

Maori culture next big thing in tourism

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By Michelle DaCruz

Magnificent landscape may be the main attraction for international travellers but cultural tourism that shows off the country's Maori heritage is gaining ground as another big money-maker.

Industry experts say growth of the \$17 billion tourism sector depends on its ability to deliver an authentic experience to the savvy travellers who have limitless global choice.

In a shift in the way New Zealand is marketed abroad, the industry is leveraging its indigenous roots with Maori-led tourism ventures to draw visitors like never before.

It is difficult to obtain data on how much the Maori tourism sector is worth but evidence suggests it is growing strongly.

Less than a decade ago there were few indigenous tourism companies but according to the Maori Tourism Council at least 600 are in business now.

Most start-ups fall into the micro-sized category - companies with annual sales of less than \$50,000 to small businesses with revenue of less than \$250,000 a year.

One business that is set to reap a profit within a year is Tourism Auckland's Maori guided walks through the city, Tamaki Hikoi, launched last October.

Three guides from Ngati Whatua treat visitors to ancient stories on a trek from Mt Eden (Maungawhau) through Auckland's sacred Maori landmarks to the edge of the Waitemata Harbour.

Graeme Osborne, chief executive of Tourism Auckland, said demand for the tours was exceptional. They were capturing tourism business from some of the country's largest markets, the UK and the US.

The venture targeted English speakers at the moment but Osborne said it was looking into audio translation technology.

The tours, he said, succeeded because they were simple but distinct.

"We have a unique Auckland story. There is no other Mt Eden. These are truthful and authentic stories," said Osborne.

Tourism industry veteran Keith Bellows predicted that within a decade culture would be one of the main draws for well-heeled travellers.

"The traveller has changed dramatically. They are seeking personalised trips

and unique experiences," said Bellows, editor-in-chief of one of the world's best-read travel magazines, National Geographic Traveler. He was the keynote speaker for the country's annual tourism conference last year. Data compiled by Tourism New Zealand shows that culture and history are already the second biggest draws for tourists.

Nearly 55 per cent of tourists say they visited the country for the culture and history. But scenery still has the biggest pull, with 91 per cent ticking that as their number one reason for visiting.

While Bellows sang the praises of Tourism New Zealand's 100 Per Cent Pure advertising campaign as a successful marketing tool that traded on the country's pristine vistas, he said it wasn't as effective as it could be in promoting Maori culture.

"While 100 Per Cent Pure is effective, Maori culture does not come through. In the next 10 years culture will be the barometer of choice," he said.

Tourism New Zealand chief executive George Hickton said the marketing agency was working hard to incorporate Maori culture into its international marketing. Instead of rethinking the wildly effective 100 Per Cent Pure campaign, the agency was looking at ways of enticing tourists to look at New Zealand as more than just a landscape destination.

Through such overseas events as the two-week Maori Art Festival that kicked off with 18 warriors paddling under the Golden Gate Bridge to the creation of a Maori-inspired garden for the Chelsea Flower Show fitted with native plants and sculptures by master carver Lyonel Grant, indigenous culture was being sold abroad.

Meanwhile, many individual operators are collaborating with organisations such as Maori Experienz and Poutama Maori Business Trust to market Maori culture to such niche international markets as the Middle East, India, and Japan.

Poutama Trust chief executive Richard Jones is set to take a delegation of tour operators to Russia this month.

"We are trying to tap into niche markets in the global environment, places we might not have tapped into," said Jones.

Established in 1988, the trust provides investment and advice to Maori small businesses in all sectors, including tourism.

No matter which international markets were targeted, the key, said Hickton, was to attract the "interactive traveller" who had much money to spend and wanted a side of history along with a main course of beautiful scenery.

Such tourists tended to take an interest in Maoritanga.

Delivering the authentic required more than a "traditional concert and a hangi" which in the past was often the way Maori culture was presented, he said.

"We are going to need to get progressively better at providing that authentic experience. We do it pretty well in some locations but not all."

One attraction that has succeeded in drawing crowds is Whale Watch Kaikoura. Owned and operated by the Kati Kuri people, a sub-tribe of Ngai Tahu, the attraction offers visitors close encounters with giant sperm whales and other marine life.

Ngai Tahu, which owns nearly 44 per cent of Whale Watch, is the country's largest Maori tourism player, with many investments such as Dart River Safaris, Hollyford Track and the popular Shotover Jet - which was grounded this week while safety issues were worked through.

Whale Watch chairman Wally Stone said the marine tour, nearly 20 years old, had succeeded because it married beautiful landscape with the strong Maori heritage of the region as well as offering a unique experience.

"Whales form a strong part of the Maori belief system and those beliefs are part of our living culture.

"When you are passionate and have a strong belief in those things it tends to add to the ambience that you create. We've never tried to orchestrate it," said Stone.

While privately held Whale Watch does not disclose its sales, Stone said the venture was profitable and employed 70 people.

It had continually improved its offering with subtle but critical elements that all contributed to a memorable experience, he said. For instance, its boats were all less than 20 metres long, no bigger than the marine life, so the whales were dominant.

It also limited the number of the tourists it taxied at any one time so each person had a clear view of the whales and did not have to stand behind another visitor.

The company also offered an 80 per cent refund if passengers did not see a whale.

Stone said tourists saw whales about 90 per cent of the time but the guarantee coupled with the other little extras allowed Whale Watch to save on marketing.

For the last decade, Stone said, the venture had relied on word of mouth.

"We send people away with no regrets. The majority of people come to do our experience because of positive endorsements from people who have done it,"

said Stone.

"Word of mouth is the strongest marketing tool there is."

Johnny Edmonds, chief executive of the Maori Tourism Council, which was formed last year, agreed with Bellows that the sector's next big challenge would be moving from an industry almost solely dependent on landscape to one that made the most of promoting its culture.

Landscape had served us well but if they wanted to people could find fiords and rainforests elsewhere.

- * The country has about 600 Maori tourism ventures.
- * Most of these are small businesses with annual sales of less than \$250,000 a year.
- * About 55 per cent of tourists say they visit New Zealand for the cultural experience.
- * About 18,000 Maori worked in the tourism sector last year - a 72 per cent increase since 1991.