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How to Build Peace by Providing Meaningful Travel Experiences

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For a long time, an increase in global interconnectedness has been paralleled with the creation of a more peaceful world. The logic, as it's been presented, is that the more we interact with each other, the more we'll care about each other, and the less we'll do to hurt each other.

This theory makes a lot of sense, especially in the context of travel. People who are adventurous and who commit to participating in travel experiences that take them outside of resorts walls and beyond the confines of cruise ships approach the world with enthusiasm and a desire to understand the cultures they encounter and the people they come into contact with.

The link between global connection and peace isn't a perfectly straight line, but it makes sense that these adventurous travelers have an immense potential for creating good in the world just by visiting new places and building cultural bridges that increase understanding.

However, this potential also comes with great responsibility, especially for the companies and organizations that facilitate trips in both group and solo settings. The ways in which programs are designed and executed is perhaps the strongest determinant of whether a traveler's experience will cultivate peace or sow discord in a community. It's therefore imperative that trip providers integrate strategies for promoting peace into their programming whether their offerings are just a few days or last for months at a time. Below are four strategies that providers can use to cultivate peace through their programming.

Encourage Connection Before Clicking



Visiting a new place is always a bit like stepping into another person's home. Walking, eating, and simply experiencing somewhere alongside locals is one of the things that makes travel so compelling and intimate.

In large cities and developed areas, a culturally-conscious traveler can often go unnoticed, slipping into the stream of city life, but in less-developed areas and smaller communities, their desire to experience can put a community on guard, even if only subconsciously. This is especially true because in less-developed communities the areas outside of physical houses don't just feel like home, they are actually an extension of community members' personal space. Roads become front porches, water pumps transform into living rooms, and so even the most seemingly innocuous location can be somewhere that someone considers intimate or private.

It can be easy for travelers to treat these communities in the same way as they may New York or London, but carrying those big city behaviors over to developing communities can have negative consequences. To address this, trip providers should work to help their clients enter communities more gradually. A good first step is asking clients to start with conversations, not clicks. Instituting a "no picture on the first day" rule will challenge travelers to step out from behind their cameras and truly engage with the places they are going. With the barrier of the camera dissolved, they will focus on the people, rather than on framing the perfect photo.

Encouraging travelers to think more consciously about how and when they take photos, and what subjects they include will enrich their experience, which contributes to deeper connections and more meaningful peace-building interactions.

Empower Everyone Through Reciprocal Exchange



One of the struggles many travelers face when they go into less developed areas is the desire to give things away. Whether it's the shirt off their back or an old smartphone, many travelers are attracted to the idea of 'donating' the things that they don't need to less-privileged people.

However, it's been found that allowing travelers to give things away can actually create rifts within communities, undermining the cultivation of peace. However, there are ways that travelers can engage in moments of gifting that reduce the potential harm.

Trip providers should foster opportunities for the exchange of information, language, and culture. While conversation doesn't fix infrastructural issues, it can lead to greater understanding of the challenges a community is facing and may result in more physical work further down the road.

Cooking a meal together is another wonderful way for travelers and locals to interact. Perhaps a group can learn how to cook a local dish from their hosts, and then return the favor by teaching them how to cook one of their favorites. In places with limited ingredients, just sharing pot stirring duties over the fire can be a great source of connection and cross-cultural engagement.

Regardless of if and how travelers engage in giving to a community, it's important that trip providers are clear with their clients about why simply giving things away can be harmful to communities. Investing in truly equal exchange, by comparison, can build communities up and foster lasting and peace-building bonds between the travelers and their hosts.

Put the Control in the Hands of Communities



Photo by Mary., Mang'eni-Mauritius African Leadership College

Globally, travelers aren't known for being the most subtle when they visit a new place – hence the many negative stereotypes affixed to the word 'tourist.' One of the reasons why travelers can get a bad reputation is that they mix up when to listen, and when to speak.

Fostering peace is deeply connected to empowering communities, and community empowerment doesn't happen if the visitor is the one holding the microphone or monopolizing every conversation.

Travel providers should make a concerted effort to put locals in the captain's chair, especially when it comes to things that impact their lives and livelihoods. All travelers should also receive cultural competency training that covers local norms, like how people greet each other. They should also be encouraged to let their hosts initiate and lead conversations, and to take a breath before jumping into social situations. Listening before talking is a powerful way of initiating more peaceful and equitable interactions, especially when the cultures that are meeting have a complicated historical past.

The same goes for opportunities to teach or learn. Travelers should focus on learning from the locals which will encourage bonds based on mutual respect and purposeful humility.

Foster a Culture of Collaboration



If you are a nonprofit or social enterprise serving a community in a long-term way, the best method for cultivating and maintaining peace is putting locals at the center of your work.

Invest in a local workforce by recruiting and training community members to serve in positions that would otherwise be held by a foreigner and conduct regular community surveys that are designed and implemented by community members. When planning trip programming, try to include homestay options that serve as employment and hospitality training for locals.

The accommodations might be rustic, so clients should be briefed ahead of time so that they know what to expect, but the benefits of staying with a local far exceed the positives of a plush bed. Working around communities isn't just tiring, it's also harmful to community vitality and undermines travelers experiences. Throughout everything you do, look for ways to collaborate *with* communities by leveraging local competencies and resources to create better and more sustainable experiences for travelers and community members alike.

Cultivating peace can seem like an overwhelming task. This is especially true because peace isn't tactile, so it can be hard to measure success. However, peace can be fostered through immersive and authentic adventures that emphasize deep human connection above surface-level experiences.

What travelers do on their trips has a direct impact not just on them and on the places they visit, but also on the people and communities they return home to. By encouraging collaboration, purposeful humility, respect, and community leadership, trip providers can have an enormous positive impact that fosters a more peaceful global community.



Authored by Pippa Biddle

Pippa Biddle is a writer whose work focuses mostly on issues of voluntourism, sustainable development, and travel. She has been featured in The New York Times, The Independent, and Forbes, and is featured in the 2015 documentary "Volunteers Unleashed" (available on Amazon and iTunes). Pippa is on the Board of Onwards, a 501(c)3 organization that fights poverty through transformative adventure experiences.

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