CULTURAL TOURISM: OBSERVATIONS OF A BUREAUCRATIC EXPERIENCE

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Introduction
First of all I must make it quite clear that the comments I am about to make are my own and in no way represent the views of the Victorian government.

I also don’t wish to regale you with some tedious chronology of Victorian government activity in this area. It is important, however, that I outline the historic background and relate my more pertinent comments to that experience.

Historic background
By necessity the story must start in 1982 with the election of the first Cain Labor government. Elected on a platform of change, one of the first changes was the reorganisation of tourism management through the creation of the Victorian Tourism Commission (VTC) under the chairmanship of Don Dunstan. Previously the government had played something of a benign role in tourism matters, undertaking some basic promotional work and selling tickets for the Victorian Railways and a few significant attractions and holiday destinations. Much of the day-to-day promotional work had been left in the hands of Regional Tourism Boards. The new organisation set out to produce a comprehensive tourism strategy for the State, to explore new ideas and initiatives and to link tourism into the State’s economic strategies.

The concept of cultural (heritage) tourism was developing in the minds of a number of people, and in fact had been the subject of a small government sponsored seminar held in the last days of the previous government.

What was particularly important at this stage was to see that the concept was bedded down as part of the tourism curriculum and, as a consequence, had a rationale in economic terms.

By 1984 these new initiatives had led to a joint seminar between the staff of the Ministry for Planning and Environment (MPE) to provide key staff with an opportunity to appreciate their degree of interdependence and to come to some view of what opportunities existed for better cooperation and interaction. It was no coincidence that heritage issues were prominent on the agenda of that seminar.

Perhaps the most important event was the publication of the government’s economic strategy, Victoria: The Next Step: Economic Initiatives and Opportunities for the 1980s. In this document tourism rated a whole chapter and gave credit to the notion that the State’s man-made heritage was an asset worth pursuing. What was particularly significant was that here was an opening for tourism and heritage to play a key part in the State’s economic revival. It needs to be realised that the economic strategy was to provide the context for State budgets and intervention in economic activity. It is also important to realise that it preceded the State Conservation Strategy (where you would normally find heritage issues identified) by a good two years. It made particular reference to tourism opportunities in the goldfields’ regions of the State, such opportunities relying largely on the presentation of the remains of nineteenth century gold-mining.

The Heritage Branch of MPE took up this challenge and in 1985 produced a summary of tourism opportunities in the goldfields and set out a thematic basis for looking at them. This work was transmitted to VTC in the hope that it would act as a basis for their work in this area.

At this time the National Trust also identified the opportunity for themselves to make a contribution (and dare I say it, also to attract some money). It made representations to VTC which led to the establishment of a working group of the Trust, VTC, Department of Management and Budget (DMB), the Ministry for the Arts and MPE. This group acted as the basis for the establishment of an interdepartmental committee to promote the concepts of cultural tourism. This committee was clearly established as an incentive of the Heritage Unit at MPE, with the full support of the then Secretary for Planning and Environment, David Yencken. For sound political reasons it was established under the auspices of the VTC and at the invitation of the then chairman, Don Dunstan.

I believe that it was at this point that a fatal mistake was made. There would appear to have been inadequate assurances received from both Dunstan and the VTC that this initiative had some priority within the organisation and that all staff would be required to support it. Its terms of reference were:

• to be a forum for discussion and interdepartmental liaison in regard to projects and programs that concern cultural tourism;
• to comment and make recommendations on cultural tourism projects referred to it by the Commission;

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to inform the Commission of the impact on
cultural tourism of programs and projects of
other departments;

to generally coordinate heritage advice to the
Commission and assist in the future development
of cultural tourism including coordinating with
Federal funding agencies such as the National
Estate Grants Program.

The first meeting of the committee didn't take place
until April 1986 and, at that meeting, a VTC officer,
Graeme Dunstan, presented a paper entitled
'Cultural Tourism – linking the economies of tourism
to the goals of cultural development'. This remains a
valuable introduction to concepts and should have
acted as the basis for fruitful work. However, it is clear
from the minutes of that first meeting that there
remained strongly antagonistic elements within the
VTC and that representatives of those elements made
it clear that they weren't going to have interference
with their mode of operation or their views on strategy
and implementation.

It was also at this time that we first see a formal recogni-
tion of the work of a company called Australians
Studying Abroad, which for some time had been
running highly successful overseas study tours for
Australians, particularly tertiary students. This
company, the brainchild of an art historian, Chris
Wood, had recently started running study tours of
Australia for Americans. Obviously this new official
tourism initiative had more than an academic interest
to him and his company. David Dunstan has already
given credit to Chris' work and there is no need for me
to repeat those comments here. Chris was invited to
address the next meeting of the committee. Dare I say,
that despite Chris' skills and talents in this area,
this action by the committee was probably one of
sowing a fatal seed.

By May 1986 the committee was up to its fourth
meeting, the representation from VTC was left to the
enthusiastic Graeme Dunstan and there was consider-
able time devoted to discussing the possible employ-
ment of Chris Woods as a consultant. As it turned
out, despite all his support and efforts Chris or his
company appear to have never received any
commission or payment from VTC. Interestingly
enough, attached to those minutes is a summary of
VTC capital funding proposals for 1985-86, of which
only three bore any relationship to the goldfields
region and none of them to developing new concepts
of cultural (heritage) tourism. Undoubtedly other
work was being done within VTC to develop a
Central Goldfields Strategy. However, the emphasis,
given currency in the economic strategy, does not
seem to have been filtering through to the important
promotion of private tourism initiatives.

In July 1986 the VTC sponsored Banks Report was
completed. It undertook an analysis of Victoria's
tourist opportunities and identified that Victoria's
tourism market advantage was as a centre of cultural
experience. This gave the little band of 'cultural tour-
ists' within the bureaucracy new heart and
enthusiasm and reinforced the policies and ideas
which had been promoted since 1982.

Ironically in June the VTC had produced its Gold-
fields Tourism Development Program, a belated
response to the economic strategy. This program was
dominated by a commitment to facility development
as opposed to the promotion of new concepts and
markets. In other words it was all about creating
visitor centres and accommodation.

The greatest shot in the arm for the complete concept
of cultural tourism (as opposed to heritage tourism)
came with the August 1987 Cultural Tourism Confer-
ence. Sponsored by VTC it attracted some 400
participants. It was, undoubtedly, the most significant
tourism conference in Victoria in years and was not
only received with great enthusiasm by the industry,
but led to the formation of the Cultural Tourism
Association of Victoria. At last there was a broader
industry base from which to pursue these ideas.

But what happened? By September 1988 there is
evidence of very little support from within VTC.
Some might say that there were elements within that
organisation which were directly undermining
the idea. The interdepartmental committee, now
downgraded to a working group again, continued to
meet until early 1989, but then disappeared from
view. This probably had more than a little bit to do
with the departure of Graeme Dunstan from the
VTC. It was also no coincidence that in this period
the Commission was restructured and yet another
shake-up of the organisation was undertaken. We are
still waiting to see whether any of those exciting ideas
will be resuscitated. The VTC has continued to do
work on Aboriginal tourist initiatives and in that
context the concepts seem to have been more readily
adopted.

But what of the other actors? MPE and its Heritage
Branch not only still exist, but remain interested in
these issues; but should it and can it effectively steer
such a resuscitation? The National Trust, obviously
seeing that there was no ready money floating around
have disappeared from view. This is despite the fact
that the Trust in Victoria has its own tourist operation
called Trust Tours, which would seem a perfect
vehicle to pursue high quality initiatives in heritage
tourism and to tap its ready-made markets. Of the
other government departments, Conservation,
Forests and Lands developed its own tourism
strategy, which touched on some of these concepts;
the Department of Management and Budget has most
recently been more interested in reigniting in govern-
ment expenditure and the Ministry for the Arts, aside

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from its agency, the Museum of Victoria, has seemingly lost interest. Chris Wood and Australians Studying Abroad maintain a successful commercial operation and continue to pursue their particular ideas in that context. The Cultural Tourism Association of Victoria has been absorbed into the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

I will now move on to make some observations on how this activity has impacted on the success of cultural heritage tourism programs.

What is cultural tourism?

Others over the last two days have either directly or indirectly set out to define cultural tourism and I don’t wish to labour over the definition. In simple terms I see it as meaning the development, presentation and interpretation of cultural resources for tourism purposes. Obviously this can be applied to a great range of different scenarios as disparate as the operation of a small local historical society museum cottage through to the full blown cultural/educational tour for international academics.

Interestingly enough, the Victorian effort to date has been directed more toward the latter than the former and, as a consequence, has largely ignored the very areas where:

- a major economic benefit can be achieved, i.e. interstate travel and visits;
- the multitude of local tourist operators have marketable products.

Cultural tourism as it relates to heritage should be seen as presenting a total experience to the tourist/visitor and not simply being the presentation of one or two places as isolated things to ‘gawk’ at. It must set out to relate the past to the present (and preferably the future) and provide the visitor with more than a fleeting reason for being there.

The concept proposed by the Banks Report, i.e. that Victoria could obtain a market advantage through the promotion of itself as a centre of cultural experience, has not been totally lost. The development of the Melbourne Comedy Festival from small beginnings to its current international status is an ideal example.

We must hope that officialdom’s view of cultural tourism will ultimately extend beyond comedy.

What do we have to sell?

We have the opportunity to present a great range of cultural heritage, be it pertaining to the pre or post European settlement of the country.

Over the last two days we have heard from a variety of people presenting ideas for the development and use of heritage sites for tourism purposes. I don’t want to start relisting these places here or attempt to catalogue the types of cultural experiences that Australia can offer. I must however reinforce the need for cultural (heritage) tourism to be related to more than just the odd site or place. Our history (both pre and post European settlement) and its physical remains is diverse and unique and offers a remarkable opportunity to pursue education in Australia and things Australian. This opportunity is far broader and more interesting than the opportunities offered by textbooks by themselves.

In fact a recent article in the Melbourne Age pointed out the new found enthusiasm for Australian studies. This new found enthusiasm will need to be serviced by high quality educational material. So whether the traditional tourist bureaucrats like it or not the tourist industry will develop in this direction anyway.

The early choice of the Victorian goldfields as a theme for the development of concepts and ideas was particularly pertinent in setting out to service a broader educational role. As members of ICOMOS who attended the Central Goldfields Conference in 1988 would realise, this subject presents a picture of intense and massive economic activity and its consequential social and environmental upheaval. High quality presentations, however, rely on an understanding by the presenter of the sources of the relevant material so that they are able to join the bits of the jigsaw together. For example, the Creswick deep lead mining dumps are a spectacular feature in their own right, but before they can be given any real meaning they need to be related to the resultant physical changes in the region and the social and economic consequences for the community as a whole.

The Heritage Branch continues to promote the completion of comprehensive local heritage surveys throughout Victoria, ostensibly to provide local government with the basis to protect its heritage assets, but also to ensure that a sound data base exists to ultimately assist in promoting and servicing educational and tourist programs such as these.

So what we have to sell are the particular and unique features of this country, not the things that somehow replicate other cultures (unless of course there is a particular message to be learned from such things). What is perhaps more important is to able to present these things in a way which reinforces the unique aspects of our society.

What is the market?

In my earlier comments I alluded to fatal mistakes in the work and approach of the committee promoting the development of cultural heritage tourism. One of those was not to take a broad enough view of the market for this form of tourism. Much time was put into discussing ways of establishing contacts with
overseas groups and designing itineraries which would suit groups being brought in from overseas. There were several reasons for this:

- It was perceived that the input of U.S. dollars or German deutschmarks to the Australian economy was what would attract greater government support. There is an element of truth in such a proposition. However, with hindsight, it seems a little naive to believe that Australia’s economic woes would be easily solved by the influx of the sort of income cultural tourism could hope to bring in either in the short or medium term.

- The influence of Chris Wood was such that his experiences with organisations in the United States seemed to provide an appropriate route to travel, so to speak. Given the attitude of certain key tourism bureaucrats and the lack of official enthusiasm for promoting real cultural (heritage tourism), it is not surprising that latching onto existing networks seemed attractive.

I believe that the first market to be tapped should have been the local one, particularly that sector of the market which contains tertiary and to a lesser extent secondary education institutes. Earlier in this paper I mentioned the growing interest in Australian studies. Here lay and dare I say still lies a rapidly growing and, in local economic terms, golden opportunity. As people working on the new Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) curriculum in Australian studies have found, it will be some time before the extensive and exciting educational resources available for this course are fully and imaginatively utilised. An enterprising entrepreneur or even the State education and tourism authorities could assemble packages which readily serviced such educational needs. I can’t imagine that the teachers are going to have enough time to do it themselves. Ultimately such packages would be picked up by other groups, including the economically more attractive interstate and overseas groups.

In making these statements I do not wish to be seen as denigrating the value of the international market. I simply believe that there is value in tackling a problem on more than one front. Alternatively, where resources and commitment are as low as they were in this case, a more strategic view would have been to build broader local support first. After all there was already a keen collection of local operators and a local education system which was waiting for the lead. They are all still there if the enthusiasm of the 1980s can be resuscitated.

What is a realistic role for government?

The first economic strategy had outlined a role for government in tourism to:

- provide an administrative and coordinating focus for the tourism sector;
- liaise with the Federal government to ensure that Victoria’s tourism potential is maximized under Australian government regulations and attitudes;
- undertake information and marketing campaigns on behalf of the Victorian tourism sector;
- participate, both directly and indirectly, in development activities which enhance Victoria’s tourism potential;
- ensure that the limited resources available are used with maximum effect and, in particular, to produce a regionally balanced outcome;
- ensure large scale participation by low income earners in tourism activities.

It is notable that nowhere in that list is there any mention of the Victorian government acting as a tourism operator. It is a gross omission if for no other reason than it was already operating substantial tourist destinations and facilities, both through the VTC’s Victour Properties (since wound up) and the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (now Conservation and Environment), and not only continued to do so but developed further direct operations as the years progressed.

The most recent reorganisation of the VTC has led to the winding up of Victour Properties and the dispersal of its direct operational and management responsibilities. A number of those responsibilities have been packed off to other government agencies, particularly the Department of Conservation and Environment. So the government finds it necessary to continue in the direct management of tourist facilities and places, even if it is a by-product of other heritage and conservation functions.

Perhaps the most impressive direct government operation of heritage sites for tourism is the NSW Historic Houses Trust. Whilst it would be wonderful to think that all governments would be willing to adopt that model it is only realistic to accept that governments will not be willing to make the commitment such as New South Wales has done (it waits to be seen whether NSW keeps it up). Unless of course it can be shown that there is compensating direct or indirect financial return to the State or some other indirect community benefit. To date the Historic Houses Trust has been able to trade on the fact that it is leading the country in setting standards in development and presentation. It is not unreasonable to expect governments to buy this sort of argument. After all, the massive expenditure on National Parks around the country is justified with similar arguments, i.e. the necessity to provide leadership in the conservation and presentation of the natural environment.
Should government be directly involved in the development and operation of itineraries and tours? In the long term probably not, but in developing good cultural (heritage) tourism programs, it may, in the short to medium term be necessary to directly develop and operate tours and itineraries to ensure that resources are utilized to maximum effect, quality is maintained and that demand is met through a reasonable spread. The Heritage Branch, utilizing a National Estate Grant, commissioned Chris Wood to prepare an itinerary for the central goldfields. This was a direct result of a justifiable concern that there was little real understanding of what could be achieved and what quality could be expected. The real shame is that this work has neither been marketed nor to my knowledge is it being used. It has also not been repeated for other places or areas.

As I see it, governments throughout Australia will need to become directly involved if they wish to see high quality models for cultural (heritage) tourism developed. They will have to become involved not only through their tourist agencies but through heritage units and groups and even education agencies. These agencies will need to be active, to the point of producing and promoting itineraries and tours to ensure that desired high quality standards are maintained. It is also imperative that community heritage groups, such as the National Trust, develop a genuine interest in this area and not simply see it as a source of government handouts for its normal work.

Conclusions
In conclusion, I have been saying:

• Cultural (heritage) tourism is not going to go away nor is it going to be satisfied simply by the development of further facilities. Clearly the tourist infrastructure of visitor centres, displays, accommodation, etc. will be required but it should be a by-product of the tourist products being sold.

• Government agencies will need to be involved and probably initially at a detailed level of development. It is only in this way that the real aims and objectives will be met and that high standards and quality are pursued.

• Government involvement must come with political backing and determination and bureaucratic commitment. As Victoria’s experience shows a part time sense of vision is not enough.

• The whole market must be surveyed and its needs considered. Obviously all sectors will not be able to be addressed immediately, but at least some strategic decisions can be taken as to which sectors to pursue initially. The goodwill of one or two operators in offering their views on such matters will inevitably be treated with suspicion. The view must be broader and thereby avoid accusations of feather bedding, particularly given the ruthless and cut-throat nature of the industry.

Endnotes