Celebrating Women in Tourism

With International Women’s Day just around the corner on March 8th, we at the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) are pausing to celebrate the achievements of women with our industry. In fact, this essay itself has been written collaboratively between three women in tourism – CREST’s executive director, Martha Honey, CREST’s program associate, Samantha Hogenson, and a CREST research assistant, Umi Kim. At CREST, we work for our namesake - responsible travel - defined as “tourism that maximizes the benefits to local communities, minimizes negative social or environmental impacts, and helps local people conserve fragile cultures and habitats or species.” Gender responsible tourism is absolutely engrained in this definition, and we strive to empower women through our relationships, projects, travelers’ philanthropy programs, and work we do around the world.

In the travel industry, women have taken a prominent role in recent decades. The majority of employees in the industry are woman, especially employed in services and service management. Still, there is an undeniable glass ceiling for women. According to Global Report on Women in Tourism by UNWTO, only one in five tourism ministers in the world are women. Travel Market Report published some interesting findings in 2013, among them, “Of the 50 largest travel agencies in the US (based on Travel Weekly’s Power List 2012), seven (14%) are headed by females”. However, women are doing incredibly important work. Anecdotal evidence suggests CSR and sustainability departments, as well as marketing and sales departments, are often staffed by women. Selling the experience and doing it sustainably are two very crucial components to tourism success!

Within hotels and other tourism enterprises, employment in tourism can help break the poverty cycle and offer training and education, while on other occasions, it perpetuates gender and inequality stereotypes. Though the industry still has a number of problems, on the ground level, tourism can offer significant opportunity for creativity, contribution to local communities, and conservation of environments. This is an area where women thrive. The opportunity to celebrate culture through handicrafts, cuisine, and hospitality, combined with often relatively low barriers to entry, have allowed women to welcome tourists into their worlds in innovative and sustainable ways.

Women are also traveling more. By 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 49% of U.S. travelers were women. In 2014, Yahoo Travel reported that 72% of women surveyed planned to travel alone that year, and that American women took an average of three trips or more per year. The survey sited the reasons for travel alone being “rejuvenation and empowerment”. It seems that connecting these adventure-seeking women with the local women running successful tourism ventures all over the world would be a benefit to all. We applaud Gender Responsible Tourism for highlighting destinations where 1) women are
involved in community projects, 2) where women are a significant part of projects in tourism, and 3) where ideas and management are all by women.

We’d like to share with you a few projects and companies with which we have had the honor of knowing, involving women in tourism:

**Belmont Estate**: This agritourism project is owned and managed by Shadel Nyack Compton, in Grenada, West Indies. Created as a tribute to her grandparents and located on their original estate, Shadel has successfully integrated local culture, history, traditions, and cuisine of the colorful island into an enriching experience for guests and locals alike. It features an organic cocoa farm, a goat dairy (a separate non-profit, founded by Christine A. Curry), a local craft cooperative, farm and garden tours, a museum, and special cultural events.

**Myths & Mountains**: Established by Dr. Antonia Neubauer more than 20 years ago, Myths & Mountains is a luxury tour operator with an impressive social and environmental track record. The company’s coinciding non-profit, READ Global, helps to build community library resource centers in the destinations they visit. Not only do the Centers offer knowledge, information, and educational opportunities to rural villages in Nepal, India, and Bhutan, but they also “seed for-profit businesses to make each library self-sustaining and connect centers with other organizations providing such diverse resources as microcredit, women’s empowerment, literacy training, and health care”. To date, READ has established nearly 100 enterprises supporting 67 READ Centers, serving almost 2 million rural villagers.

**Kaross**: On a recent trip to South Africa, CREST had the opportunity to visit this exemplary embroidery initiative, which was started in 1989 by five Shangaan embroiderers and Irma van Rooyen as the founder. Since 1989, Kaross has become the “voice of over 700 community members, allowing them to share their culture by exploring their heritage and reapplying it to modern, marketable products and artworks”. The cooperative creates opportunities for rural women to make a living, while strengthening cultural pride and awareness.

The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and the UN World Tourism Organization also provide case studies on a number of successful tourism projects run by women, in their [Global Report on Women in Tourism 2010](#). We’d like to highlight a few here:

**Agape Women’s Group (The Mulala Cultural Tourism Enterprise)**: Established by eight women in the Mulala village of Tanzania, this group has benefited the entire community and encouraged tourists to visit Mt. Meru Forest Reserve, as well as take part in local cheese-making, gardening, and farming activities. They enable every tourist to contribute to Village Development Fund, which is used to improve school buildings, the local dispensary, and other community development projects.

**Empowering Women Nepal (EWN)**: Three Nepali sisters founded the company named Three Sisters Adventure and Trekking Company, in 1994. They gave the opportunity for over 800 Nepalese women to be tour guides in Nepal through training and motivation. This group is
focusing on the potential of women to succeed in the tourism industry.

Keyna Sun ‘n’ Sand Beach Resort (SNSBR): Sun ‘n’ Sand Beach Resort in Kenya is a successful business model of a large women-run resort that contributes to the local community and makes significant impact on the lives of women. This resort built a community center, which provides health care services, classrooms, a library, and water tanks for the local community. The resort is empowering women villagers to start small scale businesses.

The East Timor Women’s Association (ETWA): Established by Australian activist Debra Salvagno to support women, this association includes the Cooperative for Tais, Culture, and Sustainable Development (CTKDS) women’s group, which pursues ecotourism by weaving handcrafts with traditional textiles. ETWA helped CTKDS to start a literacy program and micro-credit program for women and to build sustainable weaving centers.

Fijian Women Package Natural Beauty Products: Pure Fiji is an outstanding example of a small business that grew into a multi-million-dollar international business owned by women. Started by the idea of making body products using local resources, the mother and daughter team is contributing to the local economy by employing over 500 women. The products are frequently sought by tourists as local souvenir. Pure Fiji has won many awards, including Excellence in Tourism and a Business Woman of the Year Award. The company is also contributing to the environment by using the sourcing of local components, traditional plants and studying the sustainable use of natural resources.

We cannot wait to see what visionary projects and businesses are coming next!

The Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) is a non-profit research institute based in Washington, DC. Founded in 2003, our mission is to promote responsible tourism policies and practices globally so that local communities may thrive and steward their cultural resources and biodiversity.