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Education for more Sustainable Travel Approaches in Group Tourism: Forum Anders Reisen

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ABSTRACT

The paper will show how German tour operators facilitate sustainable tourism and encourage their travellers to value and respect heritage and living cultures of host communities by providing and promoting sustainability criteria. A selection of criteria will be presented and their effect on the stakeholders (host communities, travellers and tour operators) will be analysed.

Keywords: Tour Operators, Heritage, Travellers, Host Communities

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German tour operators facilitate sustainable tourism and encourage their travellers to value and respect heritage and living cultures of host communities by providing and promoting sustainability criteria. Samples of those criteria are presented and their effect on the stakeholders (host communities, travellers and tour operators) are analysed. In the following text we are looking at the question of sustainable tourism at heritage sites primarily from the viewpoint of the tour operator and the customer.

I have picked the German weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT as an example for a German tour operator. ZEIT REISEN itself publishes programs of several “forum anders reisen” (www.forumandersreisen.de) tour operators thus promoting special interest travel to their readers. These tours may include but are not limited to hiking, bicycling, nature watching, literature, philosophy, gourmet, etc. and are to some extent accompanied by correspondents or employees of the publishing house. ZEIT REISEN produces a travel brochure with about 120 different itineraries. These include flights, ground transportation, accommodation and always a tour guide.

Main target group for ZEIT REISEN are the so called “Silver Agers” – referring to the colour of their hair and meaning that they are usually members of the age group 50+. They are usually well educated, well settled in life, their children have left home and there is sufficient available income. Silver Agers often belong to the marketing target group of LOHAS (Lifestyle Of Health And Sustainability). On the other hand Silver Agers have usually left school or university well before “Sustainability” became a common topic and have therefore not been exposed to its implications.

Some goals of the Hercules project are – among others – to raise the awareness for experiencing World Heritage Sites in a responsible way, to create a sense of place and to educate visitors to be mindful of the sites.

“Forum anders reisen” tour operators are ideally suited to foster the needs of heritage sites and at the same time to educate the traveller. “Forum anders reisen” was founded in 1998 by 12 German tour operators and today represents 130 members. The association promotes gentle forms of tourism based on sustainable development. The members have committed themselves to comply with a comprehensive list of criteria and have set in place a CSR process to monitor the success. The complete list is available in the internet at

http://forumandersreisen.de/content/dokumente/Kriterienkatalog%20far_en.pdf

and is named “Our Set of Criteria”.

The following examples may serve only as a brief introduction:

1. “Forum anders reisen” will not offer flights to destinations less than 800 km away from the customer’s hometown and ask the traveller to use train travel instead. If air travel is offered for distances ranging from 800 km to 3.800 km (which is including most destinations in the Mediterranean) the duration of stay must be at least one week. Flights that cover more than 3.800 km will only be offered if the length of travel is at least 15 days. Commercially this means that members may potentially loose customers that are unwilling to comply to these restrictions because they are forced out of their comfort zone.

2. Economic criteria ensure, for example, that as much money as possible remains in and thus benefits the destination. More precisely, this means that accommodation, which is typical for the region, family-run and managed by the owner is being preferred. It also means that domestic owned accommodation offering only 2*-4*-standard will be chosen over large international hotel chains promoting 5*-standard properties.

3. Other criteria have been defined regarding social aspects. These include respect for the society, culture and needs of the local population at the destinations. In practice this means, for example, that cultural mediators accompany the groups and local people are being involved to a large extent in the development and implementation of tourism activities.

4. When travelling into particularly sensitive areas (national parks, conservation areas, nature reserves), the customer receives further, qualified information (either in writing or verbally by the tour guide), e.g. about the following topics:

General information about the conservation area, protected species, experience value for the visitor in relation to the potential endangerment of the area through tourism

A responsible tour operator adhering to the criteria of “forum anders reisen” thus has the potential to support World Heritage Sites in educating their visitors. The common goal of the tour operators as well as the heritage sites is avoid the “loved-to-death syndrome”, to ensure sustainable use of the resource and thereby ongoing economic success. Heritage sites therefore need closer cooperation with responsible tour operators to manage visitors. Only then sustainable development like in Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska – where access is limited to one cruise-ship only per day – seems to be possible.