

NATCHEZ ON THE WATERFRONT

NAUTICAL TOURISM – GREAT FOR THE BOATER – AND A REVENUE CENTER CARD

Boaters by their very nature are adventurous and, as such, like to go places. Destinations make boating more interesting, whether it be for a couple of hours, a few days or for longer and more adventurous times. This desire to leave one's backyard and go to another location is, in fact, nautical tourism. Nautical tourism can range from one leaving their home port and traveling to a nearby destination or spending days or weeks exploring the seas and the various locations along the way. It also includes one flying to an embarkation port, boarding a boat (charter or other) and exploring that corner of the world.

More and more facilities are seeking to make themselves a point of destination or a destination along the routes of the various nautical navigational highways.

No different than the RV industry, recreational boating is offering the ability for people in boats to use the nautical highways to explore and enjoy the waters as well as the various harbors, communities and geographic areas. Part of that ability no doubt has come from improvements in technology, particularly the technology that one is able to bring on board – greatly improving navigation capabilities, weather tracking and ways of keeping connected to the land based world. Of course there are those who warn that we are becoming too dependent on such “gadgets” and that many of the fundamentals of good seamanship are not being learned. But there can be no denying that the increased power of those gadgets is emboldening many a boater to become more adventurous than they otherwise might have been. There is also no denying that the Internet is allowing more boaters to find out more about places they might go and ways to get there than ever before.

There is more to becoming a point of destination than just posting a sign at the entrance to the facility or setting up a web page (though both very important considerations). Having a meaningful point of destination starts with a mindset to want to attract nautical tourists and provide a reason for the boater to stop at the facility. It has to be with a friendly and inviting atmosphere that has to pervade throughout the entire facility, including not only all of the employees, but a welcoming good neighbor approach of one's regular customers.

Boaters by their very nature are a friendly and helpful group. By and large, boaters identify with each other and generally are willing to go out of their way to lend a helping hand to a visiting boater. Building upon this inherent nature of boaters, facilities have to provide meaningful accoutrements to make their facilities more appealing to the traveling boater. They can range from simplistic to more encompassing. Inviting restrooms with showers and laundry facilities are at the top of the list as well as adequate shore power, water and internet connections. Other types of additions can range from a welcome kit

(that can include such things as maps, information on points of interest, names and locations of restaurants, movie theaters, parks, hiking trails, shopping areas, etc.), bikes, taxi access, rental cars, swimming pool, tennis court, volleyball areas, food provisioning, restaurants and mail/messenger services - etc.

Some enterprising facility operators create maps of their community with various restaurants, banks and other points of interest and sell advertising space to the different restaurants and shops, not only recouping the cost of the welcome kits but also actually contributing a revenue stream to the facility. Some shops provide a coupon for a discount on purchases, while others provide different incentives for patronage, including small giveaways such as visors, key rings, etc.

Neither the size nor the complexity of the facilities are of themselves the only or major incentives for boaters to stop at a facility. It is an attitude and the fulfilling of the needs and expectations of your specific market. The types of facilities might be different from heavily traveled boating areas within the US to that of the Virgin Islands to that of the Turkish coast to that of areas within the Asian theater.

There are many similarities of enhancing the hospitality experience and meeting or hopefully exceeding the expectations of the visiting boater. Offering reservations similar to the hotel industry allows the boater to enjoy the cruise to the harbor as opposed to making a mad scramble before all the spaces are taken. Having the boat met, first over the radio with simple and meaningful directions, then by either a guide boat or by dock hands at the dock is always a desired and most welcomed approach. Providing meaningful concierge service is also most welcomed. Finding out what the customers' needs, desires and wants are and helping to achieve them earns high points and becomes the talk of the boating circuit. Being greeted in the morning with the morning newspapers, maybe even a fresh croissant or bagel, has always been more than an eye opener. Some facilities even provide fresh flowers every morning to their overnight guests.

So why should facilities consider trying to attract these customers? Simple, it can be a meaningful revenue stream. For the areas that are exotic points of destination – it is their lifeblood. For those on the path of the nautical highway, it is found money that can be more than enriching.

Some point of destination facilities, particularly for the large mega and super yacht boats, are finding that they are able to make long term agreements for the leasing, and in some cases, sale of the slips. Today 10 year leases have been attracting between US\$500,000 to US\$1,000,000+ in various prime locations around the world. Sometimes the megayacht owner allows the slip to be rented out when not in use, and has the marina take a management fee for managing the slip. Such approaches (while limited) do allow for significant funding of the cost of construction of such facilities.

For facilities that have a large domestic home base fleet, they may be in the position that they are 100% sold out. In others, they may not be 100% sold out. In both cases, what

nautical tourism provides is a revenue stream to the facility. Most facilities where there are other places to go within reasonable travel time distances have patrons, particularly during the peak boating season, who leave for anywhere from a day to a week to a month or more. That allows space within the facility to accommodate other transients. This provides additional revenue without much work and certainly limited additional costs.

Some home based non tourist oriented facilities have been apprehensive about encouraging their patrons to leave their facility and go spend their money at someone else's marina. To those folks I would suggest that the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks – and more than likely the person who regularly leaves your facility will spend more than the average stay-at-homer: the traveler will spend more provisioning the boat and being sure it's in good condition, will be more enthusiastic about boating and spend more time on the boat, will bring more people along and encourage others to get into boating, and will spend a fair amount of time at your bar telling tales big and small of adventures near and far; not to mention that more than likely you can rent out the traveling boater's already paid for slip to another traveler. To those who insist they can only be a home base facility because of x, y and z, my suggestion is to take another look at your facility and its place in the world. Chances are you will find something that's attractive to someone, and you may not just be a nice place to live, but a nice place to visit as well.

Many less exotic and more traditionally located marinas are starting to cater to a particular niche in their local markets whether it be fishing, power boat racing, sailing regattas or other. Each of these attracts additional visitors, all willing to enhance the facilities' revenue streams when their needs and expectations are met or exceeded.

The boating traveler is seeking to limit their hassles, find friendly and meaningful atmospheres to stay in and, when that mechanical problem arises, quality service to correct the problem.

Numerous (but as of yet, unfortunately, not all) municipalities throughout the world are learning that nautical tourism has meaningful economic impacts upon the local communities and are now actively seeking more nautical tourism. In many areas municipalities are actually working with marinas to allow increased expansion and enhancements along with other ways of attracting the nautical tourist dollar.

Marinas are well advised to get together with their local governments, discuss the economic impacts and partner in finding ways to enhance nautical tourism for the benefit of all.

Happy touring.

Dan Natchez is President of DANIEL S. NATCHEZ and ASSOCIATES, Inc., a leading International Environmental Waterfront Design Consulting Company specializing in the design of marinas and marina resorts throughout the world. Your comments and inquiries are invited by phone at 1-914-698-5678, by FAX at 1-914-698-7321, by e-mail at dan.n@dsnainc.com or on the Web at www.dsnainc.com.