partners. As such we use entrepreneurial principles to organize and manage our company to make social change.

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

This initiative is absolutely sustainable, financially and organizationally. We are currently striving to reach that point of critical mass where participation will keep the community busy, support local partners financially, support a U.S. staff financially, and allow for program development and expansion to other world communities.

It is important we reach that point before running out of resources and inspiration. Each year we gain more interest, recruit more participants, and hear from more communities around the world who want to explore this initiative. Profits for the next three to four years will go towards marketing, staff compensation, and program development.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

Because we have not reached a point where our efforts can support a full-time, professional recruitment and program development staff we are have only the time we can donate to the project. Not being able to dedicate our total attention to recruitment it will take us longer to reach a level of participation that can support growth and have a greater impact.

With full-time staff and some well placed, and well timed, mass marketing campaigns in colleges and schools we could reach more interested people and educate them about the experience. The cost of large scale mass marketing (print advertising, poster and college visits) and high internet placement fees are also barriers.

Replicating this program in other cultures is something we are looking forward to doing. Every week we receive emails from people in developing countries offering to partner with us. It may be a challenge for us to find partners who share all of our core values, but once we do it will be a pleasure to develop and implement new and diverse programs.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

We are exploring opportunities to expand to other communities and to other countries. In 2008 we partnered with a group in Ecuador that matches most of our core values. A very popular destination, we would explore more opportunities in Ecuador.

We are also considering expansion to more communities in Nicaragua, and we are exploring a program in Brazil. By expanding our geographical presence we limit the risk to the whole program from political unrest or program failure in one program community.

Ultimately we would like all of our programs to be consistent with the model developed in Ocotal, Nicaragua.

---

**The Story**

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

Having enjoyed the benefits of immersion travel, long-term travel abroad, language acquisition, and living in a community abroad I dreamt of ways to provide the same opportunities to other people in a way that may not require a long-term commitment on their part.

The dream usually involved language study in non-traditional locations. My first significant experience abroad was in Spain in the early 1990s, when Spain was still running to catch up with the rest of Europe. An early idea was to develop a program in the Czech Republic, which at the time was quickly emerging from a long period of restrictions from communist rule. It was at my high school reunion in 2004 that I first started thinking about a program in Nicaragua.

My former high school German teacher had been living in Nicaragua, taught at the engineering university in Managua, and was directing a grass-roots, sustainable energy program in the rich coffee growing region of north-central Nicaragua. She explained to me that her program hosted international volunteers, technicians, students, teachers, and others and that often short-term volunteers were only marginally affective spending much of their time in culture shock, struggling with the language, recovering from ailments, and just trying to manage in the new environment. Nonetheless they were valuable to the program for the revenue they brought; paying for accommodation and small donations, and the notoriety they brought to the program.

I wondered how much more affective these volunteers could be if instead of arriving fresh off the plane and beginning their service in a new and strange environment, they could spend a week, two weeks, or more adjusting to life in a local community. What if they could immerse themselves in the language, culture, family-life, and work of the community, and then; after they had reached a level of comfort, they could volunteer with the sustainable energy project. I thought that maybe they could provide a higher value to the project, and the experience might be much more enriching for them too.

That is how the idea of cultural immersion in Nicaragua was born. The next step was to explore feasibility and develop a project plan. My former teacher provided the local contacts who were already interested in a community focused language and volunteer program. Together we started to share ideas and make plans until we reached a point where it was time to make a decision.
I recruited a U.S. partner, and still unsure about moving forward with this project, we traveled together to meet with our local partners who had already been working hard to recruit teachers, home-stay families, and volunteer projects. Near the end of our first of many in-person planning trips we met with a group of about thirty home-stay family members who listened for over an hour as we explained the details of how this program might work. After our presentation we asked for questions and the first person jumping to her feet asked simply, “when can you start sending people”.

Walking away from that presentation I commented to my U.S. partner, “I was on the fence until I heard the first question, now I know we have to do this.” She agreed!

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers’ marketing material.

Tom LeaMond, born in U.S., with an eye towards the larger world, as a sophomore in college switched from studying business to geography, and before graduating had worked on a Mississippi River steamer, in the Outward Bound sailing program, and on two separate Atlantic sailing schooners between Northern Maine and Martinique.

At age 26 learned Spanish and Spanish culture in Spain. At 36 earned an MBA in international business in just one year. Refined his business skills at the University of Chicago Hospitals, and in 2005 founded Travel Alive to provide mutually beneficial immersion travel to others.

Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

Language and cultural immersion allows travelers to experience details of family and community life – not usually accessible to tourists. They participate in birthdays, anniversaries, street play, and last summer some dealt with the passing from cancer of a young mother who left two young children and no known family.

The exchange goes both ways as the community welcomes visitors into their homes, helps them celebrate milestones and cares for them when they are homesick, ill, or having trouble adjusting.

Visitor and host benefit from the interaction and the end result is usually an understanding that they are not so different.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

Our successes in Ocotal, Nicaragua can be translated into other areas through similar community partnerships. Continuing to seek out suitable community partners will help us spread language and cultural immersion programs to other off-the-beaten-path communities in Nicaragua and in other countries.

Attracting suitable participants through marketing efforts and through partnerships with schools, churches, community groups, and others will provide increased participant interest and eventually create repeat participants and a team of alumni program advocates.

Source URL: https://www.changemakers.com/geotourismchallenge/entries/language-cultural-immersion-and-volunteering-beaten#comment-0