

Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Development

Allow me to begin by saying that I am proud to be a part of this conference and thank Governor Bob Miller and Mr. Thomas Tait for their kind invitation. I hope the work and mission of our foundation will continue to add merit to the development of tourism in Bulgaria and in gaining continued respect for Bulgarian culture worldwide.

Currently the work of Friendship Ambassadors Foundation is focused on several strategic development projects with local communities in Bulgaria. The foundation helps promote and organize them while providing an international focus on tours that create sustainable development through cultural exchange. Our cultural tourism projects are active and involve local travel agents, artistic groups, and cultural institutions that work with our groups from the United States. This, we believe, is cultural tourism in action and at its best.

Some of our projects that we would like you to know more about, include:

- 1) The Festival of Light. This June we will present our third annual international choral and dance festival in Plovdiv, Sofia, Veliko Turnovo, and Varna. We bring hundreds of international visitors each year - who pay all of their own costs, and want to perform alongside Bulgarian arts groups ... as well as discover the wonders of your country with our local tour partners. Both the local groups and the travel agents design and own the programs they create for us, and benefit financially because of them.

In fact the Festival of Light is the product of a strategic plan among several choirs, hotels, performance venues, and the Juvenile Musicale, a youth choir association in Bulgaria. Each benefit from the project directly and financially, and our foundation benefits by enabling local organizations to find some sustainable development while attracting new cultural influences.

So there we are: a local strategy with an international approach promoting sustainable development, mutual understanding, global cooperation, and we hope, ultimately, peace thru cultural exchange.

As part of our work in Plovdiv, we are happy to support the participation of Ms. Teodora Stoikova, Manager of the Ancient Plovdiv Trust, to be here today. She has been and continues to be a strong supporter of our work and mission. In the near future, we hope to lease some buildings in the Old Town of Plovdiv for use as NGO centers, performance venues, and related shops. Our foundation is committed there to acquiring as many properties as possible for use by local shopkeepers, the NGO and cultural communities - to ensure that the Old Town of Plovdiv remains authentic, locally managed, and a great expression of Bulgarian culture.

- 2) With the Chepelare municipality in the Rhodope Mountains, we are preparing new tourism projects as partners with Mayor Todor Bozukov that involve international arts exchange, alongside of skiing, hiking, and folklore.

Currently we have announced our own conference, in cooperation with the mayor of Chepelare, in Pamporovo, for this Spring. The conference is called: The Road Ahead, The First Bulgarian Forum on Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Development. From May 21-23, we will present a forum there on ways to unite the culture and tourism industries in meaningful ways that promote sustainable development. We invite you to learn more about this project by visiting our booth at the end of the hall.

There are several other project ideas that have developed today in meetings with Bulgarian colleagues there at our booth. We are excited by the possibilities for the future; we look forward to more and more opportunities to serve the people and culture of Bulgaria.

I was asked to show ways that local, cultural strategy might emerge in an international tourism destination. I have given examples so far of ways that local destinations can emerge as international ones by developing a clear, local strategy. In other words, we believe that in order to succeed, the strategy must always be local. The motto used to be: "Think Globally, Act Locally." Now it has been changed by culture and technology to read: "Think Locally, Act Globally."

I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Executive Planning Committee for the United Nations Department of Public Information in New York City. In my role, I suggested that Bulgaria be a site for a mini conference related to the main NGO/DPI conference held in September, as part of the General Assembly proceedings. This meant that for the first time ever, the United Nations DPI held an event prior to and outside of its main gathering. Through a strategic partnership with New Bulgaria University, we brought in NGO representatives from the entire region to discuss a topic that was then brought back to the UN. Many companies and associations, who would not otherwise have had the chance to be heard by the United Nations, were heard. AND - It was also tourism. They came from as far away as Croatia and Moscow, and spent money in Sofia. Again, a local strategy with international implications: The United Nations was so impressed with Bulgaria's role that they invited another of our guests here today, Mr. Evgeni Vassilev, to address the main conference later and his talk was very well received.

There in New York, Mr. Vassilev addressed the topic of creating a Trails of Peace through the formerly warring nations of the Balkans. This idea was developed with FAF in a peace conference in Plovdiv one year earlier. Together we hope to realize this effort in the coming year.

You may ask for more details about how we came to such agreements and opportunities. In most cases, they are the product of forward thinking, visionary local leaders and the immense economic power of pre-formed, cultural group travel. Let me tell you a little about this side of the partnership by explaining the way our foundation operates.

Friendship Ambassadors Foundation is a U.S.-based NGO that believes in advancing the cause of peace through the cultural interchange among unfamiliar cultures. I am an IATA travel agent and we are members of ASTA – the American Association of Travel Agents. FAF was begun by Readers Digest's founders in 1973 and since then has created global opportunities for people to meet others in cultural, engaging ways.

Our mission promotes pre-formed, cultural group tourism as a means of peace-building on the one hand - while also promoting sustainable development in the emerging regions we serve.

In this difficult period of isolationism and unilateralism in the United States, it helps to educate and train the Americans who are among the most 'open' in our country to receiving new civilizational information: news about 'the others'. Other cultures, other ways of thought, other foods, and other levels of income and reward.

Through the hard currency of travel dollars, FAF helps maintain classical cultures worldwide, while simultaneously teaching members of those cultures how to use healthier economies to find an improved place within the world community.

FAF's seeks to create an atmosphere of free interchange among peoples - to develop a center of interest that we all can share in. We believe in a future that respects and encourages all forms of cultural exchange.

In a wonderful way, there have always been American groups, mostly in arts and education, wanting to perform, to meet, and to experience. These travelers, once considered 'alternative' now are part of the fastest growing market segment within the industry. Let us view them as a small, unimportant minority of travelers, let me tell you that in 2000, they numbered 10 million travelers and represented \$8.9 Billion in revenues. They are resilient travelers who no longer seek out fun and sand and surf; in its place they seek experiences; as such they tend to care less for normal travel concerns. Their numbers have not dropped off in the past year; indeed pre-formed, cultural group travelers are increasing in number and scope.

Following this conference, I will travel to Geneva to speak at the Peace Through Tourism conference there. This is part of a series of talks I give on a regular basis addressing a form of tourism that is local, international, cultural, and involves meaningful exchange. For the past decade, I have also addressed these issues as the lead faculty member at the State University of New York where I teach nonprofits how to develop and manage their affairs. For nearly ten years I have also been Executive Director for the foundation during this incredible expansion for pre-formed, cultural group tourism. They have been interesting times; both for the foundation and for the many local communities and thousands of active, cultural group tourists we serve.

In closing, I'll share one last story where a local strategy in an international destination had a truly successful ending. In its infancy, FAF was able to bring a young boy from a well-known African capital to the States on a related cultural exchange we began with the city there. He fell in love with travel and exchange. He later grew up at home to become the Minister of Tourism in his home country, Ghana. Later still, he joined the United Nations as a career diplomat and then eventually became the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize winner, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

In your young people, I have met the next Kofi Annan's. I work with several young Bulgarians involved in tourism development. They understand both the need and opportunity this form of travel implies. And we at FAF are proud to be a part of their future, and yours.

I thank you so much for your attention and interest.

Delivered by Patrick Sciarratta
in Sofia, Bulgaria

Second International Travel and Tourism Conference
Bulgaria: Dream Area
Sheraton Hotel
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Mr. Sciarratta also moderated the Olympics Panel at the conference too.

