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Two weeks experiencing community tourism in Jamaica **- introduction (more to come!)**



With Colonel Frank Lumsden of the Maroon community in Charles Town. The Maroons are the descendants of runaway slaves who fought off the British and established their own free communities throughout Jamaica.

From July 8 through 21, I visited Jamaica courtesy of Diana McIntyre-Pike and the Countrystyle Community Tourism Network. During this visit, I stayed in 6 hotels and 4 homestays, stopped at 14 additional properties, ate in 27 different locations, took 12 individual tours, delivered a presentation in one hotel, appeared on live television, and attended a convention where the Prime Minister of Jamaica spoke. All these experiences were organized with my particular wishes in mind, while keeping to a schedule and including areas that were worthy of showcasing. The overall theme of the trip was the entire concept of "community tourism," which Diana has pioneered in Jamaica and is ready to promote in other areas of the Caribbean.

I will describe how I experienced community tourism during this trip rather than attempt to define the concept, so as not to pigeonhole it in any fashion. It is definitely not a niche market unto itself, but rather an approach. The easiest way to describe community tourism is that regardless of the activity, the focus is always on having an authentic encounter with the land, the people and their way of life. However, it would be wrong to assume that any authentic encounter, some of which happen by accident, would automatically fall into the category of community tourism. Instead, these authentic experiences are organically fused into a whole which carries with it a set of assumptions and values, some of which are:


- Isolating the visitor from the community by means of a series of barriers is the direct opposite of what tourism is meant to provide to both visitor and host.
- For tourism to be sustainable, its benefits must be made available to people of all social and economic levels.
- The community has the right to be compensated for its labor when receiving visitors.
- For tourism to serve the community, the community must have a voice in determining how it will be undertaken in its space.

- The tourism infrastructure must not change the landscape in a way that is detrimental to the land or its inhabitants.
- It is possible to achieve a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship between much of the existing tourism infrastructure and the growing community tourism infrastructure. In fact, the existing tourism infrastructure can provide a bridge between the visitor and the community tourism experience.
- The logistics and communication behind any tourism endeavor are best handled by a group that understands, engages and advocates for the community, while also understanding the expectations of visitors.
- The tourism experience can be customized even more than what typically happens in package tours.
- For community tourism to achieve meaningful exchanges, the visitor must be able to spend time with the local people and get a glimpse of how they really live and what is important to them.

It would be a gross understatement for me to say that I found the experience highly rewarding. The connections that I established with people made me feel that I was one of them, and from what I could sense from their reactions, they likewise felt some special connection with me, that our destinies from that moment on would be intertwined. This feeling strikes such a responsive chord inside oneself that it seems absurd to reduce tourism solely to dollars and statistics. True, we need to work and earn a living to sustain ourselves, and it is the responsibility of any industry to create lasting sources of income, but the condition of our souls transcends any of these concerns. If the industry is earning income from their visitors, and the experience resonates as hollow to both visitors and hosts, this cannot help but drag us all down.

There were so many facets to the trip, encompassing history, crafts, music, flora and fauna, that I will be dealing with these in several articles, some on this site and others in different publications. These topics have been the subject of books and articles by others, so I will do my best to approach these subjects from unique perspectives. I will also showcase different places I visited.

Both Diana McIntyre-Pike and the Countrystyle Community Tourism Network are on Facebook.

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