

# Integrative Travel and Tourism: A Holistic Approach to Visitor Experience and Destination Development

*To help us address this issue, we have turned to Mr. Burt Woolf, a well-known champion for integrative travel and tourism who, for many years, has been advising large-scale destination development strategies for public sector agencies and NGOs in the USA. Some of our members may recall that Burt facilitated PATA's global management planning process in 1997 (shortly after these meetings, PATA moved its headquarters to Bangkok).*

*In early 2007, Burt and his teenage daughter spent two weeks in Thailand, participating in a cross-cultural educational programme called Power of One Thailand. While in Bangkok, Burt enthusiastically shared with us his experience of this programme and how well it manifested an integrative approach to tourism development. We commissioned him to prepare the following case study and explain exactly why he views the Power of One programme to be an innovative prototype strategy for its development of integrative tourism in Asia.*

*Burt's article has a significantly different flavour from past editions of Issues&Trends. We hope you enjoy its style and find its message stimulating.*

As the scope and magnitude of visitation in Asia grow, so, too, will the role and influence of the travel and tourism (T&T) industry continue to expand in the domestic life of Asian communities. The benefit of T&T now extends beyond just the economic realm, to include social, cultural, educational and ecological development at local, regional and national levels. T&T industry officials and executives have long been aware that a socially, economically and culturally vital locality makes for a healthy tourism destination. They know that such integrative tourism is here to stay. However, several questions still linger:

- What does "integrative travel and tourism" really mean for the T&T industry?
- What challenges will the T&T industry face as tourism becomes more integrated with the complex fabric of society?
- What kinds of travel programmes and tourism development strategies does an integrative perspective require?

## Setting the stage

It is the morning of December 29, 2006 at Suvarnabhumi International Airport (BKK) on the outskirts of Bangkok. Twenty-one bleary-eyed Americans have arrived following 20 hours of flights from Los Angeles via Taipei on EVA Air. The American group is comprised of eight teenagers and 13 adult mentor-chaperones from all over the United States. Together, they have arrived to participate in the Power of One Thailand programme in 2007.

The Americans are herded from their arrival gate to the baggage claim area by Juelle Wilkins, executive director and founder of Blue Star of Hope, the US-based NGO that has created the Power of One programme. Juelle scans urgently across the waiting crowds, searching for the familiar face of her husband, Donovan, who is co-leading the programme. At last...there he is, surrounded by eight bright-eyed Thai teenagers and the two mentor-chaperones who have accompanied them from their home town of Bang Krud on the Gulf of Thailand, about 200 km south of Bangkok. The

American and the Thais – about 30 people in all – converge and meld as they head outside to find the bus that will take them to their hotel in downtown Bangkok. The Power of One programme has officially begun...and hardly any of the participants are capable of speaking to one other.

As their bus heads out onto the highway towards Bangkok, both American and Thai students are now eyes-wide-open, heads pressed intently against the bus windows. None of the American teenage students have ever travelled to such a far-away land. Meanwhile, the Thai students are no less in awe of the urban metropolis they see passing by. Few of them have ever travelled beyond the borders of their local province (Prachuap Kiri Khan), let alone all the way to Bangkok. These Thai students and their mentors have never met an American. In a few days they will all board a plane for the first time and travel north to Chiang Mai. They come from modest circumstances, and their participation in this programme is possible currently only through the financial sponsorship of individuals in the US.

At the Asia Hotel in downtown Bangkok, the programme participants check into their rooms and then gather for first introductions. Because it is still early in the programme, the Thais are still sitting with Thais, and the Americans with Americans. One by one, each person is asked to stand and say their name. The Thai participants start the process, each speaking in English as best they can...

"Hello everybody, my name is Phetcharat Nopraphan..."

The Americans look at each other. This is a name they cannot possibly pronounce.

"...but you can just call me Jessy!"

"Whew!" The Americans breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness for those Thai nick-names!

Now it is the Americans' turn...the names are all short, but not so easy for someone from Thailand to say: "Shannen," "Rees," "Lizzy," "Barbara". The Thai students and mentors laugh as they practice speaking each American name in turn, repeating the sounds several times until they finally get the pronunciation. By the end of the introductions, smiles have emerged throughout the group; students and mentors alike are discovering common ground for relating to one another – simply from the act of speaking each other's "strange" name. A personal transformation has begun that will continue and flourish over the next 16 days.

### How it all began...

The Power of One began several years ago as a vision and dream conceived by former US teacher and school administrator Juelle Wilkins, and her husband Donovan ("Dono") from Crestone, Colorado, US. For the past several years, Juelle and Dono have been leading cross-cultural travel pilgrimages for adults to exotic sites throughout the world. During their travels, they discovered and fell in love with the people, culture and natural resources of Thailand. They have since visited Thailand each year, spending several months, primarily in the northern provinces around Chiang Mai, and on the southern peninsula in the coastal province of Prachuap Kiri Khan.

During one of their visits this time to the north of Thailand, Juelle and Dono were introduced to Sangduen "Lek" Chailert, a diminutive ("Lek" means "small" in Thai) powerhouse of a woman from Chiang Mai, who founded and runs the Elephant Nature Park, a 40-acre preserve and 100 acres of lush jungle, located in a mountain valley, 60 km northwest of Chiang Mai. At the Park, Lek and her dedicated team of paid staff and volunteers not only care for 30 or so abused and orphaned elephants; they also run extensive educational programmes about elephant conservation; initiate rain forest preservation projects to conserve the mountain jungles from illegal logging; and organise community economic development programmes for the nearby remote Karen hilltribe villages (where Lek is from). For her efforts, Lek was honored by TIME Magazine's Asia edition as one of Asia's heroes of 2005. Juelle and Dono became close friends with Lek and, together, the three of them dreamed of ways they might bring young people into close contact with the elephants and with Lek's work.

During another of their visits to the south of Thailand, Juelle and Dono came upon a monastery under construction, where the interior was being hand-painted with intricate murals depicting the life and enlightenment of the Lord Buddha. There, they met and became close friends with Phra Denduang ("Den") Nakaton, a Thai Buddhist monk and leader of the monastery, who speaks fluent English. They soon came to call the monk "Ajahn" (Thai for "teacher"), which is what his students and the local townspeople call him. Juelle and Dono shared with Ajahn their idea of a

programme that would bring together teenagers from around the world, and, using the natural and cultural resources of Thailand, would teach these young people to be citizens of the world, capable of making a difference both as individuals as well as collectively with their peers. Ajahn introduced Juelle and Donovan to officials and administrators at the nearby Chaikasem Wittaya (secondary) School, and after considerable discussions and negotiations over several years, the cross-cultural educational programme called Power of One was announced for December 2006.

## The Power of One Experience

The 16 days of the Power of One programme provide a remarkable, intense and thoroughly enjoyable personal experience for each and every participant in the programme. In the 2007 programme, over the course of those 16 days, and notwithstanding the language barrier and their socio-cultural differences, the students, together with their adult mentors:

- Visited some of Thailand's most significant and sacred cultural, historic, natural and religious sites;
- Offered alms and received the teaching and blessings of a number of Thai Buddhist monks, and conducted a clean-up project on the grounds of a monastery;
- Performed eight days of intense, full-time volunteer service caring for abused and abandoned elephants at an internationally known elephant sanctuary;
- Helped construct a new water system for a Karen hilltribe village, and distributed supplies to the children and women of two villages;
- Participated in a rainforest preservation project that prevents trees from being illegally logged;
- Learned the principles and practice of meditation and yoga;
- Practiced and performed traditional Thai dancing;
- Helped 150 Thai secondary school students improve their foreign language skills at a two-day "English Camp";
- Shared their common interests and cultural differences through an experiential curriculum that spanned the entire time they were together; and
- Developed personal action plans for becoming more active global citizens of the world.

Even with a list of activities like this, the Power of One student participants had lots of fun shopping in the markets, swimming in rivers and streams, playing games, listening to pop music, etc. – all the things that teenagers the world over are likely to do when given the chance to express themselves freely!

## Understanding integrative travel and tourism

The Power of One programme is an especially rigorous cross-cultural educational and service learning programme that exemplifies an integrative approach to T&T development. By "integrative", we mean a holistic orientation that ties together the visitor's experience with many aspects of personal and community life in the destination being visited. An integrative visitor experience encompasses the physical, emotional, spiritual, cultural, educational, ecological and economic aspects of a destination and its people.

Two key ingredients of integrative T&T are present in the Power of One programme. First, the programme emphasises both personal development of the individuals who are travelling, as well as the social development of the people and places they visit. Second, for the Power of One programme, improving the well-being of the destination population is a primary aspect of the visitor's experience.

Integrative programmes such as the Power of One generate an expansive and lasting set of possibilities for tourism development, far beyond their immediate economic benefit. Travel opportunities of this kind are designed to effect long-term positive qualitative impacts on the individual traveller, as well as to address long-term community quality-of-life issues, needs and opportunities for the destination – for example, the possibility of educating Thai students to become quality tourism workers when they grow up; or the possibility of preserving natural and built resources that

if not to attended to today, will be unavailable for the next generation of visitors. Integrative T&T provides a quality experience for the visitor while at the same time enhancing the quality of life of the local population – and vice versa. In this *interdevelopmental* context, integrative tourism yields genuine sustainability: as the quality and quantity of visitation grows, the quality of life of the destination develops and grows as well.

## Lessons from the Power of One

The Power of One programme is an example of an integrative visitor programme in which the quality of life of the destination is as important as the quality of the visit itself. As such, it offers a number of lessons that could further an integrative approach to T&T development in Asia. The Power of One in its current form involves primarily secondary school students and their adult mentors from around the world (in 2008, a total of 40 students and mentors participated in the programme), which adds a significant intergenerational dimension that distinguishes it from adult-only programmes of this kind. Nonetheless, the following five lessons learned from the Power of One would be valid for groups comprised exclusively of adults.

**Lesson 1: Travel for a higher purpose.** When travel encompasses a higher purpose, the destination becomes something more than simply a place to visit – it becomes a motivating source of new possibilities for the common good. The Power of One is designed to create conscious citizens of the world, regardless of their socio-economic background. Thailand and its natural, cultural, spiritual and educational resources become models for global action by the young students, as well as by the mentors who travel with them.

**Lesson 2: Visitors and destination residents travel together.** When visitors and residents of the destination travel together, the visitors learn to respect the destination with “local” eyes, and the resident travellers experience a heightened sense of pride and awareness of their own sites, culture and traditions. In 2007, the Power of One American participants learned far more deeply with their Thai counterparts present, while the Thai participants were delighted to be showing their country to the Americans.

**Lesson 3: Intense cross-cultural interaction.** The Power of One programme forces its student and adult travellers to coalesce by engaging them all together in challenging cross-cultural situations. Stereotypes rapidly drop away as the participants begin to understand and accept different personal perspectives on life. Furthermore, through cross-cultural activities, visitors deepen their relationship to and respect for the destination country’s people, traditions and values, and the host-country travellers experience a new level of relationship to and respect for their own world.

**Lesson 4: Deep engagement with indigenous resources through service.** Integrative travel suggests a direct and active relationship between traveller and destination, the highest form of which is voluntary service. Participants in the Power of One programme are expected to be service workers throughout the trip. By the end of the programme they become champions for sustainability of authentic Thai resources – cultural, recreational, natural, culinary, religious, etc.

**Lesson 5: An environment for self-reflection and learning.** An integrative travel programme is actually a learning environment where peer-to-peer sharing of insights is encouraged and facilitated. In the Power of One programme, every activity that takes place in Thailand – from visiting sites, to shopping in the markets, and even eating meals – is accompanied by a group conversation that intentionally draws out the participants’ reactions to their experience. This self-reflection establishes for the participants a closer connection to the people and places they visit, and a more caring relationship with the local people they meet.

## Conclusion

If the T&T industry of Asia is to truly become integrative, three challenges must be met:

**Challenge 1: Stewardship Role.** The T&T industry should assume a serious stewardship role for “quality of life” within the destinations they serve. *Stewardship* means watching over and taking responsibility for the quality and sustainability of a resource. Within their respective jurisdictions, T&T industry representatives should be serious and active players in addressing broad local development issues and concerns. They should sit at the public policy-making table as peers and equals alongside the traditional community development players: educational, cultural, heritage, social service and economic development agencies. They should participate in the public process to address the complex challenges facing local development in areas of community life such as education,

health care, recreation, cultural development, land use, environmental sustainability, design of the built environment, infrastructure development, and public safety. These issues have always been concerns of the T&T industry; in an integrative context, they now become core factors.

**Challenge 2: New Partnerships.** A more central stewardship role will bring tourism interests into closer relationships with a wide variety of other civic and commercial interests that previously were important to, but only on the periphery of tourism development. The T&T industry will need to forge productive and resourceful partnerships with these “new” tourism stakeholders: educational, cultural, social, civic and business entities. This means not only more voices to listen to, but also more perspectives to accommodate – a potentially daunting task, especially when many of the new stakeholders have had little if any prior experience with the tourism industry, and probably have never viewed themselves as part of the “tourism” sector.

**Challenge 3: Finding and supporting integrative programme strategies.** An integrative tourism development approach will only come about if the T&T industry can showcase specific travel programmes that exemplify its value to the many and diverse new community development interests that are now part of the tourism system. Exemplars such as the Power of One programme need to be identified, promoted, and helped to thrive with funding. Such efforts can then be held up as models to show the value of tourism development to improve the overall quality of life of the destinations that visitors are experiencing.

If the T&T industry is to flourish in the long run, it will need to develop strategies that weave T&T programmes, services, facilities, promotions, events and activities into the fabric of local, national and even global communities. Such an integrative context will position the T&T industry to be a more central player in shaping public policy and implementing developmental initiatives. The impact on the industry will focus the industry on new ways to address needs, resources and opportunities; and new partnerships with players who have heretofore seen T&T as peripheral.

**An integrative approach holds that responsibility for quality of life in the destination locality is an appropriate and proper role for tourism development!**

## About the author

Burt Woolf is principal and founder of The Center for Quality of Life ([www.C4QL.org](http://www.C4QL.org)), and President of QL Consulting ([www.qlconsult.com](http://www.qlconsult.com)), both of Amherst, Massachusetts, US (150 miles north of New York City). He has developed a citizen-based approach to strategic decision-making – called **Accelerated Consensus™** – that assures genuine public participation in large-scale public sector quality-of-life improvement initiatives. Burt has used the Accelerated Consensus process to facilitate major destination development initiatives in communities and regions throughout the US, focusing on such issues as historic preservation and heritage tourism, scenic byways, cultural districts, outdoor recreation and revitalization of downtowns, waterfronts and environmentally distressed areas. Formerly, Burt was a senior consultant at Economics Research Associates, executive director of the international Creative Education Foundation, and early in his career, Project Director for CITY SPIRIT, a cultural development initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (a US federal agency). Burt holds a B.A. in political science from Amherst College and a master’s in management from the University of California at Los Angeles. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts where he has conducted research on the relationship of citizen-based public planning processes and adult learning.

To learn more about the Power of One programmes, please contact [Juelle Wilkins](mailto:Juelle.Wilkins@bluestarofhope.org), Executive Director, Blue Star of Hope ([www.bluestarofhope.org](http://www.bluestarofhope.org)).



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Mr John Koldowski **Editor and Director-  
Strategic Intelligence Centre**  
Burt Woolf **Writer and researcher**  
Keen Media **Design and layout**

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The editor and PATA’s Strategic Intelligence Centre welcome your comments and feedback. Please contact Mr. John Koldowski via e-mail at [johnk@PATA.org](mailto:johnk@PATA.org)