

## **Understanding Negative Visitor Experiences at Indigenous Cultural Tourism Venues: Marketing and Operational Implications**

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*There is a tendency for indigenous tourism destinations to focus their marketing on the international markets. In Australia, in addition to the many high profile indigenous sites there are a number of smaller sites which present indigenous culture and heritage for tourists. This study examines the level of market awareness of and satisfaction with the offerings at the Brambuk Cultural Centre located at the Grampians National Park, in the west of Victoria. The Grampians is a premier tourism destination for international and domestic tourists. The study, which included a satisfaction survey of visitors to the indigenous cultural centre, found that the centre is perceived as not well promoted and in need of repositioning as a tourist destination. Visitors were often surprised at the historical and heritage value of the site and its educational potential. This paper suggests that the difference between the expected time and actual time spent on the visit should be an indicator for managers on the packaging of offerings, and reports on the degree to which satisfactory performance was achieved. The findings suggest that greater attention be placed on the dissatisfaction expressed as signals about offerings that may need improvement.*

### **BACKGROUND**

Many indigenous tourism venues and destinations fall under the banner of “cultural tourism” because they involve Aboriginal art, craft and cultural displays. Indigenous cultural tourists also include those who visit indigenous performances, Aboriginal sites of historical significance and indigenous communities (Fairweather, 2008). Indigenous tourism comprises tourism activity in which indigenous people have some direct control and management over the tourism enterprise and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Hinch & Butler, 1996).

In Australia some indigenous tourism enterprises have focused on international markets, which account for only 11% of cultural visitors, as a whole. The remaining are domestic “day” and domestic “overnight” visitors. Indigenous tourism visitors from international markets have been declining and in the 2005-2009 period, the annual average decline was 6%, with 2009 registering 709,000 visitors. Europe was the major source of the international indigenous visitors (47%). Indigenous tourism visitors were more likely to travel on a packaged tour than other visitors, and 40% of all those on packaged tours were from Asian countries. While most international indigenous tourists reported having an indigenous

learning experience, 16% reported that this was not experienced (Fairweather, 2008). The most popular indigenous activities are shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**MOST POPULAR INDIGENOUS TOURISM ACTIVITIES**

<b>Most popular indigenous activities</b>	<b>International indigenous tourists</b>	<b>Domestic indigenous tourists</b>
Seeing Aboriginal art, craft and cultural displays	45%	54%
Visiting an Aboriginal gallery	32%	24%
Visiting an Aboriginal cultural centre	28%	22%
Seeing Aboriginal dance or theatre performance	27%	10%

(Source: Fairweather, 2008)

Domestic overnight indigenous tourists tended to be parents (35%), older and not working (24%) and were generally over the age of 40 years (74%). For this group, the experiencing of Aboriginal art, craft and cultural displays were the most popular, as shown in Table 1.

Tourists visiting Aboriginal cultural centers such as Brambuk do so with limited, if any, contextual knowledge of Aboriginal cultural heritage (Sparks, 2002). Ryan and Huyton (2002) suggest that it would be more appropriate to contextualize Aboriginal tourism with its connection to landscape, placing greater emphasis on engagement and participation rather than observation. How places, cultures and values are portrayed to the tourists as being of indigenous significance tends to inhibit engagement of domestic travelers with Aboriginal tourism products and destinations (Beck & Somerville, 2002). International tourists especially value meeting indigenous people and ‘living the experience’ which is critical to developing knowledge that Aboriginality is a ‘living’ entity (Spark, 2002).

This study relates to and was conducted at the indigenous cultural centre (Brambuk), located in Western Victoria, about 4 hours travel from Melbourne. It is situated at the Grampians National Park, a site of indigenous significance and a primer tourist destination for both domestic and international visitors. The Grampians or Gariwerd contains many “sacred places” and is a culturally significant landscape, especially for the Aboriginal (Koori) communities of the region. The proper experience of indigenous connections to the landscape requires interpretation, which Brambuk attempts to provide. The authentic interpretation provides visitors with the cross-cultural understanding and enhances the quality of the experience and the levels of satisfaction (Ryan & Huyton, 2000; Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

## **INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND TOURISM**

Over the last decade or two there has been an increasing level of involvement of indigenous communities in the identification, development and operation of tourism enterprises (Anderson, 1991; Altman & Finlayson, 1993; Ryan & Huyton, 2000; 2002). The involvement of indigenous people and communities in tourism within Australia is relatively new when compared with New Zealand and Canada. For the future growth of visitor demand and in the interest of continual renewal of offerings, visitor satisfaction and expectation studies provide a critical basis for future developments, marketing and targeting of new audiences (McIntosh, 2004).

Research into Aboriginal tourism in the Northern Territory (Ryan & Huyton, 2000) found that generally there was greater interest in nature rather than culturally based tourism, with the greatest interest or demand for Aboriginal cultural products coming from only a third of all visitors. Generally, respondents rated Aboriginal tourism products highly. Their study found that the respondents identified

the key cultural products (in NT) to be ‘authentic Aboriginal souvenirs, Aboriginal music, dance performances, and rock art’. The authors also report that with respect to overseas visitors, the tourist from North America and Northern Europe were most interested in Aboriginal tourism rather than those from the fast growing Asian tourist markets. Mohsin and Ryan (1999) and Blamey (1998) confirm the lower interest levels of Asian tourists in Aboriginal culture and heritage. Findings of studies on major motivation for visitors to New Zealand also do not flag Maori culture as being rated highly and classified it as a secondary influence on their decision to visit the country. However, the experiencing of Maori culture was mostly classified as an important and integral part of the total tourism experience (McIntosh, 2004).

## **THE STUDY**

The study used multiple-items to measure and evaluate visitor experiences of the visit as a whole, but particularly concentrating on the various products and services on offer. These products generally are in the form of displays of artifacts and as well as story telling videos. Therefore, the focus is on information provision. The study focuses on what visitors liked and disliked about their visit and what improvements would enhance their experience. The data was collected by scaled responses to a series of statements relating to their experiences and comments and suggestions were invited on future improvements. The study attempts to evaluate expectations prior to the visit, especially in relation to the time taken for the visit. One of the key parameters in service enhancement in a tourism enterprise is the expected time an average visitor would spend at such a destination. Managers can use this information to cater for the diversity of visitor needs and provide adequate products of interest to fill a given amount of time.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Leisure Motivation Scale has been used to identify variables that should be measured to determine visitor satisfaction. The LMS identifies four motives that determine satisfaction derived from leisure pursuits. The first involves the intellectual motive involving activities such as learning, exploring, discovering and may involve thoughtfulness and imagination. The second is the social motive, which relate to and involves the need for friendship and interpersonal relations. The third is the competence-mastery motive which relates to the need to “achieve, master, challenge, and compete”. The fourth is the stimulus avoidance motive seeking relaxation, calmness, solitude and the breaking away from routine. (Beard & Ragheb, 1983, p.225).

Churchill and Surprenant (1982) argue that the type of product category under consideration would have an effect on how performance expectation influences satisfaction. If actual performance is close to expectation, then the level of satisfaction experienced will positively influenced by those expectations. However, if actual performance is sufficiently different from pre-purchase expectations, then this expectation will have either no effect or a negative effect on subsequent judgment (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Therefore, visitor satisfaction data collection should be based on at least two dimensions.

### **Survey Instrument Design Considerations**

The purpose of this study was to seek information, opinions and attitudes on “performance”, as suggested by the literature discussed in the previous section. In order to collect relevant information on “performance” one needs to understand the nature and characteristics of the industry (if relevant) and more specially, the missions and objectives of the enterprise. This will identify the issues that the research must address if visitor satisfaction is to be meaningfully measured.

Consequently, the visitors were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement to twenty items (statements) using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Agree Strongly to 1 = Disagree Strongly). These items were selected based on the typical objectives that the organization was deemed to be pursuing, using the literature and publicly available information. The data collection, using the self administered survey

forms was conducted over 17 days, incorporating three weekends. There were 522 usable forms returned, out of which 230 included comments with ideas and suggestions to improve the Centre.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

### Respondent Profiles

The study sample include a good mix of ages, however, 65% of the respondents were female. As expected for a premier tourist destination during the school holiday period, when the study was conducted, 84% of the respondents were domestic visitors, comprising approximately a third from interstate, and 16% were overseas visitors. First time visitors comprised 62% of the respondents, 38% were repeat visitors and 17% had visited in the previous two years.

**TABLE 2  
RESPONDENT PROFILES**

	<b>Brambuk</b>
Sample size	522
Domestic visitors	84%
Overseas visitors	16%
Gender: Females	65%
Males	35%
Age: Under 30 years	36.8%
30 – 49 years	39.5%
50+ years	23.7%
First- time visitors	62%
Repeat visitors	38%

### Time Spent at the Centre

A very high proportion of respondents spent one hour or less at the Centre in total (50%), and an additional 31% spent between one and two hours , as shown in Table 3. Only 10.1% spent between two and three hours and 8.7% spent more than 4 hours.

There was a statistically significant difference in the time spent between domestic and overseas visitors,  $t = 2.683$ ,  $df = 503$ ,  $p = .008$ . The time spent at the Centre by overseas visitors tended to be generally shorter, compared with domestic visitors, with 67.5% of the overseas visitors spending one hour or less compared to 47.1% of domestic visitors. It should be noted that some respondents from overseas may have been on packaged tours which generally allow only a fixed amount of time at each location. However, only 37 respondents were part of a packaged tour.

**TABLE 3  
TOTAL TIME SPENT AT THE CENTRE**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
One hour or less	255	50.4
Between 1 and 2 hours	157	31.0
Between 2 and 3 hours	51	10.1
Between 3 and 4 hours	22	4.3
More than 4 hours	20	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>507</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The average time spent at the Centre was one hour and forty minutes (with a standard deviation of 1 hour and 15 minutes). The analysis was controlled for time visits to determine if first visits were indeed longer. This was not the case. For first visits, the average time spent was 90 minutes (with  $sd = 68$  minutes, indicating that most people fell into a range between approximately 20 minutes and two hours and 40 minutes).

Studies show that in cultural and heritage museums, exhibitions or events satisfaction levels can be enhanced through a greater level of involvement and engagement of visitors (de Rogas&Camarero, 2006). This can, to a large extent, be achieved in the design stages of a centre as has been done at Brambuk through information panels, walkways, lighting and audio, which stimulate as well as create interest in the visitor. However, the emotional engagement of the visitor could be enhanced through a greater degree of personalization through interaction and dialogue with visitors and hence a greater degree of emotional involvement. This could come in the form of cultural interpretations, descriptions and insights that cannot be gleaned from tangible displays. The time spent at the Centre can be an indicator of the Center's ability to both cognitively and emotionally involve the visitor. A number of visitors commented on the need for interaction with indigenous staff, with comments such as: "More indigenous staff roaming ready to explain things with their stories and experiences (bit like Australia zoo)." Emotional involvement can lead to longer visits, with more time spent at the site, the shop and the café.

### **Understanding Negative Experiences**

Tourism literature and experience of customer relations managers indicates that visitor satisfaction levels in leisure activities is generally skewed towards satisfaction and that people are relaxed and perhaps less critical. As the satisfaction scale relating to statements about the experiences shown in Table 4 demonstrates, based on mean scores and their standard deviation, the satisfaction levels of visitors to the indigenous Centre were very high. The obvious managerial conclusion from the investigation of averages is that visitors are very satisfied and therefore, plans and programs are deemed to be performing to managerial expectations. A second level of analysis is required to uncover any gaps that may exist between visitor expectations and managerial expectations.

In order to evaluate performance it is important to undertake a measurement of satisfaction generally as well as with specific objective related indicators of "performance". These indicators should be based on the dimensions that may constitute satisfaction. Firstly, we need to assume that there will be a high level of satisfaction and turn our attention to understanding the non-positive end of the scale that can provide some operational guidance. (See Table 4)

Generalized satisfaction scales are not sufficient in themselves to determine how visitors may actually feel about a product, service or issue. The choice of the twenty items was also guided by what management of such a tourism focused enterprise may be interested in from an operational point of view. The analysis below is organized around organizational goals and mission. For example, one of the goals is to provide visitors with an understanding of indigenous culture and history. This would be regarded as Brambuk's "core competency" (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). To address this, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement for two statements: "I gained a better insight into indigenous culture" and "I gained a better understanding of indigenous history." The combined score was 3.95 with a standard deviation of 0.851. There were 21 respondents who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this item (4.2%) and 113 (22.8%) were neutral. Therefore, one could conclude that 27% were not willing to give a positive score. From the point of view of visitor satisfaction and as explained in the literature section of this report, the visitor responses are generally skewed towards satisfaction. The purpose of studies of this type is to identify underlying discontent and address any hidden issues with respect to satisfaction and expectation.

**TABLE 4**  
**MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF MEASURES**

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q11_1 Overall, this visit was very enjoyable	4.51	.595
Q11_2 The Centre is well maintained and well organized	4.60	.579
Q11_3 The displays and stands were informative	4.51	.640
Q11_4 The staff were knowledgeable and friendly	4.40	.726
Q11_5 I have learnt a lot on this visit	4.09	.870
Q11_6 There should be more educational emphasis in displays	3.28	1.041
Q11_7 I took particular notice of plants along walkways	3.78	.979
Q11_8 The shop should provide a wider range of indigenous items and crafts for sale	3.32	1.051
Q11_9 I expected a greater variety of displays & information	2.82	1.044
Q11_10 I expected that the visit would take longer than it did	2.82	.986
Q11_11 I would feel comfortable in recommending this Centre to others	4.48	.706
Q11_12 I gained a better insight into indigenous culture	4.23	.818
Q11_13 The service overall was of a high standard	4.34	.703
Q11_14 I had no difficulty with access to the various parts of the Centre	4.43	.745
Q11_15 The Centre was easy to find	4.54	.700
Q11_16 This is one of the best Cultural Centers I have visited	4.00	.923
Q11_17 I expected to see more than I did at this Centre	2.90	1.093
Q11_18 I gained a better understanding of indigenous history	3.95	.851
Q11_19 I was able to get enough printed information to take home	3.62	.966
Q11_20 The displays adequately met my needs	4.07	.799

**TABLE 5**  
**INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND HISTORY**

Items	Mean Score	No. (%) with Negative Score (DS/D)	No. (%) with Neutral Score
I gained a better insight into indigenous culture	4.23	12 (2.4%)	75 (15%)
I gained a better understanding of indigenous history	3.95	21 (4.2%)	113 (22.8%)

## CONCLUSIONS

These conclusions are based on the matching of two broad sources of information comprising feedback from visitors to Brambuk and the understanding of operational goals and competencies of the organization. In order to bring about meaningful change and improvement to tourism offerings tourist expectations and dislikes or dissatisfactions must form the grounding for future changes. Too often emphasis is placed on what visitors are satisfied about and on how satisfied they are. Therefore correct

signals for discontent get overlooked in the change process. This study looked at the “bundle of benefits or offerings” and attempts to tease out those elements of programs or services need to be addressed. Consequently, this conclusion will highlight specific indicators that all may not be as it appears.

For example, in response to the statement, “I expected that the visit would take longer than it did”, 134 (25.7%) of visitors indicated that their expectation was not met and a further 173 (35%) were neutral. More than a third of all respondents (37.5%) either agreed or agreed strongly that there should be more educational emphasis in displays. Nearly a quarter (22.5%) of visitors were expecting a greater variety of displays and information and generally expected to see more at the Centre. Nevertheless, they were almost always satisfied with the visit and the level of enjoyment experienced from the visit was very high, in aggregate terms. An example of a comment reflecting that the Centre exceeded a visitor’s expectations is “I expected much less things then there is. I walked in and I was amazed.”

Brambuk’s core competencies are the provision of insights into indigenous culture and the provision of an understanding of indigenous history for the visiting public. It is expected that visitors would gain a better insight into indigenous culture. This was generally the case, as indicated by the mean score of 4.23 (5 maximum), with a large standard deviation of 0.818. It is important to note that 75 respondents were neutral (15%) and 12 were either in disagreement or strong disagreement (2.4%). Given that this item reflects the main purpose of the Centre, it may be important strategically to address why 17.4% of the respondents did not give a positive score. The answer may lie in the analysis of other service or product offerings, displays, activities, information, customer service and the like. This would also include individual characteristics, backgrounds and experiences, which influence their expectations.

Similarly, with the item “I gained a better understanding of indigenous history” the mean score was 3.95 with a standard deviation of 0.851. There were 21 respondents who either disagreed or strong disagreed with this item (4.2%) and 113 (22.8%) were neutral. Therefore, one could conclude that 27% were not willing to give a positive score. From the point of view of visitor satisfaction and as explained in the literature section of this report, the visitor responses are generally skewed towards satisfaction. The purpose of studies of this type is to identify underlying discontent and address any hidden issues with respect to satisfaction and expectation.

There were a large number of comments received about the need for more displays, activities and information, indicating that expectations were relatively high creating a wider expectation-satisfaction gap. International tourists expected to meet and communicate with Aboriginal people and there was some discontent expressed about the lack to engagement and participation. However, satisfaction levels with the visit were very positive in aggregate terms. How the programs, activities and displays address the key functional objectives and core competencies should be subjected to regular reviews and modernization so that they remain effective in meeting changing visitor needs and expectations. It is important for Brambuk to reposition itself as a truly ‘living’ cultural centre, as is indicated in the promotional material, with a greater focus on engagement through active participation rather than being a centre which displays Aboriginal artifacts.

Furthermore, in order to encourage repeat visits the programs and displays require continuous renewal. This could be achieved by staging of historical and cultural events targeting particular segments of the tourist market. Event programming should include collaboration with regional indigenous groups such as artists, historians, writers, storytellers and various community based organizations. In the tourism sector, continuous improvement strategies are critical to addressing the ever-changing needs of disparate segments which are seeking to be engaged by the indigenous experience.

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