Promoting ‘travel that aint ordinary’

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One of the less written about aspects of last year’s conference on sustainable tourism organised by the United Nation’s World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the Jamaican Government, were the sometimes inspiring mini-presentations made in sessions away from the main conference.

Although the event at the Montego Bay Conference Centre was intended to develop an agenda and a final declaration that would locate tourism and its ability to drive economic and social development within the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal’s, it also provided a wealth of detail on alternative visitor offerings.

Away from the conference’s plenary sessions, in break out rooms, sometimes with standing room only, panels featured small entrepreneurs talking about their own experience and the very different visitor oriented personal businesses they had created.

One particularly memorable presentation came in a session entitled ‘Micro, Small and Medium Size Tourism Enterprises and the Future’. It was made by Noelle Nicolls, the Jamaican-Bahamian, owner of The Domestic Tourist which operates in the Bahamas.

Ms Nicholl has effectively created a visitor experience based around her family's Sunday brunch.

Explaining that Sunday Brunch on her family's patio is a cherished family ritual that keeps generations of her family and friends connected, she said that she realised that if she quite literally opened the door of her home to a small number of visitors, a very personal business opportunity existed.

Ms Nichols decided to establish through her company the Domestic Tourist, ‘Backyaad Brunch’, entertaining visitors on what she calls her ‘rainforest patio’, providing not just genuine Jamaican-Bahamian hospitality, but also the opportunity to experience authentic home-cooking and to talk with her family and friends.

The idea is that visitors – usually couples, singles or small family groups - sign up online and for a fee then travel away from New Providence’s tourist areas to enjoy a lively conversation over a meal and an experience that is genuine and authentic, and which hopefully enables her guests to understand more about the country they are visiting.

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For those who want to know more, go to Noelle Nicholl’s website https://www.domestictourist.com/ from which it is immediately evident that what she is also about much more, including personal travel to less known locations in the out-islands, and is developing a business around, “travel that aint ordinary”.

Her approach is clearly not for most visitors, but is for the growing number of travellers who when visiting the Caribbean want to come away with the sense that they have experienced something that is real, and perhaps more importantly, have made a personal connection. It is for those who are culturally curious and who do not do tourism in the normal sense.

The concept is fascinating as not only is it replicable elsewhere in the region - assuming those providing the service have the same spirit, ability and marketing skills – but it addresses in a practical way the type of individual experience that higher spending visitors want.

It represents a growing but little understood category of travel which by definition is not easy to package, and which seemingly requires visitors and one imagines, intermediaries as unusual as the providers.

How destinations support such endeavours will require sensitivity. For a critical mass of experiences of the kind Ms Nicholls has developed requires quality publicity, and most importantly visitor and industry word of mouth and recommendations.

It needs also to be seen as separate from trends in some developing countries whereby very wealthy visitors want more than just the sense of where they are visiting, but as a part of their vacation are literally buying experiences such as visits alone to historic sites or even private meetings with politicians, writers or artists, that only they and their companions can ever share.

What Ms Nicholls and others like her are doing in a small but important way is what last November’s post-conference Montego Bay Declaration is all about: developing tourism in a sustainable, socially and environmentally aware manner, spreading its benefits more widely, while providing authentic experience.

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