

The Role of Diaspora Tourism: Building Economies through Cultural Connections

Source: Diaspora Tourism Alliance

Diaspora tourism comes in many forms, including family visits, heritage or “roots” tourism to medical tourism, business travel, and “birthright” tours. But regardless of the purpose of their travels, diaspora members are generally more likely to infuse money into the local economy when traveling to their country of heritage than most international tourists.

Recent emigrants are familiar with the culture and may not need international agents to charge them higher rates in order to feel comfortable and at home. As a result, diaspora tourists are less likely to limit themselves to foreign-owned tourist enclaves that import their supplies and export their profits. Generally diaspora tourists are more willing to stay in locally owned or smaller accommodations (including with friends and relatives), eat in local restaurants, and buy locally-produced goods than other international travellers.

Diasporas can help open markets for new tourist destinations in their countries of heritage. As diaspora tourists travel to less-visited regions to see friends and family or participate in various cultural events they will promote the creation of new restaurants, attractions, and general services for tourists outside of the major cities. The pioneering tourists themselves might choose to invest in businesses in the region after making connections on their visits. They will likely influence others to visit through word of mouth and may become involved with local community projects.

Government Efforts to Draw in Diasporan Visitors

One way that governments attract diaspora tourists is by promoting genealogy tourism as an exciting way to learn about one’s family history and reconnect with the past. The Discover Ireland website provides a portal for tracing one’s ancestors before embarking on a trip or upon arrival in the homeland.

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar also sponsor a project that allows persons of Indian origin to have their roots traced with the goal of increasing tourism and philanthropy within the Indian diaspora. The Indian national government eases the stress and cost of travel by granting a visa waiver to all diaspora members.

The African Diaspora Tourism site highlights the avenues through which African countries are working to attract visitors including heritage tours, festivals, and other cultural events. Speaking with a *New York Times* reporter in 2005 about attracting travellers from the diaspora, Ghana’s tourism minister said: “We want Africans everywhere, no matter where they live or how they got there, to see Ghana as their gateway home. We hope we can help bring the African family back together again.”

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) supports the development of African Diaspora Heritage Trails, an initiative originally proposed by the government of Bermuda to preserve and explain the artifacts of slave life.

What’s Next?

Newland and Taylor put forward six different ways that governments and NGOs can promote diaspora tourism, including:

1. Creating programs dedicated specifically to diaspora tourism

2. Offering educational and cultural exchange programs
3. Subsidizing heritage and sporting events
4. Developing a strong internet presence
5. Making entries into countries of origin easier and less expensive

In general, the efforts of governments to benefit from diaspora ties have been fairly limited and can be seen as an untapped resource with a great deal of potential for the advancement of development work.

We are interested in hearing your thoughts on this topic. Have you travelled to your country of heritage? What prompted you to take this trip? Based on your experiences, how do you think diaspora tourism should be developed? Please let us know and join the conversation!