Dreamtime Travel

ETHICAL TRAVELERS CAN SUPPORT ABORIGINAL TOURISM

by Margaret Ambrose

At the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, Aboriginal culture went on show for the world. Aboriginal dancers and storytellers, with their painted bodies and unique movements told the story of the creation of their land, a story passed on from elders in the beautiful tradition of Dreamtime. Suddenly, Aborigines weren't just natives that tourists might happen across in the outback. Suddenly Aboriginal tourism was big business. And just as suddenly, there emerged yet another way in which Aborigines could be exploited and abused.

"Aboriginal" tours and stores selling didgeridoos and dot paintings sprung up, many with only loose ties to any Aboriginal communities and some with none at all. Well-intentioned travelers found it near impossible to know if they were participating in activities that were offensive and harmful to indigenous communities, or if they were supporting them. The good news is that, increasingly, the Australian Aboriginal community, with the help of some government bodies and nonprofit organizations, is attempting to take control of Aboriginal cultural tourism. Ethical travelers can support Aboriginal tourism, but it takes understanding the issues surrounding the exploitation of Aborigines, knowing which travel outfits to trust, and learning how to respectfully interact with the people.

A HISTORY OF ABUSE

When the British first arrived in Australia over 200 years ago they considered that the country belonged to no one and claimed it as a colony of Great Britain.

Following white settlement, the issue of Aboriginal land rights was not an issue until 1992 when the High Court of Australia deemed that Aborigines on the Torres Straights (situated between Australia and Indonesia) had a right to the land they had inhabited for generations, and the government was forced to pass the Native Title Act.

Up until the 1970s Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their parents without judicial process. Around 100,000 children were "stolen." Some were raised in institutions while others were placed with white families. Children were subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and many were told they were orphans.

These days the experience of the Australian Aborigines remains grim. Aborigines have an unemployment rate four times that of non-indigenous Australians. They have a disproportionate level of drug and alcohol abuse, and are over-represented in prisons. The infant mortality rate is three times that of non-indigenous babies and the life expectancy is 20-25 percent lower than the white population.

ABORIGINES AND THE LAND

The land rights debate is often framed by white Australia in terms of who owns what. For the Aborigines of Australia, land is not just something that belongs to them, it's what defines them.

Aborigines believe that the Australian landscape—from the red sand of the country's center, to rivers, mountain ranges, and rock formations—was created by their ancient ancestors. They value the land as they would value a grandparent or other ancestor. Destruction of the land is akin to the death of a family member. Tourists traipsing through sacred land are akin to the rape of a family member.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABORIGINAL TOURISM

As the issue of land rights gains popular appeal, a lot of debate is being given to what bureaucrats call the question of "appropriate economies." Once Aborigines get their land back—or at least some management rights—what should they do with it? How can they make it economically viable, while preserving their culture and environment?

One solution that is almost universally accepted by white and black Australians is the development of an Aboriginal tourist industry. In 1985 Uluru, which until ▸

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TIPS FOR TRAVELERS

When visiting aboriginal land or participating in Aboriginal tours, it's important to remember that indigenous life differs in some areas from non-indigenous Australians.

- Some sacred sites are off limits to women and others to men, and some sites are not able to be accessed at certain times. It is always advisable to seek permission from the indigenous communities before entering an area.
- Tour times and dates can change or vary without warning for culturally significant occasions like periods of bereavement.
- Many Aborigines believe photographs capture the souls of their subjects and therefore become distressed when confronted with images of deceased people. Always seek permission before taking photographs of any Aboriginal person.
- The concept of time as we know it is a new concept to many tribal communities, so be patient and have a flexible itinerary.

customs, culture, and religious beliefs of different groups within China. Many irritations and complaints reported by foreigners can be explained by lack of knowledge. Some behavior considered antisocial and rude in the West is considered normal in China. Examples include spitting in buses, restaurants, and at home; speaking loudly; intense curiosity with foreigners, including staring; different table manners; and asking personal questions.

6. Choose an ethical travel agent. It is worthwhile finding out more about ethical travel, which is now a growing industry. Use travel agents and tour operators with established ethical policies. You could go one step further and plan your trip around a program that offers responsible alternatives to conventional holidays, such as volunteering. Examples include community development and education; teaching English to disadvantaged children; caring for orphans or the disabled; building homes and communities; wildlife conservation; staying at eco-friendly hostels; and visiting locations that use tourism to replace activities such as forest logging.

7. Promote China. In the West some people develop biased assumptions about China that are based on unrepresentative information sources such as media reports. Your trip will show you otherwise. The country's rich cultural diversity, unique history, exuberant festivals, hospitality, and mouth-watering cuisine will leave you craving more. For some, China becomes a life-long passion. So when you return, tell people about the realities of the country and encourage them to visit and see for themselves. The more people who visit, the more who will benefit from the cultural delights that China offers. ■

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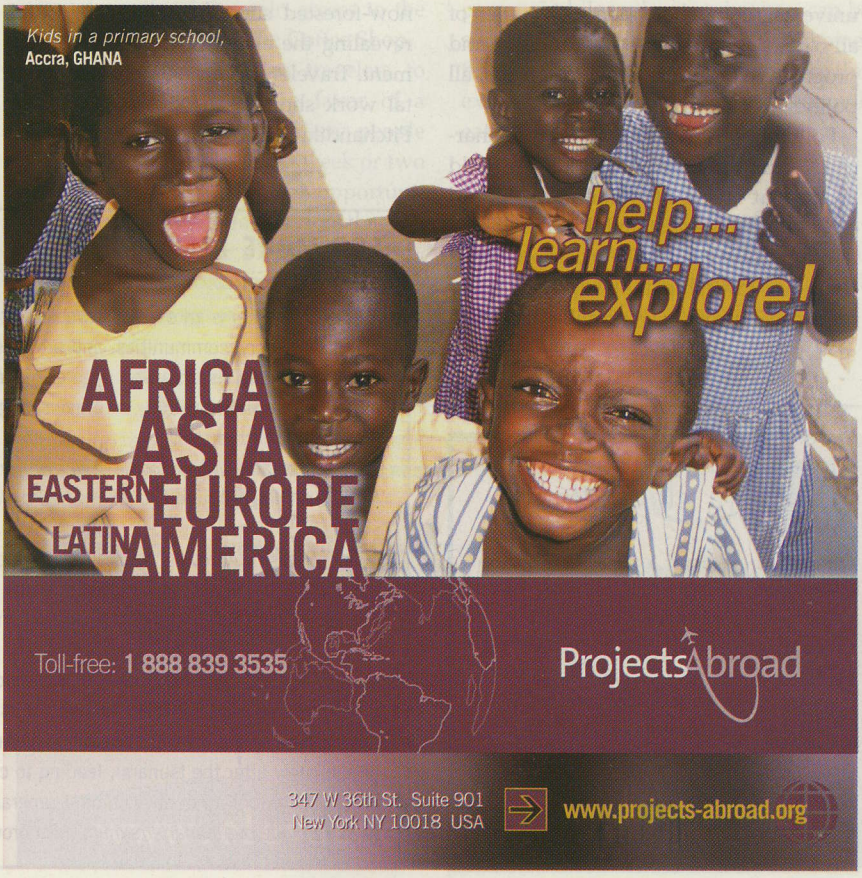
that time had been called Ayers Rock, in Australia's outback was controversially handed back to its traditional owners, the Anangu people. Before then, climbing "the rock" was seen by travelers as both an achievement and remarkable experience. When they were handed back their land, the Anangu people strongly discouraged people from climbing the rock—and offered an alternative. Now, traditional owners take travelers on guided tours around the rock to view sacred areas and ancient rock paintings and pass on stories about the Dreamtime. Rather than declining as feared, tourism to Uluru has never been better. Travelers are even boasting about observing the cultural boundaries.

TOURS VERSUS INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

It is strongly advisable that travelers visit outback and Aboriginal sacred sites with an organized tour. You will be supporting local Aboriginal communities, and you can be assured that your presence will not breach cultural protocols or cause distress to the indigenous people.

WHERE TO START

It's not always easy for visitors to Australia to know what tour operators work with Aborigines or exploit them. The best place to start is to log onto the website of Aboriginal Tourism Australia *(www.aboriginaltourism.com.au)*, which contains an extensive list of tours that are owned and operated by Aborigines. The Black Pages directory *(www.blackpages.com.au)* is the Aboriginal version of the Yellow Pages and contains details of tours, galleries, and stores that are run by indigenous communities and organizations. ■

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