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*Session : "Destination marketing, appeal, adapt or sell?"*

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Thank you very much for inviting the "Grands Sites de France Network". This session asks the following question : *"Destination marketing, appeal, adapt or sell ?"*.

Our experience is : first and mainly "appeal", do not "adapt" too much, and "sell" will come naturally.

Let me explain why.

### **What are the "Grands Sites de France"?**

France is known all over the world for its natural and cultural heritage. Not only for a marvellous collection of monuments and museums, which are tourism hot spots, but also **for a diversity of large preserved landscapes** in which every tourist **can have a specific experience of beauty and authenticity**.

"Grands Sites de France" are rural **cultural landscapes, protected for their high quality** and for their natural and cultural values. They are very famous and **very attractive for tourism**. Visitors come there, not attracted by something to buy, but first for their outstanding beauty, which is a non-commercial value. This beauty **is a common heritage AND is the capital of tourism economy**. But when people come and stay because of the interest of heritage, of the contact with people living there, and the experience they can live there, **they spend time and therefore money for commercial goods and services**.

You can see on the slides, some of the forty (40) member sites of the "Grands Sites de France Network", visited annually by thirty-two (32) million visitors.

For example :

- The Gorges du Gardon site, including le Pont du Gard (a World Heritage Site) built by Romans 2000 years ago to bridge the river Gardon,
- Or The Montagne Sainte Victoire, in Provence, painted 80 times by Paul Cezanne known as being the father of modern painting.

The "Grand Sites de France" are **more** than places of outstanding beauty and immense value, they are more than just the monument or protected area in their centre. They are territories where people live and work, they comprise fields, pastures, economic activities etc. and of course intangible components.

**Heritage Sites cannot be apprehended only as destinations for tourists, managed only by tourism professionals, which may create an artificial attraction.** They are living spaces. So, the fact that populations and local authorities are taking part in the "Grands Sites de France programme" is essential, for it brings better understanding and pride to the inhabitants, better preservation and a better foundation for sustainable development. This approach benefits to tourism as well, since tourists are more and more looking for **authenticity**.

This lesson has been learned the hard way, after the nineteen-seventies (1970s'), a period where uncontrolled tourism growth in France had negative impact on the environment in these attractive areas : invasion of cars and buses, undesirable levels of crowding disrupting site's atmosphere (genius loci), obtrusive shops becoming the same wherever you went, local residents depending only on tourism or, on the contrary, residents who objected to the influx of tourists. In short, many heritage sites were victims of their own success, and were becoming "tourist traps".

A lot of efforts and public money have been put into restoring these sites and developing services that correspond to the twenty-first (21<sup>st</sup>) century visitors who aspire to authenticity and preserved environment.

Studies carried out with our public show that more and more, visitors do not appreciate being drowned in a crowd, preferring to be treated in a more personalized manner. Mass tourism is not the way to go. Visitors want human contact, they want to eat local food and buy local products (pottery, carved wood, local stories, etc.). What comes up is : "Don't over-develop these sites!", "Don't turn these sites into tourism attraction parks!". Public is attached to the notion of heritage as a common asset with a local anchorage which should not be turned into business.

In a "Grand Site de France", visitors are looking for a new, interesting and enriching experience, something unfamiliar and in a way overpowering by its

beauty and identity, but also relaxing and shareable with friends and family. Heritage sites are important places for value transmission from elders to younger generations. Therefore, information about the values of the site and services, must be accessible and adapted to all.

### **What about the economic point of view ?**

Tourism in the "Grands Sites de France Network" is an important source of local economic development.

A significant point is that heritage sites' impacts on local economy are important **but indirect**. This has to be explained to partners and investors who think in terms of immediate return on investment, profitability and direct economic impact. Short-term economic profitability should never be a site manager's first aim.

The impact is indirect and will be attained only through a long-term vision and a management in a framework of sustainable development.

### **In conclusion**

I would like to say that, based on our experience, management of heritage sites as a tourism destination, needs to be regulated by a local body representing long term vision and common interest, in co-operation with all stakeholders (public authorities, businesses, tourism sector, scientists, etc...) and also of course the inhabitants.

The challenge is to combine good public policies with private involvement around shared values. Finally the main objective of a "Grand Site de France" is that there is no dissonance between the promoted image and the reality people experience on the site.

Thank you very much for your attention.

*THIBAULT, Jean-Pierre (ed.). Petit traité des Grands Sites – Réfléchir et agir sur les hauts lieux de notre patrimoine. Arles: Actes Sud, 2009. 222 p. ISBN 978-2-7427-8062-4.*

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