



## Indigenous People and the Travel Industry: Practical Global Guidelines to Good Practice

***G Adventures***

  
**Planeterra**  
Foundation

International Institute  
of Tourism Studies  

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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# Why Global Guidelines?

The cultural survival of the world's 370 million indigenous people hangs in the balance. Caught between the pressures to modernize and conform to dominant societies, many of these often-isolated communities have an increasingly compromised relationship to their rich cultural traditions, histories and languages. Not only are they threatened culturally, but often, indigenous communities are among the world's most impoverished and disenfranchised people. With few options, indigenous people often choose to develop their precious natural resources as a means of economic survival.

Tourism can provide a viable alternative—a way of ensuring the cultural fabric and environmental resources of indigenous communities remain intact for themselves and their children while serving as an incentive to protect their business assets. Travel companies that interact with indigenous communities have a special responsibility to help them safeguard their resources and can play a key role in helping to do so.

The following practical guidelines—developed over the course of a year by the George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies, G Adventures and the Planeterra Foundation—are intended for use by travel companies that work with indigenous communities around the world. They are meant to encourage responsible conduct and guide good business practices that serve and protect the interests of indigenous communities and travel companies as well as produce visitor experiences that are authentic, respectful and rewarding.

A photograph of a man in traditional indigenous clothing, including a red and white patterned headband and a red vest over a grey sweater, working in a field of pink flowers. In the background, there are green hills, trees, and a few cows grazing.

# Our Approach to Developing Good Guidance

The George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies, G Adventures and the Planeterra Foundation worked together to define good practices for travel companies. Over the course of a year, we:

1. Reviewed literature and existing declarations and codes established by indigenous communities, associations, and NGOs
2. Conducted [primary research](#) with indigenous tourism suppliers and travelers
3. Developed guiding principles for respectful business practices
4. Established a set of guidelines with corresponding concrete actions
5. Engaged an expert review panel of indigenous tourism experts and tour operations professionals to provide feedback on draft guidelines
6. Incorporated feedback to produce final guidelines.

Project partners plan to work with travel companies over the next 12 months to pilot test the guidelines in order to ensure applicability to different operational realities and scales of operations. This will help project partners to refine the guidance document.





# How to Use These Guidelines

In general, the guidelines are intended to provide a framework for good business practices rather than dictate imperatives. It is important to note that the guidelines are not standards but meant to inform good, responsible and culturally sensitive business behavior. They are meant to be scaled, adapted to fit local conditions and adjusted over time.

Certain guidelines may need to be tailored based on the size of the tour company, the availability of resources and whether or not the primary relationship is between the travel company and an indigenous community or an entrepreneur providing tourism products and services. Depending on the scale of the engagement with indigenous communities, travel companies may also want to consider working with partners in the NGO and consulting communities to operationalize the guidelines.

While all of the guidelines are applicable to communities with limited or no tourism, companies that are bringing visitors to communities with extensive tourism experience will need to modify the guidelines accordingly. For instance, a travel company bringing a small group of visitors to a community every six months to enjoy a locally-owned restaurant will not need to spend nearly as much time researching community governance, laws and customs as a travel company aiming to develop community infrastructure with the intention of bringing in hundreds of visitors on a regular basis. Even the conditions of neighboring communities may differ greatly, depending on their size, experience, the number of visitors they are hosting and the scale of their tourism enterprises. In some cases, political conditions and the general marginalization of indigenous people may impact the adoption and implementation of particular guidelines.

When determining whether a guideline would be applicable to a certain situation, travel companies would best be served by gaining some objectivity and asking themselves whether a third party, for example, would find that the guideline in question was applied in a reasonable manner. In other words, does the guideline seem to correspond with the situation? Does the situation justify and necessitate the application of a particular guideline? The guidelines are divided into three subsections: developing, operating and marketing tourism experiences in order for travel companies to relate the guidelines to particular areas of work functions. Travel company staff may focus on one or more of these sections as applicable to their roles, and use the corresponding key actions as a check list.



# Guiding Principles of Responsible Indigenous Tourism

*The following principles represent key pillars of responsible business practices for use in negotiating agreements around the development and operation of tourism products and experiences. They are the basis on which the practical guidelines were built.*

## **Full and Effective Participation**

Ensure that Indigenous communities and suppliers participate in all strategic discussions and share decision-making based on the dictates of their traditional laws and customs. Travel companies should keep indigenous communities and suppliers well-informed of all relevant business decisions.

## **Equitable Engagement**

Make certain that indigenous communities are treated as equal business partners and clearly understand the implications of all arrangements to ensure equitable participation. The indigenous communities themselves, rather than the travel company, should determine the level of their involvement in tourism activities.

## **Informed Consent**

Inform Indigenous communities of any activities that may affect their well-being and to ensure that they are free to exercise their right to self-determination.

## **Business Values**

Respect traditional values, customs and conventions in all business transactions.

## **Local Purchasing**

Give priority to indigenous suppliers when purchasing and offering goods and services. These suppliers should be treated fairly and promoted appropriately.

## **Community Support**

Ensure fair and equitable business relationships with indigenous communities or suppliers. Provide direct employment opportunities to local indigenous communities.



### **Local Ownership**

Support indigenous community members own and derive direct benefits from tourism products and services.

### **Decent Work**

Respect labor rights, provide safe and secure working environments for employees and minimum payment of a living wage, (which is generally higher than minimum wage and reflective of local costs of living), and offer opportunities for advancement.

### **Customary Laws and Practices**

Understand, respect and accept traditional norms, land ownership rights and management systems.

### **Traditional Knowledge**

Make every effort to ensure that traditional knowledge and its representations—including including artwork, crafts, ceremonies, rituals, performing arts and all intangible assets— are protected from commercial exploitation. Tour operators should only use indigenous communities' traditional knowledge with full community consent.

### **Protection of Cultural Heritage**

Ensure that traditional lands, territories, sacred sites and resources are used with communities' full knowledge and consent and protected against exploitation.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Tour operators should ensure that there is a process in place for tracking the impacts of the business relationship in order to minimize potential negative outcomes and ensure positive results.

### **Cultural Interaction**

Promote respectful visitor-host interactions that enhance cross-cultural learning and understanding without disrupting daily routines.

### **Collaborative Interpretation**

Ensure that all storytelling and narratives told about indigenous communities are accurate and defined and approved by the indigenous community itself, with respect and appreciation for traditional languages.

### **Stewardship of Heritage**

Work toward conserving natural and cultural resources, and assist indigenous communities to steward and protect these assets, which form the basis of their tourism businesses.



*A homestay meal being prepared by a host in Guatemala.*



# Guidelines for Developing Tourism Experiences

*Tour operators are encouraged to use the following guidelines in assessing their existing business relationships with indigenous communities and suppliers and in developing new relationships. The recommendations are organized into four stages of business engagement.*

## Relationship Creation

### **GUIDELINE 1**

Depending on the scale and nature of the business relationship with the indigenous community, it is recommended that travel companies conduct thorough research on community organization and governance, prior to engaging community members or suppliers in business relationships. A comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of traditional governance and organization is useful in effective and culturally appropriate, communication and in conducting meetings. Travel companies should familiarize themselves with the following aspects of community protocols and place-based factors.

- Traditional communications and decision-making processes
- Self-governance and indigenous governing traditions and leadership
- Traditional/customary laws that may affect tour operations
- Ownership of resources, including land (where possible to determine)
- Cultural assets and intellectual property laws (if existing)
- Traditional customs and values associated to conducting business
- Historical and societal issues, such as poverty, access to education, health, infrastructure and services, and marginalization
- The community's level of business understanding and knowledge, literacy, numeracy and language proficiency
- Local economic conditions and wages

### **KEY ACTIONS**

*When engaging with indigenous communities new to tourism or proposing a significant scale-up of an existing experience:*



- ☑ Define scope of research based on scale of new business relationship. Travel companies can ensure a thorough understanding of the organizational and governance topics listed above through discussions with the indigenous community or supplier.
- ☑ Share information with all staff planning process.
- ☑ Ensure that supplier contracts reflect the outcomes of due diligence discussions.

*For existing business relationships or small-scale initiatives:*

- ☑ Share information with all staff engaged in the planning process.
- ☑ If the business relationship is expanding, determine the scope of research based on scale of the evolving business relationship.
- ☑ Ensure the supplier contract is reflective of findings.

## GUIDELINE 2

Identify, with indigenous community or supplier, the individuals and groups that are involved in the business relationship or directly impacted by it.

### KEY ACTIONS

*When engaging with indigenous communities new to tourism or proposing a significant scale-up of an existing experience:*

- ☑ List the main individuals and groups that are involved in and will be directly impacted by the business relationship, and their needs and interests to ensure the new tourism product will be shaped by all relevant stakeholders, and that key tourism decision-makers are identified.
- ☑ Share stakeholder information with all staff involved in planning, operation, marketing and monitoring.

*For existing business relationships or small-scale initiatives:*

- ☑ Determine if there are any new or previously unidentified individuals and groups that may have a stake in, or may be impacted by, the ongoing business relationship in order to determine if there are any new stakeholders and interests that need to be taken into account. This activity should occur periodically in tandem with the contract renewal process.
- ☑ Share findings with staff involved in planning, operations, marketing and monitoring.

## Engagement

### GUIDELINE 3

Establish a process for ongoing communication that is in line with methods regularly used by the indigenous community or supplier, takes into account available technology and is clearly understood by all relevant stakeholders or parties. The communication process should focus on developing trust and establishing mutual understanding of expectations.



*Celebrating San culture at !Khwa ttu in South Africa.*

## KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Discuss the communications process, methods (phone, email, videoconferencing etc.) and schedule with indigenous tourism decision-makers as part of the initial engagement discussions.
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## GUIDELINE 4

Define the objectives of the business relationship in collaboration with the indigenous community or supplier, taking into account costs and benefits. When engaging with a whole community, and especially if tourism is being developed for the first time, this process would require consultation with main stakeholders. Depending on the situation and scale of the collaboration, the travel company may find it useful to engage a local third-party organization with particular expertise in community development and stakeholder consultation to facilitate these discussions.

## KEY ACTIONS

*When engaging with indigenous communities new to tourism or proposing a significant scale-up of an existing experience:*

- ☑ Engage the indigenous community in a dialogue to understand members' vision and objectives for tourism development, including a discussion of all potential impacts of tourism on the community including both positive and negative.
- ☑ Discuss the benefits and costs associated with the proposed business relationship, to ensure a realistic understanding of the potential prospects of the tourism venture.
- ☑ Complete business planning exercises, identifying all associated costs and establishing fair pricing for profitability and appropriateness for market.

*For existing business relationships or small-scale initiatives:*

- ☑ Review all existing costs and determine if any changes are needed to pricing, to ensure fairness, profitability and market appropriateness.
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## GUIDELINE 5

Consider, respond to, and where possible, resolve priority issues and concerns that emerge from discussions with community stakeholders.

## KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Maintain a log of discussions with stakeholders that includes who has been consulted, date, topics discussed, key issues raised, indigenous community's comments, and travel company's response to those issues.
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## GUIDELINE 6

Establish an agreement around the volume of visitors that the indigenous community can realistically accommodate. This agreement should be reviewed periodically and revised as needed.

## KEY ACTIONS

*When engaging with indigenous communities new to tourism or proposing a significant scale-up of an existing experience:*

- ☑ Initiate discussions with relevant community leaders to determine the ideal number of visitors, frequency of tour groups, and tour guide-to-guest ratios to ensure positive results for both the community and the travel company, and to prevent negative social and environmental impacts.



Travel companies may need the assistance of a third-party organization to complete this activity depending on the size and scale of the collaboration.

- ☑ Document main agreements both in the log that covers discussions with stakeholders, and incorporate the anticipated number of annual visitors in the contract with indigenous community or supplier

*For existing business relationships or small-scale initiatives:*

- ☑ Number of annual visitors to the community should be reflected in tour operator - supplier contract and re-evaluated periodically at the time of contract renewal.

## Contract (Business Agreement)

### GUIDELINE 7

Obtain explicit approval from indigenous community or supplier and other key stakeholders where applicable, for use of natural assets and cultural assets, such as traditional customs, music, art forms, dress, food, storytelling etc., as a part of indigenous tour experiences, as well as indigenous lands and other natural resources. Where an indigenous community or supplier does not have ownership rights, it is imperative that access rights are understood, and that the relevant external authority is consulted.



*A group dressed in traditional Maasai attire take part in a tour that allows tourists to witness cook-stoves being installed by local Tanzanian women and learn about how the stoves prevent air pollution in homes.*

## KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Craft a formal agreement, such as a supplier contract or Memorandum of Association, that outlines all key details of the business relationship including but not limited to agreements regarding:
  - Use of cultural assets, and indigenous lands and other resources
  - Volume of visitors on an annual basis, frequency of tour groups, and tour guide to guest ratios
  - Costs and fair pricing for profitability and appropriateness for market.
  - Avoidance of anti-competitive practices.
  - Rules and/or code of conduct for visitors to community
- ☑ The agreement is understood by all parties and translated into indigenous language(s) and reviewed together where necessary.
- ☑ Maintain formal agreements and permits.

# Monitoring

## GUIDELINE 8

Depending on the nature and scale of the collaboration with the community, it is recommended that companies engage with indigenous leaders and other key stakeholders at least once a year to discuss shared vision and objectives as well as impacts from and benefits of tourism.

## KEY ACTIONS

*When engaging with indigenous communities new to tourism or proposing a significant scale-up of an existing experience:*

- ☑ Track impacts of the business relationship, prepare summary report, and share findings with indigenous community and other stakeholders on an annual (or biannual) basis. Use findings from monitoring activities as a basis for this report. Make the report accessible to indigenous community or supplier. This may include translating report into indigenous language(s) and printing for dissemination if necessary. In some cases where there is either a high level of illiteracy or the local language is verbal, it is important to agree with the community the best way to illustrate findings.

*For existing business relationships or small-scale initiatives:*

- ☑ Use this annual (or biannual, or other period, based on company's contracting frequency) contracting period to review business relationship and benefits to both parties. Contractors can ask questions such as:
  - Is tourism resulting in net positive impacts in the community?
  - Is the volume of travelers optimal or are there any risks of over-exposing community, either culturally or in relation to use of natural resources such as water?
  - How are costs and cash flows for the indigenous business? And, is the price fair for both parties?
  - In terms of tourist behavior, have there been any concerns, any information that needs to be updated regarding rules or conduct in the community?
- ☑ Determine if, and what, changes may be needed to the business relationship and/or operation based on discussion with indigenous leaders or supplier.





# Guidelines for Operating Tourism Experiences

## Interpretation

### **GUIDELINE 9**

Develop tourism experiences, including interpretive elements, in a manner that presents the living (current) culture, customs, language, connection to natural resources, history and local sites consistent with the indigenous narrative (in their own voice), protocols and cultural codes (customs) as is agreed to as relevant to the tourism experience design.

### **KEY ACTIONS**

- ☑ Request protocols and cultural codes and norms for sharing cultural elements from the indigenous tourism supplier. For example, ask “Is the community involved in the delivery of the cultural programming to the visitor?” It should be from their perspective and voice, and should only be aspects of the culture that the community wants to share, in a way they want to share it.
- ☑ Assess whether the tourism experience complies with any existing protocols and/or cultural codes and norms developed by the indigenous community to ensure authenticity and safeguard culturally sensitive sites, customs and resources. Address any gaps that may be identified through the assessment.
- ☑ Provide description of the tourism experience elements, including interpretation of those elements, to the traditional leadership for review and recommendations, which are then incorporated.
- ☑ Secure approval from traditional leadership for the interpretation of cultural assets to be included in tourism experience.
- ☑ Invite members of the indigenous community to speak for and represent themselves [first-voice]

## GUIDELINE 10

Meaningful cultural exchange between visitors and hosts should be the goal of indigenous tourism experiences; such as, learning opportunities, natural exchanges, dialogue between travelers and indigenous community members, craft workshop, meal with community members, etc., depending on the situation and what is the norm to be shared with outsiders. Consider limiting group size and/or splitting large groups in order for interactions to be meaningful. Instructions to both hosts and visitors may be necessary to create these meaningful exchanges.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Ensure the travelers are accompanied by one or more members of the indigenous host community, including staff, local suppliers and heritage interpreters, at all times during the indigenous tourism experience.
- ☑ Provide opportunities for travelers to engage with diverse members of the community, including elders and youth, when appropriate.
- ☑ Create unstructured or informal opportunities for engagement between visitors and hosts, such as during meal times.

## Employment & Growth

### GUIDELINE 11

Provide preference in employment and procurement to indigenous community members.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Where business is located near indigenous populations and where the tourism experience involves indigenous communities, establish an indigenous employment and procurement preference policy on all applications and solicitations. Indigenous tourism experiences should always be interpreted by an indigenous person.

### GUIDELINE 12

Pay fair wages and prices at or above market rates.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Wages and prices must be stable and in line with, or higher than, the local average (where the local average is too low and not reflective of cost of living). This figure should be based on research into the local economic situation and average wages in the country.
- ☑ This research and stakeholder discussions are documented (see Guidelines 1, 2, 4 and 5).
- ☑ Provision should be made for food, accommodation and gear for employees and suppliers, where appropriate, so that they do not have to provide for this out of their wages.



*Host welcoming visitors to Barauli Homestay, Nepal.*



# Visitor Education

## GUIDELINE 13

On an ongoing basis, travel companies should provide indigenous enterprise managers, tour guides, hosts and suppliers with regularly updated information about the anticipated type of visitors and their expectations for their experience. For example, are they budget-style backpackers who are flexible and whose demands are modest, or do they need a higher level of comfort and service? What language do they speak? How much do they know about the indigenous culture?

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ During the initial engagement, travel companies should share clear descriptions of who will be visiting as well as their anticipated service standards, needs and preferences, with the indigenous supplier or community to ensure a thorough understanding of visitor expectations and preferences
  - ☑ For each weekly, monthly tour, the guide or office in charge of reservations should provide advance warnings directly to community or supplier, regarding food preferences, rooming requirements, changes in numbers, cancellations, etc., so expectations are managed on both sides.
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## GUIDELINE 14

Travel companies should establish a code of conduct for their staff as well as for visitors in consultation with the indigenous community. Monitor and improve code of conduct over time in collaboration with indigenous community or supplier.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Establish a general code of conduct that can be used by staff and visitors engaging with indigenous communities.
- ☑ Define protocol if a breach of the code of conduct should occur and communicate it with staff and visitors.
- ☑ For each community, request from indigenous supplier(s), or traditional leadership a code of conduct that can be provided to tour guides in trip-specific notes, which includes guidance around the following issues as applicable:
  - Photography, recording, filming, and sketching
  - Dress
  - Religion
  - Litter
  - Haggling/bargaining
  - Tipping
  - Business transactions
  - Gift-giving
  - Souvenirs
  - Artifacts
  - Water and energy use
  - Public displays of affection
  - Social structure & respect towards elders
  - Eye contact and gestures
  - Alcohol and drugs
  - Meal norms
  - Behavior at cultural activities
  - Independent exploration
  - Off-limits areas
- ☑ Include codes of conduct in staff training manuals and sessions and require written confirmation of understanding of and compliance with the codes of conduct. This signed statement can be incorporated into employee contracts along with other company policies.
- ☑ Communicate codes of conduct clearly to visitors during tour briefing and obtain all visitors' verbal or written commitment that they have understood and are willing to abide by the code.

## GUIDELINE 15

Acknowledge the indigenous community's traditional knowledge and customs, especially as pertaining to religious, medicinal, plant and animal knowledge and actively work with the community to prevent misuse, cultural appropriation, and exploitation.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ☑ Ensure that the tourism experience complies with existing protocols and/or cultural codes developed by the indigenous community and that culturally sensitive sites, customs and resources are accurately represented and safeguarded.
- ☑ Familiarize local staff with the protocols and codes and implement an anonymous system for recognizing and reporting suspected or observed violations of the code to indigenous leadership.



*Traditional weaving techniques being practiced at the Ccaccacollo Women's Weaving Co-op in Peru.*





# Guidelines for Marketing Tourism Experiences

*This section provides guidance for marketing professionals promoting experiences with indigenous communities and preparing travelers for their trips. These guidelines are applicable to all situations where an indigenous community is represented to an external audience.*

## **GUIDELINE 16**

Provide indigenous community stakeholders with the opportunity to approve the use of images and text related to their cultural assets for marketing purposes.

### **KEY ACTIONS**

- ☑ Obtain written consent from the community to publish or otherwise feature photographs, videos, text and interviews.
- ☑ Obtain usage guidelines from indigenous leadership for use of such images and text with emphasis on sharing and use of indigenous images and art.
- ☑ Provide the community with examples of the kind of images and text used in company's marketing materials.
- ☑ Explicit approval for a featured article should be obtained; for example, if one individual will be used in a promotion for a tour, across web, print, etc., approval should be obtained from that person. Where children are involved, consent for images and use of images should be obtained from parents or legal guardians or caretakers. See children-specific guidelines in Child Welfare and the Travel Industry: Practical Global Guidelines to Good Practice.

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## **GUIDELINE 17**

Educate visitors prior to arrival with the aim of informing them about the host community, dispelling stereotypes and promoting mutual respect.

### **KEY ACTIONS**

- ☑ Request that the indigenous host community provide information — including history, customs, basic phrases in the local language, a code of conduct, and any other information leaders may wish to communicate to visitors. This information should be included in tour guide's trip notes for



discussion with travelers before and/or upon arrival.

- Specific customs and rules that tourists should be mindful of, such as dress codes, should be provided in itineraries online and/or otherwise distributed prior to community visits.

## **GUIDELINE 18**

All promotional materials made available by tour operators should accurately and respectfully represent the community's living culture, customs, language, connection to natural resources, and history in a manner consistent with the indigenous narrative.

### **KEY ACTIONS**

- ☑ Travel companies should request protocols and cultural codes and customs for sharing information from indigenous supplier or community.
- ☑ Assess marketing materials against existing protocols and cultural codes, particularly around the language used to describe history, culture and place names.
- ☑ In cases where protocols and cultural codes are not available, travel companies and suppliers should consult publicly available marketing materials generated by the community and/or supplier for guidance. Document sources used.



*Members of the Wiwa community assist in the creation of a meal experience in Colombia.*



# Glossary

## **Indigenous Tourism**

Activities that take place in or around indigenous communities with the purpose of exposing visitors to traditional customs and that provide the communities themselves with the resources and incentive to preserve their cultural and natural resources.

## **Community-Based Tourism Enterprise**

A service business operated by a community with the purpose of providing visitors with authentic learning experiences. While these businesses may develop with public and private support, the goal is that they become self-sustaining and generate economic value for the community.

## **Indigenous Community**

A community that has inherited and continues to practice a unique set of cultural traditions, which are distinct from those of the surrounding dominant society and are characterized by particular social, cultural, economic and political norms.

## **Indigenous Supplier**

A business owned and operated by members of an indigenous community that provides goods and services such as food or guided tours and activities.

## **Cultural Codes**

Symbols and systems of meaning relevant to members of a particular indigenous community.

## **Cultural Appropriation**

The taking or adopting of aspects of an indigenous culture without proper consultation, agreement, and/or permission of that community.

## **Stakeholder**

Any individual, group or organization with a particular interest and/or concern around the planning, impact and benefits of tourism activities and projects.



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