

MEN'S JOURNAL

TRAVEL

Native American Tribes Embrace Tourism



Native American-owned casinos have long brought in crowds and profits for select few tribes, but reservations are still viewed as areas to be avoided, slums by a different name. That's beginning to change. More and more of America's 566 independent, federally recognized tribes are embracing tourism as a way to keep culture alive and bring jobs and money to economically depressed areas. It's not a panacea, but the trend represents a positive change for communities that haven't seen many of those over the last several centuries. It also presents an opportunity for outsiders to engage with native cultures.

"People from all around the world are interested in us and our traditions," says Harold Simpson, a Native American guide who acts as president of Monument Valley Simpson's Trailhandler Tours. "So we're trying to educate them about it – not a Hollywood version – rather how we actually live out here." His company specializes in tours of Southern Utah, where visitors spend days following a Navajo guide and nights learning about his culture. The business welcomes between 80 and 100 visitors – most foreign – on an average summer night and employs about 30 people year round. "Visitors don't realize that every tribe is unique and different," says Simpson. "Some people expect to find us riding painted horses, living in teepees, hunting buffalo."

Simpson's operation works on a fair-trade tourism model that empowers employees and communities and gives tourists real, unsanitized history and larger organizations like NDN2rs (say it out loud), which offers trips all over North America, are doing the same. "Guides need to receive a fair living wage, and the other money spent needs to benefit the native community," says NDN2rs owner Sarah Mathuin. "We also expect our guides to tell their own story and give visitors a fair crack at what's going on in Indian country." One of the requirements to work for Mathuin: Tell the story you want to tell, not the story you think the tourists want to hear. Mathuin's group runs trips in cooperation with the Lakota, Blackfeet, Arapaho, and Eskimo tribes – among many others.

The American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, which works with Native tourism organizations, advocating on their behalf and supply publicity and business development support, is monitoring the growing interest in Native-run operations and reservation-centric trips. "We're seeing more and more visitors each year," says Rachel Cromer, AIANTA's press liaison. "2012 was the busiest year since we started tracking people about 20 years ago."

One of AIANTA's priorities is to get travelers to spend less time at sites like the Crazy Horse Monument and Little Big Horn, where non-native guides tend to soften the historical narrative, and more time with actual First Peoples. Though Crazy Horse is surrounded by Lakota reservations, few travelers stop in and meet the people they've been hearing about. Still, it's hard to blame the travelers. Most Native tourism organizations are considerably harder to find than a 560-foot-tall stone warrior. Operator websites are buried on the back pages of Google and sport dated design templates despite being frequently updated.

"We're trying to diversify from gaming and agriculture and other industries, and tourism is a huge part of the diversification," says Ed Hall, a Federal Representative of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. "Tourism is an avenue for economic development, but also to educate people and share our culture and history on our own terms, from our own voices."

More information: An eight-day trip through the Black Hills of South Dakota with NDN2rs begins at \$1825 and features visits to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, one of the poorest places in the U.S., and the Badlands.

– Michael Easter