

Culture rather than Clichees

Encounters with Native Americans – a dream for many Germans. But only a few of them realize this dream as packaging, marketing and distribution are not all they could be.

By Holger Jacobs

Native Tourism – if all that conjures up in your mind is folk dances by feathered Indians, you haven't even begun to experience the wide variety of tourism activities offered by Native Americans in America. Casinos, arts and crafts markets, museums, resorts, spas, photo safari trips, outdoor adventures, prehistoric pueblos and modern tipi camps: the range is far wider than the Pow Wows (colorful Indian get togethers with singing and dancing) with which we are familiar. (See inlay on p. 64)

Tour operators are disappointed that only a few holidaymakers find out all that is on offer. "Guests' expectations are a long way off from the real Indian day to day living" says Erich Lorenz of Lawrence Touristik, "due to the Wild West films' portrayals (of Indians)". Thus tour operators are forced to include "tourism folklore" in their programs.

Specialists like Corinna Veit see it even more extremely. She says of the impressions of her guests "their illusions are shattered when they find out that the reservation is not like in the old cowboy and Indian books". Her company Begegnungs-Reisen (the name means Encounters Travel) does true cultural work, so that her guests do not regret having booked the tour with her even if they are disillusioned by what they experience.

Bertram Postner, owner of the American Indian Travel Center, reports that most of his guests do have some more definite impressions other than the Hollywood clichés. There is a lot of interest in getting to know a reservation, though this is usually as only one element of a longer trip. "Many do not want a solely Indian trip but like to integrate a one or several day visit into their vacation:.

Native Americans offer more than just clichés: Anyone who goes into the wilderness with Moose Cree will experience not only adventure but will learn first-hand of the Indians' traditions, ways of life and problems (see page 66). Not that it always has to be a romantic camp fire. Luxury hotels such as the Tamaya Resort in Albuquerque or the Wild Horse Pass Resort near Phoenix cater to all needs with their wellness centers, golf courses, native-inspired architecture and cuisine.

These luxury resorts on Native American land are managed by hotel chains such as Hyatt and Sheraton. This guarantees that the tribes have professional management on hand and helps to eradicate the prejudices that they are not yet capable of operating in the open economy. Unfortunately, this is not the case across the board. Canada Expert Rainer Schoof of SK-Touristik complains that "this tourism segment sometimes blocks its own

path to success". Apart from the well established companies, there are still several fly-by-night Native American tourism programs. These programs offer zero product security, i.e. no guarantee that they will deliver.

Short termed Offers and Lack of Service

"In the 80's, suddenly, everyone wanted to offer Native American tours", Bertram recalls. Then in the 90's, several operators disappeared from the market. "Most of those who are still in the market offer good products". Bertram likes to work with native umbrella organizations such as Nonta in Ontario, so that he does not have to depend on operators who "dabble" in tourism. It's still important to maintain contacts both in the destinations and at trade shows. "This can be a long drawn out and wearying process".

Corinna Veit is in full agreement here. She's been working actively as a tour operator for eight years now and has built up partnerships over this time "but yet she still always has to send a German guide with the group". The two cultures are just so different. "The Native Americans have no service mentality. Each one of them is responsible for him or herself". And they don't take some things very seriously: "It may not be a big deal for a Native American to go for an evening without a meal, but a tourist, after a long day of travel needs a meal".

In general, tribes like the Navajo Nation with their 300,000 members are reliable partners. The Navajo reservation, the largest reservation in the United States covering parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, has got a well-organized infrastructure on offer. The tribal area has 13 hotels with 1000 rooms in total, a modern bus fleet, and a wide range of tours including Monument Valley, Canyon de Chelly and Antelope Canyon.

These specialists will bring your clients to the Native Americans

Two German tour operators have specialized in trips to the Native Americans of North America. They offer a wide range of tours from day trips to 16-day tours, including visits to traditional dances, participation in healing ceremonies, riding and kayaking with the Indians and accommodation in tipi camps. And of course they also pay commission to travel agents.

- American Indian Travel Center
www.indianerreisen.com
- Begegnungs-Reisen – Meeting Native America
www.begegnungs-reisen.de

This is all marketed on a dedicated web site and of course through international tour operators who are supported by the tribe with brochures, CD's of photos, tour guides and in the creating and packaging of tours. Service providers are also helped. "We provide training on subjects such as product development, business planning, financing and marketing" says Cindy Sapp, of the Navajo Nation Hospitality Enterprise.

Givers of Hope for the Reservations

Arizona is one of the states which has recognized Native tourism as a strategic business segment. Thus the Office of Tourism has created a new position for a Native American Tourism Development Manager. "The state tourism offices are very important to us" says Cindy. "They organize familiarization trips, press tours and trade show participation with us".

There are reasons why tourism is highly regarded: Apart from gaming, for which the High Court of the United States has granted Native Americans permission, and in some cases the sole permission, the travel and tourism industry offers low-income reservations an out from economic misery and social isolation. Tourism guarantees approximately 3,500 jobs and more than \$100 million per year for the Navajo Nation, according to a study done in 2002.

Further interesting points: The average age of visitors to the Navajo reservation is quite high at 51, and these people are highly educated with two thirds of them having a high school degree (only 29 percent of the total population in the United States has this). Interesting to note too is that it is mostly domestic guests who visit Native American lands. This is a disadvantage for the European visitor: the purchasing power of the American visitors force the prices up.

The percentage of foreigners is approximately one fifth, with interest showing from primarily British (28 percent) and German (15 percent) visitors. "The Germans have a good reputation" says Bertram. "They are usually more deeply interested in the culture" than for example all the tour bus groups who are whooshed through the reservations in an hour.

"Most of our foreign visitors are Germans" says Cindy, one of the Navajo marketing people. But larger German tour operators such as Airtours, Berge & Meer, Explorer, FTI, Rewe Touristik and TUI are not active in this segment. Rolf Bienert (Explorer) says he is "not very experimental". Ulrike Richardt (TUI) says "there are too many other highlights which have priority, before a German holidaymaker looks at the theme Native American travel". There's a lack of "an absolute wow that would generate the necessary attention for this product".

Specialists See Greater Potential

This is how the (USA) specialists see it too. Therefore almost all of them offer Native American programs, but have had varying degrees of success with these. "We try to market these programs with our other ones but the maximum we can get is a handful of bookings" Tilo Krause-Duenow (Canusa) is sorry to report. They're not well enough known, confirms Dirk Buettner of Argus Reisen, which offers Native American tourism programs in the Southwest and in Montana for small groups (a maximum of 8 guests accompanied by one Native guide and one German guide), or as car rental tours for individual travelers.

Rainer Schoof (SK Touristik) also confirms that he only has “limited success because on average the demand is not enough”. Too bad, says Rainer, as “getting back to basic values through nature is better encapsulated by the Native Americans than almost any other indigenous group”.

Barbara Glanz (Suntrek Tours) confirms that most holidaymakers “feel attracted by the myths of the Native Americans and are inquisitive about the way they live, their customs and habits”. This “exotic aura” is available to Suntrek clients who book a day’s riding in Monument Valley or who sign up for learning crafts on Manitoulin Island in the Canadian province of Ontario.

Walter Langenberger (Eest Reisen), who offers Native American holidays in groups of 6 to 12 people, does not believe that the product is the barrier “as the programmes have been on the market in the United States for years”. The issue is more the marketing and distribution. Because the U.S. partners do not provide enough marketing support, potential visitors are not very motivated. And, according to Walter, most travel agents prefer to concentrate on selling the general catalog programs of the large tour operators and thus are not a useful distribution channel. So in spite of the attractiveness and diversity of the Native American tourism products, they will remain a niche product for the time being.

From Climbing Adventure to Swamp Tour
Native Tourism from the Atlantic to the Pacific

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