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How Well Do Developing Countries Promote Nature-Oriented Tourism By Mail?

By

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THE FORESTRY PRIVATE ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE

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How well do developing countries promote
nature-oriented tourism by mail?

Patrick B. Durst and C. Denise Ingram

Abstract

A survey of promotional practices indicates that many offices representing developing countries are slow to respond to written requests for information on nature-oriented tourism opportunities. Many requests go completely. Promotional materials vary greatly in quality of visual appeal and information provided.

Keywords: tourism promotion; nature-oriented tourism; developing countries

Natural history enthusiasts and nature-oriented adventure travelers tend to be independent-minded individuals. They often seek physical challenges or educational experiences far from home. Their trips sometimes last for weeks. Many personally plan their travels rather than rely on professional consultants. Studies show that these types of travelers depend heavily on travel literature when choosing destinations and itineraries^{1,2}.

For developing countries hoping to attract nature-oriented tourists, it is especially important to promptly respond to inquiries with informative and appealing promotional materials. Quality brochures and pamphlets, quickly delivered to the traveler, can often influence the choice of destination or reinforce a tentative decision. Failure to provide information in a timely manner can mean losing travelers to competitors.

This study assessed the efficiency of developing countries in delivering destination-specific and activity-specific travel literature in response to requests from nature-oriented Americans. Responses were compared for the number and quality of enclosures, time delay before receipt of materials,

diversity of activities being promoted, and evidence of public/private cooperation in distribution.

Methodology

In April 1986, a short letter requesting information on nature-oriented tourism was sent to 230 tourism offices representing 116 developing countries. The distribution of the letters included 116 U.S.-based embassies, 59 U.S.-based tourism boards, and 55 tourism promotion offices located in host countries as shown in Table 1. These addresses were obtained from the World-Wide Chamber of Commerce Directory³, The Adventure Vacation Catalog⁴, Pan Am's World Guide⁵, and the Manhattan Consumer Yellow Pages⁶.

The letter stated the signatory was "planning an extended trip to Africa" (or Asia, Latin America, etc., as appropriate), and would like to participate in nature-related tourism activities. The office was requested to send travel information describing opportunities for wildlife safaris, hiking, trekking, mountain climbing, canoeing, rafting, bird watching, nature photography,

camping, botanical studies, hunting, and fishing. The letter indicated an interest in arranging these activities "through government agencies or private organizations," and asked for "specific addresses and details." It further requested that if the office was unable to provide the desired information, referrals should be made for "others to contact, including private tour operators."

Each letter was personally signed and precautions were taken to avoid the appearance of a mass mailing. Every effort was made to ensure that the inquiries would be treated as any other personal request for tourism information.

The number of days between posting the letters and receiving the response was carefully recorded for each request. The nature-related activities and attractions being promoted by each office were then tabulated and the brochures were classified by the type of printing (i.e., color, black and white, or mimeograph) and language (i.e., all English text, mixed-language text, or non-English). Any indications of government cooperation in

advertising the services of private tour operators, transportation companies, and hotels were also noted. Finally, if letters were included in the response, they were categorized as personal letters or form letters.

Poor response

Twenty-four of the letters requesting information were returned because of incorrect addresses or because offices had moved without making adequate provisions to have mail forwarded.

Table 2 shows the response rate for the remaining 206 requests. Only slightly more than half (108 of 206) of the requests elicited any type of response. Of the U.S.-based tourism promotion boards, which are ostensibly established to target the U.S. travel market, only 40 percent responded to the requests directed to them.

On a regional basis, representatives of the Caribbean and Middle Eastern countries produced the highest response rates. With tourism well established

as a major industry in the region, the performance of Caribbean countries is not surprising.

Table 3 gives the average time delay between the date requests were mailed and the date materials were received from tourism offices. Responses from U.S.-based offices took an average of 24 days to arrive, those from offices overseas took almost three times longer. The quickest response from a U.S.-based office arrived in 6 days; the slowest took 83 days. Responses from overseas offices took from 21 days to 238 days. U.S.-based tourism boards representing Asian countries were the most prompt, averaging only 16 days. Prompt response by the U.S.-based Asian tourism boards helps offset the relatively poor record of their counterpart offices located in Asia.

Delays in the delivery of materials from overseas may not be entirely due to inefficient foreign tourism offices. Some delays may be attributed to long distances between the U.S. and the potential host countries, inefficient postal systems, or other factors. However, there are opportunities for many of the foreign offices to improve their performances.

Of the 108 offices that responded, three letters were returned stating that their countries offered no nature-oriented activities for tourists. Two of these responses came from Middle Eastern countries; the third came from a small Asian nation.

Eight respondents had no promotional materials available and referred the inquiries to other offices maintained by their countries. Seven of these referrals were made by embassies, which are not always mandated to pursue aggressive tourism marketing.

Seventeen offices mailed general tourism literature about their countries that provided no specific information on natural history or nature-oriented recreation in their countries. It is possible that these countries have no nature-related attractions for tourists to visit. But it is more likely that they have not produced literature that specifically describes their nature-related attractions, or that stocks of such literature are temporarily depleted.

Nature-specific promotion

Only 78 of the 206 offices approached (38%) provided promotional materials specific to the nature-oriented activities and attractions requested in the letter. These responses included some brochures entirely devoted to nature-related attractions and some that combine the promotion of nature tourism with other attractions. Thirty-one offices sent at least one brochure solely devoted to natural attractions. One office representing an African country included 19 brochures dedicated solely to nature tourism. The 31 offices each supplied an average of four nature-specific brochures. National parks were highlighted more frequently than any other natural attraction.

The 78 responses that included information on nature-oriented tourism (either combined with other information or in exclusive brochures) adequately represent the five regions surveyed; 22 were received from offices representing

African countries, 22 from Asian countries, 11 from the Caribbean, 20 from Latin American countries, and 3 from offices of Middle Eastern countries.

Table 4 shows the nature-oriented activities being promoted by developing countries. Wildlife viewing is the most frequently promoted activity, followed closely by hiking and trekking, bird watching, and hunting and fishing. Not surprisingly, wildlife viewing is the activity most often promoted by African countries. Asian countries heavily promote hiking, trekking, and bird watching.

Rafting and canoeing are promoted by countries in all regions except the Middle East, but these white-water activities appear to be concentrated in Latin American countries. Africa and Asia lead in promoting mountain climbing. Considering the outstanding mountain resources of Latin America, it is surprising that climbing is seldom promoted by countries of that region. Other nature-oriented activities promoted in the literature received included rock and gem hunting, butterfly watching, and spelunking.

Most of the offices supplying nature-specific promotional materials provided visually appealing literature. Three-fourths (58 of 78) of the offices responding with activity-specific literature included at least one full-color brochure, although the quality of the printing and the clarity of the photographs vary noticeably from brochure to brochure. Eight offices supplied only black-and-white brochures, and 12 offices responded with mimeographed or photocopied materials. This is apparently a common practice when supplies of original promotional materials run low. Promoters must believe that providing something--even if poor in quality--is better than ignoring a request altogether. Nevertheless, the promotional value of such visually unattractive materials is greatly reduced.

Variability in visual appeal is frequently related to the quality of paper used for promotional materials. The literature received was printed on paper ranging from coated stock to thin, rough, or uneven cuts. Although paper quality was not specifically rated, the extreme range in quality indicates an opportunity for promoters to produce distinctive literature simply by using high-grade paper.

Nearly all offices provided literature written in English, although 12 offices sent bilingual brochures. Most of the bilingual materials came from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. Only one office supplied promotional materials written exclusively in Spanish.

Thirty-nine percent (30 of 78) of the offices returning nature-specific literature included letters. Of these, about half were letters simply acknowledging the request for information. Some offices, however, sent personalized responses, indicating a substantial amount of attention given to the individual request.

Public/private cooperation

Independent-minded travelers seek information on transportation, lodging, and tours prior to departure from home⁷. For many nature-oriented tourists,

Information on these services is especially important because they may be traveling in relatively remote areas.

Cooperative advertising, when done, is usually limited to providing addresses and phone numbers of private firms that supply services to tourists. Occasionally, however, government agencies distribute informative brochures printed by private companies.

The 78 responses, which provided the specific information requested in the letter, were scrutinized for indications of cooperation between governments (the distributing agents) and private-sector transportation companies, lodging establishments, and tour operators. The promotional literature had to include addresses, phone numbers, or telex contacts for private firms as a minimal indication of meaningful cooperation.

Information on lodging is included in government-distributed tourism packets more frequently than information on other private services as shown in Table 5. Tour operators often receive more detailed exposure in government

tourism packets, however, because they are commonly allowed to enclose brochures highlighting their services. Caribbean firms in all three major service sectors enjoy the greatest cooperation with the government in advertising and promotion.

It is contrary to the policies and laws of some countries for government agencies to promote the services of private companies. In other countries, government tourism offices fail to recognize the value of providing additional private-sector information to potential visitors. In still other countries, the lack of a cooperative relationship prevents the government and the private sector from sharing the printing and distribution costs of promotional materials.

Conclusions

The fact that nearly 50 percent of the requests for information received no reply underscores the need for improving the operations of tourism offices representing developing countries. Among those offices that do respond, many

could greatly reduce the time between receiving requests and mailing responses.

Seventy-three percent of the 108 offices that responded were able to supply nature-specific tourism information. Their literature indicates that nature-oriented tourism attractions are common throughout the developing world.

Much of the literature provided by tourism offices has pertinent information and is visually appealing. Many countries could improve their promotional efforts, however, by investing in better printing and higher quality paper.

Development of more nature-specific literature is a necessary requisite for some countries to capitalize on the growing trend toward special-interest nature tourism. Some tourism offices are doing an excellent job, but many developing countries could undoubtedly increase the number of nature-oriented travelers coming to their countries by improving their promotion practices.

Footnotes

- ¹Richard J. Gitelson and John L. Crompton, "Towards a sociology of information used by pleasure vacationers," *Journal of Travel Research* 21, 1983, pages 2-7.
- ²Michael J. Etzel and Russell G. Wahlers, "The use of requested promotional material by pleasure travelers," *Journal of Travel Research* 23, 1985, pages 2-6.
- ³Johnson Publishing Company, *World-Wide Chamber of Commerce Directory*, (Johnson Publishing Company, 1985).
- ⁴Andy Alpine, Steen Hansen, Rita Weinreb and Lisa Carolan Alpine, *The Adventure Vacation Catalog* (Simon and Schuster, 1984).
- ⁵Pan American World Airways, *Pan Am's World Guide*, 26th ed., (McGraw-Hill, 1982).

⁶New York Telephone, Manhattan Consumer Yellow Pages 1985-1986, (MYNEX Information Resources, 1985).

⁷Ghulam Naqshband, "Role and functions of the operational sector of youth tourism," World Travel 184, 1985, pages 33-34.

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Table 1. Number of requests for nature-related travel information, by region and type of office.

Region	In the U.S.:		In the Host	Total
	Embassies	Tourism Boards	Country:	
Africa	46	12	16	74
Asia	20	18	22	60
Caribbean	9	15	0	24
Latin America	32	11	17	60
Middle East	9	3	0	12
Total	116	59	55	230

Table 2. Response rates for offices and regions asked to provide nature-related travel information (based on 206 responses).

Region	In the U.S.:		In the Host	Total
	Embassies	Tourism Boards	Country:	Percent
Africa	42%	43%	44%	43%
Asia	63	57	48	56
Caribbean	55	71	--	65
Latin America	50	33	59	51
Middle East	67	100	--	75
Total Percent	51	59	50	52

Table 3. Average time between request and receipt of promotional materials from 108 respondents.

Region	In the U.S.:		In the Host
	Embassies	Tourism Boards	Country
Africa	26	20	73
Asia	23	16	65*
Caribbean	21	22	--
Latin America	31	31	50
Middle East	18	22	--
Overall Mean	25	21	62*

* Mean response times of overseas offices which are statistically different (significantly longer) than mean response times for corresponding U.S.-based offices (95% level of confidence).

Table 4. Number of times selected nature-oriented activities are promoted in travel brochures from tourism offices representing developing countries (based on 78 responses).

Activity	Africa	Asia	Caribbean	Latin America	Middle East	Total
Wildlife Viewing	17	15	4	14	2	52
Hiking/Trekking	8	17	6	15	3	49
Bird Watching	8	19	7	12	2	48
Hunting/Fishing	13	12	7	14	1	47
Botanical Study	9	9	8	8	2	36
Mountain Climbing	7	10	2	3	0	22
Rafting/Canoeing	2	6	1	12	0	21
Other	1	6	2	5	1	15

Table 5. Percentage of responses with evidence of public/private cooperation in promoting services to tourists (based on 78 responses).

Region	Transportation	Lodging	Tour Operators
Africa	23%	50%	36%
Asia	32	64	41
Caribbean	91	91	91
Latin America	25	50	60
Middle East	0	33	67
Total Percent	35	59	53
