

# **Climate Change and Responsible Tourism Travel Another India – The Village Experience**

**By Gouthami,  
CEO, Travel Another India**

The tourism industry is growing worldwide and especially in India. As disposable incomes increase, there are more people traveling on more occasions. People are curious about other cultures, cuisines and places. A couple of decades ago, Indians traveled either to pilgrimage centers – a church, temple, mosque, gurudwara – or on an annual voyage back to their village or “native place.” Typically travel involved many forms of transport – train, bus, bullock cart, rickshaw, ferry et al. Travelers carried with them all that they would need during the journey, as they were not sure of availability or quality en route – water, a lot of food in typical Indian Tiffin carriers, bedding, personal belongings and, of course, gifts for those back home. The whole process of travel involved a lot of fun for the younger ones and a lot of activity for the older people. Very rarely would a family or group go just to enjoy the beauty of a place or admire a culture different from theirs or “travel for travels sake.” Every journey had a purpose – to see God, to see family, to go for “higher” studies and so on.

In the last 20 years, this has changed rapidly in India. Transport facilities – air, road and rail – have improved dramatically while costs have actually come down in real terms. An air ticket from Chennai to Delhi cost me 5000 Indian rupee in 1994. It didn’t matter if I booked the ticket the day before or a year before – the cost was the same. Today, I can get the same ticket for 3000 rupee if I plan just a month earlier! With the growth of digital technology, I can book tickets, rooms, taxis and guides at the click of a button. And this has translated into more than 600 million Indians traveling around India in 2009 and 2010.

The numbers that India throws up with its population of more than 1.2 billion always leads to a groan. Given that this trend of tourism is going to only increase, responsible tourism offers a way forward for travelers and service providers to reduce their impact on the planet.

Responsible tourism means that we keep the triple bottom line of “People, Planet and Profit” very clearly on equal priority as we set up tourism ventures. A typical business venture would focus only on the profits. However, for long-term sustainability, it is equally important to focus on the environmental impact as well as the social impact on the community where the venture is located.

We translate this focus on the triple bottom line in the way we plan and set up responsible tourism ventures in Travel Another India.

While all three – People, Planet and Profit – are equally important, (alphabetically), “People” gets our first consideration. This would include the communities who host the ventures as well as the guests who come to enjoy the experience.

## **People**

- The primary stakeholder is the local community or their representative(s).
- They need to get a tangible economic benefit out of the venture while ensuring minimal negative social and economic impact on the community.
- They need to be involved in all the decisions involved in setting up the venture, as it will impact their lives directly.
- The guests need to have an enjoyable experience.
- The venture should be accessible for all – people with disabilities, single women, older people, families with children, etc.
- Finally, the experience should be based on mutual respect between the host community and the guests and should enhance the pride of the host community.

All our ventures are owned, managed and controlled by the local community or their representatives. As far as possible, local people are employed by the venture or provide services to the venture. If it is not possible to find trained staff in the surrounding villages, then we work on ensuring that with training and exposure, a trained team is built up over a three-year period.

Accessibility is a key issue while planning the venture, especially for persons with disabilities. We start by identifying itineraries for our guests. An access audit is conducted to make sure that the itinerary is made accessible for guests using wheelchairs, those with a visual or hearing impairment, guests with autism, etc. The access audit document details the steps that need to be taken to make each of the places accessible – place of stay, monuments, places of worship, picnic spots, restaurants and most importantly, toilets.

If a place is impossible to make accessible, such as the steeper monasteries in Ladakh, it is then dropped from the itinerary and replaced with another place of tourist importance. All the suggestions are made keeping in mind physical feasibility, financial viability and practicality. If we are constructing a guest house, we make sure that the doorways to the rooms, bathrooms, dining area, lounge, etc. are wide enough to take a wheelchair; supports are given in the bathroom; switch boards are at a lower height; furniture is widely spaced; switches are clearly marked; natural light is enhanced, etc.



Helpers, drivers and all staff are trained in handling special needs with dignity. Through all our communications material, we highlight the fact that the customer is a guest in the host community to obtain a unique experience and not merely making a payment for a room. We ensure structured interaction with local craftspeople and artisans to highlight the skills of the host community.

## Planet

- We focus on minimizing the environmental impact through the venture.
- We enhance the natural and cultural heritage through the venture.

All our guesthouses are built using local materials, reusing old material and in local style (vernacular architecture). Traveling across India one sees a variety of construction in rural areas. On closer examination it is explained that housing has evolved, keeping in mind the material available nearby as well as the climate of the area. So along the west coast where rainfall is typically high, one finds sloping roofs with a higher incline than in the interiors where the rainfall is less. One also sees the overhang to be much greater in high-rainfall areas to protect the main building from the direct impact of the rain. In Kutch where it is hot during the day with bright sunshine and cool at night, windows are small and placed so as to ensure maximum cross ventilation.



Typically, the construction is such that it has an inbuilt temperature control system that minimizes extreme hot or cold conditions. This reduces the need to have artificial temperature control and leads to a huge savings in energy. There is a belief that it is cheaper to build using local material. While there is a marginal difference, it is important to ensure quality of construction so as to ensure maximum benefits. It is also important to bring in some modifications – to bring in modern

conveniences and make the structures suitable for guests with disabilities.

Most old houses will have a threshold at the doorway to ensure that bugs are kept out. This however, poses a problem for guests using wheelchairs. Doorways are typically narrow and low to keep rooms cool or retain their warmth. There is a need to modify intelligently to allow for greater access while ensuring the building retains its traditional properties.

One area where there is little compromise is in the construction of the bathroom and toilet. Again, rather than designing for international standards, one needs to take into account the local water table in deciding if we provide a bath tub or a bucket bath and a shower.

It is important to explain to guests that it is not a mere frugality on our part to request them to reuse towels and use less water but the local water situation that demands we do so. This generates an interest in the guest to find out more about the place they have come to and perhaps count their blessings in living in a place with abundant water! In our destinations, guests are given the option of reusing sheets and linen and using thin towels that use less water. Guests are encouraged to go swimming in clean and safe natural water bodies if they are really keen to swim.

The influx of urban guests often leads to a problem of waste creation and disposal. We work on a principle of zero-waste and ensure that plastic use is kept to a minimum. (Unfortunately the best makers of water tanks in India are Sintex – plastics!) Organic material is composted while plastics are sent off to the nearest town for recycling. The whole village is involved in this, including the Gram Panchayat (local governance body) so that the village itself is transformed.

Guests are encouraged to carry back plastic waste, batteries, etc. Again this often gets them, especially the younger ones, active on the whole issue of waste management in their cities leading to a larger impact on climate change.

We are also in the process of designing shopping bags made of cloth as souvenirs for our guests.

Guests are given the option of clean drinking water that is not in plastic bottles and a chance to refill their own plastic bottles. It is important, especially in India, that guests keep hydrated through drinking water. So special efforts need to go into ensuring that they carry water, but with minimal environmental impact. A leading hotel chain in India has taken the positive step of setting up their own bottling plant and using glass bottles in their hotels. This is a step in the right direction and needs to be widely followed.

We highlight the value of local fauna and flora – bird sanctuary, lake, forest, etc. Local guides are trained in understanding the importance of the ecosystem. A guidebook is prepared for each destination that we set up. This helps guests to better understand and appreciate both the natural and cultural heritage of the region.

Finally, we use only CFL lamps where there is electricity. We are increasingly switching over to solar lights since power cuts are so frequent in the areas that we work. We are also replacing our battery-operated torches with solar-powered torches. We are considering pedal pumps for lifting water to the overhead tanks and solar-powered fans. We will order and use a “fridge made of mud” designed by a potter in western India. Two of our partners are completely off the electricity grid. Using alternate energy serves to reduce our impact on the planet and also meets the very practical need of erratic supply on the grid.



Many of us from urban areas ignore climate change and its impact since we do not understand how it could change our lives. In rural areas, it is easier to explain the interconnectedness of the ecosystem using live examples. It is also easier to see physically the signs of climate change, the changing weather patterns, the need to sow different crops because of that, etc. The stories of the farmers across India immediately illustrate a complex global phenomenon in very simple language.

We work alongside the Gram Panchayat and the Village Tourism Committee to ensure conservation activities at the local level. It is important at every level to explain the changes, their roots and impact.

### **Profit**

Activist groups working in the area of environment often disdain profit. Perhaps it is not possible to be “green” and profitable if profit is the only goal of a business. However, if we are clear that we are pursuing the triple bottom line of “People, Planet and Profit,” then it becomes much easier to take decisions that have a minimal negative impact on the environment. The smallest decision in a tourism venture has a cost impact – the decision to request guests to reuse towels, for example. The decision options are many – we can decide to insist that guests have to reuse towels or we can request them or we can simply replace towels everyday. Which decision we opt for will be decided based on our product and the company’s goals. We have decided that we will request, not insist, that guests reuse towels. We are walking the thin line between focusing purely on profits and purely on the environmental impact.

Equally, local people need to make profits out of the inflow of guests to ensure a greater buy in into the tourism initiative. In a rural setting, it would be easy for one disgruntled person to make tourism a negative experience. However, if there are more local people getting revenue from tourism, they are likely to come together to face that one person.

Tourism highlights the natural and cultural heritage of the area. When we are trying to conserve a way of life that naturally conserves its environment (as in much of India), Tourism can be a powerful tool to support the initiative. Just like any tool, it can work positively as well as negatively; therefore, it is important to convey the positives of going in for responsible tourism. This becomes easier if local people also benefit economically from the initiative.

We ensure that local people are able to set up and benefit from businesses, such as accommodation, food, craft, transport, etc.

Most villages in India have different caste groups and while the cuisine is similar based on what is grown, there are variations between caste groups and between different religious groups. So it is possible even within one village to have different families profiting from sharing their food with guests.

Most rural areas have a variety of crafts. While one source of revenue is the sale of souvenirs, another could be through workshops in that craft. Of course, a three-hour workshop in a craft, such as weaving or pottery, does not make one an expert. But it does help the urban guests to understand the complexity of a craft that is often taken for granted.



Providing bicycles gives the guests a green and simple way of getting around the area. It also revives an interest in what is rapidly being forgotten in urban areas in India – the joys of cycling.

Of course, the best people to show you around an area are the local youth. They are trained to highlight the attractions of the village as well as share some local myth, ghost stories, etc.



We ensure that in each destination we encourage local businesses based on the principles of people and planet. It is easy enough to fall into the trap of focusing only on profit and ignoring the other two. For example, the food provider may find it less messy to use plastic disposable plates. So it is important to explain to them during training the advantages of using plates that a family would normally use for a special occasion and the disadvantages of using disposable plates (or the option to serve in leaf plates as is common in many parts of southern India).

It is not the easiest option to work with local communities who often do not understand what responsible tourism is all about; however, in the long term, it is the only sustainable way – economically, socially and environmentally.

### **Conclusion**

As a company, we are in the business of setting up tourism ventures and selling holidays. The difference is that we request our guests to consider a different type of holiday. As a starting point, I would suggest that everyone take at least one holiday a year responsibly. In addition, on every holiday, try to go beyond the routine and understand the life of the people in the area you visit. Today it is easy to travel around the world and yet stay in the same kind of rooms, eat the same kind of food and even buy similar souvenirs. Make a conscious decision that on each holiday you will view at least one aspect of the local people and their lives – be it food, craft, architecture, the local school or simply having a 10-minute conversation with someone other than your service providers (waiter, taxi driver, masseur, etc.)

I am not going to wax eloquent about the charm, warm hospitality natural beauty and exquisite cuisine of our villages – I will leave it to you to try out!

Keep the principles of responsible tourism in mind – People, Planet and Profit – and you can't go wrong!

• • •



*“Travel Another India is in the business of providing a unique experience to discerning clients exploring another India, rich in diversity, of cultures, cuisines and comforts, while enriching lives along roads less traveled.”*

*We promote Responsible Tourism with travelers and hosts through supporting village communities and interested individuals set up Responsible Tourism Ventures (RTV). We support on sensitizing on Responsible Tourism, planning the experience, bringing in technical and financial resources, reaching out to guests, ensuring appropriate capacity building, facilitating learning across RTVs and identifying allied livelihoods that can be enhanced.*

*Looking forward to hosting you when you travel another India...*