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Seminars for Arts Professionals

OCTOBER SEMINAR SUMMARY

Cultural Tourism...what the bloody hell is it?

Chair: Penny Miles, SAMAG Committee member
Speakers: Stephen Clark, Consultant, Marketing and Management
Simon Spellicy, Tourism Manager, Sydney Opera House
John Odgers, Senior Export Adviser Arts, Austrade

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by Lauren Smelcher

Going to New York and missing MoMA is like going to Greece and avoiding the Acropolis. It's like visiting Paris without catching a glimpse of the shyly smiling *Mona Lisa*, or heading all the way to London and missing the chance to see the next Dench or Olivier onstage at the West End. Or at least, that's the way I feel. As a cultural tourist, my travel itineraries are dotted with galleries, museums, architecture, theatre, and libraries. I'm not alone, either – these days, many tourists would rather take in some downtown Greenwich Village jazz, rather than hop on a generic tour bus to see the Chrysler Building. Cultural tourism is about ensconcing yourself in a city – it's an illusory (and incredibly alluring) exercise based on your ability to trick yourself into believing that you belong in said city. Similarly, it's also based on the city's ability to make you believe you belong. Tourism, in all its forms, is big business – it doesn't take a genius to figure that out. And in Sydney, tourism is booming. Of course, we are fortunate to have pristine stretches of sand, iconic architecture, and some of the world's finest food. There are lots of obvious reasons that a traveller would make the trek to Sydney – but is culture one of those reasons?

At the October SAMAG seminar, panellists investigated the notion of cultural tourism – namely, what the bloody hell is it?

Stephen Clark defines cultural tourism as the commodification of culture for commercial consumption. Basically, he sees cultural tourism as an extension of the school excursion experience. Cultural tourists want more from their holiday than lying on a beach – they want to learn, they want to be inspired. Most are tertiary educated and have both disposable time and income. While they represent a relatively small portion of tourists at large, it is an important section.

Cultural tourists are those travellers who attend theatres, visit galleries and museums, and enjoy cultural or heritage sites. Since tourism is considered an export, and cultural tourism contributes greatly to Australian tourism generally, cultural tourism is a lucrative market.

Having said that, though, it should be noted that while Australian cultural exports are valued at around \$595 million per annum, cultural imports are much, much more – almost \$300 billion. Surprisingly, the biggest cultural import is plasma televisions.

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Clearly then, there is work to be done.

While it would be easy to dismiss cultural tourism as irrelevant in Australia (by stating, for instance, that Australia may not be a 'cultural destination' in the same way as Berlin or Paris), it is more accurate to say that Australia and in particular, Sydney, has the potential to be a successful cultural tourism destination. So what is needed to bridge the gap?

First, it's useful to have some understanding of Australian tourism in general. Tourists are attracted to Australia primarily due to its international branding, and also through third party or personal experiences.

We are at an immediate disadvantage because of our distance – it is both expensive and time-consuming to visit the land down under. This means that tourist promotions have to be sufficiently appealing: what can we offer a tourist that is uniquely Australian?

So far, we've offered them our beachbum lifestyle, the lure of the outback, the hum of our cities, fresh fusions in food and wine, nature, and of course, Aboriginal Australia. While we certainly haven't neglected to show our guests Australian culture entirely, this is most definitely a market that needs improvement.

Increasingly, travellers are creating their own itineraries. With the growth of travel journalism (particularly on the web, which makes a Tony Wheeler of all of us), tourists can afford to direct their own travel. While most tourists will still want to visit the icons (the Harbour Bridge, for example), more and more, people want to experience a city rather than a building.

So how can we take advantage of cultural tourism? Again, it comes down to marketing. In order to appeal to cultural tourists, you have to market your business as a cultural tourism business. Know who your customers are – and know how many customers you're likely to have. If your market is a little too niche, making a profit could be problematic. Asking yourself questions (as you would if you were a customer) is also important. Why would you buy this product or service? What is it that sets you apart from the competition? Why will this be successful?

As all three panel members noted, learning how to manage cultural tourism will benefit us all. While our icons – the Harbour Bridge, Taronga Zoo, and our beaches – will always attract tourists who stay an average of five days, the onus is on selling Sydney's culture and lifestyle in order to encourage them to stay awhile longer.