



The problem with having an Indigenous cultural experience

Date: Wednesday, 22 November 2006

Editor of The National Indigenous Times, Chris Graham, writes:

Former Democrat Senator Aden Ridgeway, now chair of Indigenous Tourism Australia, is to lead a push to market an "Indigenous cultural experience" to international tourists visiting Australia, *The Oz* reported yesterday.

The story follows a report released yesterday which shows that 53% of international visitors say that having an indigenous experience was of little or no influence in their decision to travel to Australia. Ridgeway wants to turn that around and sees potential for Aboriginal communities and business to get their teeth into the tourism industry.

Marketing Indigenous Australia to the rest of the world is a great idea, but I can't help but feel that despite Aboriginal culture not pushing the buttons of a slight majority of international visitors, ITA will still be preaching to the converted.

38% of Germans surveyed, and 30% of Americans, were interested in tasting Aboriginal culture. That's not a bad recognition rate. But wouldn't it be interesting to conduct the same survey of white Australia?

Australia is home to the oldest surviving culture in the world; tens of thousands of years older than the Pyramids. The world's oldest surviving man-made houses are situated in Victoria, at Lake Condah. They're about 8,000 years old and pre-dated the pyramids by about 5,000 years. They have no World Heritage listing.

While Aboriginal culture fascinates people around the world, for Australians it sparks emotions that range from outrage to indifference.

Take the quintessentially Aboriginal didgeridoo. The first magazine ever launched on the instrument was produced and sold in both Europe and Britain. Asia has the Japan Didgeridoo Association, which produces its own magazine in Japanese. Australia has no magazine devoted to the didgeridoo. The website www.didgeworld.com (which is hosted in Switzerland), lists three major didgeridoo festivals in Australia for 2006 (although two of them aren't actually didge festivals at all). There are four listed in the United Kingdom and five in Germany. Even Italy and the United States host three.

Aboriginal art is another case in point. It's well-known among Indigenous artists that they'll enjoy substantially more success (and respect) overseas than in Australia. The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, based at the University of Virginia in America, claims to be the world's largest private collection of Australian Aboriginal art.

And it's precisely this lack of interest from Australians that will make the marketing of Indigenous Australia to international tourists a little troublesome. ITA's attempts to promote Indigenous Australia are admirable. But you've got to wonder why, given Australia's obsession with real estate, the rest of us are not making any serious attempt to clean up our backyard before we try and sell it to international visitors.

After all where, exactly, should Buck and Mary-Lou Texas from the good 'ol USA go on their "cultural tour" of Australia?

Wadeye might be a good start. Of course, Mr and Mrs Texas won't be able to get their Humvee 4WD in for five months of the year as the sixth largest town in the Northern Territory has no road access during the wet. It's probably just as well with an average 17 people living in a single home, accommodation is a little hard to come by.

So the Texasases are perhaps better to head south down the Sturt Highway through Ti-Tree, where Aboriginal unemployment sits above 90%, for a few leisurely days in Alice Springs and a guided tour of a third-world town camp (which features demountable buildings from the now-closed Woomera Detention Centre paid for out of Aboriginal mining royalties).

When in Central Australia, a visit to Uluru is a must. The tourists get to climb all over a sacred Aboriginal site!

A quick trip west sees Buck and Mary-Lou meet those "crazy Noongars" from Perth who had "some big win in the courts" but are now fighting an appeal. A dash up the coast brings them to the Burrup Peninsula where they can visit the Black Tip gas plants plus whatever is left of some of the world's oldest rock art, which unfortunately had to be "disturbed", explained the federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell, to make way for more mining.

The Texasases get a tip that there's no point visiting Victoria as less than half of one percent of the state is actually owned by Aboriginal people (which is perplexing for the all-American couple, who have a vague recollection of a news item in the US in the early 90s which featured a small, strange looking man with glasses in front of a map of Australia claiming 70% of the nation's land mass would be "lost to the Aborigines").

So instead Mr and Mrs Texas drive over to the NSW South Coast. At sunset, the tourists gather on local beaches to watch NSW Fisheries officers arrest Aboriginal people caught "stealing" abalone. The blackfellas say they're practising their culture. Aren't they silly!

An overnight stay in Canberra sees the Texases visit the burnt out remains of the former Aboriginal Tent Embassy (which has been firebombed more times than a McDonald's store in central Baghdad). Then it's on to the Australian War Memorial, which in the interests of equality, has installed a rock climbing wall in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Of course, a trip to Oz wouldn't be complete without a guided tour of Palm Island by the Queensland Police Tactical Riot Squad. Affable host Peter Beattie explains why it's not appropriate to suspend a police officer from duty after he's accused of lying to a coronial inquest which found him responsible for the death of an Aboriginal man.