

BUFFALO STANCE

Bailey Seybolt finds out how tourism can enrich both travellers and communities. Photo by Aaron Joel Santos.

BEFORE "RESPONSIBLE TOURISM" became such a buzz word, Tran Trong Kien, executive chairman and CEO of the Thien Minh Group, which includes Buffalo Tours, was experimenting with ways of using tourism to give something back to the community.

In 1994, Kien was a medical student studying to be a general practitioner. He has always had a good grasp of foreign languages - learning French and Russian in primary school and, later English - but in medical school he was "lucky enough to get into a sphere of friends who weren't uniquely Vietnamese".

"This gave me a better understanding of what the outside world looks like," he says. He began to view travel as a necessity - a way of learning about other cultures and sharing his own culture with the rest of the world. He decided to take a few years off to work in the travel industry, eventually launching a small niche tourism company that offered tours off the beaten path.

"In 1993 I was riding a bike with my friend through a remote area of Vietnam. He had blond hair and all the children came running out of the school saying 'Russian'," says Kien. "I decided I didn't want to do the standard tours that everyone else was doing. The country had just opened up and people wanted to see its diversity."

The company has grown significantly since then - employing 200 people in Vietnam and 375 globally - but still maintains its key core philosophy: the best travel experience will benefit both the traveller and the local community.

"Often when a small business becomes big, you lose the culture that makes it special," says Kien. "We work hard to

maintain our 'Buffalo culture'. We always look at a way of investing to give the most authentic experience to the client, but it is also important to have a relatively transparent system of bringing benefits to the community."

◉ An Alternative to Charity

At a time when the proliferation of NGOs working across the developing world is coming under scrutiny and the organisations themselves are having to answer questions about their effectiveness, companies like Kien's are pushing a different philosophy of helping the community.

"I don't think charity is a good way to grow a country," he says. "The most responsible thing you can do for a community is run a good business, pay taxes and employ local people."

He is quick to point out the growing gap between the rich and poor in Vietnam. "I see a lot of expensive cars, but I know that 80 percent of people are still working in the rice fields."

But Kien believes the solution lies not in pouring money into aid organisations, but in strategies that will empower locals and spread the tourist dollar further. In Laos, Buffalo Tours built a bridge that would allow a village to have year-round access to the jungle, instead of just the six months when the river was at its lowest. He plans to build a small base of operations there to train local guides to lead treks into the surrounding mountains.

Though he is mainly focused on his business venture, Kien hasn't entirely left behind his past as a doctor. Every year he leads a team of medical practitioners on a trek into remote areas of Vietnam to provide

medical care for areas that often aren't accessible by road.

Also, every year the company dedicates US\$100,000 towards developing local infrastructure projects like schools and medical clinics. Kien sees this not as charity, but as investing in his community, something he thinks more business in Vietnam should take note of.


Five percent of Vietnam's GDP comes directly from tourism and as much as 13.5 percent is indirectly connected to the tourism industry. "The industry directly provides half a million jobs and another 1.5 million indirectly," he says. "Despite its faults, tourism as a whole is a good way to deal with poverty."

◉ Safeguarding the future

"Being a responsible business means not only looking after local people, but also local resources," says Kien. Part of the company's employee training and internal code of conduct involves educating local guides about conserving natural resources and promoting local cultural values.

"At the end of the day, if we don't do it, there will be no more oceans, no more jungles, nothing for our children," he says. "If local tour operators destroy the resources that are attracting tourists, it's also bad business. Conserving the environment is a win-win situation."

He adds: "I wouldn't be surprised if five to ten years from now, what we're doing becomes a basic requirement. You can see it happening already in Australia and the EU. They're passing laws to make sure companies are acting responsibly."

Power with responsibility, it's a potent formula. Let's hope it keeps catching on. 

"I don't think charity is a good way to grow a country. The most responsible thing you can do for a community is run a good business- pay taxes, employ local people."

