CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM
FOR SMALL ENTREPRENEURS

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Introduction – Trevor Budge

In this paper we want to range over a number of matters which relate to the planning, marketing and conducting of our tours which are relevant to the theme of this conference. In particular we want to examine who our customers are, what they want and how to bring it all together. We will be fairly pragmatic in our observations of trying to make a business out of cultural tourism.

Let us set the scene. We started two years ago with no capital – only an overdraft, limited knowledge of the tourism industry, a desire to make a profit at the end of the tour but a strong principle not to compromise the quality of our product. We had no special contacts in the industry and no guaranteed business. At one of the seminars we went to just after we started we heard a number of statements which at the time we didn’t believe, or didn’t want to believe. They included the fact that:

- you must be prepared to work for two years without any money;
- you must accept that you will receive no help from government, e.g. tourism commissions;
- you will not be able to break into the international market within the first two years in the tourism industry unless you have some very lucky breaks;
- most people will sit back and wait for you to go broke;
- you must make your product work for the domestic market before it will be taken seriously at the international level;
- the inbound market is controlled by a dozen or so firms in Sydney and you must present your product to them and they will not want to listen.

Two years later we can confirm all of these points, but to some extent each of them is far from a rigid rule.

Let me illustrate. The international business we have generated to date has come from completely unconventional sources – a colleague of a colleague, a chance acquaintance.

We have followed a simple maxim which has proved correct time and again: ‘Luck is when preparation meets opportunity’. We have spent an enormous amount of our greatest resource – time – to ensure that we are constantly prepared to be able to respond in the shortest possible time to any opportunity which arises.

We have also recognised that no matter how well prepared we are we must be flexible. The product must be adapted to the market within the operating principles set. However, no matter how well prepared one is, it always takes three times as long to finalise something than one imagines. Perhaps the greatest lesson we have learned is that you can learn more and achieve more by working with your competitors rather than against them.

When we started two years ago it was with four distinct aims which were to:

- arrange and conduct small group special interest tours based on the cultural heritage of the goldfields of central Victoria;
- organise and market a network of personalised accommodation - farmstay, homestay, historic bed and breakfasts and self contained cottages in the goldfields of central Victoria;
- take every opportunity to bring these two concepts together as a unique form of product offering;
- and develop the business for the domestic market and take every opportunity to increase the level of overseas business.

We have made considerable progress in two years. Our product range is now Victoria-wide with strong links to South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania. Our tours include interstate. Our business name has changed from Goldfields Host Home Connection and Goldfields Cultural Tours to Australian Designer Travel which incorporates the former business focus.

We have adhered to three principles in terms of our operation: very personal service to customer needs, attention to detail and flexibility.

Julie Hurley will specifically address these issues but I want to focus on the market and marketing itself.

Marketing cultural tourism

Whilst we both have had some experience on the fringe of tourism for a number of years we had much to learn, particularly regarding international tourism.
We have undergone a crash course in respect to the tourism industry and we are still learning.

Although we consider ourselves to be successful in what we have achieved in the past two years we are still a long way from being financially successful. We estimate that we will be able to pay real wages out of the business in 1992 if projects in the pipeline come to fruition.

In developing a tourism service and product both domestically and internationally for Australia's cultural heritage product, we consider that Australia needs to be very careful in not being overly prescriptive in defining the market. We need to define our potential product very broadly in developing cultural tourism. It is not quite as broad as the ordinary lives of ordinary people, but it seeks the potentially extraordinary in all of us.

We must recognise that there is no such creature as a 'cultural tourist'. We were inspired in our early days by Chris Wood from Australians Studying Abroad. Chris spent a long time trying to point the Victorian Tourism Commission in a new direction or at least make it realise that there is more than one direction in which it can head.

In one address Chris gave, he spoke about how relatively ordinary things in our everyday lives are potential cultural tourism experiences. He spoke of the decorative tiles on butchers' shops and fish shops in suburbs, of rows of Federation-style housing, miners' cottages in gold mining towns, and of overseas visitors seeing aspects of our lives which we pass by.

It is crucial that our definition of cultural tourism and more particularly, cultural tourists, is not rigid. We have run a number of tours which are a long way from what we could describe as an academically based program. However, the participants have learnt enormously from the resource people we have used and from each other. We have learnt quickly that there are a range of audiences. Our tour programs can be adapted to the nature and interest of the participants.

The problem is that this flexibility, personal approach and the individuality of each program runs counter to the way the vast majority of the tour industry works. The tour industry want packages and products which it can sell. Therefore, it largely rejects as too hard much of the product which operators like ourselves promote. So the pressure is placed on us to adapt or change our product to suit, not necessarily what our customer wants, or what we want to provide, but what the industry finds easy to package, to brochure and to sell.

If you want to succeed in the cultural tourist industry without giving in to this sort of pressure, such as reducing your product to a single common denomination, putting price before content and abandoning your principles, you have to search for operators who want to work in the same way you do. It is our experience that although they are numerous they are outnumbered.

We have also found that any new operator has tremendous credibility problems. It is a risky business for potential participants on tour to book with an unknown organisation. If they book with a large well known firm they feel secure. They don't know you and they don't know whether they are being 'ripped off'. The only real credibility you have is word-of-mouth from satisfied customers and the eventual recognition you get from the industry and that is critical. One method which we have used to successfully overcome credibility problems is to market through or with other organisations which are well known and highly respected. We were fortunate that Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, saw that what we were doing had potential to put greater depth into their product and we were able to jointly brochure product with them. By being able to share a booth with them we were able to gain admission into prestigious events like the Australian Tourism Exchange. We market many of our tours through the National Trust in Victoria. They 'buy' the tour from us. We find that if they advertise the identical tour they can generate a lot more response than we can. Life Be In It is another organisation which markets our tours.

I would like to illustrate what I have been saying by two brief experiences. One is from an address I read from a conference held in Adelaide four years ago, and the other is from our own experiences.

The first is from an address by Marilyn Abbott Zweck to a Conference titled 'Tourism and the Arts'. In her address, about marketing the Sydney Opera House, she describes how in 1977 it was a great tourist attraction. However, visitors rarely attended performances. The problems related to the building, the tourist industry and the tradition of marketing theatre. To the visitor, it was a sculpture, an empty shell. The tourism industry found bookings to be inflexible and shows couldn't be guaranteed far enough in advance. The travel industry was promoting the Sydney Opera House from the point of view of seeing it from a harbour cruise. The box office was not used to problems like delayed aeroplanes, last minute cancellations and the antics of tour leaders. The solution was to encourage tourists to buy all the services the Opera House had to offer, create packages that provided a total experience of Sydney and the Opera House and then sell this product to the industry. They made it easy for the tour operator or the public to book a package. Travel agents are paid commission on all products. Marilyn noted in her address that different packages were needed for different markets.
One of our own experiences illustrates other aspects of what I have been saying. How do we come to be organisers of a 16-day tour of Australian lighthouses for the New England Branch of the United States Lighthouse Society? The producers of the Australian Garden Journal in Bowral, with whom we had advertised, were approached by a specialist travel agent in the United States with whom they had some dealings as to whether they knew of any operators who could put a tour together of lighthouses. By chance, they approached us and, in two days, we put together a comprehensive tour package. By using every contact we knew we had arranged the tour in association with the President of the Australian Lighthouse Association and through a chance contact in Tasmania we had arranged helicopter trips to Maatsuyker and Tasman Island.

Julie Hurley
My friends looked askance: 'You're in tourism', they exclaimed! I hastily explained:

It is not like the usual tourism. I am not loading people on buses, giving a rehearsed spiel and driving through towns and countryside at a whirlwind pace. This is different. It is cultural heritage tourism. It is for small groups and individuals with an interest in our heritage and a desire to learn more about history and our built and natural resources.

This has been the explanation we have given on a number of occasions since setting up our business just two years ago. The image of tourism and of the industry which supports it has confirmed our thinking about the commercial attractions and large establishments. A 'them and us' situation has developed between those exporting and at times exploiting our country and its assets.

When we first started to explore the potential for our business, we decided there were two sides to the story - 'packaged tours and travellers' on the one hand and 'people and places' on the other.

The challenge
The challenge is to manage both 'packaged tours and travellers' as well as 'people and places' in a way which is viable as a business enterprise but which offer a learning experience for our travellers/clients and guests. We have just prepared our third series of tours under the title 'cultural, special interest tourism'. We have been reasonably successful on the domestic market and are slowly establishing a reputation and contacts on the international market with a few select agencies who are like-minded in their approach to tourism.

Whilst it is exciting to be at the forefront of what we believe is a changing attitude to tourism and a growing demand for travel opportunities which cater for individual and special interest needs, it is a long haul to achieve recognition in the market place with competition from large, established companies.

Our tours are designed around a special theme, sometimes on request, for a group or society; other times from our own interest and knowledge of an area or subject. We try to strike a balance in our approach between responding to perceived demand on one hand and offering a program which seeks to educate on the other.

The reality looks something like this:

Step 1 Collect, identify the resources. Know where, what and how accessible they are.

Step 2 Determine the market. Who will buy the tour and for whom is it designed?

Step 3 Confirm a title which suits the concept and will appeal to the market group.

Step 4 Research the topic, explore the area, become informed about and familiar with the feature, site or building. Talk to people: the locals, property owners, professionals, writers. Seek advice, input and suggestions. Add self knowledge to this mix.

Step 5 Contact those most suitable to lead, guide or contribute to the program as key people. In many cases the people most suitable are the locals: the owner of the historic home, or garden, the descendant of the family who lived and worked in the historic home village or mining site, the farmer who still works the property and who knows the special, natural features.

Step 6 Decide a commercial price structure which takes into account the specialist guides, entry to property, sites, transport, meals, accommodation and is based on a limited number of people – usually 15-20.

Step 7 Time the tours/tour so that there is an opportunity to learn and share knowledge. Allow for space to explore further if warranted and consider those who may want to move on at a faster pace. Take account of weather conditions, allow for social time so that there is an interaction between the group and the guide – and for questions, review of the day's activity and plans for the remainder of the tour.

Step 8 Ensure that the atmosphere in which food is presented is in keeping with the theme of the tour. We mostly eat in a private home or garden by arrangement and we enjoy fresh, home grown produce. Accommodation is arranged, where possible in guest houses or hotels which are of historical interest.

Historic Environment VII 3 & 4 (1990)
Step 9  Take into account all aspects of the itinerary.
Step 10  Present the itinerary to the group or organisation or prepare to market it as part of a public program.

The key factors on which we base our tour design and concepts are recognition, sensitivity and relevance.

**Recognition**
It is important to recognise the wealth of people resources we have in local communities who, with assistance, encouragement and guidance, are able to offer a rare insight into their own heritage, and therefore ours. There are outstanding built resources which are taken for granted unless their character, style, period and history can be interpreted. There is our superb natural environment, unknown for its beauty, diversity and historic importance.

**Sensitivity**
It is important to be sensitive to the use of historic sites and places, to their value and preservation, as well as to people's personal property. This also includes sensitivity to the feelings of 'small people' who have contributed doggedly to establishing a pastoral/agricultural culture: to the hard working men and women, the innovators, pioneers, designers and entrepreneurs of all origins who have made Australian culture what it is today.

**Relevance**
Experts are needed. They add a dimension, interpretation and knowledge which are equally important to that of the local guide. The combination of both views, the stories, the timing and the telling is the key to the design of tours which offer a balance of education, information, informality and pleasure. Knowledge of the tour group makes this task so much easier of course, and this is where the design of programs for identified groups is a more satisfying, lateral thinking exercise.

**Expectations: mine and theirs**
How much information should be offered?
What are their real interests?
Who will buy?
How will I know they like what they get?

**So, now the tour is ready to go!**
I meet my guests for the next two days at the start of the tour. Together we check the program, answer questions, clarify those times which are important to adhere to; we also check that everyone knows each other, enjoy a cup of tea around a cosy fire whilst our guide/resource person introduces the theme and provides a context for our exploration. I allow for as much flexibility within the framework of the tour as possible. If some feature, site or building is particularly important to the group, we try and allow extra time. If, on return to our hotel, there is something still to be seen, such as a walk through parks or gardens which holds obvious interest, then we endeavour to include it.

By this time, I certainly know more about my companions, their own background, knowledge and special interests. I always check my program, speak to individuals and make rearrangements if it is appropriate or relevant to do so. The chance for them to offer constructive criticism and ideas is always given. I have been impressed and pleased by the response I have had. There have been compliments and also some really worthwhile feedback which I take into account for my next effort.

**Conclusion**
Notwithstanding the issues associated with tourism and our historic sites and monuments in Australia, I believe that we have the potential to develop a more aware, interested and educated community – one that is more willing to actively support the retention and preservation of our heritage. Cultural tourism, augurs well for the future of the tourism operator if it is managed well and cooperatively presented and supported.