OPENING REMOTE AREAS TO TOURISM

Why 'Build It and They Will Come' Doesn't Work

Tourism loves novelty. Operators search for "hidden gems", "pristine locations" and "authentic experiences" to tempt travellers jaded by mainstream tourism locations and the impacts of overtourism. So it is hardly surprising that development agencies often gaze at an untouched landscape and think: Aha! A tourism market waiting to be born – ideally one that also claims to boost inclusion and dampen migration, because why waste a good narrative?

But romanticism is not a strategy. And creating a tourism market from scratch – especially in remote areas – is not simple. Experience suggests that it is, in most cases, improbable and unfeasible.

This blog asks a simple question: If remote areas hold such extraordinary potential, why does tourism stubbornly refuse to appear? It then suggests a more realistic way forward: stop talking about "creating" markets and focus instead on expanding existing ones.

A valley that has everything… except tourists

The Pungmo Valley in Shey Phoksundo National Park in NW Nepal looks like a travel company's fever dream. Traditional Tibetan-style villages, snow-capped peaks, turquoise lakes, ancient monasteries, Bon temples, pastures of grazing yaks and religious festivals with masked lamas. Yet almost no tourists find their way to this valley.

The community is keen on tourism. Government, national park authorities and international donors have supported them to establish accommodation, build paths and put up signs to tempt trekkers to stray from the more popular routes. The result: paths used by livestock and the occasional researcher.

Pungmo is not unusual. Many places in Nepal – and beyond – are breathtaking, culturally rich but completely unvisited. Development types are naturally drawn to these gaps and start dreaming of "grassroots tourism", "community-based tourism" and "sustainable livelihoods". The harsh truth is that desire, training and signage do not constitute a market.

The supply-side myth: build a homestay, wait for magic

Development projects often respond to the absence of tourism by trying to create "readiness". Homestays are built. Trails are created. Guides are trained. Websites appear. A workshop on "western food preferences" is held. Perhaps a destination management organisation is set up. Communities wait. And they wait. And they wait...

The tourists do not arrive.

Ask Pusbah, from Rechi. She was trained by an NGO, invested in a guest room, bought bedding and even learned to make teas from wild herbs. But trekkers continued to slog past – on tight schedules and established routes – and her room reverted to storage.

This is not failure of effort. It is failure of diagnosis. Tourism is not a morality tale where noble effort is rewarded with visitors. It is a demand-led industry with hard commercial incentives, complex logistics and lots of risk. National and international operators are usually instrumental to moving tourists around and shaping the tourism experience. In short, tourism is an export industry with a complicated supply chain. Over the years, we have learned that a farmer doesn't start selling to export markets just by giving them some seeds and agronomic training. Why do we expect something different from remote microentrepreneurs, with limited tourism experience, disconnected from international markets?

So, should we just stick to Everest?

Is one option to work to improve established tourism hotspots? In Nepal that would be Everest and Annapurna – where demand already borders on unmanageable: dozens of flights a day to Lukla, helicopter congestion and price competition that erodes quality. Some see this overtourism as an opportunity to make tourism greener, more inclusive, less harmful. But in a market competing solely on price and where the tourism culture has almost eradicated local culture and traditional livelihoods, the opportunities are meagre and growth, in an already over saturated market, unachievable.

Meanwhile, less-visited areas offer potential for enhanced tourism experiences, better distribution of revenues, reduced migration and preservation of cultural heritage – but require a very different mindset.

The realistic path: Expand existing markets, don't invent new ones

New tourism markets are not "created". They are extended.

Remote destinations enter tourism not as stand-alone markets but as branches of existing ones. They grow when operators see commercial opportunities for product diversification in response to changing market demand. They can grow when barriers to expansion into new areas are reduced and/or incentives increase. This is expansion of an existing market and NOT the creation of a new one.

Expanding existing tourism markets into new areas requires a diagnosis of market demand, commercial interest in expansion and barriers to expansion, i.e. understanding the existing tourism market system.

Why Pungmo has no tourists

Pungmo's problem is not aesthetics. It is systems. What are some of the "route" causes why tourists bypass Pungmo?

- Nepal's limited aircraft that fly to mountain destinations are monopolised by Everest.
- Road access is arduous and dangerous.
- Operators follow existing routes and set trekking trails.
- Tourism promotion focuses on the big-name circuits.

Homestays do not fix flight schedules. Bedding does not persuade trekking firms to design new routes. The actors that are in a position to change things are likely to be elsewhere in the tourism supply chain, some way away from Pungmo.

Putting Pungmo on the map: what to work on and with whom

Opening new tourism areas requires fewer interventions than many projects assume but they must be the right ones with the right people. For these new markets to last, they will need to rely on businesses and governments doing things differently over time so that tourists keep coming.

The task is to work with pioneering operators to test new routes, lower their commercial risk and tackle the real access bottlenecks that keep places like Pungmo off the map. Early groups may stay in tents or basic homestays, with services improving gradually as viability becomes clearer. Meanwhile, national and international promotion – from familiarisation trips to travel journalists and influencers – needs to start including these emerging routes. With modest finance to help households upgrade, quality rises in step with demand. This is a slow, cumulative process in which remote destinations grow only when the supply chain sees reason to shift. Evolution, not revolution.

The route ahead

A handful of accidental tourists is not a market. If tourism is to contribute to rural economies, we must abandon the idea that building supply automatically summons demand. If "build it and they will come" were true, Pungmo would be buzzing and Everest wouldn't look like a human traffic jam in down jackets. Everest base camp wouldn’t look like a camping ground the morning after a rock festival. But tourists don’t follow scenery; they follow supply chains – flights, operators, itineraries and influencers. Remote areas don’t need more readiness workshops; they need the tourism industry to reroute itself.

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This blog is a contribution from Gavin Anderson. *Gavin is a market development specialist working with The Springfield Centre as a consultant, and also as a trainer on our 'Making Markets Work' training programme. He has specialised in tourism development and also runs a small travel company (Nomadic Skies Expeditions) taking small groups to remote and areas of Nepal, Uganda and Armenia.*