

# ADVANTAGE

Live Unconventionally



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A Mediterranean journey with tailored experiences throughout

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An interview with Finnish explorer Patrick Degerman



WORDS Lauren Ho. IMAGES (left page) © Arctic Bath, (right page) © Gangtey Lodge www.slh.com/considerate

# TRAVEL WITH A CAUSE

As the world begins to travel again, community-based tourism encourages travelers to connect with their destination and the locals in a way that is much more meaningful and mutually rewarding

*“Community-based tourism empowers local people to uplift their communities and provides them with the tools to invest in their own development priorities including health-care, education and the environment.”*

The one thing the last two years have shown us is that the way the world travels has changed. If nothing else, border restrictions and time-consuming medical protocol have forced us to seriously reassess not just how but also why we travel. What’s more, mass tourism, once a phenomenon taken so much for granted, is being replaced by an awareness that travel, if not managed responsibly, has an incremental and detrimental impact on the destination.

Indeed, as Daniel Luddington, Senior Vice-President of Development at Small Luxury Hotels of the World, pointed out, the UN’s recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and COP26 have signposted a distinct urgency for travelers and businesses to do more in their sustainability commitments.

Which explains why community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as a model of sustainable tourism especially in beautiful, remote spots in developing countries. CBT encourages travelers to visit a destination and immerse themselves in the local culture, heritage and history, while mutually benefitting the communities living there to improve their standard of living and preserve the environment.

For Sara King, General Manager at Intrepid Travel, which specializes in small-group travel,

committing to this kind of tourism encourages travelers to research a little more deeply. “Does the itinerary include eating local food and drinking local brands and brews, shopping from traditional artisans and for locally made products,” she asked. “Does it include public transport, meeting locals and getting to know the authentic place? Does any activity promote cruelty or exploitation of endangered species?”

Of course, in a sense, all travel is community-based, even that five-star beach resort. It’s just that—as Planeterra, a nonprofit outfitter using community tourism to change lives, pointed out—even though tourism is a USD 8 trillion global industry, many local businesses and communities do not benefit from it, and there are “some forms of tourism where zero dollars reaches the hands of local people.”

In other words, though tourism is big business, it is often a net negative for that community in which it’s based. This is why, for Chris Baker, the Founder of OneSeed Expeditions—which runs very popular, intimate tours through Patagonia, Peru and Tanzania—there can be “no separating the infrastructure and impact of tourism from the people and places in which it occurs. CBT reaches its loftier aims when that community is considered, engaged and empowered at every step of the tourism experience.”



Left page: A member of the Considerate Collection (SLH), Arctic Bath strives to spread the spirit of the small Swedish Lapland community

Right page: Gangtey Lodge offers authentic experiences through deep connections with the culture and community of rural Bhutan



*Above: OneSeed Expeditions is a recognized leader in community-based tourism, offering the best in trekking and multi-sport adventures*

*Below: Planeterra uses tourism as a catalyst to improve people's lives, protect their natural environments and celebrate their culture*

“The current system of big hotel organizations and management normally does not make way for important local roles other than simple, functional ones because they can’t have more elaborate responsibilities,” added Luddington. “However, if you have several small houses converted into hotels or guesthouses, you can have several small teams in charge of them. And this can be local people running the houses—feeling empowered, being creative, having ownership.”

And so, in Bhutan’s stunning Phobjikha Valley, Gangtey Lodge, a Small Luxury Hotels of the World property, guests immerse themselves into the lives of the local communities by taking part in breakfast ceremonies at the monastery and meditating with the monks; and visiting local farming families to learn about their way of life by helping with the harvest and learning to make cheese and butter. Similarly, at Arctic Bath in Sweden’s serene Harads, guests are guided by members of the small Lapland community on berry picking excursions, taught to ice-fish by a local nature conservationist, or taken husky sledding to the legendary Northern Lights.

So committed to the cause is Small Luxury Hotels of the World that last October, the group launched Considerate Collection, a portfolio of over 30 hotels in 25 countries assessed by its own Sustainability Advisory Panel, with independent and impartial review by the GSTC. Central to the Collection’s approach are its three pillars: Environmentally Conscious, Cultural Custodians and Community Minded, which target not just community support and locally owned, family-run hotels, but also a local procurement policy, water conservation, and the elimination of plastic and single-use products.

Meanwhile, Planeterra works with another nonprofit in Delhi to train former homeless youth to guide walking tours of the city; and in Zimbabwe’s Victoria Falls, a chicken-rearing co-operative run by women has transitioned into



*Above: Intrepid Travel ensures that local communities have full ownership and management of the tourism experience*

*Below: Community-based travel experiences vary greatly depending on the country you visit and the needs of local people*



IMAGES (left page, above) © Courtney Gerard, (left page, below) © Planeterra, (above) © Matt Cherubino, (right page) Courtesy of Intrepid Travel



a catering company that provides cooking demonstrations and meals to travelers at campsites and lodges around town.

Similarly, Intrepid Travel develops new CBT experiences in destinations that might otherwise not see the benefits of tourism. Its activities include working with Action Aid Myanmar to support villagers in the picturesque Myaing town with tree-planting programs, medical access and the provision of running water, while at the same time giving travelers an authentic snapshot of rural Myanmar with hikes and cycling routes.

Which is to say that CBT is not as simple as tweaking an itinerary and adding a couple of nights in a homestay. “Often, it’s a greenfield approach,” stressed Sara King, Intrepid’s General Manager. “It takes time to develop.”

Likewise, good CBT is specific to the communities in which it operates. “It’s not a case of one size fits all,” noted One Seed’s Chris Baker. “It is driven by the unique challenges and opportunities present in those communities.”

“But when done right,” added Jamie Sweeting, the President of Planeterra, “community-based tourism empowers local people to uplift their communities and provides them with the tools to invest in their own development priorities, including healthcare, education and the environment. So, not only does it make for better travel experiences for the visitor, but it also leads to improved livelihoods for communities.”

“Ask lots of questions,” advised Baker. “Don’t be afraid to call a hotel and ask,” said Luddington. “Book with a travel company that has a track record of offering community-based tourism experiences,” added Sweeting.

And as Sara King put it: “With great travel comes great responsibility.” ←