THEMATIC ITINERARIES: AN APPROACH TO TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Throughout the U.S., scenic byways, heritage corridors, and similar concepts are being developed to: (1) preserve and interpret natural and cultural resources unique to an area; (2) coordinate the efforts of private, public, and non-profit organizations; and (3) market the new product to targeted audiences. Growing interest in nature and culture travel provides an opportunity to integrate interpretation with tourism product development and marketing. Examples will be discussed, including: Scenic Byways in the Great Lakes Region, the Western North Carolina Heritage Craft Trail, California’s thematic itinerary program for San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego; and in Hawaii, the Hilo Hamakua Heritage Coast and South Maui Heritage Corridor. This paper discusses how interpretive planning can contribute to visitor itinerary and destination area development.

Keywords: interpretation, tourism development, destination areas, visitor itineraries, visitor information systems

Introduction

In the world of real estate, it is well established that the three most important factors that determine property value are, “location, location, and location.” Similarly, in the world of travel, location – or knowing where to find points of interest – is critical. Depending on a traveler’s particular interests, he will seek information on local attractions and activities that meet his needs. The word “itinerary,” means, “the route of a journey or tour, or the proposed outline of one.” Anyone who has planned a trip would appreciate the importance of having some idea of what they plan to see and do at their destination. In fact, that kind of knowledge could determine the selection of the destination itself. Also, suggested itineraries can be very helpful for independent travelers once they arrive at their destination. Traditionally, self-guiding pamphlets and guides serve this purpose. Itinerary development can be a powerful tool in organizing information about an area’s attractions and presenting that information to visitors in an appealing manner. In tourism, this could be called “tourism product development.” In our profession, we could call this “interpretation,” perhaps at a regional level, as opposed to at the site level. How do we marry these two worlds having such common interests?

Recent Trends in Travel and Destination Area Development

There are increasing numbers of travelers seeking high-quality, authentic experiences relating to nature, history, and culture. Ecotourism and heritage tourism are considered among the fastest growing segments of travel throughout the world. Another trend is that more travelers are on their own – FITs or free and independent travelers. They generally seek out their own activities and develop their own customized itineraries, largely determined by special interests. From birding to spelunking, and archeological digs to scuba diving, travelers are motivated more than ever in finding opportunities to learn while on vacation, to seek new experiences, and to find inspiration.

In many communities throughout the U.S., scenic byways, heritage corridors, and similar concepts are being planned to meet several community goals: (1) identify natural and cultural resources unique to an area; (2) integrate and coordinate efforts of private,
public, and NGO sectors in preserving and enhancing identified resources; and (3) developing and marketing new products. While such approaches are not entirely novel, the growing interest in nature and culture travel provides an excellent opportunity to integrate community based tourism development with enhanced interpretation and visitor information services. These types of product development approaches are valuable in organizing visitor experiences, enhancing interpretive services, and organizing the communities themselves.

Interpretation and Itinerary Development

Interpretive planning is perfectly suited for developing visitor itineraries. Interpretation contributes to itinerary development in several important ways: (1) focuses attention on the “whole” destination area, however defined, rather than the individual sites and attractions; (2) develops themes that appeal to potential visitors; (3) provides a “way-finding” function for visitors; (4) increases the holding power an area by provoking the interest of visitors and providing memorable visitor experiences; (5) and supports other local industries and businesses such as unique souvenirs and foods.

Focus on the Whole

At the most basic level, interpretation focuses attention on the whole, and not the pieces. One of Freeman Tilden’s principles was, “Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.” John Burnet is similarly quoted by Tilden: “Wisdom is not a knowledge of many things, but the perception of the underlying unity of seemingly unrelated facts. Most destination areas fail to present a “whole” message. Instead, they tend to overwhelm visitors with information on “pieces” – individual activities and attractions – but no over-arching sense of what’s unique about their area. Of course, mega-destinations such as Las Vegas or Disney World don’t have this problem. We’re, however, more concerned about rural communities and small towns without million dollar budgets and marketing departments who need help with creating more attractive destination areas based on the natural and cultural resources. Interpretive planning can be a powerful tool in helping such communities identify what’s truly unique about their area and would distinguish them from a thousand other similar communities.

Theme Development

As in interpretation, theme development is often viewed as identifying subjects or topics. As such, topics such as birds or geology are not particularly appealing to visitors. However, if communities worked at theme development, as good interpretation should, they might come up with themes such as, “Glaciers transformed raw mountains into today’s scenic landscapes.” In an area such as Anchorage, the works of glaciers are plainly evident. Interpretation, applied to tourism development and marketing, would capitalize on this kind of grand theme that ties together visitor experiences such as driving along Turnagain Arm, touring the Matanuska-Sisitna Valley, or visiting the Portage Glacier Visitor Center.

Wayfinding

David Bucy, a consultant from Oregon and fellow NAI member, is a proponent of visitor communication systems that systematically provides information and interpretation to visitors. This system would be useful in helping visitors find their way through a destination area when they are planning a trip, when they arrive, and as they tour the area. What distinguishes this system from the typical printed guides available in most destination areas is that visitors would gain a sense of the area’s unique natural and cultural history – as opposed to pages and pages of running text with bold-faced points of interest which have paid advertisements in a commercial pamphlet.

Holding Power

Interpretation in various forms – from way-
side exhibits and self-guiding trails to bro-
chures and personal guides – provides the
visitor with a reason to stay longer and stop
at more places in the destination area. Scenic
byways, for example, can provide more op-
portunities for periodic stops to appreciate
interesting views, historic sites, or natural
areas. Interpretation at key points can
enhance the entire experience and encourage
visitors to make more stops along the way
on side roads and in little towns – rather
than zip through the region on the Interstate
highway.

Support Other Industries and Businesses
Interpretation can also be used to tie in local
industries and businesses. For example, cof-
fee in Hawaii is a major segment of diversi-
fied agriculture. Creating a coffee country
tour guide was an attempt to educate visi-
tors about the industry and where to find
coffee farms in one district of the Big Island
of Hawaii. The guide and the promotion
encourages visitors to get off the “beaten
track” and roam through coffee country,
tasting and buying different brands. The
tour covers a large enough area that a stay
of one extra would be warranted. This effort
also supports the sale of a locally produced
souvenir – something to take back for
friends, family, or the office. The economic
effects to the local community would be
much greater than if the visitor had pur-
chased a trinket manufactured in some for-
"Hawaii" label stuck on it.

Examples of Thematic
Approaches

While there are many examples of thematic
approaches to itinerary development for
various destination areas, a few notable ex-
amples may illustrate the value of the ap-
proach. The Western North Carolina Heri-
tage Craft Trail project of Hand Made in
America is one example of community and
economic development tied in with visitor
information and marketing. The overall pro-
ject was designed to empower small rural

communities and their residents to revitalize
their local economies by capitalizing on
their unique heritage arts and crafts – every-
thing from glassmaking to basketry. One of
their tangible products was the publication
of a four-color printed guide to the region
which beautifully illustrates its diversity
and provides ample information on way-
finding, food, lodging, and history.

In 1998, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San
Diego initiated a thematic itinerary program
in California that coordinates culture and
arts experiences in these three metropolitan
areas. “California: Culture’s Edge”, at
<http://www.californiasedge.com/> pro-
motes the following themes with their own
suggested itineraries: On the Edge, East is
West, Art to Architecture, Jazz and Blues,
African American Heritage, Pride, Fiesta,
Jewish Heritage, Performed, Gold Rush to
Statehood, and Mission Trail. According to
the Web site,

“The California Cultural Tourism Coa-

tition was formed by arts and tourism
organizations to promote the rich cul-
tural diversity of the Golden State. Cali-
ifornia’s cultural leaders joined the coalit-
tion members to identify destinations
and organize itineraries that reflect at-
tractions, events, restaurants and night
life that they would share with friends
visiting their cities. The result: Califor-
nia, Culture’s Edge. This guidebook
consists of 13 culturally themed itiner-
aries that suggest 9 to 15 day adven-
tures in California’s three urban cul-
tural centers - Los Angeles, San Diego
and San Francisco.”

New York State has a similar thematic itin-
ery approach. Its Web site at
<http://iloveny.state.ny.us/> has sug-

Suggested “Themed Vacation Ideas and Sugges-
tions” for: Family Vacations, Historic New
York, New York City Weekends, I Love the
Outdoors, Road Trips, Romantic Getaways,
and Water Vacations. On the Historic New
York theme, one of the suggested itineraries
reads as follows,
“Eleanor Roosevelt's Heritage”


Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed a delegate in 1945 to the United Nations (212/963-7713) in New York City, where she lobbied for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This year, the United Nations will celebrate its 50th anniversary with commemorative sessions in New York City on October 22 and other events throughout the year.

For information about the area, contact Dutchess County Tourism 800/445-3131 or 914/463-4000.”

These examples of visitor itineraries from California and New York illustrate that tourism offices are actively developing thematic itineraries that appeal to particular audiences. Interpretation adds to the overall marketing message by effectively enhancing the product.

In Hawaii, local efforts include the Hilo-Hamakua Heritage Coast and South Maui Heritage Corridor projects. The Hilo-Hamakua Heritage Coast began as a regional community effort to revitalize the northeast windward coast of the Big Island of Hawaii, an area that lost its traditional sugar cane industry. Throughout the region that stretches for about 30 miles, tourists zip by on a coastal highway, bypassing remnants of small plantation towns which are struggling to survive in modern times. The Heritage Coast project involved community groups from the entire region in identifying their heritage and what they would like to highlight for visitors. An initial pilot project partly funded by the state’s Cultural Tour-

ism grant program resulted in directional signs and a self-guiding brochure. Other community projects include the restoration of the Laupahoehoe railroad station master’s home and murals in Honokaa, a former cowboy town.

Elsewhere, many examples abound of how various destination areas are using thematic itineraries to develop new tourism products and enhance the visitor experience. National scenic byways, such as the North Shore National Scenic Byway on the shores of Lake Superior in Minnesota, offer visitors outstanding landscapes for driving itineraries. The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area offers two excellent visitor centers, tours of hydroelectric plants, sturgeon hatchery, salmon ladders, and splendid waterfalls, as well as a historic driving route that parallels the Lewis & Clark expedition. A system of National Heritage Areas, such as the Silos and Smokestacks NHA in Iowa, provide new opportunities for travelers who want to experience the rich natural and cultural heritage of the United States. More recently, new programs such as National Heritage Rivers (http://www.epa.gov/rivers), Millennium Trails (see http://www.millenniumtrails.org), and Lewis & Clark Bicentennial (project of the National Council of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial, see http://www.lewisandclark200.org) bring focus to efforts to identify unifying itinerary themes for targeted groups of travelers. Interpreters can play a key role in helping to identify such themes and develop interpretive products and services that will help visitors better appreciate the natural, historic and cultural resources in these newly defined destination areas.

Conclusion

Interpreters offer special approach and insights that would be invaluable in tourism product development – particularly with regard to developing opportunities for independent nature and culture travel. With the growing interest in ecotourism and heri-
tage/culture tourism, the professional interpreter can provide a unique sensitivity to focusing on the “whole” or unifying themes that will create a “brand image” for a destination to distinguish it from a thousand other competing destinations. The interpreter will also use interpretation as a management tool in protecting natural and cultural resources from inappropriate visitor use. The interpreter can also enhance the visitor experience throughout the destination area by developing effective interpretation programs at major points of interest. Professional interpreters need to be active partners in community tourism development efforts because they are as important as traditional participants – hotels, restaurants, transportation, and attractions. The interpreters in resource agencies, parks, and museums – as well as the private sector – can all play a key role in producing high-quality tourism destination areas.