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A Nonprofit Travel Company With a Global Mission



Top. Cofounders of Crooked Trails (Tammy Leland, far left, and Chris Mackay, far right,) and participants lunch at a café in Ollantaytambo, Peru in the Sacred Valley near Machu Picchu.

Bottom. Tammy Leland interacts with the animal residents at a farm on Isla de Tequila in Lake Titicaca.

By Lori Hinton

Tammy Leland spends six months each year abroad. She works out of a “living office,” sometimes in Seattle, other times from a tiny Internet café in the Barranco neighborhood of Lima, Peru.

Her business partner, Chris Mackay, is a new mom who works from a home office in West Seattle, with walls shrouded in tapestries from Thailand and photos of Nepalese children.

Together, the two share one goal: to change the way people travel.

Introducing Crooked Trails, a Seattle women-owned, nonprofit, community-based travel company. That may be a mouthful, but this little company is doing a lot – building relationships with each community it visits and making strides of global significance.

An Educational Approach
Created to inspire more sensitive travel in areas where the negative impacts of tourism were threatening cultures and environments, Crooked Trails works with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to conduct community-based travel programs. Community-based tourism (or CBT as they say in the biz) is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment while sustaining the well-being of local people.

“We exist to broaden understanding of the planet and its diverse cultures through education, community development and responsible travel,” says Mackay.

“And we operate under three educational objectives,” explains Leland. “To teach people about other cultures and responsible travel here at home (through slide shows, educational materials, classes and fundrais-

ers); to do the same by taking groups abroad; and to reciprocate the process for the communities we visit (by helping village leaders develop educational tools, videos and cultural centers that preserve their heritage and educate travelers)."

"Community members decide what our projects will be. They decide how often we come, what we do, where we go and what we pay," Mackay says.

Often travel companies use the idea of visiting vibrant indigenous villages to lure clients onto intriguing trips. While witnessing colorful foreign cultures is appealing, just going for "the show" can leave travelers feeling empty. And, more often than not, the cultures visited rarely see a benefit from those visits.

"Rather than having tourism happen *to* them, with Crooked Trails it has to happen *with* them," says Mackay.

Recognized by university study abroad programs as an expert in educational travel, Crooked Trails is also providing opportunities for youth with internship placement for college students, university study abroad trips, service learning and volunteer work.

"It's our ultimate goal," says Mackay, "that someday everyone who travels internationally will gain the knowledge to travel respectfully." That's why Crooked Trails doesn't think of their travel as trips but rather as exchange programs. "Kind of like a mini Peace Corp experience," Mackay observes. "You should see our pre-departure packet, it's about 30 pages – almost a book!"

The Returns of a Nonprofit

"Being a nonprofit allows us to support community development work," explains Leland. "We can hold fundraisers, write grants and solicit

funds to create projects overseas such as building schools, community centers, water systems, indigenous mapping projects, protection of sacred sites and positive tourism development."

This method gives the local people the ability to control projects and benefit economically. A large percentage of program fees for each trip go directly to the project in the community being visited. In addition, the NGOs working with Crooked Trails often provide financial support, and so do the trip participants.

Travel trend experts show that these globally minded women could be onto something. According to the Seminary on the Strategic Development of Ecotourism, community-based tourism is the fastest growing sector of the tourist industry. More and more people are looking for meaningful experiences when they travel.

Getting Started

Leland and Mackay met at Western Washington University while doing graduate work in environmental education. When Mackay was out in the field practicing responsible travel, Leland did her thesis research on the impacts of global tourism with the intent to run a business of educating tour operators.

The two furthered their studies through a course at England's Schumacher College where, under the leadership of Helena Norberg-Hodge, they began to hone their focus.

Their first glimpse at global influence began in Thailand.

"I traveled to an anti-consumerism conference," reflects Mackay. "Once the conference was over, a group of us visited the country's exploited

A World First in Peru: Opening 1,000-Year-Old Routes

Forging the way as one of the first nonprofit, community-based travel companies, Crooked Trails was offered a groundbreaking opportunity through Peru's Mountain Institute.

For the first time ever, La Gran Ruta Inca (the 4,300-mile-long road system constructed by the Inca Empire in the Andes Mountains, not to mention one of the marvels of antiquity) will be explored by a small group of tourists through Crooked Trails.

After extensive field studies to determine how this unique resource could be used for sustainable development of communities along the route, while protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the indigenous inhabitants, Crooked Trails was invited by the Mountain Institute to be the first organization to lead treks of La Gran Ruta Inca.

"We will be the first-ever tourist organization invited to participate in the project," says Leland. "We will trek the Great Inca Highland Road from Huari to Huanuco Viejo, working with local communities to help them develop community-based tourism that aids in the protection of La Gran Ruta Inca."

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Travel Programs at a Glance

Thailand

In Thailand, Crooked Trails works in conjunction with the Hill Area Development Foundation and Natural Focus to build community projects, to educate and help develop successful business practices for community artisans.

India

Working with the Lingshed Area Project, the India program is a cultural exchange homestay with the Ladakhi people in the 14,000-foot high Himalayan region.

Peru

The programs in Peru focus on developing community-based tourism such as teaching weavers to sell their wares and mapping out the finer points of beneficial tour practices. In Peru, Crooked Trails works with The Mountain Institute and Rainforest Expeditions.

Nepal

In conjunction with The Katmandu Environmental Education Project and the Annapurna Area Conservation Association in Nepal, Crooked Trails gets physical. "Here we always do hands-on projects, like building schools, or toilets for schools," says Mackay.

Vietnam

A growing tourist destination, Vietnam is part of Crooked Trails community-based tourism and cultural awareness programs.

Kenya

Crooked Trails, in a partnership with Global Development Partnerships, will travel to Africa in June to help the Massai Association build a school while simultaneously building leadership skills.

Northern Hill tribes and listened to the villagers to learn about the issues they faced."

At the time, the people of this community had few rights and were not considered Thai citizens. And before long, Leland and Mackay were organizing solidarity walks from village to village to village with homestays along the way.

"We felt we were helping these people, but tourism was rapidly coming to this area, and the Thais were the ones benefiting, not the Hill tribes," Mackay points out. "Thais used them as a show, yet this community had no say and no gain from this."

So Mackay and Leland started their own program in which travelers stayed in a village and constructed projects based on the decisions of the community. "Since then," Mackay says, "we've built bridges, a school cafeteria, a community center and began village artisan programs."

From Thailand, Crooked Trails branched off to include programs in India, Peru, Nepal, and Kenya.

"Crooked Trails' biggest contribution has been to connect people around the world in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment," smiles Leland. "Creating new friendships, building understanding of our global community, breaking down cultural barriers, and encouraging people to be active in their own communities at home." ■

Lori Hinton is a freelance writer and producer based in West Seattle. She has written and produced for the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, The History Channel, PBS and Bill Nye the Science Guy. She also serves as a playwright, producer and consultant for NASA's youth education program.