



## Can Experiential Travel Help Save the World?

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What do Pakistan, Venezuela and Nigeria have in common?

If your answer is unstable governments or destabilized states, you would be partially correct. What they lack is a central vision of where their countries want to be and where they want to be as a people. That vision doesn't always revolve around tourism, however, more and more countries are beginning to understand that tourism is the central pillar by which a country and its government is stabilized. When tourism is placed at the center, along with the services sector of the economy, for all government decisions, the results are quite amazing. However, when tourism is limited or non-existent, which is the case in the three countries I just mentioned, the result of change is almost always destabilization.

Here are a few of the best examples starting with Thailand. On the morning of October 13, 2016, King Bhumipol Adulyadej passed away. He had been the longest reigning monarch in the world, ascending the throne in 1946. The very first concern in Thailand was how to keep this from destabilizing a nation that relies on tourism to make up more than 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). There is genuine concern about the heir to the throne receiving the same respect his father earned over his decades on the throne and also about how the new

constitution will play out. Even with the challenges ahead as this transition begins, the focus on tourism never waivers and course corrections required to keep tourism in sight are swift and frequent. This is not to say that the opposition points are not valid or not without cause, it is to say only that even through differences, all sides of the equation in Thailand recognize the consequences if tourism were to become a non-revenue generating factor for their economy, and massive job losses that would result.



Another positive example, and one of my favorite cases, is Colombia. Go back decades and think about what Colombia stood for. Ask anyone their first reaction when you say you are going to Colombia and see how quickly the mind thinks of the days of the Medellin and Cali cartels. For decades, the governments of Colombia were either failing to stop the cartels or were in collusion with them. Fast forward to today and the cartels are no longer the driving force in the Colombian economy the way they once were. The current president of Colombia, as polarizing as he is, was just awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for getting closer than anyone in modern history to brokering a true peace with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Farmers that once served the cartels growing their product in their crops are now working in tourism, making positive contributions to Colombia's GDP. The tourist board, one of the most engaged I have ever seen, used a very catchy slogan that went viral – "the only risk is wanting to stay." Today, tourism is major contributing factor to the economy and yet another case that tourism at the center of a country's vision of stability usually helps a country exceed all expectations.

Botswana is probably the benchmark when it comes to this ideology. Called "The Last Frontier" by National Geographic Traveler, Botswana represents a case study of what all African nations

can be when animal conservation and sustainability are perfectly balanced to create a thriving tourism economy. Think of the African continent and think of the instability in countries where tourism either doesn't exist, or is overshadowed by a dictator. Then think of what Botswana represents where the government is a willing participant in the conservation of animals, and sees tourism as a viable income generator for citizens in a country where resources like water are already scarce; and where corruption, while always present, is kept under control. Tourism at the center of an economy is what has led Botswana to make decisions on their economy where conservation and sustainability are at the center. It is what led the country to ban hunting in all forms, which is still allowed in neighboring countries. It is what led the country to create an organic cap on the number of visitors who enter the country each year by ensuring the price points always allow for a fair wage for citizens working in tourism.



*Botswana's principal tourist attractions are its game reserves, with hunting and photographic safaris available. Other attractions include the Okavango Delta region, which during the rainy season is a maze of waterways, islands, and lakes. The tourism industry also helped to diversify Botswana's economy from traditional sources such as diamonds and beef and created 23,000 jobs in 2005.*

Then there is the alternative scenario where tourism is not the central focus and not part of the central vision a country has for stability. In those cases, the results can be disastrous. Here are few examples.

Elephant poaching: National Geographic published a wonderful study that illustrated how poaching rates in nations with little or no tourism were double the rates of those countries with thriving tourism. That in-depth study showed that in West Africa, out of 100 elephants, 90 were poached versus half that rate in East Africa, where tourism again makes up 10 percent or more of the GDP. And in areas where the indigenous community such as the Maasai are involved in the tourism equation, and part of the conservation equation, the rate is even lower such as in the Chyulu Hills region of Kenya.

The Amazon Rainforest: When tourism is prevalent, local communities, working in partnership with a sustainable local lodges, can actually remain energy independent while still retaining their original way of life all the way down to the dialect. Yet when tourism is not prevalent or as important, such as the case with the Hourani culture in the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the local communities are infiltrated by large corporations looking to lobby the government and purchase the land from the community for development. These indigenous people are promised riches beyond belief including high-end modern electronics, only to be left living in poverty, owning the electronics but deprived of electricity.

The core to success is again making sure a country truly wants stability in a form of government the people accept and that has a positive track record. This does not mean western democracy is the only answer, only to say that government, even one like the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, is actually accepted and beneficial to the people of the country. When you have this and you form a unified vision of stability placing tourism at the center of with a macro goal of having it provide at least 10 percent of the country's GDP or more, wonderful things can happen across all sectors.



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Ashish, like his father, is a native of Kenya. As a child, he saw firsthand the value of customer relationships when clients often dined with his family in their Nairobi home. In the mid 1980s, he moved with his family to New York. Ashish attended the University of Arizona in Tucson, graduating with a degree in political science, with a special focus on international economics. He worked as an economic analyst and trainer in Charles Schwab's Capital Markets Division. But his passion for travel resurfaced, and he formally joined the family business, Big Five Tours & Expeditions, in 2002, becoming president of Big Five in 2008.