

Experiential Tourism around the World and at Home: Definitions and Standards

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Abstract

This paper examines the “experiential tourism” concept as reported in the academic and practitioner literature. Examples of experiential tourism around the world are examined. Standards for the experiential tourism concept suggested by the literature are developed and presented. Using the standards framework developed, a specific rural regional planning process is used to describe a sample of activities based on the standards. The implications for both research and practitioners are discussed.

“Experiential Tourism” was described as a rapidly emerging trend in a tourism industry report in Australia in June 2001 [1]. The report distinguishes the ‘new’ tourism of the 1990’s from ‘mass’ tourism of the 1980’s. This decade “witnessed the evolution of a more experience-based domestic traveler,” the report continues, especially with respect to self-drive visitors and to a lesser extent, organized tours. Through the late 1990’s and into the new millennium, then, “experiential tourism” began to appear in tourism practitioner literature around the world.

Also over the last several years, in the United States, the work of Pine and Gilmore [2, 3, 4] on “The Experience Economy” was permeating many facets of the service industry, including entertainment attractions, hospitality venues and customer services of all kinds. They have provided the best presentation of a theory based approach to experiential activities, as we discuss later in the paper.

In our region of the United States, our first exposure to the concept of “experiential tourism” was from a consultant¹ responding to the needs of the local area for sustainable economic development with minimal impact on the environment. The program presented had been demonstrated as very successful in a limited number of other regions, but those regions had many similarities to ours and appeared to be very promising.

The three sets of circumstances described in the above paragraphs suggest the need for an academic review of the literature available to better understand the implications of adoption of this approach to business development in our rural area. This paper reviews available academic and practitioner literature to develop a working definition of the “experiential tourism” concept, examines examples of “experiential tourism” activities around the world, and suggests a set of standards for an analytical framework. We then apply the framework to the local rural environment and its economic development needs. Finally, implications for further research and for practitioners will be discussed.

Literature Review

Experiences are now seen as the latest economic progression (most advanced form of differentiated position along with premium pricing): extract commodities, make goods, deliver services, stage experiences [2]. Whereas goods are tangible and services are intangible, experiences are memorable. Experiences are personal, revealed over a

¹ Fermata, Inc. <http://fermatainc.com>

duration, and typically involve multiple sensations. Experiences occur across to sets of dimensions: customer participation (ranging from passive to active) and connection or environmental relationship (ranging from absorption to immersion). These four realms have been described as: Entertainment (passive, absorption), Educational (active, absorption), Escapist (active, immersion), and Esthetic (passive, immersion). The richest experiences encompass aspects of all four realms. There are five key experience-design principles:

- Theme the experience
- Harmonize impression with positive cues
- Eliminate negative cues
- Mix in memorabilia
- Engage all five senses.

Canada's Minister's Roundtable on Parks Canada [5] provides the most recent set of insights into accepted definitions of "experiential tourism" in the literature. They use the following descriptors (essential verbatim, numbers added):

- 1) Experiential tourism is an outgrowth of a global movement toward experiential learning, whereby people create meaning through direct experience.
- 2) Experiential tourism is also tied to the evolution of mass customization and the experience economy. Companies are moving beyond services, to experiences. For the tourist, the experience includes, among other aspects, the people one meets, the places they visit, the

accommodations where they stay, activities participated in and the memories created. For the tourism provider, it integrates all aspects of the visitor experience including pre-departure trip planning, basic and enhanced services and programs, post-trip follow-up and much more.

- 3) Experiential tourism encourages visitors to participate and promotes activities that draw people into cultures, communities and the outdoors.
- 4) Experiential tourism is the opposite of mass tourism that traditionally focused on package tours and vacations with low levels of personal involvement. Experiential tourism shows rather than describes. It encourages visitors to actively participate in the experience and promotes activities that draw people outdoors, and into cultures and communities. In this sense it is very personal and individual. Nature tourism, resource-based tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, transformational travel, heritage tourism and other niche areas fit under the umbrella of experiential tourism. Essentially, experiential tourists seek memorable experiences.
- 5) Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the provider. The visitor invests their personal time and dollars while the provider gains an understanding of the visitor's interests and provides what is required to facilitate the opportunity for a memorable experience. The resulting interaction allows for personal growth and reflects the values and attitudes of the individual visitor. The evolving lifestyles and interests of travelers are increasingly

focused on opportunities to connect with unique natural and cultural heritage. They seek diverse experiences that match their interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment. Most importantly, these experiences allow visitors to create their own memories.

- 6) The change from active holidays to holidays as an experience is a significant shift for the tourism industry. The desired outcome is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences. To remain relevant in this new reality it is essential to focus on the visitor experience. Those who deliver memorable customer experiences consistently create superior value and competitive advantages.

Andean Odyssey is a service provider that offers customized experiential tourism experiences in the Andean Region: Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. They note that experiential tourism constitutes an important means of encouraging the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potentials, especially in rural areas. They provide tourists with experiences completely different from their usual ones in big cities. Their patrons experience first-hand the rich cultural diversity of the Andean communities [6].

Dr. Sasithara Pichaichannarong, director general, officer of tourism development, ministry of tourism and sports, Thailand, discussing the sustainable development of tourism, notes that marketing promotion related to experiential tourism gives importance

to the participation of tourists in the ways of life of the local people living at the tourism sites, referred to as tourism villages. He offers 6 P's:

1. Place infrastructure and landscapes are to be improved, such as building more toilets and rest areas, information centers with telephone/internet services, ATM machines, post offices, roads, direction signs as well as boards telling the history of the communities or products, parking areas with shuttle vehicles (may be carts or bicycles) from the parking areas to tourism sites.
2. Products and services are to be diversified and elevated standards such as demonstrating producing process, folk cultural performance, delivery services, massage and much more.
3. People human resources are to be developed such as increasing skills in working, language, product design, work safety, providing services, administration in finance, marketing, environment.
4. Planning and management systematic planning, clear targets and indicators, integrated implementation among governmental, non-government and local authorities should be developed.
5. Presentation legends of villages and products are to be presented, displaying product designs and packaging, in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.

6. Promotion marketing such as public relations on tourism sites, promotion to attract tourists to purchase more through travel agents or tourists themselves or even through advertisement [7].

In a Wisconsin report, Fermata, Inc. discusses “experiential tourism” in these words:

Experiential tourism is an amorphous term that is difficult to define. In short, experiential tourism shows rather than describes; it allows the tourist to be an active participant in the experience. It involves activities that draw people outdoors such as birding and other wildlife viewing, hiking, camping, learning about the Native American history of a region, and nature photography, just to name a few. Nature tourism, nature-based tourism, resource-based tourism, adventure tourism, ecotourism, and heritage tourism have all been applied to this field. Nature tourism encompasses a broad range of travel interests and activities that elevate and enhance the individual experiences of the traveler. While individual travel interests may differ, they are all bound together by the shared goal of expanding personal horizons. People want to “experience” nature as an active, not an idle, participant on their nature adventure. Personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement are among the primary motivators for these travelers [8].

Speaking at the 2004 Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Tourism, Ted Eubanks defined "experiential tourism" as something that attracts people to places and markets to merchandise. He said that experiential tourism is everything visitors touch, feel, see and do, and, people are craving experiential tourism now more than ever. As the U.S. population grows and continues to urbanize rapidly, "travel consumers increasingly favor experiences over traditional goods and services." According to Eubanks' research, 87 percent of Americans live in an urban area. He noted that the so-called "creative class," especially, prefers active, authentic and participatory experiences that provide a taste of nature, the outdoors and rural living. Eubanks added that it is up to people in the tourism industry to create and facilitate experiences for visitors, to create travel "packages." Those travel experiences can revolve around historical, cultural or natural resources, for example. He quoted travel trend research showing that people who used to travel to exotic locales are now more likely to stay close to home as long as they can find something transformative or experiential. These research findings are:

- 1) 76 percent of U.S. travelers say they "would like to visit someplace they have never visited before."
- 2) 48 percent say they are interested in an area that is "remote and untouched."
- 3) 57 percent say they are attracted to an area's culture.

4) 44 percent say they would like to "learn a new skill or engage in a new activity" during a trip.

5) 41 percent complain of "time poverty."

6) 56 percent complain of "vacation time poverty."

“In other words, visitors are looking for vacations and travel opportunities that are shorter, flexible, impulsive and, of course, experiential” [9]

In Australia, as elsewhere, the industry responded to the needs of travelers in at least these four ways:

- Network tourism initiatives,
- The development of interpretive highways,
- The explosion of interpretive centers, and
- A movement towards regional base camps [1].

We will use these as categories to examine additional literature describing these opportunities:

Network tourism initiatives

Network tourism has evolved specifically to respond to the need of experiential travelers to savor a diverse range of experiences along their travel path. This has contributed to the growth of interpretive highways and interpretive centers, discussed later in this paper [1].

This phenomenon is also referred to as a holistic destination approach. New tourism development needs are considered in relation to facilities and infrastructure already existing in any given destination. New ventures should be complimentary to existing offerings and opportunities and augment an existing destination “feel.” As visitors demand more experiential tourism, the relevance of the “whole destination” and its ambience becomes increasingly important [10].

Effective interpretation of cultural and natural heritage (delivered by skilled guides, visitor centers, displays, signs and multimedia) is one of the key aspects of satisfying visitor needs and expectations. Work in this area over the past decade has shown that good interpretation will engage, involve, educate, challenge and entertain visitors. It provides a sense of place and meaning and brings people and the environment to life. It takes time, flexibility and courage to create innovative interpretation as a key aspect of a complete tourism product, but the rewards include satisfied visitors and a continually developing product to meet changing consumer demands [11].

Martin [11] goes on to list several key points in planning interpretive tourism:

- “Focus on your strengths - base your product on what natural and cultural resources you have that others don’t have.
- Plan all stages of the project in detail before commencing, including marketing, product evaluation and redevelopment. Plan for and monitor budgets tightly.
- Be very clear about what you want to achieve – profit, local employment, community pride and involvement, and conservation of the resource.

- Consult and involve the local community.
- Take the time to do the project well. Do not rush the stages of consultation and product development. Innovation does not happen overnight.
- Know your target audience. Plan and tailor the product from the consumer's needs and perspectives. Undertake market research.
- Interpretation should be fun, encourage involvement, stimulate the senses, and pose a challenge. Plan all activities to reflect a strong theme.
- Choose methods that involve and engage the senses. Face to face interpretation is the most effective.
- Be cautious with technology. Can you afford it and do you need it?
- Collaborate with experts. Expertise may be found within your local community.
- Train the interpretative team to ensure consistency of product and messages.”

The profile of the experiential traveler supports the notion that the entire tourism experience comprises not only the major attractions but also ancillary experiences such as talking to locals and travel experiences between attractions. It is imperative that a strong referral system is developed between attractions contained in the network, beyond the promotional attempts by the tourism agencies. This must rest on the individual attractions

within the network themselves and the need to cross promote between attractions themselves [1].

The development of interpretive highways

Interpretive highways have responded to the needs of the experiential tourist by providing the links among disparate experiences for a more comprehensive visitor experience. While principally a tool for satisfying the travel needs of self-directed travelers, this framework is also very useful for commercial guided tour operators. This is primarily attributed to improved interpretation offered along the travel path to break the monotony of long haul travel between attractions (ATS Group Pty Ltd, 2001).

The following comments are from an interview with an experienced experiential traveler, making her first visit to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island:

“In Nova Scotia they focused on things like .. We chose the Cabot Trail and the Lighthouse Route...some called tours and some trails. All the tour guides have picked up on it.

<http://www.novascotia.com/howtogetaround/default.htm>

In PEI, they use logos for each designated area such as crown, ladyslipper, heron...

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/visitorsguide/scenicdrives/index.php3>

We got a great map to do the lighthouses... they were even having a lighthouse contest where each lighthouse had a stamp for your brochure... get all the stamps and you can mail in for a certificate and free tourism poster... great gimmick... we got all but a couple stamps.

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/visitorsguide/explore/lighthouse.php3>

Two keys! 1) a good map, and 2) nice icons to represent the key activities: farms, crafts, museums, parks, photographic spot [12].”

The explosion of interpretive centers

Contemporary interpretive centers must exist in a world of diminishing resources and demonstrate responsible sustainable designs. The dimensions of design should incorporate a “spirit of place.” They should be compatible with nature by selecting forms, textures, colors, groupings, and rhythms that replicate or compliment the landforms and ecology of the site. They should be compatible with the culture. The designer needs to study the site’s history and mythology. They need to use indigenous designs and materials. And, respect the genius loci, the “spirit of the place” [13].

Visitor centers are not destinations but serve as portals to a site that assists people in their quest for self-renewal and personal growth. Visitor centers are facilities that prepare travelers physically, mentally and spiritually to experience a special place. Visitor centers provide services at three levels: 1) They welcome travelers and provide for their physical comforts and needs; 2) They orient and inform; and 3) They ingrain and instill reverence and awe for the features and events of that special place. A nature center is land based, serves a local community, and fosters sustainable relationships between people and the earth [13].

A movement towards regional base camps

This is a relative new concept from Australia that may have useful applications in the Great Plains and the American southwest. These initiatives seek to develop “base camps” or “interpretive platforms” at strategic critical mass nodes in a region that provide support infrastructure and support regional exploration. The principle adopts a “hub and spokes” approach to regional interpretation. This approach enhances the network tourism elements and interpretive highway elements discussed above by providing an overview and expectation experience prior to the regional tour, for example. In addition, the process more directly encourages increased expenditures and an increased length of stay in the region. The principle recognizes that the attraction comprises not only the base camp/interpretive platform, but also all the associated experiences that emanate from it [1].

Experiential Tourism around the World

Experiential tourism has become the current term that encompasses a variety of tourism and traveler categories, including the following: cultural tourism, ecotourism, educational travel, experimental tourism, heritage tourism, nature tourism, ... - where activities are environmentally sensitive, displaying respect for the culture of the host area and looking to experience and learn rather than merely stand back and gaze. Experiential tourism involves active participation, involvement, even immersion. Here are some additional examples from around the world.

Bryner [14] reported that “nature tourism” (exploring the outdoors) has increased more than 100 percent since 1990. This report is based on a survey conducted by

Conservation International. The trendiest escapes are areas with high biodiversity (number of different plants and animals). They also contain many endemic species found nowhere else in the world. This can spell trouble as people trample delicate plants in these bustling ecosystems (organisms and their surroundings), according to Tony Rango, of the Sierra Club. One possible solution: “Ecotourism is responsible travel that protects nature and supports the local people,” says Costas Christ, of Conservation International. An example of how your vacation can jibe with ecotourism: Stay at a “tree-house resort.” These huts are built high in the trees. And, unlike many hotels, they don’t require builders to clear lush forest. So this vacation, take a hike. But tread lightly.

Sheffield and Dawson [15] report useful selected results of the “Outdoor Recreation in America 1998” report of the American Recreation Coalition survey conducted by Roper. Visitors to different types of federally managed public lands, for instance, had different profiles. Visitors to Fish and Wildlife and Army Corps of Engineers sites were more likely to fish and hunt. Forest Service visitors, on the other hand, were more likely to picnic, visit cultural sites, and engage in outdoor photography. Bureau of Land Management recreationists were much more likely to participate in off-road-vehicle use and motorcycling. National Park Service visitors, through more active than the average American, are “the most moderate participants in outdoor recreation activities of all the federal site Visitor groups.”

An experiential traveler discusses a first night in Morocco:

“In the evening we strolled through the cobble streets of the Casbah of Oudayas. We heard live music, but it was ignored by our lead guide. I said to our female guide, hey where’s that coming from? She took

the initiative to track it down in a narrow alleyway, knocked on the door and explained that we were interested visitors. We were introduced to the matron of the small apartment, and before I knew it, on my first night in North Africa I found myself dancing in a tiny room surrounded by drumming troop and neighbors celebrating a young girl's birthday. I immersed in a behind the scenes moment of local life, experienced as a result of a little interest by myself and a lot of initiative from our guide. It was one of those magical moments that distinguish an authentic adventure from a tour [16].”

The first Director of Nature Tourism was in the McAllen (TX) Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber is also the sponsor of the annual Texas Tropics Nature Festival, a celebration of birds and biodiversity held every year. Birding is big business. 40,000 birders visit the Lower Rio Grande River Valley each year, adding \$45 million and supporting nearly 600 jobs in the area. Birders are excellent guests. They don't trash hotel rooms during annual spring breaks, and they read. One local hotel put up a hummingbird feeder for the resident buff-bellied hummingbird, enabling many a birder to add this “micro-bird” to their life list right on-site. The hotel also installed a birders' library that guests can borrow from while they stay at the hotel. The local chamber of commerce, museums, nature centers, national refuges, and hotels have all teamed together in the area to add butterfly and hummingbird gardens to their properties, to join in the program [17].

A Set of Standards for Experiential Tourism

Based on a review of the literature above, the following set of standards, in the form of objective sentences, are proposed for consideration and further research. This list of standards [18, 19] might be used as either a checklist, with a simple check to indicate presence or absence of the standard, or as an evaluation form, rating each standard, for example, on a scale of one (little or none of the attribute) to five (full compliance with the standard), for example.

1. People create meaning through direct experience.
2. The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.
3. The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up.
4. Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.
5. Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.
6. Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor.
7. Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.
8. Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor.
9. Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor's interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories.

10. The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.
11. Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.
12. Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.
13. Experiential tourism shows rather than describes.
14. Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons.
15. Experiential tourism opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.
16. Experiential tourism attracts people to places.
17. Experiential tourism attracts markets to merchandise.
18. Experiential tourism engages all five senses.
19. Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.
20. Experiential tourism includes “the story of the place.”

These twenty standards are presented as a suggested beginning point for further research and consideration. In the next section, we provide a specific example to illustrate each of the standards in a real-world situation.

Local Application of the Experiential Tourism Concept

In this section, a real-world example will be provided as an illustration of each of the twenty standards. These examples are drawn from experiences on the farms and ranches of the local rural area.

People create meaning through direct experience.

There is nothing quite like riding (and/or walking alongside) a horse or oxen drawn covered wagon, today, across the open prairie, over hills, fording streams, eating food prepared over an open fire, using no modern conveniences for two days... to create real meaning regarding the “covered wagon” experience.

The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.

Visitors interact with working cowboys on the ranch as they participate in feeding the cattle bales of hay and supplements in the feed bunks.

The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up.

Photos on the web site of “Fire on the Prairie” and maps of how to get there build excitement prior to the visit. Photos of their visit coupled with email messages following the visit add to the created memories of the visit to the “Fire on the Prairie” ranch [20, 21].

Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.

Standing in the ruts made in the prairie by the covered wagons on an actual portion of the Santa Fe Trail, immediately after visiting the museum where the visitor can see and touch the wagons of their pioneer ancestors causes most visitor to want to know more about the history, the culture and natural attributes of this part of our shared existence.

Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.

Visitors generally arrive at the ranch in individual cars, perhaps a few at a time. They spend two to four hours, on average, experiencing a set of activities designed for that time period which involve the visitor in experiential learning involvements for a reasonable price. Merchandise items created on the ranch are available for sale in a tasteful display that fits into the ambiance of the ranch. The typical visitor regularly spends \$200-\$300 per day and leaves the ranch virtually unchanged. They are also carrying with them items purchased at the ranch to enhance memories and provide recollections of the visit long after they have returned to their home

Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor.

For members of a family visiting a general farm, each member of the family will take away a unique experience from the same activities, primarily because of the individual interests and unique background of each family member. Dad may recall operating a tractor himself as a child, plowing or cultivating the corn on his parent's farm. Mom may recall a 4-H project from her youth involving canning the sweet corn

raised on her uncle's farm. Junior, born and raised in the city, is fascinated to learn how the corn is fed to the cattle that become the hamburgers he eats regularly.

Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.

At the "Fire on the Prairie" experience, each visitor (a limited number) fully participates with the ranch owner in lighting the fire at appropriate times and places, monitoring it closely, and enjoying the beauty of the experience. This also recreates, in most respects, a tradition on the plains going back, perhaps, thousands of years.

Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor.

John is a history professor who has studied and written about the "Cities of Gold" the Spanish explorers tried to find in the Great Plains of America. Yet, it was not until he joined an archeological dig on a ranch in that area that he gained a greater measure of a fuller understanding of the area and the tools and other artifacts of the time.

Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor's interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories.

Sarah had always enjoyed hand-made willow furniture and accessories. A visit to a farm on a midlands river, with plentiful willow trees and a true artisan as an instructor, brought the craft to life and greatly enhanced Sarah's interest. She also created a basket

herself which she took home with her as a unique memento and added memory of her experience.

The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.

Jan involves his guests in the full experience of taking a horseback ride by teaching and assisting each guest in feeding the horse, saddling it, and after the ride, unsaddling, brushing, and feeding and watering as appropriate, depending on the length of the ride. The ride includes unique ranch areas with explanations by Jan, the guide, of the reactions of the horse to unique situations on the ride.

Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.

Local experiential tourism venues operated by Native Americans provide opportunities to interact with various aspects of their lives, both past and present, both good and not so good.

Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.

Working ranch experiences normally include activities that take the visitor back to elements of the “wild west” – in the way it really happened, not just as portrayed in the movies... hard, honest, sweaty, dirty work, for example.

Experiential tourism shows rather than describes.

Traditional farm venues show (and allow the experience of) the actual operational elements of feeding cattle and hogs, gathering eggs in the chicken house, and perhaps weeding and/or gathering vegetables from the garden.

Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons.

Sarah grew up in the city, recalling how her father had talked about the joys and trials of calving time on the ranch as a young man. Sarah now has her own career, but wants to expand her personal experiences, so she books a visit to a working ranch during calving time. Not only does she get to be intimately involved, but she is lucky enough to witness the birth of twins... a truly unique personal experience.

Experiential tourism opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.

An extended visit to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve (<http://www.nps.gov/tapr/>), for instance, provides the opportunity to: 1) experience a rich dose of natural and historic immersion, 2) learn new things about life on the prairie, 3) hike on the prairie and be stimulated by plants and wildlife not previously known, and interact with re-creator's of the Z-Bar ranch's founders in the nineteenth century.

Experiential tourism attracts people to places.

Birding is a special activity that draws people to particular, often very unique places, such as the nearby Bald Eagle nests and viewing areas.

Experiential tourism attracts markets to merchandise.

Many people collect particular types of crafts and handmade products. These people are the “markets” who are drawn to a particular craft store or art gallery providing the source of particular merchandise of interest.

Experiential tourism engages all five senses.

A horseback ride on the prairie provides:

Smell – the horse, the hay, the prairie grass and weeds

Sight – wide open spaces, flowers and wildlife, the other horses and riders

Touch – the leather of the saddle, the mane of the horse, the reins in your hands

Sound – the call of a bird, the sound of the horse, the stories of the guide

Taste – water from the well in a tin cup, food cooked over a campfire on the prairie

Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.

Grandpa Jones shows visitors how to shell and ear of corn and mash it to make corn meal from which Grandma Jones makes the cornbread for lunch.

Experiential tourism includes “the story of the place.”

Each stone house in our area has a detailed story of the pioneers who built the house, where they came from, how and when they arrived, what became of their family in the ensuing years, etc. Most people can easily relate to some aspect of “the story” to make it a special memory.

Implications for Research and Practitioners

We have reviewed and examined both practitioner and academic literature from around the world in search of definitions and standards that we can apply to the concept of “experiential tourism” – a broad term being used more and more in the travel and tourism area. Travel service and related standards are under continuous pressure for improvement both by the traveling public and by the industry seeking to serve better.

The set of 20 standards developed from the literature review provides an opportunity for future research to verify and confirm the usefulness (or not) of these standards. These standards also provide a useful starting point for practitioners to use as a basis for creating and evaluating their own sets of experiential tourism opportunities.

One approach to research on this set of standards will be to ask a group of “subject area experts” to evaluate each standard, both on a numerical rating and with evaluative comments [22,23]. Analysis of the numerical results will show where there may be overlap or redundancy. Analysis of evaluative comments will contribute to the interpretation of the statistical analysis and may suggest additional standards that might be considered. As additional research appears in the literature, the concepts considered need to be periodically reviewed for updates to the list of standards for travel services [24, 25, 26].

Practitioners will want to review the standards and compare their current practices with each standard. Each comparison will provide some opportunities to make small (or large) adjustments in current practices in order to provide more meaningful experiences for guests. In all cases, of course, it is critical that practitioners depend primarily upon

their own vision, mission statement, positioning statement or other considered organizational guidelines first, followed by the implications of the standards comparisons.

Guests will be monitored closely for their reactions to changes in the services and standards and this information must be fed back into the continuous review process.

Guests, after all, are the only legitimate source of meaningful evaluation of the experiential tourism set of activities and experiences. Improved methods of obtaining and processing this information are also worthy goals of researchers and practitioners alike.

Finally, all interested parties are encouraged to continue to search for improvements in ways to satisfy and delight their guests at their respective venues.

Managerial Implications to Services and Standards

The twenty standards presented and discussed in this paper serve as a framework for managers of service providers as they adjust and grow their enterprises in the twenty-first century. Whereas goods are tangible and services are intangible, experiences are memorable. More and more services are being directed, as noted in the discussion on the standards, toward memorable experiences using a various combinations of the standards in the process.

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