

Alaska Natives Capitalizing on Tourism

Travelers are going out of their way to seek indigenous cultures

Historically, much of Alaska's tourism industry has been found mainly at cruise ship ports, the large cities and the places along the rough-hewn state's spread-out and sparse road system.

One sign of this development can be seen in Hoonah, a Tlingit community of 765 people that had struggled for years following the closing of a cannery in the 1950s and the subsequent decline of the fishing and logging industries.



Icy Strait Point with the historic cannery buildings in the background in Hoonah, Alaska

But experts now say more and more travelers are seeking out Native villages for a chance to experience life with the continent's first peoples. Alaska Natives such as the Tlingit and the Sitka especially are establishing solid foundations in the state's tourism industry, the Associated Press has reported. This trend will be studied in a summer survey by the Alaska Travel Industry Association.

Association president Ron Peck told the AP that travelers come for the beauty of Alaska but are also seeking something "more experiential," thus reflecting a genuine desire to learn about Native cultures.

Things looked bleak until Huna Totem Corp., Hoonah's Native corporation, transformed the old buildings of the cannery, which are a mile and a half from the village, into a cruise ship port.

Icy Strait Point, the name of the tourism complex the Tlingit built, opened in 2004. It has since brought in "hundreds of thousands of visitors, including 123,000 people last year," the AP reported. The site has created 130 seasonal and permanent jobs, most of which have gone to Hoonah residents, which makes Huna Totem Corp. the largest local employer. Last year, Icy Strait Point brought \$3.6 million to

the local economy, which represented 60 percent of the local sales tax revenue. Huna Totem Corp. also funnels some Icy Strait profits into scholarships awarded to Hoonah teens.

Icy Strait Point has restaurants, nearby tram rides, Tlingit heritage performances, fishing excursions, whale watching tours and, for the adventurous, a mile-long zipline with a 1,300-foot vertical drop.

"Heritage and cultural tourism is one of our state's fastest-growing and best economic assets," Camille Ferguson of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska told the *Bristol Bay Times*. Ferguson, the Alaska representative on the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association Board, added, "We are going to help Alaskans learn how to build or expand their businesses using the unique experiences that Alaska offers our visitors."

Travelers heading to Alaska are going out of their way to find off-road villages that lack the cushier accommodations that were once thought of as necessary to all but the most extreme, hard-core travelers. As people increasingly seek to immerse themselves in Native cultures, the message being sent to both the tourism industry and especially to the Native children in these villages is clear: such culture and traditions are valuable and important. A recent overseas conference, the ITB Berlin, reinforced the widespread interest in indigenous American cultures. Germans in particular are fascinated by what Ferguson calls "the real American Indian."

The staggering rugged beauty of Alaska, long a pull for travelers from all over the world, is but one component of what calls vacationers to the state. As more and more tourists and their dollars pour into the Native communities, it becomes more evident that the world sees the Alaska Native community itself as a big part of the 49th state's lure. 🌐