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Tourism without Threat? Excerpts from Rural Costa Rica

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This research note examines the host–tourist relationship in rural Latin America. Its purpose is to illustrate how tourism can be structured in a way to improve the benefit to local communities and is targeted particularly to communities in the incipient stages of tourism development.

In the summer of 2002, this author led one of the first groups of tourists to spend an extended period in the small, rural community of Quebrada Grande, Costa Rica. They were 11 university-level student “volunteers”, earning course credits by working on a community development project alongside local residents. The majority of the locals are farmers who relocated there as part of a government settlement plan approximately 15 years ago. The standard of living is relatively low, even by local standards. In Quebrada Grande, the small-scale, nature-based tourism facilitated partially by the creation of a preserve luring tourists from the surrounding areas as well as volunteer tourists from abroad, has had a galvanizing effect in the community and is helping to distinguish it from other small farming villages in the area. In this form, tourism can help build solidarity, foster pride, enhance self-esteem, increase opportunities for women, and provide material benefits for the residents.

Tourists are increasingly in quest of, among other things, difference and authenticity and are less likely to visit places multiple times. This increases the competition among tourist spaces as they need to consistently seek out “new” tourists rather than rely on people returning. An increasing number of tourists are rejecting mass tourism (although it still the dominate type) and seeking alternative forms (such as education, ecotourism, and adventure).

These are becoming increasingly popular to satisfy diverse demands. In these instances, tourists often find the mundane aspects of life extraordinary. For example, in Quebrada Grande picking pineapples, milking cows, and building trails were quite thrilling, provided it was only for two weeks. In this condensed format, it becomes a sample of the exotic or an experience to share with friends back home. Ironically, people often travel to get a break from the monotony of their own lives, but then sometimes seek out new experiences which are the monotony of someone else’s existence.

Individuals seeking to distance themselves from mass tourism destinations are increasingly common and approach this with an inflated sense of righteousness, which can prove to be beneficial to places like Quebrada Grande. Butcher has identified these folks as “new moral tourists”. They, including volunteer tourists, view their trips as culturally and environmentally benign and as an antidote to mass tourism. Butcher adds that they situate tourism in a good vs. evil dichotomy which, he argues, is a bit too simplistic and self-congratulatory (2003:21). For example, there is a tendency in the tourism-culture literature to view contact as a constant cultural dilemma (Williams 1998), but the differences may be more of a function of material than cultural inequality. Indeed, the principal divide between residents of Quebrada Grande and the tourists from the North might be better conceptualized as industrialized vs. non-industrialized or metropolis vs. periphery.

Quebrada Grande is a small agricultural community consisting of 36 families located in the Provincia of Alajuela in the North Central part of Costa Rica. Quebrada Grande has recently embarked on a program of community development that integrates tourism with environmental conservation. The town has no telephone lines and no commercial establishments, except for a small *pulperia* (a tiny family owned grocery store selling snacks and drinks). The nearest town, Veracruz, is about 2 km away and the larger town of Pital is about 10 km away, complete with restaurants, grocery stores, and the nearest *colegio* (secondary school).

Recently, Quebrada Grande, in collaboration with three other communities, has broadened its economic base beyond traditional agriculture to include a tilapia fish farm and tourism. It is demonstrating how a small locality can build regional, national, and international linkages to provide economic alternatives benefiting the community at-large. They have joined forces with other communities in the form of a cooperative, Asociación Comunal para el Manejo Forestal (Communal Association for Forest Management), to broaden their visibility and leverage to access greater resources. They have also tied their efforts into ecotourism, which has been central to Costa Rica’s national development strategy for some time (Honey 2003; Place 2001).

Quebrada Grande is an interesting case study in many ways, including its implementation of tourism as only part of its overall development strategy. Tourism is not front and center in community improvement initiatives and thus the locals can control its development and not become overly reliant on revenues generated by outsiders. This type of control is near impossible where the driving principle is to serve the tourists. Here, culture is not part of the allure of the community; it is the emphasis on conservation issues and the relative isolation that draw in outsiders. Those who visit this community are required to stay in the home of a local and develop a working relationship with the host who possesses the knowledge. In contrast, in a mass tourism setting where the activities of the locals are limited to serving drinks and food, cleaning rooms, renting equipment, etc., the tourist is often viewed as more sophisticated than the host.

None of the residents in Quebrada Grande viewed the presence of tourists as a cultural threat. Rather they were perceived as helping hands to get certain tasks accomplished and as an opportunity to learn more about the United States. Locals viewed the presence of these volunteer tourists positively, which, according to Timothy (2002), results in a more positive experience for the host community. The volunteer tourists pay \$10 for a bed and three meals per day, and that is distributed among the community. Aside from the economic gains, the community benefits by increasing cohesion as they work together to share tourist revenues and labor. The strategy also results in greater local pride and

self-esteem as the cooperation between host and tourist helps to improve life in the community.

One of the major cultural differences between the tourists and the locals is values. The tourists/students in Quebrada Grande frequently spoke of the tranquility and slow pace of life in this small town and how they could “see themselves living in a place like this.” As Butcher (2003) claims, they desire these experiences but usually only for a week or two. Many of those who seek “alternative” forms of tourism, like to identify themselves with simple lifestyles, eschew modernity, and distance themselves from material culture; but most often only like to do so temporarily while on vacation. For example, by the end of the first week, students began to make regular trips to the nearby town where they could eat pizza, drink beer, and buy products not available in the small town. This is not to suggest that these tourists should quickly adapt to a different lifestyle, but it does demonstrate that the novelty of someone else’s drudgery can wear off rather quickly.

More thorough empirical analyses of the host–tourist interaction need to be undertaken to better understand the impacts of these relationships. As tourism continues to penetrate communities of all sizes and locations, it is important that these areas are proactive in their tourism planning. This should help maximize potential benefits that can accrue from the influx of outsiders, and prevent a locality from becoming the object of development rather than the subject (Mitchell and Reid 2001).

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Physical Design Correlates of Small Ventures' Profitability

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Although interest in small tourism ventures has accelerated, empirical research has not yet attempted to identify the planning and design characteristics contributing to their performance. Specifically, this exploratory study attempts to test the contribution of design features, such as signposts and esthetics, to venture performance. Sites often consist of a range of attributes—including a building's size, materials, appearance, and routes—that influence the internal development of the venture for creating a unique atmosphere and shaping the intangible tourism experience (Grönroos 2000; Gunn 1994). It requires an orchestration of planning, management, and execution mediating the experience of the place, with special attention to the enhancement of scenic quality and information content (Ayala 1995). According to Swarbrooke (1995), the site itself needs to generate income and minimize operation costs. For example, the creation of a visually striking entrance encourages bypassers to enter, and the development of retail outlets within a site entices them to purchase items such as souvenirs, food, and beverages. In addition, design can help control costs in human resources by promoting self-service, including the use of information panels and leaflets.

To date, the impact of specific design characteristics on the performance of small ventures of accommodation, attractions, and active recreation has not been empirically tested. Most of the literature on attractions planning is descriptive, case-specific, geared toward large attractions, and non-explanatory in both a general and a specific sense. An empirical investigation of small venture performance requires identifying, validating, and quantifying the venture's planning features. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the extent of the physical planning and design affect the performance.

Data were collected by means of face-to-face interviews during July–December 1999 at 305 tourism ventures in Israel. A cluster sample was created according to the country's 12 regional (nonprofit) associations and covered 24% of the total population of such small ventures in Israel. The 305 enterprises represent a response rate of 94% (out of a sample of 325).

The dependent variables are two types of perceived profitability measures, one commonly used and other reflecting the venture's unique vulnerability to geopolitical crises (Haber and Reichel 2004). First, profitability relative to competitors' index includes three items: profitability relative to competitors in the venture's establishment year, and again in 1998 and in 1999. Using Likert-type scales (ranging from 1, lowest compared with competitors to 5, highest compared with competitors) the reliability coefficient of the three items