



2.6 Premier Tours: Camps and Lodges that Support Local Conservation Projects

Description of Good Practice

Premier Tours, a US-based tour operator specialising in safari tours to Southern and East Africa, selects accommodation facilities (tented camps and lodges) in national parks and private game reserves that are committed to sustainable practices on a day-to-day basis and apply a sensible approach to tourism, conservation and local community involvement. Such an approach ensures a sustainable environment, employment and other benefits for local communities, and a high-quality holiday for clients.

As an example, the Southern Africa 20-day tour includes:

- Makololo Plains Camp in Zimbabwe, which is jointly owned by a rural family that runs a small trading store just outside the park;
- Chitabe Camp in the Moremi Wildlife Reserve in Botswana, which donates a portion of guest revenues to a local Wild Dog Research Project;
- Vumbura Camp in the Okavango Delta in Botswana, which is part of a successful rural community development programme in which villagers have been given land to the north of the Okavango River;
- Damaraland Camp in Namibia, where the local community benefits directly by earning ten percent of the night revenues;
- Cape Town in South Africa, where a visit is included to the New Rest settlement where revenue collected from visits has been used to buy three brick-making machines;
- Phinda Game Reserve in South Africa, where 11,000 hectares of commercial farmland have been restored and re-stocked with game. Local communities now benefit from new business ventures in the harvesting of wood and medicinal plants, transport, butcheries, charcoal manufacture, brick making, and vegetable, poultry and fish production; and
- Rocktail Bay Lodge in KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, where a portion of guest revenues supports the KwaZulu Natal Nature Conservation Services, a 20-year-old turtle monitoring and satellite tracking programme.

Camps, lodges and reserves are selected on the basis of a number of criteria. Brick-and-mortar establishments in environmentally sensitive areas are avoided, as are over-crowded camps, so that guests can be given personalized attention and impacts on the environment and on game viewing can be minimized. Premier Tours favours camps that:

- Employ full-time ecologists whose job it is to ensure that camps are as environmentally friendly as possible;

Box 1: The Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust

The Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust was set up by Premier Tours' principal ground handler, Wilderness Safaris of Johannesburg, South Africa. A portion (US\$25) of every guest's fare is set aside for the trust, which provides quick access to essential funds to solve wildlife dilemmas as they arise. No administration fees are charged for running the trust. Trust Fund projects include support to:

- A turtle project at Rocktail Bay Lodge, which includes paying game scouts' salaries during the egg-laying season and the provision of satellite tracking equipment;
- Community conservation groups in the Okavango Delta, Botswana;
- Lobbyists from Botswana trying to prevent Namibia from taking too much water from the Okavango River before it reaches the Okavango Delta;
- A large-scale water project for communities on the boundary of the Kruger National Park in South Africa; and
- The formation of a Community Wildlife Conservancy in Damaraland, Namibia, in an area that is home to both the elephant and the black rhino.

- Provide electricity through solar-powered panels or have generators run only while guests are out of camp;
- Do not allow hunting, but support photographic safaris;
- Provide for a direct or indirect spin-off to local communities and/or conservation projects;
- Have lined tanks for safe sewage processing;
- Have garbage removed to appropriate places for safe disposal.

Extensive discussions are held with key partners to obtain the maximum market intelligence necessary to make sound decisions on future tour packages. This aspect of the business is vitally important, because the tour packages selected serve to portray the company's image to thousands of travel agents and consumers.



TURTLE MONITORING

Implementation

To maximize the success of this approach, Premier Tours has adopted an evaluation strategy for its service providers. Premier Tours makes frequent visits to its destinations to update information on facilities and check on adherence to acceptable environmental standards. Client feedback is an important indicator of whether the necessary criteria are being met on a constant basis. Feedback is generally obtained through questionnaires distributed at destinations. Telephone calls to clients after their return also provide valuable information.

To communicate the elements of Premier Tours' philosophy to clients, the back cover of the company's brochure explains its operating philosophy and commitment to the environment through conservation and local community involvement. In addition, clients are informed about achievements in this field during the trip, so they know that a portion of their tour fare is being donated to an environmental project. Tailor-made itineraries include a detailed explanation to customers of why each element has been selected.

Benefits

Premier Tours' policy has resulted in benefits both on the ground and for the company. In the destinations that Premier Tours visits, benefits have included community development funds in rural areas, environmental protection and enhanced longevity of the tourism industry for future generations. Specific benefits include:

- The existence of Makalolo Plains Camp and others in the area has assisted in the management of the entire southeastern section of Hwange National Park, where the park authorities previously had neither the necessary funds nor the resources to carry out this task. Some 40 water holes have been sunk in the park, allowing game to spread and natural vegetation to flourish,



HWANGE SHOP

resulting in an increase of big game such as buffalo and elephant;

- The donation of funds from Chitabe Camp to the Wild Dog Research Project has increased knowledge and understanding of these animals, which are currently facing possible extinction;
- At the Damaraland Camp in Namibia, a conservation area of more than 80,000 hectares has been created to protect the area and its wildlife, and the local community has benefited from a joint venture scheme and employment opportunities;
- Contributions by Rocktail Bay Lodge and the Wilderness Safaris Trust (see Box 1) are helping the KwaZulu Natal Nature Conservation services to protect several species of marine turtles;
- All the camps contribute to fire control, road maintenance and game counts both inside and outside parks; and
- White rhinos have been reintroduced to Chief's Island in the Okavango Delta, Botswana, after being locally extinct for many years.



ECO-FRIENDLY ENERGY SYSTEMS

The main benefits for Premier Tours business have included:

- Premier Tours has been able to acquire new clients as a result of a strong reputation. The company has been selected for two consecutive years by the highly prestigious Conde Nast Traveler Magazine as one of the 'Top 100 Travel Agents' in the United States. In addition, the company has been rated by several travel guides and other publications as 'Highly Recommended'. This is in part due to high service levels provided to clients who are actively encouraged to call or e-mail the office as often as they like prior to their trip to discuss any and all aspects of the trip, a policy that has led to an extremely high repeat and referral business.
- The company recently began to pursue a new market segment, non-profit organisations such as museums, zoos and universities that promote group educational tours. In the short term, this strategy has already proven successful due to a strong reputation for service and the company's commitment to the environment and local communities.
- The company has an excellent track record in retaining employees, because of a highly stimulating work environment where new challenges are regularly met in the creation of new packages and constant education is offered on existing products, including staff educational trips. In addition, the provision of an incentive scheme in the form of profit sharing once a sales target has been reached has resulted in key talent being retained.

Comments

For a company such as Premier Tours with fairly limited resources to contribute directly to sustainable development, it is important to select the right products and suppliers. The challenge is to scrutinise past, present and projected performance in order to establish a pattern of commitment to the environment. This is best done by visiting projects and carrying out site inspections to discuss the issues with those who have an interest or stake in the project. By supporting such projects and encouraging others to get involved, product suppliers will be encouraged to re-direct their operating procedures in order to contribute to environmental quality, which is an important factor for the tourism market.