

LED AND ROUTE TOURISM



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Route tourism is a market-driven approach for tourism destination development. The scope for tourism as a driver for local and regional economic development across South Africa can be maximized only with appropriate policy interventions designed to support the competitive niches in local tourism economies.

South Africa can learn from an extended international experience of tourism route planning and of its impacts for local economic development. This briefing highlights the significance of South African tourism and LED planners learning from the wider international experience in planning route tourism. In particular, these lessons highlight the need for developing cooperative networks and involvement of local government as well as the private sector; the importance of innovative product development and good quality infra-structural access; the value of community participation and of promoting local linkages with SMMEs; the critical importance of marketing and of support for marketing by local and provincial authorities; and of the need for a pro-poor focus.



Introduction



With the close of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, growing international attention inevitably will focus upon events building up to 2010. Global attention will turn to South Africa's tourism products. It is clear that the tourism sector offers enormous opportunities for local economic development (LED) in South Africa over the next few years. The critical importance of tourism for national and local economic development programmes was underlined by the launch in 2006 by the Deputy President of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA), which aims to achieve six percent annual economic growth by 2010. Under ASGISA tourism was identified as one of two Immediate Priority Areas, with a mandate for urgent attention by Government. Tourism was selected for such high profile policy attention because it creates more jobs while contributing to the GDP of the country than any other sector.

In this briefing attention centres upon analyzing the issues surrounding 'route development' which is viewed by some as the world's best hope to secure sustainability in travel and tourism. The concept of tourism routes refers to an "initiative to bring together a variety of activities and attractions under a unified theme and thus stimulate entrepreneurial opportunity through the development of ancillary products and services" (Grefe,

1994). The terminology used to describe the concept often varies in different parts of the world with use of the notions of 'themed routes', 'trails', 'scenic by-ways', 'drive tourism' and so on. Overall, the tourism route concept is considered to be an effective method of tourism distribution especially of tourists travelling by road (driving, hiking, cycling etc) within a given geographical area.

In terms of LED planning, the activity of route tourism is of special interest for it often involves developing cooperative planning arrangements and relationships taking place between different localities in order for them to collectively compete as tourism spaces. It is argued that "the clustering of activities and attractions in less developed areas, stimulates cooperation and partnerships between communities in local and neighbouring regions and serves as a vehicle for the stimulation of economic development through tourism" (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004, p. 72). Spatial networks are constituted by 'packaging' rural tourism products into "inclusive and coherent routes through the use of themes and stories (such as folklore, working lives, food and drink routes, religious routes) which help to move the tourist around geographically dispersed attractions" (Clarke, 2005, p. 92).



Lessons from international experience



In several parts of the world, the concept of rural trails or heritage routes has been used, particularly in the context of promoting rural tourism (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Meyer-Cech, 2005). According to Meyer (2004), routes seem to be a particularly good opportunity for the development of less mature areas with high cultural resources that appeal to special interest tourists, who often not only stay longer but also spend more to pursue their particular interest. Routes appeal to a great variety of users such as international overnight visitors that visit the route as part of a special interest holiday, staying visitors that frequent the route (or part of it) on day excursions, or urban domestic day visitors.

The essential concept of route tourism is simple, namely that of the linking together a series of tourism attractions in order to promote local tourism by encouraging visitors to travel from one location to another. Routes vary considerably in length and scale as well as theme adopted and visitors attracted in terms of characteristics as well as numbers. The development of tourism routes offers opportunities for the formation of local development partnerships. The Niagara Wine Route in Canada links over 50 wineries in the region and is the anchor for wine tourism (Telfer, 2001a). This partnership for successful rural tourism is indicative of the potential for the development of competitive advantage through local clusters as a form of tourism-led LED (Telfer, 2001b).

It has been shown that, if well-designed and imaginative, tourism routes can generate several positive advantages,

including for local economic development. According to Meyer (2004) the most important are:

- ▶ Spreading the economic benefits more widely by developing tourist facilities, activities and services along tour routes in a manner that will facilitate tourist spending at these stopover points;
- ▶ Providing additional employment and income, both directly and indirectly, through local facilities and services used to operate tour programmes;
- ▶ Expanding the tourist markets and extending the average length of stay of tourists by providing a variety of attractions and activities.

A review of the international experience across tourism routes in both developed and developing countries suggests that there are several key preconditions that are necessary for successful tourism routes. In particular five factors have been identified as particularly significant ingredients for success:

- ▶ Cooperation networks, regional thinking and leadership;
- ▶ Product Development, infrastructure and access;
- ▶ Community Participation, micro-enterprise development and innovation;
- ▶ Information and promotion;
- ▶ An Explicit Pro-Poor Focus.



Co-operation Networks, Regional Thinking and Leadership



For Mitchell and Hall (2005, p. 5): "the very essence of rural tourism is local cooperation and community involvement through appropriate forms of networking, arguably one of the most important requirements for the sustainability of rural tourism". It is evident that a central element for successful route development "is the formation of co-operative networks among a multitude of often very diverse tourism suppliers" (Meyer, 2004, p. 16).

A pre-condition for establishing a route is the build up within a region of a good framework of collaboration between government, local council, private enterprises and associations, the tourism industry and local council. Cooperation is viewed as "a productive factor" that is necessary and able to harness the energies of all involved with local development for the benefit of job creation and LED. Conceptually, these collaborative associations are considered as 'route networks', characterized by participating parties being mutually dependent on resources controlled by others, albeit recognising that there are advantages to be accrued from a collective pooling of resources (Meyer, 2004).

An essential starting point for route development is thus the development of a collective culture of 'cooperation to compete'. There is an imperative for intense cooperation as opposed to competition between a variety of attractions and tourism suppliers. In many cases collaborative networks and routes have only been established because of a small number of key individuals that function as the driving forces or leaders. Good South African examples are those of Open Africa (Visser, 2004) and the Stellenbosch wine routes, which grew out from the activities of viticulturalists who saw the opportunities that would accrue from collaboration in terms of the selling of wine (Preston-Whyte, 2000; Bruwer, 2003).

However, whilst local governments are seeking to use tourism as a critical lever for LED, "it is frequently felt that the inability of local governments to take responsibility is commonplace". The work of Briedenhann and Wickens (2004) confirms that "local government must understand the value of tourism and provide a platform for the private sector to deliver". As argued by Meyer (2004, p. 19): "leadership in developing routes is essential, if this is not forthcoming from the public sector, all too often the private sector fills this space".



Product Development, Infrastructure and Access



The two critical foundations for designing a tourism route are innovative product development and establishing infrastructure and access.

In terms of developing any route, it is critical to be familiar with the tourism segment that is being appealed to. In Europe it is argued that one of the most difficult issues for route development has been the extreme diversity of tastes and preferences that exist across the continent. Likewise in South Africa what would be extremely attractive for international visitors to the country – such as heritage or township tours – does not necessarily hold appeal for the domestic South African market. What is therefore important is that at the outset, there is a clear and agreed 'vision' of what the region/locality aims to portray. A pre-condition for this is conducting a thorough assessment of the region's needs and tourism assets, a task that requires the bringing together of all the region's stakeholders in order to develop a product that is based on demand, satisfies all stakeholders and creates linkages with SMMEs.

A second critical aspect for any route development is the availability of infrastructure. In most cases this refers to the road or trail network on which tourists are supposed to travel, which must be to a quality standard that attracts and satisfies potential visitors. For drive tourists, the quality of the road network is vital. The scenic aspect of routes is viewed as especially vital for

the day visitor whose focus is upon a 'leisurely drive' rather than getting from point A to B. Beyond the infrastructure, as represented by the road, other crucial aspects of the 'route infrastructure' include signage and provision of accommodation, refreshment facilities and sanitary areas. Meyer (2004) stresses that route tourism developers should not neglect these other aspects of route infrastructure and that this kind of infrastructure can provide invaluable linkages with SMMEs.

As well as availability and quality of infrastructure, access to the route is another fundamental requirement for success. It is evident that other major constraints on local tourism growth relate to transport access in terms of costs of airfares and public transport linkages to specific destinations. The location of any route and its proximity to the main tourism source or generating areas will determine the clientele that can be attracted and the needs that must be taken into account when planning for route development. A route that is not situated within day travel from the main generating areas must provide attractions that would appeal to visitors for a longer time span but will also require accommodation hubs to cater for tourists. The majority of route initiatives are geared towards day trippers, which can considerably reduce infrastructure and development costs. Routes which aim to attract tourists (stay-overs) are generally related to physical activity like hiking and cycle routes.



Community Participation, SMME Development and Innovation



Community participation and capacity building are considered central to any approach that seeks to spread the economic benefits of tourism projects more widely. In an ideal scenario this should involve both the participation of the local community in decision-making about the type and scale of development (especially of cultural routes), and participation in economic benefits. Nevertheless, the danger has been pointed out by Bramwell and Sharman (1999, p. 396) that in developed countries collaborative arrangements in destinations can become "conversations among local elites, rather than involving a representative range of stakeholders", not least local communities.

Across the developing world, Tosun (2000, 2006) emphasizes that the notion of community participation in tourism is problematic and fraught with challenges. The reality, as Tosun (2000) shows, is that, in many cases, community involvement in tourism is "pseudo", superficial or manipulative. Although community participation is supposed to re-adjust the balance of power and re-assert community views against that of developers, Tosun (2000) stresses that there are real limits that are not always acknowledged in the extent to which the objectives of community participation can be achieved. Among the major limits are those which relate to the near absence of decentralization of planning in many developing countries (often because of a lack of political will from the centre); lack of information to local residents about tourism development leading to lack of awareness and participation; lack of enthusiasm by 'technocrats' in tourism planning towards community partici-

pation; and, limited capacity among poor people and lack of expertise in tourism planning. Many communities simply "do not see the potential that tourism could provide" (Meyer, 2004, p. 25) and there is often a limited understanding of tourism as people have often had neither access to markets and entrepreneurship nor to travel themselves. In addition, to be successful, community participation requires money and resources which are not provided for (Tosun, 2000, 2006).

The outcomes of these limitations on participation are that local communities find themselves often caught in a "globally integrated system of resources over which they have no control" and decisions regarding daily life are made by decision-makers at the centre and local elites. Hence, participation in a tourism development process which demands time and energy is "a luxury that the host communities cannot afford", not least in terms of route tourism initiatives. Nevertheless, Meyer (2004, p. 24) concedes that for many poor communities, traditionally excluded from all spheres of participation, initial steps such as information and consultation can represent "major breakthroughs" which are necessary in order to empower communities to take on the next steps. Adequate information and marketing promotion of any route tourism initiative is another essential building block for successful route tourism. The international experience contains many examples of the setting of routes or trails designed to attract day visitors and tourists and failing because of the inadequate provision of information or of the lack of any publicity concerning these routes.



Information and Promotion



The responsibility for promotion can vary from case to case; in some examples it is the private sector, in other cases the public sector through local government tourism initiatives becomes involved. It is essential that whatever agency takes responsibility for marketing that tourism promotion be an accurate and true representation of the tourism product as it exists in reality. Indeed, it is evident that promotion that is not handled in a responsible manner can be harmful to both tourist and local communities.

The international experience suggests that the management and marketing of routes is usually undertaken by private sector tourism associations often with the support of local, regional or state authorities. There are multiple advantages that can accrue

from creating an association or partnership for the management of rural tourism routes. The international experience of associations and destination marketing organisations is that most appear dependent on funding from provincial and local authorities. Without such support funding, it is often the case that marketing budgets for routes are usually limited if it is funded solely from the local private sector.

A commitment to local SMME development must be at the heart of any route tourism planning that is linked to the objectives of local economic development. None the less, it is one of the most difficult objectives to achieve because the obstacles to tourism SMME development, especially in poor and marginalized communities.



Pro-Poor Focus



In terms of the approach of pro-poor tourism which is geared to tilting tourism projects so that they will have net positive benefits for poor communities, route tourism is a form of tourism that can be approached in a pro-poor manner. For Meyer (2004, p. 26): "such an approach goes well beyond new product development and niche marketing to recognising that the prime aim of any route development is to use it to increase the net benefits to poor stakeholders". It is evident that the manner in which this can be attained may vary greatly and would depend upon the characteristics of local communities, enterprises along the route; and the tourism product.

The strategies for operationalising a pro-poor focus on route tourism obviously vary according to local needs and assets. Nevertheless, the range of benefits would encompass a combi-

nation of direct employment opportunities, enterprise or SMME opportunities, communal income and livelihood benefits.

The international record suggests that the poor be involved in tourism product development for route tourism initiatives. Several advantages accrue from involving the poor in tourism product development. In particular, "through the involvement of the 'poor' in product development, capacity can be built-up and business support can be provided, while the linking with established private sector businesses can create product marketing and information channels that were previously unavailable" (Meyer, 2004, p. 26). Overall, therefore, it is argued that "route developments can offer opportunities when they are based on an explicit pro-poor approach" (Meyer, 2004, p. 26).



Route Tourism and LED in South Africa



In South Africa, considerable activity also surrounds the development of 'route tourism', involving a linkage together of the tourism resources of a number of smaller centres and collectively marketing them as a single tourism destination region (Rogerson, 2002a; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004). The development of wine routes as part of the strong and growing interest in special interest wine tourism represents one of the most well-known examples (Preston-Whyte, 2000; Bruwer, 2003). The most high profile and ambitious route tourism ini-

tiative is the activities of the African Dream Project, organised by the Open Africa Foundation, which seeks to link the splendours of Africa in a continuous network of Africa tourism routes, from the Cape to Cairo (Visser, 2004).

Of several route tourism initiatives that currently exist in South Africa, two of the most advanced are the Midlands Meander in KwaZulu-Natal and the Highlands Meander in Mpumalanga province. Another emerging route tourism initiative is the Magaliesberg Meander in Gauteng.



Case study: The Midlands Meander



The Midlands Meander, spanning an area of approximately 64 km from Pietermaritzburg to Mooi River, represents the earliest example of route tourism, as a form of tourism-led LED in South Africa. The Meander is focused upon a cluster of 120 white-owned small enterprises, including art studios, country hotels, flower farms, cheese makers, tea gardens, craft, pottery and weaving workshops, trout farms and golf courses. Collectively, this group of hospitality ventures and craft activities produce a network of quaint experiences that has started to put the Natal Midlands firmly on the national tourism map.

At its inception in 1985 the Meander began as an unplanned local economic initiative, involving a collaboration amongst a group of local artists, potters and weavers (Mathfield, 2000). Later, a series of accommodation and other hospitality-type enterprises were added to the attractions of the area. An important step was the amalgamation of different routes in 1992 and the formation in 1993 of the Midlands Meander Association. This is a not-for-profit organisation that began and has remained a voluntary association dedicated to marketing the Midlands Meander. Each year the organization produces a Midlands Meander map with the costs of production divided among its membership who are given coverage in the brochure. In addition, the Association further supports the Meander by purchasing exhibition space at travel and trade shows.

The success of the Midlands Meander is primarily as a result of the driving forces from the private sector. Local government involvement in this development initiative has occurred, however, through the support for marketing and promotion which has been offered by the iNdllovu Regional Council. This Council has played a useful facilitative role forging linkages between various spheres of government relating to specific tourism issues, such as questions of road signage.

In a detailed investigation of the workings of the Midlands Meander it was highlighted that "in the context of an effort to grow tourism as an industry in South Africa, the Midlands Meander is an example of a successful locality-bound route that has expanded exponentially" (Mathfield, 2000: 54). One of the major facets of the Midlands Meander success is that it is targeted at a particular niche market, (day-trippers and groups of predominantly upper-income white South African

holidaymakers). In particular, the success of the Meander emphasizes the importance of 'cumulative attraction', in which a group of enterprises separated over a large area are joined conceptually together as if they are located en route, in proximity or in logical sequence to each other. The systematic linkage between businesses which is both thematic and physical is at the heart of the marketing strategy of the Midlands Meander Association. Another important feature of the success story has been the linking of enterprises to a marketing association which has engendered a strong sense of community amongst its membership.

Although the Meander has been extremely successful in terms of tapping its targeted white tourist market, questions can be posed as to whether this LED initiative can open additional opportunities for growth and development. It is evident that the Meander has not begun to attract the large and growing urban, African middle-class tourist market. Indeed, it is striking that the artefacts and cultural experiences in Zulu rural traditionalism are largely ignored despite the fact that the surrounding local communities provide a craft and heritage focus within its midst (Mathfield, 2000). Hitherto, the activities of the Midlands Meander have been linked into the white-owned commercial farming economy of the Natal Midlands with so far limited spin-offs and opportunities for black entrepreneurs. Moreover, the linkage effects of the Meander enterprises have been primarily non-local, once again with minimal multiplier consequences for surrounding poor black communities.

If the Midland Meander is to be turned from a successful example of route tourism to a successful broad-based LED initiative, a re-thinking of historical directions is required. At the outset of route planning black entrepreneurship and clientele was not seen or imagined as being possible contributors to the long-term success of the Meander and of its tourist enterprises. Without such a shift the Midlands Meander will remain an excellent example of route tourism rather than a case of "tourism-driven local economic development that reaches across racially and socially divided communities that share common space" (Mathfield, 2000). Recent signs are that the Meander is beginning to incorporate more black entrepreneurs and product owners.



Conclusion



Appropriate planning for the development of route tourism must be one element for the achievement of the high objectives associated with tourism and ASGISA.

It is evident that route tourism can offer a promising potential vehicle for local economic development in many small towns and rural areas of South Africa. The clustering of activities and attractions through the development of tourism routes potentially can stimulate cooperation and partnerships as well as catalyzing entrepreneurial opportunities. Nevertheless, the experience of several South African route tourism initiatives is that in many cases they fail to meet the key successful ingredients for route tourism as identified in the international experi-

ence. The consequence has been that the developmental impacts of these projects is uneven or disappointing. The experience of several existing routes in South Africa is that they have limited local impacts on surrounding black communities and thus serve to reinforce the existing 'white' structures in tourism. Although these private sector driven initiatives have been successful in the sense of promoting expanding tourism arrivals, they have had minimal impacts of spreading the local benefits of tourism development.

Several of the disappointments associated with South African route tourism initiatives must be linked to the absence of unified local vision for route development and planning, which

points to shortcomings of local authorities in dealing with tourism planning. The most critical recommendations that emerge from this briefing are of the necessity for route tourism initiatives in South Africa to learn lessons from the wider international experience and acknowledge these lessons in planning route tourism. In particular, these relate to the need for developing cooperative networks and involvement of local gov-



ernment as well as the private sector; the importance of innovative product development and good quality infrastructural access; the value of community participation and of promoting local linkages with SMMEs; the critical importance of marketing and of support for marketing by local and provincial authorities; and the need for an explicit pro-poor focus.



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