



THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX FOR COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY: A CASE STUDY OF NOMAD LODGES

A. SYNOPSIS

This case study illustrates how working closely with the community, stakeholders and outsiders can foster innovation to develop sustainable tourism projects that truly respect the ways of life of local communities. By keeping an open mind and using a participatory approach and two-way communication, Nomad Lodges (Colombia) have designed a different business model that fully integrates with the customs of the indigenous people that live adjacent to the area where the planned ecolodge is being built.

B. ABOUT NOMAD LODGES: AMAZON PROJECT

Nomad Lodges is an ambitious ecotourism project that envisions the development of a network of luxury ecolodges in South America, built in harmony with the environment. Nomad Lodges Amazonas is the first of the ecolodges; the planning phase started in June 2014 and it is expected to open in March 2018. Nomad Lodges is located in 500,000 hectares in the Colombian Amazon, bordering Brazil and Peru, within the biodiverse territory of the "Aticoya", an Association between the Tikuna, Yagua and Cocama indigenous communities.

The goal of Nomad Lodges is to design a sustainable project that respects and integrates profoundly with the particular ways of life of the indigenous communities they are surrounded by, while offering a high standard of quality and services that meet the guests' expectations.

C. CHALLENGES

Conventional, and often standardised, "western" operating norms which are implemented to deliver high quality service, do not fit in with the indigenous concept of life, work and time. For the Tikuna, Yagua and Cocama communities, life is about reaching a balance with the environment, and therefore, daily activities are adapted to the rhythm of nature, rather than a daily "nine to five" schedule. Fishing, growing crops and working can be influenced by the rain or the moon cycle. Similarly, social activities have a determinant role in the community life. Mingas, for example, are a collective activity where all the families reunite to discuss or work on a specific issue, and can be summoned with only one or two days' notice. Since

participating in Mingas is a priority for community members, work may be postponed to attend or organise these gatherings.

As a result, the major challenge for Nomad Lodges was to find a way to manage the high level of uncertainty and unreliability as well as the availability of mainly unskilled labour within the communities, in order to offer a consistent and high quality service without changing the dynamics of the communities' way of live and rhythm.

D. SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED

Nomad Lodges adopted the following three approaches as key elements to develop a sustainable project that respect the local communities:

Participatory planning and two-way communication with the community from the start

- Before starting the project, Nomad Lodges took extensive time to get an in-depth understanding of the indigenous communities' way of life. For 45 months they sat down with the communities and listened carefully in order to learn and understand their social structures, daily lives and knowledge of the cosmos as a whole.
- The next step was to explain to the communities what Nomad Lodges concept was all about, along with the benefits it could bring to the community and the role that they would play in the success of the project. It was an open two-way communication as Nomad Lodges equally learnt about people's concerns and interests, whilst the communities learnt about the project and increasingly identified with it.
- Then, Nomad Lodges discussed with the communities' specific issues including the operation of the lodge, conservation of the area and the importance of sustainability in general. It required plenty of time and excellent communication to explain environmentally friendly practices, which were new concepts to the communities, but necessary to ensure sustainability. For example, recycling or adequately disposing wastes that did not come from nature, instead of throwing them in the forest as locals would normally do with fruits and vegetables wastes.
- Open and informal communication between Nomad Lodges and the communities has been continuous during the 4 years of planning and development of the project, which has been key to engage with the community and make them part of the whole process.

Creating training as a social activity for the community

- Nomad Lodges worked together with the National Learning Service (SENA) to start a tourism and hospitality training programme for the three surrounding communities, which included trainings on customer service, cooking classes, food hygiene, waste management, English, amongst others.

- Trainings are carried out in a similar way to a Minga, a collective activity where everybody in the community works together. It was important to design trainings as a Minga as they enabled Nomad Lodges to involve all the members of the community in the project, which provided an equal opportunity for all, and not just a few families, to benefit from it. This in turn, avoids jealousy and conflicts amongst the members of the communities and their families. In addition, trainings carried out in form of Mingas facilitated communities' acceptance of the project since it did not require a change in their habits nor imposed a new way of working, further enhancing the integration of the project with the local traditions.
- To organise trainings, Nomad Lodges always have to speak first to the Curaca (Chief) to be able to gather the community and register everyone who is interested in a particular training. Once 50-60 people have registered, Nomad Lodges coordinates with a teacher from the SENA to organise the training.
- To support the training, all three Tikuna, Yagua and Cocama communities are in charge of the food and setting up the classrooms, contributing in some way to the organisation of the sessions. For example, one community would bring vegetables, another fish and another would cook.
- On average, each training lasts for one week. Apart from learning new skills, it also represents an opportunity to spend more time as one community as well as exchanging knowledge between the different communities.
- Nomad Lodges closely monitors the attendance of the training as it is key for them that people show continued interest and commitment by attending every class and completing the trainings. Only those community members who are genuinely interested and have confirmed that interest during the trainings will be hired as they will be more reliable.

Collaborating with outsiders to create a new operating model

- Nomad Lodges worked in collaboration with the young and motivated students from the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne (Switzerland) for 8 weeks in order to find an innovative business model that allowed Nomad Lodges Amazonas to achieve international quality and service standards, while respecting the harmony of the indigenous activities and traditions with nature.
- Nomad Lodges decided to work with students because, unlike CEO's or General Managers, students' ideas are not influenced by previous experiences. Not without acknowledging that feedbacks from experts are valuable and can be used as a point of reference, for Nomad Lodges it was important to have a fresh and relatively unbiased point of view since they wanted to develop a completely new concept.
- The "outside of the box" model that was developed, is based on a flexible organisation with a high level of rotation among staff and management. Since the indigenous people are not used to having long-term jobs, but rather work on a "mission", Nomad

Lodges will assign a person to a specific job for one or two days, after which they will rotate to another person who has the same capacities and acquired the same skills through the training scheme. Similarly, if one community summons a Minga with short notice, Nomad Lodge can quickly replace staff with people from any of the other two communities.

- To ensure the success of the model, extensive training and motivation were identified as key elements to ensure that sufficient qualified staff would be available for rotation without jeopardising the quality of the service Nomad Lodges wants to provide.
- The model also envisions a “puzzle-like” structure for managerial positions. Nomad Lodges aims to retain a General Manager for one year, but is preparing for shorter periods of time as well. After the first 3-4 months, a person will be assigned to assist the General Manager in every managerial aspect. In case the General Manager was to leave, the Assistant should have acquired sufficient knowledge of the operation in order to replace the former Manager or to train a new one.
- In addition, for Managerial positions, Nomad Lodges will seek out outstanding young hospitality professionals from abroad, who are motivated, open minded, capable of understanding and adapting to a continuously changing environment, and who are happy to live in remote areas. Motivation and a desire for a unique experience are the key elements that Nomad Lodges will seek in its future Managers. These same values and motivations will be essential for the General Manager and Chef, although they will need to have more years of experience. Local people will have the opportunity to land managerial positions if they wish to do so in the long-term.
- Nomad Lodges will continue its collaboration with the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne (Switzerland) by incorporating students aged between 22 and 24 years, as trainees into the Lodge for a period of 3 – 6 months, and graduates, who are on average over 24 years, will be considered for managerial positions.

E. IMPACTS

POSITIVE

- Preserves local traditions and cultures by respecting their ways of living and habits.
- Increases employment and revenues for local communities helping them become economically independent. The high rotation and equal opportunities to participate in the project results in more jobs and equal benefits for all the members. [*Highlight: 340 – 360 people trained to date.*]
- Empowers communities to defend and protect their land from external pressures to extract natural resources in unsustainable ways by reducing dependence on subsidies and hence, becoming less prone to manipulation. Also, increasing awareness amongst the communities of the value of the natural and cultural heritage for the tourism business, empowers communities to conserve their territories and traditions for the next generation.

- Increased awareness of illegal activities on the land owned by the communities.
- Increased motivation amongst local teenagers to stay in the region.
- Foster good relations between different indigenous communities, which can increase collaboration and governance over the territory.
- High community engagement and strong relationships with local communities increases the probability of business success and sustainability in the long term.

DOWNSIDES

- Developing an innovative and sustainable project has been a long process which required higher time and money investments compared to other conventional projects. It has taken Nomad Lodges Amazonas more than 4 years of planning and more than 2 years of on-going trainings; however, this has been necessary in order to achieve a well-thought through and sustainable project.
- Difficulties securing funding as South America is considered very risky in terms of investment.

F. LESSONS LEARNED

- Innovative ways of doing business must be designed to respect and align with the local customs and traditions, instead of imposing conventional or standardised ways of operating. Communities' wellbeing is the priority.
- Interdisciplinary work is crucial for innovation. Asking, listening and co-creating with all stakeholders (e.g. local communities, public institutions and tourists) as well as with people that are not necessarily part of the project (e.g. students and professionals from other industries), is highly advisable to achieve innovative and efficient solutions that can support businesses reach new and unexpected directions.
- Community engagement is essential to meet social and business sustainability goals. It is key to be open minded to ideas and suggestions, and address concerns of the communities from the beginning of any project and throughout its development, in order to continuously adapt, innovate and improve, creating a mutually beneficial business.
- High community engagement can be achieved by:
 - a) Having adequate communication and consultation;
 - b) Putting in place participatory planning mechanisms that are accessible to the local communities and within the local context;
 - c) Educating, not only the community to develop the skills needed for the business, but also the project developers, who should learn from local knowledge and lifestyle;

- d) Involving all members of the communities in the decision making and development of activities;
 - e) Collaborating with each other;
 - f) As a backbone of all of the above, respecting the communities in every way.
- Building strong relationships and strong communication channels with the local communities requires openness, transparency and respect for their ancestral knowledge, customs and opinions.
 - Mechanisms of communication must be selected and implemented according to the context of local communities.
 - Networking across the members of The Long Run inspires and help building solutions. However, every member should also reflect on the 4Cs with people from outside of the tourism network. This will allow them to use and bring in new knowledge to continuously develop the business and find new creative solutions.
 - Being a pioneer in the implementation of a new concept or business model requires a lot of work, time and effort. It is a learning process where mistakes are made and many difficulties are faced along the way. However, those experiences are a fundamental part to build-up new knowledge that supports a better planning and implementation of the project, and that will facilitate the development of future similar projects. Nomad Lodges, started exploring alternative ways of functioning after trying to work futilely in a conventional way with lawyers, engineers, architects and politicians who didn't understand the project.

{Highlight}: "There is always a way, there is always a solution", Pierre-A. Kruger

Tags:

Region	South America, Colombia, Amazon
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4C	Community