

A METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING THEME TOURS

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Overview

Traditionally, a cave tour typically has involved examining a particular cave and discussing a combination of factors associated with that cave including geology, history and cave fantasy. Normally what is discussed is often specific to that particular cave. This has meant that the variety of tours on offer is limited to the number of caves developed for inspection. The introduction of a themed tour where the principal attraction is the subject matter and not the cave opens up the possibility for a greater range of tours without having to incur additional development works. This article does not purport to be a definitive reference on methodologies for developing a theme tour, but rather a series of discussion points which could be used in workshopping a new tour. In looking at a methodology reference will be made to the *Jenolan Ghost Tour* which has been in place since early 1997.

Introduction

So, you're just about to introduce a theme tour - where to start? Up till now your tours have virtually shown themselves. A previous generation gave names to sections of the caves and you have a rich history to impart. You talk about geology and show your enthusiasm for caves and before know it the tour is over. Suddenly, that comfort zone has been stolen from you as you discover much of that material is no longer relevant to your theme, so what do you do to try and deliver a tour that will impress your guests?

The best place to start is at the beginning, so let's start with what the theme is. Don't make life hard by choosing a theme that is irrelevant to your area. The *Ghost Tour* works at Jenolan because irrespective of whether you believe in ghosts or not, there are plenty of stories that are part of the Jenolan culture. There is a basis on which to work. In contrast, the author was contacted a few years ago by one area asking to "borrow" some Jenolan ghost stories because they didn't have any. What do you end up with when you do this? A shallow tour that goes nowhere. You spend all your time just trying to get some subject matter together. In the end you'll be frustrated and so will your staff. So work on something that means something to your area. I understand that the area concerned now has a successful history tour, because they realized that

they had their own interesting past on which to base a tour.

Of course it doesn't matter how relevant your tour is, or how inspired the content. If you can't market it and sell tickets you might as well give up before you start. Tour names count and they count big. Hang out a sign saying *ghost tour* and you have people already forming concepts in their minds as to what the tour is like. Before you know it, you've just sold out your tour. Just look at some of the popular cave names that sell. The *River Cave* at Jenolan attracts because people because it conjures up images of vast underground streams. At the same time, long descriptive names may sound good but they just don't necessarily attract attention. Be imaginative. You can always display a description of the tour so that people aren't misled, but if you don't get their attention to start with, you've lost it.

Setting Goals

Now we've got our tour moving, it helps to know what you want to achieve. Some people delude themselves into thinking that the title tells it all. There are some broad statements that can be made for most tours, such as trying to entertain and to inform. Your tour may also have specific goals as well. In the case of the *ghost tour*, we want them to feel a certain way. We do not want people scared witless, but you'd have a lot of disappointed people if through the course of the tour they didn't feel a chill up their spine. In setting your goals it may also help to think about who will probably buy tickets. In the case of the *ghost tour*, it's run at 8.00pm on a Saturday. Given the time its quite likely that the participants will have had dinner and it is not unreasonable to expect they have had a bit to drink beforehand. Therefore, lots of steps may not be the best idea.

Goals are important to set because without them you have no guide as to how your tour will develop. If you don't set yourself a target you will never know if you hit it. It's possible that as the tour develops you see a need to change the goals. However, do not change too freely otherwise all your tours can tend to end up being the same. One particular personal goal is that in showing the *ghost tour* it should be possible for guests to have gone through the same cave earlier in the day and yet after the second tour leave almost believing that they had been through two different caves.

Developing Content

It is assumed you have taken the advice to develop a tour that has relevance to your cave system. Now is when this makes a difference. Content can present itself in a variety of ways. Start by talking to fellow members of staff. Swap ideas over coffee or in the cave. You're not just getting ideas here, you are also starting to train your staff. An idea thrust upon staff is bound to experience resistance - this is new and this is the time misconceptions can be headed off. Talk to outside groups as well. Local residents and interest groups are good sources of ideas and content. Don't forget that you also have an obligation to try and get it right. Repeat a falsehood long enough and it will become fact.

About this time you should also be working out where you are going to take your guests. The content needs to match up with the location, although many people mistake this for meaning that the content must refer to the location. In the *ghost tour*, a particular location may simply provide a suitable atmosphere for relating a story.

When you collect the content, write it down. Certainly you might be able to commit it to memory, but you will eventually want to document the tour for training purposes. Maybe you want to produce literature to go with the tour. If you have words typed down you save yourself an onerous task later on.

Be Innovative

You have a brain, so use it. Tours do not have to be just walk and talk. You want a tour that people will remember. It gives you satisfaction plus it doesn't hurt from a marketing perspective. Look at your theme and see what images it brings to mind. Can you develop those images into something slightly different? Are there any tricks you know that can be developed. Some time ago I had noticed an interesting optical effect in the *Imperial Cave* streamway. An eddy at one end of the chamber caused dust to collect in just one area so that when a torch was shone through the interface of water with dust and clear water, what appeared to be a string line appeared on the bottom of the creek. This became the legendary "*ghost piece of string*". By itself it was not too exciting, but tied into the ghost theme and coupled with a technical discussion of how it happened to be there - before you know it we had a feature of the tour!

It is also important to try and think laterally. Is a *ghost tour* about ghosts or is it something more? Ghosts have to do with people who died, don't they? People who have died must be part of the areas past. Therefore, we are talking about the area's

history. Ghosts are scary too so this must be more than just stories, it's also about feelings. Let's tap into feelings by turning the lights out and let people realize that primordial fear of the dark. It is natural to be skeptical about ghosts, so a few personal anecdotes never go astray. Don't make them up though as you will be caught out.

Time to Trial

You've now got a good deal of your tour worked out and it's about time to give it a try. Before you commit yourself to the first public run, revise it. Consider once again the subject matter and where you will do what. Don't go into the tour with only just enough material. When the *ghost tour* started, a two hour tour was filled with about six stories.

Your guests have bought tickets for a theme so that is what they expect. If you bought tickets to see a movie and then got shown shorts for it and then a different movie was screened, you'd expect a refund. That is exactly what you are doing if you run a *theme tour* which is only a thinly disguised existing tour.

Take the tour and watch your group. Notice where do you get a good response and where you lose their attention. Can you figure out why they are reacting the way they are? Is it because they're not the audience you expected? Is your lack of preparation starting to show or are you so well versed in the subject you're turning this into an endurance event? At the end, talk to your guests candidly. Explain that they had the privilege of being on the first of these tours and you are interested in their input. Take note of what they have to offer. These people are a useful resource and they will help you to develop the tour.

Final Product

There is no such thing! You will never have a final product, a better description is a mature tour. By now you should have documented not just the content but also how to show the tour. If you don't document it then suddenly your quality control is lost. Not only that but you are leaving yourself vulnerable in the event of legal action. If you have sanctioned a particular tour without really knowing what its details are, then management may end up looking very silly. A theme tour has the potential to go off at a tangent to a standard tour. Without proper direction dangerous practices may start to be introduced. If your staff have poor direction as to what this tour is about they will start to develop their own interpretation which may no longer be what you had intended. Even if the tour is "safe", how do you market a tour that changes dramatically from day to day?

Quality control is not just something that factories need to worry about. Consult a management text and you will learn quality is **delivering to the customer what they expect**. If you promise one thing but deliver something else there is no other way to look upon it - you've failed. You need to know what your customer expects and be assured

that is what they will get. That means checking right the way along that each time the guest receives information about the tour it is consistent with what they will experience. Advertising, notices, ticket staff, guiding staff - they must all agree on what the tour is about. Once you've got that, you've got yourself a theme tour.