



PROMOTING WHILE PRESERVING

THE CHALLENGE OF HERITAGE TOURISM

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The Rainforests of Central America are close to the USA but are a "world apart." Within the lush jungles of Guatemala, Honduras, and Chiapas (Mexico), there flourished the extraordinary Maya civilization in the first millennium A.D. We invite you to join two experts in Maya civilization and stroll with them through tropical jungles, exploring ancient Maya pyramids, temples, and plazas and admiring beautiful ceramics, sculptures and hieroglyphs.

And so begins a brochure announcing *The Remote Capitals of the Ancient Maya* tour from Todd Nielsen, Travel Director of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) Tours. The types of specialized tours offered by the AIA are marketed for travelers who are highly motivated to learn about archaeology and can afford the rather pricey travel programs. Led by scholars carefully selected for their expertise and lecturing abilities, AIA Tours specializes in exploring important archaeological sites and museums and also features special meetings, behind-the-scenes visits, and local performances (*AIA NEWSletter* 2004:8).

Whether the itinerary includes small-ship cruises or land-only tours, the primary goal is to offer a firsthand look at specific archaeological sites in the company of experts and likeminded travelers. Professional escorts and licensed guides take care of all the travel logistics, allowing the tourists and their scholar/tour leader to concentrate on the sites themselves. AIA Tours could be said to be restyled from classical archaeological tours in that they are exclusive, intimate, and personalized (Ehrentraut 1996:17). A bibliography of assigned reading is provided for study before the tour begins, and there are additional lectures at the sites and in the evenings, given either by a tour leader or by a local archaeologist recruited to speak to the group.

Case Study: Maya Tourism

Quite understandably, AIA tours to ancient Maya sites tend to emphasize the prolific Maya writing that introduces such evocative details about the who, what, where, and when of notable events. At Classic sites such as Tikal and Copán, tour leaders take advantage of the abundant stelae, lintels, and other surfaces decorated with Maya glyphs to present chronicles about significant events. Tour leader and guide are able to discuss the many recent advances in Maya epigraphy as demonstrated by a direct reading of the glyphs all around them. Such an intensive introduction to Mayan epigraphy is a distinctive draw for many tour participants, so those who choose to participate in an extended discussion remain close by. Meanwhile, other tour participants wish to explore a somewhat broader view of ancient life, providing a second tour leader or guide with the opportunity to discuss what is known about the non-elite who lived there, such as how they grew their food and participated in trade networks. People enjoy discovering some of the ways that ancient peoples are similar to us today, so the chance to see an indoor toilet in the Palace at Palenque or to discuss the macaw glyph just at the moment a scarlet macaw flies nearby lends an immediacy that can only become tangible during an actual visit.

For those passionate about archaeology, it may be impossible to become satiated with information, but tourists on AIA tours frequently travel with companions who may not be as keen on archaeology. Most often, the tour guide is also knowledgeable about indigenous plants, birds, and other animals, helping to broaden the tour's appeal for spouses and companions. Facts about a region's ecosystem, history, and demography are often emphasized during discussions and lectures to provide a more comprehensive depiction. Since guides depend on tips at the end of a tour, it is in their interest to attend to all the little details that make for a successful tour experience.

People come to archaeological tours from vastly different backgrounds to share a tour experience with erstwhile strangers, so for the tour's duration, they are cohorts on a collective journey. Each tour develops its own dynamic, made up from the combined personalities; however, tour participants are usually most

intent upon gratifying a specific interest in a particular region, culture, or time period. A considerable advantage for AIA-style tours is that there is a continual process of social interaction that can stimulate in-depth conversations. The tour participant has time to digest the material and ask questions along the way, developing the “feed-back” loop so conducive to learning.

As in many other parts of the world, the archaeological map of the ancient Maya is not the same as the map made for tourists. More often, it is guidebooks, not Maya archaeologists, that have established a site ranking for tourists (Ehrentraut 1996). In Mesoamerica, tourism has been programmed to highlight the Classic-period sites of Copán, Tikal, and Palenque in the southern lowlands and the Postclassic sites of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Tulum in the northern Yucatán, essentially ignoring scores of other neighboring sites (Ehrentraut 1996:17). As a result, most visitors will form their impressions of Maya civilization based on visits to a few of these sites.

Surprisingly, it can be a hard sell to get noticed by tour companies, as evidenced by the site of Ek Balam, not too distant from Chichén Itzá in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. Although developed for the tourist trade, relatively few come to Ek Balam, probably because it has not yet entered the “must see” lists in guidebooks. A visitor to Ek Balam is rewarded by the chance to see a spectacularly detailed plaster frieze unlike anything at more famous sites, but it is practically unknown to visitors other than those who hear about it by word of mouth. The unfortunate irony is that by the time Ek Balam makes the guidebook lists, the presentation of the frieze as a tourist attraction will contribute to its inevitable wearing away.

Tours and Tourism’s Impact

A poorly recognized benefit provided by tours are opportunities for follow-up evaluations of visitor satisfaction with the experience. A number of scholars (Prentice 1991:297–308) have lamented the lack of qualitative research into the public use of archaeological/heritage sites, particularly in gauging how successful visitor-education techniques are at a site. The AIA and other such tours send out follow-up evaluations to participants and take the replies very seriously, although such evaluations are not published and are unavailable to scholars.

It is important to recognize the range of consequences involved with bringing large numbers of visitors to a site, just as it would be very useful to have good data about at-risk sites. All kinds of issues about tourism’s impact on archaeological sites could be pursued, in both quantitative and qualitative formats, by incorporating visitor evaluations. Such data would enhance our understanding about questions such as

- What strategies are used to disseminate information to visitors?
- How effective are they?

- What percentages of visitors arrive with a prior appreciation for archaeology?
- Does a visit generate, or increase, an appreciation of the site?
- Is the site another form of entertainment offered up for tourists’ enjoyment?

A revealing study by Masberg and Silverman (1996:20–25) attempted to assess the meaning visitors attached to heritage sites. They found that the most relevant aspects of a visit included walking around the site with experts, especially in the presence of a companion, and learning about the built environment and its natural setting.

In a sense, it can be argued that tours are just preaching to the choir, because enlightening a small, focused group during a visit to a remote archaeological site is one thing, but imparting satisfactory information to hordes of tourists disgorging from cruise ships is another entirely. Most countries now regard archaeological sites as economic resources that are relatively resilient to wear and tear. As emphasis on heritage management has increased, it has become clear that there is very little money to be spent on the many sites identified for tourism throughout the world, not to mention those not yet seen as viable economic resources. Many nations also employ archaeological sites to promote a sense of cultural identity that tourists find compelling, although that, too, must be carefully cultivated and managed. The assumed economic, aesthetic, and cultural value of archaeological sites may act as a driver for conserving them in developing countries, as it has in many industrial nations.

Many famous sites, whether the Postclassic Maya site of Tulum in Southern Mexico or the Minoan site of Knossos in Crete, are attractive in all sorts of ways to visitors, and thus they endure the invasion of mass tourism on a daily basis. Mass tourism is a very different experience, where the burden is on the individual to make a visit meaningful. All too often, there is little incentive or opportunity to treat the visit as other than a recreational outing, especially when there is scanty signage and no explanatory literature or guides available to make the visit more meaningful.

Guides and tour leaders on AIA-style tours are aware of and tend to communicate conservation and heritage management issues to tour participants in various ways. Likewise, archaeological information is generally more accurate and up-to-date on specialized tours than the information provided by guidebooks or by local guides hired at the site. As entertaining as it might be to read a compilation of spiels overheard from local guides as they led a group around a popular site, the emphasis is unlikely to be on up-to-date, detailed, and accurate archaeological information.

Concluding Thoughts

It is a difficult challenge to direct masses of visitors toward the

thrill of archaeological discovery. Likewise, it is daunting to come up with better strategies for protecting a site once it has been opened for mass tourism. In a number of ways, archaeological and heritage tourism presents better-than-usual opportunities for finding common ground for dialogues about the goals of scientific research, publication, and conservation. Even though archaeological, heritage, and ecological tourism make up only an estimated 15 percent of the overall tourism market, this percentage is significant when the total size of the tourist industry is considered.

Despite the last few years of economic slumps, weather disasters, and warfare, people continue to travel to places they want to visit. Archaeology's mass audience is out there, otherwise television would not offer so many documentaries on the subject and cruise ships would not offer so many archaeological daytrip options. Preaching to the choir is a winning strategy, but the real challenge for archaeologists, travel industry officials, and heritage preservationists is to find better ways to reach the masses of tourists who visit through cruise and group package deals. The billion-dollar question becomes: how do we successfully reach our larger audience? 📷

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and others not. There is sufficient time for acquisition of the appropriate equipment and adequate resources in registration fees to cover all such costs. If a presenter wants a particular kind of equipment, the SAA should provide it free of further cost to that member.

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