

New tailwind for rural tourism

The Covid-19 pandemic dealt the tourist industry a devastating blow, although it has been showing clear signs of recovery this year. Furthermore, changes in tourist behaviour are opening up new opportunities for the industry which can benefit sustainability, also for rural communities. Our author looks at some of these new developments.

By Antonio López-de-Ávila

Before Covid-19, world tourism was experiencing remarkable growth, becoming an important global engine of economic activity and diversification. Data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the United Nations agency entrusted with the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism, indicate that in 2019, tourism reached 1,500 million international travellers and directly represented four per cent of the total global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But the pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to the industry, with a massive fall in international demand amid widespread lockdowns and travel restrictions put in place by countries in order to contain the spread of the virus.

This resulted in huge economic and social impacts, placing over 100 million direct tourism jobs at risk, especially in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which represent 80 per cent of the sector and employ a high share of women and young people.

International travel plunged by 72 per cent in 2020, the worst year on record for tourism, resulting in 1.1 billion fewer international tourists (overnight visitors) world-wide, putting the number of travellers back to levels 30 years previously, and was still 70 per cent below pre-pandemic levels at the end of 2021. Data for 2022 shows a significant recovery, with international tourist arrivals standing at -43 per cent compared to 2019 in the first seven months of the year.

Changing tourist behaviour

Throughout this pandemic, profound changes were accelerated in tourism patterns, where a much more digitised tourist prevails, demanding more accurate and easier to reach information. The pandemic also brought a more “conscious traveller” who values the importance of creating a positive impact on local communities and the environment. We see new emerging trends within travel and tourism like nature travel, digital nomads, well-being, authenticity and local hood travellers (seeking immersion in the community).



Tourism trends like nature travel and the search for immersion in the community can advance the role of tourism as driver of sustainable rural development. Photos: UNWTO

This represents both a challenge and an opportunity to advance the role of tourism as a driver of sustainable development for rural communities. Also, the current situation offers an immense opportunity for countries to formulate, adopt and implement new policies that would ensure resilience and economic prosperity for rural areas thanks to tourism.

A lifeline for rural communities

Tourism is a lifeline for many rural communities. It has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation, and its capacity to promote the dispersal of demand in time (fighting seasonality) and along a wider territory. UNWTO defines Rural Tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, and sightseeing. Rural Tour-

ism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle."

Travellers' demand for new experiences around nature, local culture and products, as well as community engagement in the post-Covid-19 context, encourage creativity and innovation. These opportunities may support communities, both in the short term, as they recover from the impact of the pandemic, and in the long term, to promote sustainable and inclusive growth. The integration of youth, local communities and women in the tourism sector will also promote tourism resilience and effective governance which contribute to the creative economy and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Boosting gender and the role of women constitutes the backbone of gender equity and empowerment, adding to the stability of local economies and the development of sound socio-economic policies.

Ollantaytambo, Peru

The district of Ollantaytambo is located 94 kilometres away from the city of Cusco. Throughout its history, it has managed to remain a living Inca village and is an important pillar of the Quechua culture. It is famous for its Archaeological Park of Ollantaytambo (PAO), declared Cultural Patrimony of the Nation, which was built by the Inca Pachacutec on two mountains, which constituted a military, religious, administrative and agricultural complex and a strategic site for astronomical observation. Through public and private organisations, various projects and initiatives have been developed for the protection of the cultural heritage and Inca heritage.

The rural communities of Ollantaytambo actively partici-

pate in the Queuña Raymi, a reforestation activity organised annually by the Association of Andean Ecosystems (ECOAN) with the aim of conserving the native natural flora and fauna and protecting the headwaters of the basins, to minimise the effects of climate change. Taking traditional ancestral techniques into consideration, farmers are creating sustainable solutions to produce a greater variety of potatoes, avocado crops and fruits such as strawberries, which were previously unavailable. This allows not only a diversification in the diet of the locals but also a wider offer for tourists.

Thanks to the cooperation of the local government, private companies and schools, the women of the Huilloc com-



The Archaeological Park of Ollantaytambo is declared Cultural Patrimony of the Nation.

munity are strengthening their leadership and participation in decision-making by learning to use technological tools, diversifying the handicraft offer with innovative products, and taking on roles of responsibility. During the pandemic, young

professionals designed more than 70 tourist and commercial premises in Ollantaytambo. In addition, students developed a comprehensive proposal to strengthen the Ollantaytambo brand, which is gradually being implemented.

Fostering inclusive community development

In 2020, the Year of Tourism and Rural Development, UNWTO pointed out that the sustainability of tourism in rural areas will only be possible if a global and inclusive planning strategy is adopted and executed, based on a participatory approach that has multiple actions with all stakeholders. The UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development aim to help governments at their various levels, as well as the private sector and the international community, to promote tourism in rural territories in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable development. To achieve this, tourism development and recovery plans in rural communities should encompass the key aspects of investment, capacity building, access to finance, infrastructure development, digital transformation, sustainable development, impact assessment, improving governance, and the empowerment of women and youth.

Afterwards, under the leadership of the 2020 G20 Saudi Presidency, the World Tourism Organization and the G20 Tourism Working Group developed the AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism to help fulfil the sector's potential

to contribute to and achieve inclusive community development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Framework provides guidance and inspiration to all governments, as well as all other key stakeholders in the tourism sector – including regional and local governments, the private sector, industry associations, civil society, communities and tourists – with the aim of fostering a truly holistic and integrated approach to inclusive community development through tourism.

Making tourism a driver of rural development and well-being

In 2022, inspired by the Recommendations and the AIUla Framework, UNWTO launched the Tourism for Rural Development Programme, designed with the vision of making tourism a driver of rural development and well-being. It was assigned with the mission to advance the role of tourism in valuing and safeguarding rural villages along with their associated landscapes, knowledge systems, biological and cultural diversity, local values and activities, and to promote innovative and transformative approaches to the development of tourism in rural destinations that contribute to the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental – in line with the

SDGs. The Programme will be implemented to achieve several objectives, such as: reducing regional inequalities in income and development, fighting depopulation, progressing gender equality and women's and youth empowerment, advancing innovation and digitalisation, improving connectivity, infrastructure, access to finance and investment, innovating in product development and value chain integration, promoting sustainable practices for more efficient use of resources and a reduction of emissions and waste, or enhancing education and skills.

The programme is developed around four main pillars: the Best Tourism Village Initiative, Knowledge Creation (Observatory), Skills Development (training and mentors' programme), and On the Ground projects (pilot projects and the Small Grants Initiative). The Best Tourism Village Initiative, created in 2021, has so far recognised 44 villages for their commitment to tourism as a tool for sustainable development. The villages are an example that tourism, developed under the canons of sustainability and inclusion, can contribute significantly to the recovery and conservation of the territory's natural and cultural heritage, while being a key factor in retaining the population and in attracting new residents. Some examples are presented in the Boxes.

Aligning sustainability with rural tourism is a necessary and intelligent strategy to face the future. It will bring important benefits, both economic and environmental, and will allow faster recovery from the economic downturn caused by Covid-19. Many experiences and success stories within the Best Tourism Village Network demonstrate the multiplier character that tourism has in the sustainable development of rural areas.

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Nglanggeran, Indonesia

Located on Java Island, the village of Nglanggeran has developed the concept of community-based tourism, offering visitors natural and cultural experiences. Since the initiation of the Nglanggeran Youth Working Group in 1999, there has been a development of ecotourism around the Ancient Volcano. The organisation has built community awareness to care for the environment by planting trees on 48 hectares in addition to capacity building, infrastructure development, and promotion from the local tourism office. Furthermore, cultural activities are becoming an interesting learning package that highlights local tradition in the form of Javanese cultures, such as how to dance Jathilan (traditional dance), how to play gamelan (Javanese traditional music), or a batik mask workshop in addition to tree planting and batik eco-painting.

The tourism industry provides stimulus to other sectors as well as added value and additional income to the community but does not completely replace existing occupations in agriculture (the majority of the population of Nglanggeran work as farmers, plantation workers and ranch-



In Nglanggeran, activities for tourists include taking part in a batik mask workshop.

ers), craftsmanship or other sectors. For instance, farming tours offer visitors learning about rice and cocoa cultivation and cooking. This chosen approach is ensuring resilience in times of crisis and proved successful during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nkotsi, Rwanda

Nkotsi is a small village located in the south-western area of Musanze, a town in the Northern Province of Rwanda. It is one of the villages forming part of Volcanoes National Park, an internationally recognised Unesco Biosphere Reserve and home to 30 per cent of global population of mountain gorillas. Gorilla sighting is the main tourism attraction of Rwanda. To diversify the existing range of offers and to assure that tourism is a sustainable source of income for the population, local people are brought together in programmes related to environmental conservation, arts and culture, education as well as community health & food security initiatives.

Not only does the village preserve the culture and indigenous knowledge, but it is also a place where tourists can come

and personally experience the heritage transmitted from generation to generation and slip inside the local culture and tradition. This creates employment opportunities for women and youth through arts and culture experiences focused on conservation and skills sharing through workshops. One example is the Red Rock Cultural Festival, where everyone is welcome to botanical garden tours, debates about medicinal plants, dancing, drumming and more, always in line with preserving the balance of this small ecosystem.

Through Red Rocks Initiatives for Sustainable Development (RRSD), local community members can access a variety of educational paths, designed to build practical skills which are in line with the tourism development. The courses are



Arts and culture experiences for tourists create employment opportunities for women and youth.

particularly delineated to let people understand the value of their resources and the importance of conservation. The Igihoho project, which started in 2016 with the aim of reducing the use of plastic bags, is a further venture on environmental protection and the conserva-

tion of natural resources. The project currently involves 20 women who produce and market eco-friendly seed bags made from banana barks. In this way, the project is meeting the consumer's demand for sustainable products while generating revenue.