



Cruise

Setting sail to success with cruise tourism in Timor-Leste

Nurturing gradual improvements in visitor experience to enhance cruise ship dropping anchor in Dili.



The Key Players

MDF has been playing a pivotal role working with key stakeholders in government and the private sector to improve cruise tourism in Timor-Leste. Key players in the sector include shipping agencies, government bodies, the port authority, local tour operators, the taxi association, hotels and restaurants. In the initial stages of focusing on this area, MDF worked closely with Dive, Trek and Camp (DTC), a Dili-based tour operator providing unique tour packages showcasing Timor-Leste's cultural and environmental diversity. In 2015, DTC developed a formal agreement with three cruise ships to include Dili as a destination for day trips, so offered a unique gateway into improving the visitor experience in this area.



The Context

Timor-Leste has enormous tourism potential with its scenic, natural beauty, white sand beaches and pristine mountain ranges. However, it struggles to attract international tourists - especially when compared with nearby tourist destinations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

As a post-conflict country, Timor-Leste lacks adequate tourism infrastructure and facilities. Recent tourism activities have focused on development workers and the needs of the expatriate community, but due to poor marketing and lack of private sector actors, Timor-Leste still doesn't attract the international leisure and adventure tourists that it deserves. Cruise tourism offers a unique opportunity to showcase Timor-Leste to visitors, bringing with it additional revenue for local businesses.



The Challenge

Cruise tourism faces many operational challenges in Timor-Leste, ranging from where the ships can dock to who cleans up after they visit. This challenge is exacerbated further by there being a large number of stakeholders involved. Due to poor coordination and unclear information, few businesses have profited from cruise tourism. While DTC had made significant progress in putting Timor-Leste on the cruise tourism map, they faced challenges with designing the right tour package, health and safety compliance, and relevant promotional tools.



The Solution

In September 2016, MDF partnered with DTC to develop innovative tour packages to be sold on board cruise ships. These packages encouraged visitors to disembark and explore Timor-Leste. Prior to the partnership being signed, a large number of visitors explored the city by themselves.

DTC designed a new tour concept, the Dili Explorer, a hop-on, hop-off bus that visitors could use to travel between popular sightseeing locations in the capital. To aid with compliance, MDF assisted DTC to conduct occupational health and safety assessments to ensure that their tour packages adhered to international standards.

The partnership also supported the creation of a cultural festival called Taste of Timor, where artisans, performers and food and beverage vendors from different districts are invited to set up stalls and sell their products to the visitors.

Alongside enhancing the visitor experience, MDF also tried to get to the bottom of some of the operational challenges by: facilitating strategic meetings; gaining understanding from a trilateral cruise ship study in Papua New Guinea with three private tour operators; and setting up workshops with public and private sector players to create standard operating procedures (SOPs) for cruise tourism, to give clarity on the roles and responsibilities in this process. MDF has played a key role in coordinating with other stakeholders, such as currency exchangers, the port authority, taxi associations, national police, the tourist information desk, to ensure tourists have a good experience when visiting Timor-Leste.

The Results



From the two visits in 2017 and three visits in 2018 cruise ship visits, 97 part-time job opportunities as tour guides and bus drivers were created on visit days. The 34 bus drivers earned an additional income of USD6,900 and 63 tour guides earned an additional USD4,280. The Taste of Timor festival was attended by 23 artisans who together earned an additional USD19,000 and six food and beverage vendors who together made an additional USD1,067.

Through the positive results of collaboration with DTC and the subsequent work developing the SOPs with other relevant stakeholders, the overall business environment surrounding cruise tourism has expanded, become more efficient and there has been a significant improvement in visitor experience. Effective collaboration led to the creation of the information booth on visit days, better coordination with taxi drivers at the port, the development of new tourism products and engaging students to help on cruise days as a youth training opportunity.

Initially bus drivers and tour guides were considered to be the primary beneficiaries of the partnership but many more actors are benefitting from the incoming tourists that are outside of the verified numbers. Before MDF's partnership with DTC, few businesses profited from cruise tourism, however, with increased visibility, many market actors are now benefitting from the incoming tourists.