

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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International Nature Tourism Workshop The tourism potential of birdwatching 14 November 2008

Presentation by Chris Durdin, Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays is perhaps not a typical company running birdwatching holidays. This may be a disadvantage for some at this workshop. However there are three things about Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays which makes the company unusual and, I hope may offer extra insights that will be valuable to us here today.

Firstly, Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays runs holidays that are based on mixed natural history: flowers, butterflies, whatever the special nature of an area may be. Sure, birds are an important element of the mix.

Secondly, as well as being Honeyguide's proprietor, I have worked for the RSPB for more than 30 years. That will end soon as after December I will be full-time running Honeyguide.

Thirdly, all our holidays include a conservation contribution to a local conservation project as part of the holiday price. For example, this goes to SPEA for our Algarve holiday, SEO for our Extremadura holiday and the Frieira Conservation Project – protecting the rare Zino's petrel – in Madeira. This year this is £35 per person – about €45. This goes through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, and being a charity means we can claim back extra tax from the UK Government, an additional £28 for every £100 we raise from holiday participants.

This donation with every holiday has raised more than £50,000 since Honeyguide started in 1991. Wildlife conservation matters to the company, to the participants, the leaders – and to our local hosts and partners.

So I am here because we have this link with SPEA, because we have holidays in Algarve and Madeira and in Spain.

So, what makes a good holiday destination for us? Is it rare birds, good hotels, or what?

For us, it boils down to two essentials. Places and people. I'll come back to people later, and start with places.

Places

Look at a selection of wildlife holiday brochures, and lots of names of places feature in many. You could name them. These places have established a personality. Their 'Unique Selling Points' are known. People in the UK can imagine something of the place and the wildlife in, for example, Extremadura, Coto Doñana, the Spanish Pyrenees.

Is this true for anywhere in mainland Portugal? Much less so, I think.

But that doesn't mean that there isn't potential. Every place has a personality, it's own unique combination of features. These elements may include nature, culture, history, buildings, food, conservation issues – some or all of these may appeal to the discerning traveller. Think of this traveller not as the birdwatcher who travels everywhere with a telescope but rather as the typical RSPB member feeding their garden birds and that may help you.

From where I sit in Norwich, England, I need people on the ground to tell me what that place's personality is. Potentially, we can develop it together.

Several years ago, to help me develop new holiday destinations, I asked Honeyguiders – travellers with Honeyguide – where they would like to go. One suggested Extremadura and the marshes in Poland. Why there, I asked? Because, he admitted, he had read about them in other brochures!

So groups can help to get a new area 'on the map'. To help make a place become somewhere that people would like to visit. Honeyguiders trust me that if I put a new place in the programme, it's worth visiting.

So tour operators like Honeyguide can help to establish a destination as somewhere worth visiting – which may then have a wider appeal for the independent traveller.

But if you wish to get your special area 'on the map', this is only one way to do it. Other ways include:

- Books – like the Crossbill guide to Extremadura www.crossbillguides.org/?view=guides/extremadura/Extremadura
- Magazine articles – here's one about the Danube Delta
- Talks
- Photos
- Literature – here's an example from Extremadura
- Stands at places like the British Birdwatching Fair www.birdfair.org.uk

A question. Has anyone heard of the Greek island of Lesvos for wildlife holidays?

I'll tell you why you've heard of it. Several years ago, a guy called Richard Brooks www.richard-brooks.co.uk who, like me, comes from Norfolk, England, discovered great birdwatching on Lesvos. Richard is not a natural salesman. But he wrote articles, illustrated with his own photos, did countless talks, offered people advice on how to get there and where to go on Lesvos, and published a book about the island.

Groups started going there. A momentum started. It's now well-established as a birdwatching destination.

There is another point about Lesvos. There is much to see on the island, but the biggest draw is a wetland at a place called Skala Kalloni. Wetlands and wetland birds are great attractions for UK birdwatchers. I expect you know that.

This is as relevant to Portugal as anywhere. I have been following, with much concern, the problems at the Lagoa dos Salgados near Pera in Algarve. Jose for the RSPB and SPEA have been much involved. In my opinion, this is the single best birdwatching site in Algarve – it's certainly my favourite. If the Lagoa dos Salgados is destroyed or seriously damaged, Honeyguide will stop running holidays in Algarve. I fear this will carry little weight compared with ordinary tourism in Algarve, not least the crazy demand for golf.

People

I said at the start that people are as important as places. People, like Richard Brooks on Lesvos, can make a destination well known.

All Honeyguide wildlife holidays are based around key people. Let me give you two examples.

Our Algarve holiday started because an English couple, Brian and Eileen Anderson know Algarve and its wildlife well and proposed it as a holiday destination. We are based at the Hotel Belavista in Praia da Luz www.belavistadaluz.com. This is run by an Englishman, Deric Brown, with his Portuguese business partner. Deric combines great personal warmth and hospitality with a huge enthusiasm for birdwatching and for other wildlife. You can imagine how all this helps me.

Our holiday in Madeira is run with Madeira Wind Birds www.madeirabirds.com. I first met Catarina Fagundes and Hugo Romano at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water. Every tour operator has a slightly different character. They grasped immediately how Honeyguide works. They proposed a hotel away from busy Funchal. They took me round the island on a reccy visit. They have the local knowledge that is so valuable; enthusiasm and knowledge about wildlife, a passion for conservation, and they know how deal with people – our customers. It's a winning combination.

So I like working with local people. But I hear – correct me if this is wrong – that there are rules that, strictly speaking, allow mean guides in Portugal have to be licensed, which makes it impractical for foreign guides to lead a wildlife holiday. I am pleased to used local leaders if they are good - like Madeira Wind Birds - as they offer so many advantages.

But these are few and far between. Sometimes a UK-based leader is the best leader for a group of British naturalists. Sometimes, I find, local expertise at the right standard does not exist. If restrictive rules are enforced, then some group holidays simply won't run, and where's the sense in that?

People and places

Some of our most longstanding, regular venues in the Honeyguide programme are when people and places combine perfectly.

Henri at the beautiful Finca Santa Marta in Extremadura www.fincasantamartacom; Shaun at Matchani Gran on Menorca www.menorcacountryhouse.com. Both are small venues that typically one of our groups takes over for the week. Personality, hospitality, good food and wildlife close to home. It's fun, it's easy for me, and it's profitable.

So what am I looking for in a holiday destination?

1. Ideally we like one place to call home for a week or maybe a little more. Small, community-based accommodation is ideal. Locally owned is greenest, of course. If need be, we will use a medium-sized hotel if the location is right and we like the people.
2. Wildlife close to home. The opportunity to go birdwatching before breakfast, or quietly pottering at other times. Somewhere where the first day's itinerary is on foot is ideal, failing that not far to travel.
3. We like a varied itinerary without too much travelling.
4. Some very special wildlife – whatever the area's 'Unique Selling Points' may be.
5. Good food, preferably locally sourced, and wine.
6. Rooms must have en suite facilities – never dormitories. But we aren't interested in fancy equipment like televisions and trouser presses.
7. Hospitality, charm, eccentricity – and preferably English spoken.

How to make nature tourism a winner

I am sure everyone in this room is in favour of nature tourism, eco-tourism, green tourism, slow tourism – whatever you may choose to call it.

There are many studies to show how local economies benefit from nature tourism. Jose Tavares from the RSPB has mentioned several. Here are two more I was involved with, wearing my RSPB hat:

- 'Valuing Norfolk's Coast' http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Valuing_norfolks_coast_tcm9-203973.pdf
- 'Environmental Prosperity: business and the environment in Eastern England' http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/eangliaecon_tcm9-203972.pdf

[See also Conservation Works http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/conservationworks_tcm9-132933.pdf
http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/conservationworkssumm_tcm9-132934.pdf
http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Reserves%20and%20Local%20Economies_tcm9-133069.pdf]

Do studies like these exist in Portugal? If they do, shout about them. If they don't, organise them.

There are other ways to make nature tourism punch above its weight.

For example, our Algarve holidays makes a donation to SPEA. SPEA's man in Algarve – twice Filipe Jorge, once João Ministro – comes to meet the group and to collect the cheque. Publicity about this has appeared in SPEA's newsletter, SPEA's website www.spea.pt/IBA/ibas/31.html and, most valuably, in *Barlavento* newspaper in Algarve www.barlavento.online.pt/index.php/noticia?id=5645&tnid=3.

Here's another example. People often care about a place they have visited. Honeyguide has an e-newsletter and we pass on news about places in Honeyguide's programme. Last month, this was about a potentially damaging proposal for a solar thermal generation plant in Extremadura. Through this route, Honeyguiders can be motivated to sign petitions, or to write emails or letters to help safeguard special places.

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When I was at school, I was taught that Portugal is 'Britain's oldest ally.' Yet UK naturalists are much more likely to go to France, Spain or Greece. Perhaps this conference will be a small step towards changing that.

Chris Durdin
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