

On the front page

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Indian Reservations Bank on Authenticity to Draw Tourists

The mercury had pushed over the 100-degree mark again here in the high desert, but the tourists from Germany were undeterred, looking for clues to life in the American West before every small town had an espresso bar.

"As children we used to play cowboys and Native Americans," Klaus Pumple, a 37-year-old construction manager from Stuttgart, Germany, said recently. "Now when you pass through the Native American zones in this country, it's kind of depressing, not like you expected. But also, it is so very interesting to see how these people live today."

On the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in Montana, at the high drama nexus of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, Vicky Kilian of the Netherlands had just spent another night sleeping on a dirt floor inside a tent and was wondering whether she could ever return to her life as a business consultant in a very flat country.

"When I sleep in the teepee, I feel a lot of connection to the earth," said Ms. Kilian, 29, who is on her first visit to America. "I have had a fire every night and I have been able to walk over the prairie. It has a very special energy."

American Indian reservations, long considered economic deserts in a landscape of general prosperity, are finding that they have a lot more to offer the world than casinos and art galleries -- they have their homes, their backyards, their stories.

Visitors, especially a growing number of Europeans, are traveling to some of the country's most remote places, like this Indian reservation in central Oregon, in search of life many Americans overlook on their vacations. No theme parks built around fantasies for these travelers. In fact, some of the biggest new attractions are rooted in today's world and in authenticity -- even if it leaves visitors feeling more guilt than vacation relief. Tourists to Indian country spend their holidays hearing tales of heart-numbing atrocities or listening to songs in languages that never show up in Frommer's guides. They come away thrilled.

And for Indians who have figured just how to market this niche of native society, business is booming.

"Europeans have been visiting Indian country since the time of Columbus, but what's really new is Indians getting control of it," said Gordon Bronitsky, a Denver tourism marketer who has just produced a catalogue of Indian travel packages that is going out to 5,000 travel agents in Italy.

A cruise ship full of Germans will tie up next spring near the western Oneida Reservation, next to Green Bay, Wis., after the tour operator reported that visitors requested a stop at an Indian reservation as part of their itinerary.

"We're not going to sit there and say, 'How,' and paint our faces," said Jeff House, a spokesman for the Oneida. "We will try to give an impression of how people live today. We're business people. We go to Packer games."

Other tribes are trying to blend the old with the new. Will Tsosie runs what might be called an Indian bed and breakfast on the Navajo Reservation not far from Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona. He charges \$85 a night to stay in a traditional earthen-floored hogan, a cylindrical house with no running water, and a structure in which few Indians live. But he also takes people to visit the local community college.

"Our European guests are very well-prepared and very well-read -- unlike most Americans," Mr. Tsosie said. "If they show up with too much of the wrong attitude, we turn them away." Recently, he said, some people came to the Hopi Reservation looking for a sun dance, and asked whether they could be "pierced" in the chest.

"We told them they had the wrong Indians," Mr. Tsosie said. "Try a thousand miles to the north, with the Lakota."

Roberta Conner, director of the new \$18 million Tamastlikt Cultural Center, on the Umatilla Reservation, said, "We get a lot of people who expect they are going to find the Hollywood stereotypes, the beads and feather Indians."

The center, whose Indian name means interpreter, opened this summer after nearly 10 years of planning and is drawing visitors from around the world.

Tamastlikt is the only Indian-run, Indian-owned interpretive center along the entire length of the old Oregon Trail, Ms. Conner said. The trail, from St. Louis to Western Oregon, has long been a magnet for fans of heritage tourism. With the opening of Tamastlikt, she said, there is now another side of the story of Westward expansion, as well as a history of the Indians who have long lived in this region.

The Umatilla and the two other tribes that live on the reservation, the Cayuse and the Walla Walla, sent a delegation to Berlin this year, to the world's biggest tourism trade show. They handed out posters of a Cayuse Indian leader in a buffalo headdress with the slogan "Nicht Ihr Durchschnittlicher Reisefuhrer" or Not Your Average Tour Guide.

Germany is often the focus of the marketing because the country has more than 300 Indian clubs, where people adopt a tribe or a chief and study the history. Plus, millions of Germans have grown up on the

books of Karl May, a German author who wrote a series of stories about an Apache and his white sidekick.

"There is this sort of noble savage image, unfettered by civilization, which they like," Mr. Bronitsky said. "God forbid that anyone should ever discuss that Indians have VCR's and microwaves."

But a thrust of the new interpretative center, which is part of a resort that includes a casino, an 18-hole golf course, a hotel and recreational vehicle park, is to show how Indians of the Columbia Plateau live today.

"We would like to be perceived as dynamic, evolving, healthy people," Ms. Conner said. "That's not exactly what people expect to see when they visit a reservation."

Still, the fact that these Columbia Plateau Indians have lived in roughly the same places for thousands of years is a tourist draw in a country where so many of the human attachments to the land are ephemeral, tribal officials say.

"We pretty much live where we've always lived, and people are fascinated by that," Ms. Conner said. The center tells a story of independent people whose lives were forever changed by the schooners that came over the Oregon Trail. It shows the effect of disease, of boarding schools that disrupted families, and of poverty. And it ends on a hopeful note, with visions of a tribe flourishing.

"People are very moved by it," Ms. Conner said. "We get these notes in the suggestion box: 'I'm sorry for everything we've done to you people.' It awakens a lot of trauma, a lot of fear."

Despite the guilt-swollen effect of some heritage tour sites, tour operators outside the reservation say there is great interest in all things Indian. A record number of people, about 600,000, visited the National Museum of the American Indian in lower Manhattan last year, double the attendance of the year before. And out near the reservations, museums report a similar trend.

At the Museum of the Plains Indian, on the Blackfoot Reservation, near Browning, Mont., nearly half the visitors this year have been from Europe.

A huge majority of the guests at Darrell Norman's village and horse ranch on the Blackfoot Reservation are from Europe. They take pictures of the bison herds that wander around the reservation, ride horses that are descendants of the mustangs brought to the Americas by the Spanish and learn about the culture of Northern Plains tribes.

"They want to know what the Blackfoot are all about," Mr. Norman said. "They want to taste our food. They want to sleep on the ground -- the whole package. They may show up with stereotypical image, but they leave with the sense that we have a very alive culture. We do not have dead arts, dead language."

Ms. Kilian, the Dutch visitor to the Blackfoot, said she had considered going to China on her vacation, but chose the Blackfoot Reservation instead. "Before I came here I heard that they had a dislike for whites," she said. "That is not true. I have felt very welcome."

One problem that concerns the tribes is trying to hold the line between sharing culture and exploitation. The Umatilla, for example, found that many Germans want to stay with Indian families -- but the Indians themselves do not feel like opening their homes. The Blackfoot, who are enjoying a banner year for tourism, are grappling with the same problem.

"There's always been this question," said Ray Montoya, the Blackfoot tribal planning director, "of how far we develop this industry while maintaining a pristine environment and our culture."