



COURTESY OF ANNE GODBOUT (8)

An agency with a different touch

Spiritours

BY MARIA DALGARNO AND TOM SHERRARD

THE WORST SEEMS TO BE OVER FOR the beleaguered international travel industry. Things are finally looking up, and travelers are in search of interesting alternatives. One tour operator—Spiritours—has added a unique dimension to visiting other lands. Based in Montreal, Canada, Spiritours offers travelers an opportunity to focus on the spiritual dimension of life, a chance to stop, reflect and refresh themselves on their journey through encounters with other cultures.

Anne Godbout, the founder of Spiritours, has always loved to travel and only recently understood its haunting call. She had decided to take a one-year sabbatical from her previous job to travel around the world, when she met several members of

the Focolare Movement. “Their spirituality of unity attracted me,” she says, “and I really wanted to learn more about it and experience it in the Focolare’s little cities around the world.” She visited the one in Kenya, Mariapolis Piero near Nairobi, and there experienced a warmth and friendship “that moved me to tears.” She continues: “It was there that I experienced in a new way the great love of God for me; I could respond to that love by seeing him in others and by offering even the smallest actions out of love for him.”

When she heard about Focolare founder Chiara Lubich’s proposal for a new “Economy of Communion in Freedom” (see page 31), she took up the invitation to develop a profitable business that could contribute to eradicating poverty and creating a culture of giving. “This way of doing business,” she explains, “seemed

to me a practical way of helping the needy and of putting my talents at the service of others.”

At the end of her year-long journey, Godbout returned to Quebec and decided to start a travel business based on these objectives. After 10 years in the travel industry, she had both the skills and the passion to launch her idea for a business in which human and spiritual development would be facilitated. With great enthusiasm she began Spiritours by printing 1,000 flyers advertising the tours she would organize and thought this would be enough to get the phone ringing. “What an illusion!” she recalls. “The flyers brought in no business at all!”

“Then I spotted a notice that a lecture was being given on ‘Tours of the Abbeys of Europe.’ Not only was it one of the best lectures I had ever heard, but I recruited the lecturer to become one of the guides for Spiritours, and the tour of the Monasteries of France was created.” The group sponsoring the lecture offered to include the Spiritours brochure in their publicity materials, and the first bookings began to pour in.



The savannahs of Kenya and the Holy Land are among the destinations offered by Spiritours. Opposite page: Anne Godbout (front row, center) and other travelers with children and villagers during a tour of Kenya

Things started falling into place: events and circumstances seemed to indicate she was on the right track and Divine Providence was at work. Many other organizations contracted with her agency to coordinate their group travel arrangements, and her profits increased. “Last year,” she continued, “several Catholic dioceses asked me to help with the organization of the trips to the World Youth Day in Cologne.” This important contract allowed Godbout to clear her start-up debts and share a portion of her profits with the needy who are part of the Economy of Communion.

“Our tours welcome everyone, no matter what their religious belief. Most of my clients are between 35 and 65 years of age and are looking for something meaningful in their lives. Some clients have confided to me that during a tour with us they became reconciled with the Church through their meeting with vibrant communities of persons actively living out their faith.”

This philosophy of service extends beyond her clients to her employees, whom Godbout strives to treat very fairly and to her contractors, whom she respects and pays on time. It also extends to her competitors, to whom she often refers clients who want to travel to destinations that she doesn’t serve. She is also keenly



aware of the reciprocal relationships with her tours’ host countries: the mutual enrichment for the travelers as well as the country’s local economy and sustainable development.

“When I am traveling, I find that contact with nature has an important part to play. In our spiritual safari to Kenya for example, I suggest game drives and walks in silence as nature invites contemplation. I have experienced that through creation one can be in communion with the Creator.”

“A soulful journey will enable you to get the relaxation and distance from your daily life in order to reconnect with your inner self,” says the brochure for Spiritours offering an invitation to live the words in the Gospel of Mark, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (6:31). 

For more information about Spiritours, e-mail spiritours@sympatico.ca or visit www.spiritours.com. See ad on page 2.

Ecotourism and Spiritual Traveling

A CHARACTERISTIC OF ALL SPIRITOURS excursions is that they subscribe to the beliefs of ecotourism and equitable tourism. The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” Before departure, Godbout hands out a pamphlet to all Spiritours participants that outlines the rules of ecotourism, namely to respect local culture, minimize the impact of the travelers’ stay and encourage positive interactions that benefit both parties.

Once there, the tour leaders sensitize partakers to their new environment as they visit national parks, deserts, mountains and so on. “We call attention to the importance of respecting the environment, by not dropping litter, stepping on corals in the ocean or taking things away from national parks,” says Godbout.

Tourism, according to Godbout, should provide the grounds for a meeting of two cultures, a stimulating interaction between people of diverse backgrounds, as opposed to being an economic exchange. “We have made tourism into a commodity. Now we’re trying to reinstate its *raison d’être*.” Spiritours trips encourage cultural exchanges that benefit both the tourists and the locals. Moreover, participants occupy hotels booked by local tour operators. They ensure that all services chosen are locally owned—from hotels, tour operators and restaurants to transportation—in order to stimulate local economy and the community’s sustainable development.

—From “Beyond Resorts” by Michael-Oliver Harding, published in *Siafu* magazine