



Pudakul Aboriginal Cultural Tour

Case Study



Purpose

This case study will provide information on the daily operations of a successful Aboriginal owned and operated tourism business in the Northern Territory. It has been developed to share knowledge and guidance with other Aboriginal tourism businesses and entrepreneurs. The case study highlights the challenges of commencing a business and benefits of establishing a sustainable Aboriginal tourism product, as well as suggestions for Aboriginal business development in the Northern Territory.



Description of Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tour

Pudukul is the name of the Macaranga Tree (freshwater hibiscus). Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours is owned and operated by Graham Kenyon, Traditional Owner and custodian of Limilngan-Wulna land and his wife Lynette Kenyon. It is a 100% Aboriginal owned and operated family business that commenced in 2008.

The tour is an authentic Aboriginal culture and nature based offering, providing an experience rich with information, knowledge and culture. During the tour, visitors learn about bush medicine and bush tucker including local traditional stories. Demonstrations include traditional basket weaving, spear making and throwing, and a number of other traditional activities, including learning to play the didgeridoo.

Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours operates on Aboriginal owned and operated Limilngan-Wulna Land, adjacent to the world heritage listed Kakadu National Park. Adelaide River Wetlands is a large area bursting with wildlife and plants, 45 minutes drive from Darwin. The wetlands include great local attractions Fogg Dam, Jumping Crocodile Cruises, Djukbinj National Park, Leaning Tree Lagoon, Mary River National Park and Window on the Wetlands.

Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours are a Tourism Accredited Business and proudly one of sixteen Tourism Australia "Indigenous Tourism Champions". This elite group of product suppliers represent the best Indigenous tourism experiences in Australia.

Early Days

A key motivator for starting Pudukul was Graham and Lynette's desire to create local Indigenous employment opportunities and to share Limilngan-Wulna culture with visitors to the Top End. In 2011, an opportunity became available for the Limilngan-Wulna Land Holding Corporation and the Wairuk Community to sign an agreement with the Northern Territory Government granting management of Windows on the Wetlands Visitor Centre. This opportunity allowed Graham and Lynette to test and develop their business skills and progress towards setting up their own tourism operation.

Graham was employed by Parks and Wildlife NT for many years which contributed to his interest in the tourism sector. This early experience provided the community with a testing ground for business skills. Pudukul started out with 10 Indigenous employees working in key aspects of the business such as tour guiding, land management, equipment maintenance, production of arts and crafts, kiosk sales and general administration.

The early days of the business had challenges despite support programs available through Government agencies. The complexities of operating a business whilst learning business processes and managing a large workload meant that it was difficult to complete all applications for the various support programs and stay on top of all business requirements.

In 2011, Pudukul Aboriginal Cultural Tours moved to independency offering a range of tours. This was a challenging period with limited time to prepare, due to the management commitments of the growing business. During this time of transitioning into an independent entity, Pudukul sought assistance from a number of sources including:

- Tourism NT for a broad range of support relating to the tourism industry
- Tourism NT's Indigenous Mentoring Program to assist with developing a business plan and obtain funding for Auslink Management Consultants services
- Employment and Workplace Relations, now known as the Office of the Commission of Public Employment, to assist with professional development of staff members including training in first aid and additional Chemsart training for the land management team
- Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) who contributed to the business mentorship.

Challenges faced during the commencement periods included the lack of knowledge of support available and ongoing assistance to access the support. To address this issue, Graham suggests that a Northern Territory Aboriginal Tourism Businesses support organisation be developed which would provide vital resources to successfully start up a business and comprehensive ongoing support. He believes that establishing an Aboriginal tourism representative organisation would better assist Aboriginal tourism operators especially in the developing period of the business, and provide continual support. This would in turn give confidence to Aboriginal entrepreneurs to pursue tourism business goals and aspirations. As Pudukul's business expanded into tours, their prime source of income came from Adventure Tours Australia (ATA) under an exclusive agreement which guaranteed ATA would deliver up to three tours a day and gave Pudukul priority over other operators.

ATA was Pudukul's main client for tours during this period. Pudukul's signature product is a 1.5 hour cultural experience.

Consolidation of the Business

Pudukul relies on their business experience and dedicated staff to keep it flourishing. Their business plan clearly defines their vision, mission, sustainable competitive advantage, key objectives and strategies and an action plan to ensure the nominated strategies are implemented. The business plan has seen Pudukul go from strength to strength with positive results as the business is still growing in all aspects.

Pudukul established packaged products at the Adelaide River flood plains; they now offer three tour packages including a jumping crocodile cruise, Corroboree Billabong cruise, with an accompanying cultural experience offering.

Pudukul was initially functioning as a business to business operation, relying on ATA and other group market sources. In their third year of operations, Graham and Lynette decided to tap into the self-drive FIT (Free Independent Travellers) market. This was a market Graham was confident would grow his product in terms of visitor numbers and financial gain, but did not expect it to cultivate as quickly as it did forcing him to turn away visitors to other companies when overbooked at times.

When entering the self-drive and FIT visitor markets, Graham noticed that (based upon his three years' experience operating, particularly in the group market), that Pudukul did not need to promote or market too extensively. Visitors automatically started to book providing even more confidence in their product.

In the first three years Pudukul saw 39,000 visitors and has now provided tours for between 120,000-130,000 visitors since beginning operations.

Pudukul tours average 20-40 visitors per tour in the months May to October. Visitors are 50% international markets and 50% Australian (Domestic) market.

In mid 2016, Tourism Infrastructure Development funding from the NT Government of \$110,000 was granted to improve the physical appearance and infrastructure of Pudukul's operations site. A new deck was constructed in October 2016, along with a generator, power outlets, lights and fans.

In 2017, Pudukul has up to 22 employees, many of whom are part time and come from the Wairuk Community. Graham and Lynette are committed to delivering benefits to their staff and employment opportunities for community members. The groundwork undertaken to ensure the stability of employment arrangements will enable Pudukul to grow and be sustainable in the future.



Pudukul is effectively a "stepping stone" to other employment opportunities. Graham is seen as a strong role model in his community and enables positive engagement with the business. Under Graham's leadership, employees are taught the importance of cultural knowledge to ensure preservation of culture for future generations. Pudukul's employment opportunities ensure critical skills development for the community.

Future Business Development

Graham and Lynette would like to see a dedicated NT organisation for Aboriginal tourism operators. The organisation would assist in developing sustainable and prosperous Aboriginal enterprises. This organisation could support knowledge sharing and business ideas which directly benefit the economic development for communities and encourage partnerships and collaborative promotion of Aboriginal tourism in the NT.

Tarizma and Selina Kenyon (daughters of Lynette and Graham) are guides for Pudukul and are passionate and motivated in growing the business. They also have a strong understanding of the importance of creating the best experiences for visitors to Pudukul. Tarzima has improved her communication skills and expanded her tourism knowledge through travel.

Pudukul's tours are mostly run by young people from Wairuk Community, including Danny Benjer and Shannon Charlie who are passionate and very knowledgeable about their culture and the tourism business. Pudukul is a prime example of an Aboriginal tourism business involving the younger generation to grow with the enterprise to help ensure the longevity of the business.

The important role these young people play in Pudukul's operation is the concept Graham hoped for when starting the business. Wairuk Community and Pudukul sees a bright future working together to ensure a flourishing business and culture.

With a strong tour product after operating for almost nine years, Graham is now focusing on adding other products to expand the business into other markets. Leadership opportunities provided to employees have seen them take over tour guiding responsibilities from Graham, and given him the flexibility to pursue long held aspirations for the business.

Graham's advice for up and coming business entrepreneurs is to be committed and serious about the business before going ahead. It's also important to understand and cater to people from all cultural backgrounds, in Graham's words "No shame job - we all bleed the same blood."

Graham and Lynette believe in staying loyal and maintaining a strong relationship with their business partners and other stakeholders. This is an important aspect that has contributed to the success of their business in providing a high quality product matched with sound business philosophies.

Graham provided an example of how he involves young people in his community -

"Graham's nephew asked if he could buy him a new phone. In response, Graham asked the young boy to work for him for a couple days to provide the young boy with the opportunity to earn it. Upon completion of his experience Graham bought the young man his phone as promised for working for Pudukul. The result was exactly what Graham was looking for; the boy went on for weeks talking about how he got the chance to work with Pudukul and everything he learnt during his experience."



Further Information and Key Contacts:

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- <http://www.pudukul.com.au/> and <https://www.facebook.com/Pudukul-Aboriginal-Cultural-Tours-296398817124896/>
- Pudukul ATAP Accreditation Application