

By Eugene Yiga

The business case for responsible tourism

Calabash Tours is a not your average tour company. Its co-founder and director Paul Miedema is passionate about empowering people and giving back to the communities his company works with. This is evidenced by the numerous transformative programmes it has established.



Can doing good for others be good for you too? For Calabash Tours, a Port Elizabeth-based company that runs day tours and short cultural tours in the Eastern Cape, the answer is a resounding yes.

"We're a small company so I know about cash flow difficulties," says co-founder and director Paul Miedema. "But if we hadn't engaged in responsible tourism and embedded it into the fibre of our business, I don't think we would have survived for the last 19 years."

Besides founding Calabash Trust, an NGO, in addition to the tour company, becoming certified with Fair Trade Tourism in 2005 was an important step; not just for the label but because it helped the company find its blind spots, understand the limitations of its practice, and up its game.

"It's an aspirational goal to be perfectly responsible but none of us will ever be," Miedema admits. "You have to keep moving forward all the time."

When working in poor communities, Calabash takes what Miedema calls an "asset-based approaches" by first identifying what a community can offer before talking about what it needs. They also identify three types of poverty – of mind, of pocket, and of spirit – before responding accordingly.

"In most of the narrative in South Africa, where

township or rural communities are involved, the only poverty spoken about is poverty of pocket," Miedema says. "This shapes a kind of imbalance. Because people are economically poor, there's an impression that they don't have much to offer or that they only want tourism because they're needy. That's not our experience."

Protecting the planet

Many companies don't know where to begin where responsible practice is concerned. But Miedema believes that they overcomplicate the process. For example, because all businesses generate waste, and because recycling isn't complicated, this is a simple and measurable place to start.

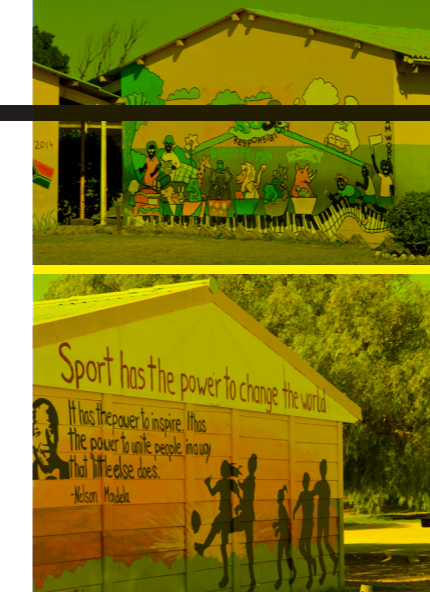
"We were challenged in that we're a tour operator," he says. "We did whatever we could to mitigate our emissions, but we also had to have a positive environmental impact. And if you know townships, you know the environmental degradation that happened because of our country's history. It's a bad situation to begin with."

Calabash focused on permaculture and opportunities for developing sustainable livelihoods. It bases its work in township schools, essentially turning them into small urban farms.

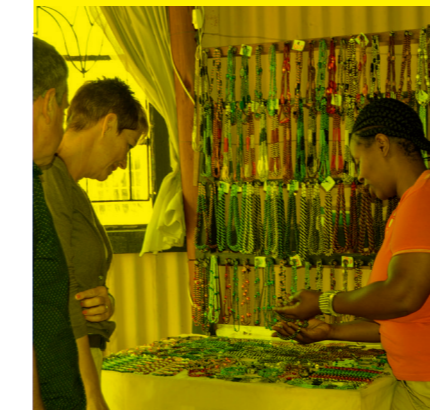
"We do a lot of rainwater harvesting because we're in an area where there's unpredictable rain," he says. "In the last year, we invested more



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Charles Duna Primary School, Port Elizabeth, is one of the beneficiaries of Calabash Tours.



Nolwethu Nokwe is a local artist whose work is promoted on the Calabash tour route.



Veronica Ngawondi is a librarian at Charles Duna and received training as part of Calabash Tours' work at the school.



Artist Shepard Xego and his work is also promoted on the local tour route.

Images: Supplied

than R500 000 in developing sports fields. And in the last two years, we invested over R1m in permaculture design, water harvesting, water tanks, training and community resource development."

Giving power to the people

Because Calabash recruits employees from the same communities in which it works, they become flag-bearers who are proud of their work.

"It's a real opportunity to work for us so we've got loyal staff," Miedema says. "They care about the client experience because they understand that what we deliver also brings benefits to their communities."

Calabash has channelled thousands of hours of volunteer work into its HIV programmes. Furthermore, being aware of the potentially damaging practices in the industry – lion-petting, orphanage tourism, and the like – has helped it design effective offerings.

"Economic inclusion is important for us," Miedema says. "All our tours have service providers from the community whom we mentor, nurture and pay. We do a lot of outreach work to find new service providers. We also do a lot of training and handholding. It's not easy."

Miedema also believes that it is vital that whoever they're paying is equitably compensated for what they do. It's why the company pays out 30% of its turnover to other small businesses.

"We work in a competitive environment," he says. "But a lot of inbound operators like to give us work because they like the story we tell. And when we have successes like these, it builds passion in our staff, builds passion in the communities, and keeps us motivated."

Righting wrongs of the past

But why did Calabash decide to operate responsibly in the first place? Miedema describes it as a "licence to operate". More specifically, one can't conduct business where there are historical challenges and poverty without doing anything to benefit the communities themselves.

"It was a no-brainer," he says. "If we didn't work the way that we do, we would have been chased out of the townships and rural communities by now because we would have been perceived – and correctly so – as being somebody who only extracts. And that's what our tourism industry has been about for many years: it's been an industry that takes out and puts little back."

By operating responsibly, Calabash has received protection from the people. Specifically,

even though volunteers often do home-based care visits in gang-ridden areas, they haven't had any incidents. Instead, the company is liked, respected, and seen as bringing something positive to the community in a tangible way.

"We use particular strategies," he says. "For example, one of the reasons we work with schools is because they're deeply embedded in communities. Everybody's got a child or a cousin who goes to that school so it's a way of spreading the word [about what we do]."

Going beyond the bottom line

Ultimately, Miedema believes that ensuring profitability is vital. But with the economic collapse of 2008 still fresh in many minds, and capitalism "beginning to consume itself to some extent", there's no need to make money in a way that rips people off.

"If you can't feed yourself, you can't feed anybody else," he says. "We're a profit-driven enterprise like any other business and we contribute to a better South Africa by making money for ourselves. But one can make profit in a benign, non-harmful way. You don't have to extract and exploit."

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No traveller wants to visit an unstable country. And yet with South Africa's unstable socio-political environment, and many born-frees expressing public and sometimes violent dissatisfaction at the unequal distribution of

wealth, Miedema believes that tourism will take a knock. That's why he urges businesses to do something about the situation.

"Use that inner thing we all have that understands what it means to be fair and, as you grow your business, you'll find [the ethical way of doing things] becomes more embedded and elaborate," he says.

Ultimately, Miedema believes that if businesses don't embed good practice, and if they continue to serve only their own interests instead of broader interests as well, we won't have a tourism industry that keeps growing. And for the sake of the country's future, responsible practice is something we all have to embrace.

"If we refuse to examine our role in the economic beneficiation of the poor, our contribution to social change through our supply chains, and our contribution to climate justice and environmental good practice, we'll kill the goose that lays the golden egg," he says. "That's why we have to find ways in which there is a greater sharing of the resources we have. It's the only way we'll survive." ■

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