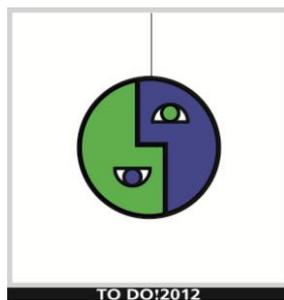


TO DO! 2012

Contest Socially Responsible Tourism



Award Winner

THE BLUE YONDER – RIVER NILA

Represented by:

Gopinath Parayil, Founder and Manager,

The Blue Yonder

Kerala

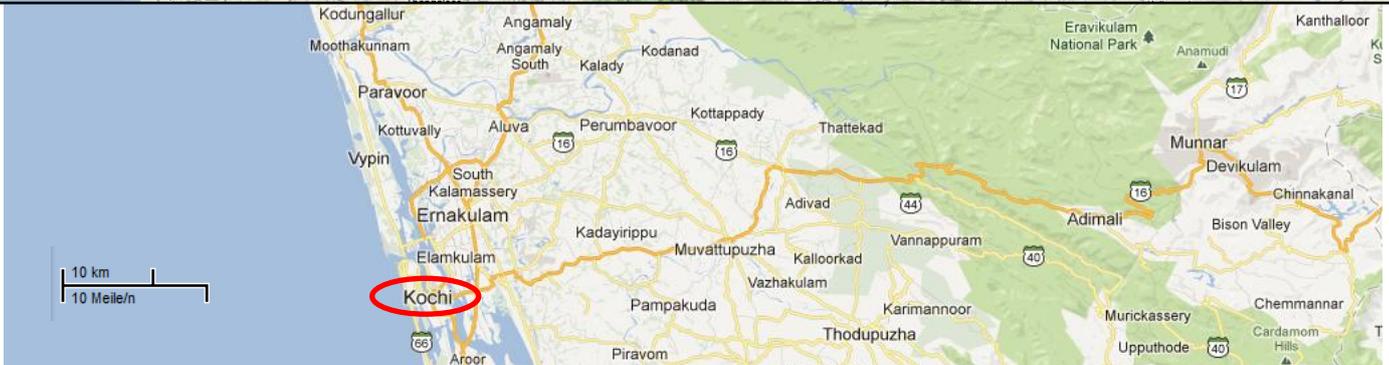
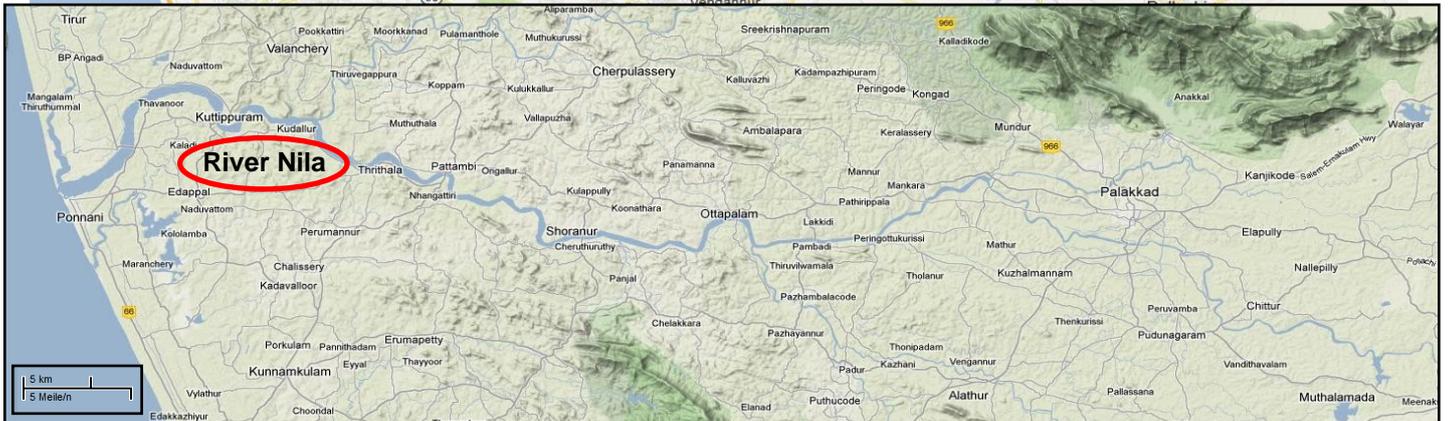
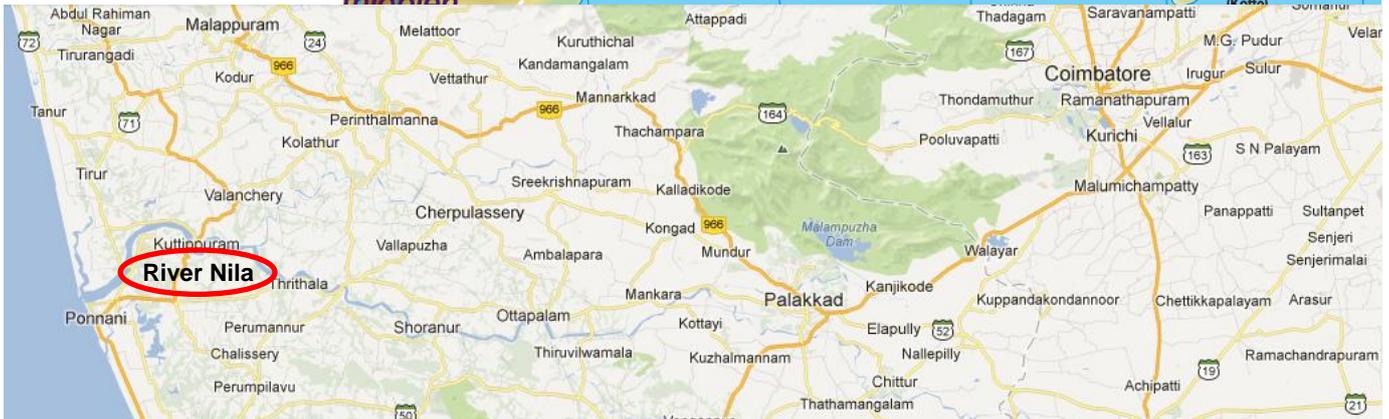
India

Rationale for the Award

by

Dr. Dietmar Quist

Source:
<http://www.welt-atlas.de/>



Source: <http://maps.google.de>

1 INTRODUCTION

The author visited Kerala/India from 9th to 15th December 2012 on behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.) in order to check the TODO! application by "The Blue Yonder – River Nila" on location.

The Project River Nila was founded by Gopinath Parayil in order to document the ecological and social decline of the Nila river area, or *Bharatapuzha*, the life line of Kerala, and to develop suggestions to improve the situation. The initiators of the Nila project decided to finance it through their own means: the independent tourism company "The Blue Yonder" (TBY) founded in 2004 by Gopi Parayil (TBY). Tourism which generates six to eight percent of Kerala's GDP was an obvious choice to generate an income.

The basic idea was to develop and coordinate tourism jointly with the local population. In a first step, the staff of TBY started to discuss with the local population the rich cultural heritage in the area where the river flows, and to discuss their own lifestyle, to increase the awareness of it and to (re-)activate it. In order to become attractive for tourism, the first thing was to rehabilitate people's own culture and to re-develop regional and local traditions. The few music and dance groups left in the region, traditional potters, brass molders, bamboo and cotton weavers, fishermen, etc. are being promoted, supported and linked to each other. Apart from the material support, e.g. through favourable loans, the support was always also about intellectual "empowerment": to regain pride and dignity.

In all the activities of The Blue Yonder, every measure must first of all benefit the population. Tourism contributes to people's livelihoods, but must not dominate their daily lives and lifestyles. Tourism must only be an additional, but never the main source of income. The visitors must go to see the music and dance groups, the groups must not go to the hotels. The products of the craftspeople are available only where they are being produced. It has remained important to support more and more projects in the region in a participatory manner and to make them accessible to tourists.

2 BACKGROUND

The *Bharatapuzha* in Kerala, the "Nile" (Nila) of "God's Own Country" (Kerala) is 209 km long, has its source in the Anamalai Hills (highest elevation 2460 m) and has a watershed area of 6186 km² (out of which 4400 km² belong to Kerala, the remaining part to Tamil Nadu). The Nila flows into the Indian Ocean at Ponnani. From times immemorial, the Nila river area has been regarded as a cultural and economic life line of Kerala. In a small part of its catchment area (less than 100 km²), the founder of The Blue Yonder, who hails from this region, began to implement his ideas.

According to Hindu belief, people attain liberation (*moksha*) if their ashes are handed over to the *Bharatapuzha*. Some of the most important poets and musicians of Kerala hail from this region, many important temples, mosques, churches and synagogues can be found here. The mix of many cultures and religions has over millennia shaped a region with exceptionally rich and diverse traditions.

Today, eleven dams hold back the river and more dams are being built. An area of more than 1200 km² is being irrigated by Nila river water. Part of the drinking water is also taken from the river. Most of the year, however, the river ceases to flow. For more than 30 years, the river's sandbanks have been (illegally) removed and no longer serve as regulating guidelines for the river. That's why nowadays, during the monsoon the Nila floods other areas and changes its course due to strong erosion along its banks. Paddy fields are often being devastated. The water is no longer being cleaned by natural filtration through sand. Furthermore, untreated waste water is mostly discharged into the river. Luckily, there are hardly any industrial enterprises near the river. Nevertheless, by now the river water is said to be undrinkable even for animals.

This ecological disaster initiated the foundation of the Nila project. All of its founders are from the region. At the beginning, they had the idea of assessing the ecological, social and economic situation of the Nila catchment area in order to then develop improvements. Very soon it became evident that a project of this dimension needs solid funding. The founders searched for sponsors, applied for funds from the authorities which were also vaguely offered. However, there was no binding commitment linked to a certain date, and the interest of potential donors in assessing an ecological catastrophe was limited. So the founders decided to "help themselves" and founded The Blue Yonder in order to generate their own funding by earning an income from tourism in the Nila region.

The region (state of Kerala) offers excellent conditions for this. Lagoons, almost 600 km of coastline and beaches and the backwater areas are tourism highlights and attract many visitors. The landscape is attractive and diverse. The mountains of the hinterland are 1500 m in altitude and have a pleasant climate all year round; the highest mountains reach 2500 m.

The Nila river region is intensively used for agriculture (86%). Cash crops such as rubber (92 percent of the Indian production), pepper (97 percent), tea, coffee and cocoa (63 percent), rice (45 percent) dominate. They are being processed on location and are directly exported. However, Kerala has to import grain from other states of India.

At a very early stage, immigrants and traders brought very different cultures and religions into the Nila region. The oldest mosque is said to have been founded during the life time of the prophet around 629. Christians assume that they have been settling in Kerala since as early as 52 AD (from the 4th century, there is evidence). Jews are said to have been living in Kerala since the destruction of Jerusalem 70 AD (in any case, there is evidence for very early Jewish settlers from Yemen). Kerala has the lowest share of Hindus (56 %) in India, the largest share of Christians (19%) and a very large share of Muslims (25%).

In Kochi, we find the first fort from colonial times, alternately used by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. From 1729, Kerala came under strong British influence, but remained formally independent until 1947. A detail that may emphasize how colourful the region is: for the first time (world wide), a communist party won free democratic elections in 1957. So the diversity of landscapes, cultures, religions and traditions forms a small and diverse mosaic with high tourism potential.

Furthermore, the living situation of Kerala which differs significantly from the rest of India enables The Blue Yonder to develop in a positive way. The state of Kerala is densely

populated, by 33 million inhabitants – 860 persons/km² (Germany: 230 inh./ km²). Language-wise the state is very homogeneous, 97 percent of the inhabitants speak Malayalam.

Kerala is "rich" compared to the rest of India: the per capita income is about 30 percent higher than the average. However, the rate of unemployment is also very high. Many Keralites therefore work abroad, especially in the Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi-Arabia. In these countries, Malayali workers are in demand, as they are well trained. The remittances by guest workers to Kerala are key to the relative prosperity of the state.

The formal level of education is above the Indian average, the literacy rate reaches about 94 percent (India 74 percent). Illiteracy among women is only eight percent, while it is almost 35 percent on average. With a life expectancy of 74 years, Keralites can expect to live more than ten years longer than Indians on average.

The considerable remittances by migrant workers lead to a construction boom and uncontrolled development. Many agricultural areas have been filled up and used for constructions, often with illegally mined river sand from the Nila. The migrant workers who often return only after decades are often no longer interested in their cultural background and don't know about it. They have forgotten and unlearned their old traditions. On their return, they bring "modernity" with them.

The strive for modernity also spread to relatives and children, and thus almost every inhabitant in the region. Slowly, and somehow as a counter-reaction, a latent longing for the (almost) forgotten rituals, for traditions, for people's own culture emerged.

3 THE ORGANISATION

3.1 History and Objectives of The Blue Yonder

The Blue Yonder (TBY) was founded in 2004 in order to (co-)finance the Nila project. From the beginning, TBY pursued the objective of enabling a joint tourism development that has the support of the population. The people concerned decide for themselves, or are at least involved in the decisions on how tourism should look like to be accepted by them.

Very early, a TBY catalogue of demands was developed:

- The way of living practiced by local people should remain as it is. Local people are not geared to the ideas and requests of the tourists, but the tourists, as visitors, use local lifestyles as their orientation. Tourists must not determine and dominate the lives of local people.
- Since there are many vegetarians in all the villages, it was also decided in advance to ask tourists not to bring any meat to the villages. Alcohol, too, is usually unwanted.
- For the tourist, not everything is available at all times. Tourists must use the possibilities and the rhythm of life of their hosts as guidance. Dance and music programmes can

only be presented in the evenings, as the members of the groups work during the day. The programmes must not degenerate to a "show" and must thus be accompanied and explained. They cannot be shortened and must remain in their "environment". Programmes in hotels "during dinner" are unthinkable. Tourists must agree to that, it is being pointed out to them before their trip.

- Potters or craftsmen are not available at all times, as their activities depend on certain work processes. Therefore, individual itineraries need to be developed for each group.

3.2 Concept and Programme

TBY founder Gopinath Parayil has adapted the concept of tourism development from a palliative clinic where he had been working for many years. There continues to be a close cooperation between the clinic and TBY.

The concept which has been successful there included patients, families, their environment, volunteers, sponsors, and small donors. This idea was now successfully adapted to the tourism situation. The village community, the neighbours, relatives and the people concerned discussed their demands and ideas about the impact of possible tourism activities. Strengthening their own traditions and rituals has been a central point in all the activities.

Some (religious) festivals include music and dance, especially among Hindus and Christians. It was hardly possible to find musicians, as the irregular income was not sufficient to earn a living; fewer and fewer young people were ready to play traditional music. With tourism as an additional source of income, the overall income is now acceptable. Playing music experiences a revival and enriches religious festivals.

Maintaining or regaining one's own dignity was an important concern. Therefore, in these meetings with the local people, clear demands were also addressed to the expected (and welcome) tourists. Tourists should travel in a respectful manner.

The hosts would like to get information about the guests and their home countries and would like to talk about themselves. This requires time, trust and respect on both sides. Encounters shall take place "at eye level". Migrant workers had always known strangers as masters, as bosses – nobody wanted to get into this role again. People did not want to adapt, let alone subordinate their own (often not Western) lifestyle to tourism. Tourists were not supposed to influence the (just rediscovered) traditions, but should be able to participate in them. The structures and jobs within the community are not to be changed at all, or at least not much. A "Keralean" way of life with its own values was supposed to be preserved and strengthened.

The ideas of the people concerned were very similar to those of the "doer" and could thus be implemented so successfully. Music and dance groups that had only four members now quickly got 150 new members, and even sponsors and students. "Living" tradition made them regain their pride. Even those who do not directly participate in the new activities support them according to their abilities. There are donors who made old, traditional instruments available which were no longer for sale. At the moment, there is a search going on for craftsmen who still have the know-how to build instruments. A music and dance group was

given a house where programmes are now being organised for tourists. Earlier, such programmes had to be organised in different private houses where there was not much space.

After many years, a temple dancer who still knows the unique temple dances that are recognized by UNESCO as cultural heritage now has students again.

In order to improve the quality of pottery products, volunteers built new ovens which are suitable for higher temperatures.

Craftsmen are being encouraged to make their products also for local people and not only for tourists. Among local people, it is again popular to buy simple pottery or traditional brass fittings for the new house.

In all areas, loans, donations and volunteers were needed. TBY was able to successfully impart the idea that only clusters of several small projects would be successful in tourism. Individual measures would not be sufficient in order to make the Nila region attractive for a sufficient number of tourists. Financial support was granted in the form of loans with long repayment periods. There are no contracts that tie a group or a craftsman to TBY. Every individual project, big or small, remains in the hands of the people concerned.

The success of the project was certainly also made possible because Gopi Parayil as well as his staff are from the region, he speaks the vernacular Malayalam and is thus "one of them".

4. EVALUATION AGAINST THE TODO! CONTEST CRITERIA

Comparing the activities of The Blue Yonder (TBY) with the **TODO! contest criteria** leads to the following assessment:

4.1 Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation

From the very beginning, the initiator of “The Blue Yonder” was aiming on the possibility to develop tourism together with the local population. They should be enabled to decide about or at least be involved in the decisions about a tourism which can be accepted by them.

After numerous meetings, the local people in the Nila region had been convinced of the necessity that only a bundeling of all the small projects would lead to a success in tourism. Separate actions were not seen as sufficient to make their region more attractive for tourism. Therefore, the ideas of the people concerned were very similar to those of the "doer" and could thus be implemented successfully. It was also meant for granted that every individual project – big or small – remains with the people involved.

The general acceptance of this kind of tourism is also approved by the fact that it even gets supported by people who do not participate in these “new” activities. Living traditions makes them all proud again.

Financial support was granted in form of loans with long repayment periods. There are no contracts that tie a group or a craftsman to TBY.

Different from other Indian states, extreme poverty and hunger rather exist only in exceptional cases in Kerala. Where there is real poverty, neighbours usually help. Furthermore, almost everybody in some way benefits from remittances by Malayalis working abroad. This also means that not everyone needs to participate in tourism in order to survive (and especially not at any cost) or even depends on it.

4.2 Enhancing the awareness of the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development in their everyday economic, social and cultural lives

As already described above, right from the beginning people had a critical awareness of their own position and that of the tourists. Many local people have travelled far and are "worldly wise" and welcome tourism as long as their world is not reduced to the supposed necessities of tourism. The chance to rediscover one's own identity has clear priority.

4.3 Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism

Returning to old traditions, being proud of one's home country and personal dignity are concerns for almost every inhabitant of a small or medium-sized place. From the beginning, it has been the declared objective of TBY not to give tourism a prominent role. Craftsmen also produce for local people and members of music or dance ensembles may earn an additional income from tourism, but should as a rule remain in their jobs.

Apart from house owners, the tourism activities first of all supported traditional craftsmen, fishermen and artists. Their income increased through their shows or sales to tourists. Craftsmen improved the quality of their products, as the products would otherwise be more difficult to sell to tourists (and local people). Products by local craftsmen (pottery, woven products) are more expensive than similar products e.g. from China. The fact that they remain competitive certainly also has to do with local customers recognizing and appreciating them as "our own". There are – even though to a limited extent – customers who do not see the price as the only criterion to purchase something. This attitude must not be overestimated. Yet, it does play a role.

On the whole, a positive economic effect of tourism will only occur on the long run. In all this, we must not lose the perspective of scale: As compared to the remittances from the gulf, the new additional income from tourism remains rather modest.

4.4 Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improving working conditions relative to payment, social security, working hours as well as education and training

The basic concept of TBY which stipulates that the structures in a community should change as little as possible, also means that only very few jobs can directly be generated in tourism as a service sector. There must not be a direct dependence on tourism. Nevertheless, the number of jobs indirectly linked to tourism has increased significantly.

The music groups altogether got more than 250 persons. Musicians, students and hundreds of musicians from the region are being trained. The income may not be very high, but is acceptable for Indian standards (food is included). The dance group "Vayali", for example, has 45 new members who also earn money when they perform – among them 20 women and girls.

The high rate of unemployment (which one was so far able to escape only through labour migration) in turn offers incentives to learn to make traditional instruments, to tan special leather for drums or to become a dancer or musician. Such jobs suddenly become attractive again and enjoy a positive image. Unemployed people get job opportunities or training. The tourism activities do not lead to envy in the community. The possibilities to earn an additional income are not significant enough to rapidly change structures in the villages.

An additional 40 workers benefit from the support for potters and brass molders.

4.5 Strengthening the local culture and the cultural identity of people living in tourism destination areas

Strengthening local culture, a return to one's cultural identity and one's own very diverse roots are the basis of tourism development in the Nila region. Without reviving the traditions, this form of tourism would not have been possible: people meet people – that is clearly the most important aspect in all the activities. A fisherman remains a fisherman who expands his work by taking tourists on "his" river. The fishermen, as well as the craftsmen and hosts have become prouder of themselves and their community, for the recognition and admiration by foreign visitors leads to an additional strengthening of the new values. Locally hand woven fabrics, locally produced ornaments are again being bought and worn. Without a renewed appreciation of the life of culture and tradition, meetings at "eye level" would not have been possible.

4.6 Avoiding and minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism in tourism destination areas

The special situation in Kerala allows the author to assume that there is no socio-cultural damage in the tourist destinations caused by tourism activities. The guest guided by TBY will at the beginning of his tour be prepared on location for his role as a responsible, active tourist. TBY has again and again received confirmation that the sight-seeing and visits are conducted in a respectful manner. The tourist has the possibility to get in touch with craftsmen, musicians, dancers and hosts, a real "meet the people". He may feel like a guest, but is expected to also behave like a guest.

Such tourists/guests travel in relatively small groups and adjust to the wishes of their hosts. This kind of tourism will rather lead to an enhancement of the social and cultural situation instead of endangering it.

4.7 Environmental compatibility

The concern of TBY, the support of the Nila project, shows that the wish for an environmentally friendly development in Kerala has priority. TBY embraces this idea. Measures which promote the respect for people's own traditions and the preservation of their own culture have a stabilising effect and also include caring for the environment.

TBY also pursues a forest rehabilitation project. They plant young trees together with the tourists. A first project has failed. A large area was fenced off and could no longer be used by local people for meetings. They were excluded and discontinued all care and support from their side. The fence was counter-productive, communication was inadequate. From this mistake, TBY learned.

A second (fenceless!) afforestation project was set up. Its relevance was discussed with the neighbours and since then the farmers have been supporting this project. They sometimes check if everything is alright, water the plants in dry periods. This "tourists' forest" seems to be growing in a way that promises success.

4.8 Gender Justice

Unlike in most of the Indian states, in Kerala the relation between men (1000) and women (1048) is balanced, there is even a slight bias towards women. This indicates that women in Kerala are socially not discriminated or less discriminated against than in other parts of India.

The crafts promoted are traditionally often practiced by men. However, they are supported by their wives, so the women are indirectly involved. In the music and dance groups, women and girls have a share of 25 to 30 percent. A positive development, as the share of women was previously almost nil.

All projects and initiatives cooperating with TBY do not just offer women and girls equal opportunities. The caste and religion of a person is not being judged either.

4.9 Measures which guarantee the economic and institutional sustainability of the project

About 300,000 "Western" and six million Indian tourists per year visit Kerala. In 2012, TBY took care of more than 1,500 tourists. TBY finds a sufficient number of tourists looking for a "meet-the-people" tour operator in a targeted manner. The demands and the needs of the people concerned coincide with those of the tourists. A further increase in the number of tourists to be taken care of is therefore very likely.

In India, but also in many European countries, TBY tries to directly position itself and to market itself. Cooperation with partners has proven difficult: tour operators expect that TBY meets the demands regarding certain standards of travel, stay and group size. However, TBY's own ideas and the agreements between TBY and local people often do not allow them to meet those standards.

The Blue Yonder is to be put in charge by the Indian government to take care of a ten times larger project area than the current one (about 9,000 km²). The concept, objectives and cooperation with the population are supposed to be similar.

TBY is providing advice to partners in Lapland and South Africa with similar objectives and on actively supporting them in the implementation of similar concepts.

The economic success made it possible to support the Nila Foundation and publish soon the first research outcomes in a book.

5 CONCLUSION

The expert in charge recommends awarding the project "The Blue Yonder – River Nila" with the TODO! 2012. The Blue Yonder fulfills the criteria of the TODO! contest in a convincing manner.

On the one hand, it is certainly rare that a tourism enterprise is founded in order to finance the scientific documentation of a region. On the other hand, the idea that is to be assessed by the contest organiser is no less "exciting". The Blue Yonder and their partners expect that the tourists actively participate in the tour. For this purpose, TBY presents a tourism concept that they developed themselves:

1. Tourism supports and strengthens individuals, local and regional enterprises and businesses. However, it only contributes to a limited extent to the overall economic situation of those involved. Tourism must not dominate the region and the businesses. The mason or plumber remains in his job, and becomes a musician or dancer only in the evening, also in order to be able to protect himself against the vulnerability of tourism in cases of crises, but above all in order to maintain his own lifestyle. The "active" tourist has to consider this and has to plan for it: not everything or everyone is available at all times.
2. First, awareness of tourism-related concerns had to be created among the population in meetings and campaigns. There was a need to explain the value of craftsmen, artists and ensembles in their importance for the traditions and the cultural heritage of the region. All the projects remain in the ownership or control of the people concerned, or of the community.
3. People who are directly involved are being supported with loans, for example to buy or make traditional instruments or set up a kiln. Grants are given in order to get students for traditional music, dance, temple dance, etc. The craftsmen are called upon to produce, "as they always used to", items for everyday use. These products must also be available to local people. Tourists are not being offered souvenirs that are common all over the world, but region-specific local products – in good quality.
4. Craftsmen are being visited by tourists at their workplaces. Their products can only be bought there. According to the ideas of TBY, the value of a pot, a hand-woven scarf lies in the history that is linked to the item, in its usefulness in everyday life, but not in the favourable price, let alone in its being available everywhere. The tour guides are therefore (according to TBY) above all interpreters; they tell the stories of the people, the tradition, the culture. This is what creates the value of a tour or of an item purchased.
5. Performances are never shown in hotels, only in people's own region, if possible in the own village. What is important for the organisers is an understanding of the contents of the music or dances. They are being shown in full length. The tourist leaves the role of a passive consumer.
6. Accommodation is offered by private households. The wishes and interests of the host must have priority. An example: the host insists that his family and the guests eat together, as they are interested in the guests and would like to know from them about their world. In this case, however, the guests have to respect the habits in the life of a Hindu Brahmin family:

no alcohol, no meat, no smoking on the premises. Only fruits and produce from their own cultivation or local production will be eaten. The family does not want any "Western", refrigerated, industrially processed food in their house and expects the guests to behave like guests: to eat what is being put on the table. This family demands a minimum stay of two nights, not because of the income. During a "flash" visit, it is not possible to really get to know each other and intensively exchange ideas. Here, too, the "active" tourist is needed.

The success of this model may only have been possible because the founder of TBY is from the region and speaks the local language Malayalam. Another aspect that also promises success in the future: The contact with all the people involved remains and is continually being renewed. For example, TBY covered the costs of a group of artists to perform at the first Indian Biennale in Kochi.

Consulting services and information don't end, but continue to be modified. The products and services offered are continuously being expanded. An example: Only a few months ago, TBY learned that in a backwater area close to the coast there was one last farmer who cultivated salt-tolerant rice. He wanted to give up its cultivation because the yield was lower than in "modern" cultivation. This is an alarming news, since with sea levels rising in the future, this specific type of rice could be of significant importance. TBY decided to include this business in their tourism programme and to guarantee the purchase of the annual harvest at a price higher than the market price. TBY thus took a major financial risk. One month later, an Indian "green" organisation committed to purchase the harvest.

The special situation of Kerala of course also plays an important role in the success of The Blue Yonder. Kerala is one of the richest states of India. School education is above average. Far above average is the number of migrant workers who intensively support their families in Kerala. At the same time, the loss of traditions and cultural heritage is much stronger than in other states of India. This, however, leads to an awareness of this loss and the wish for rehabilitation. The strong cultural and religious mix gives more scope for change.

Compared to Germany or Europe, Kerala is far from wealthy, but there is hardly any hunger and not the agonizing poverty which is still a reality in large parts of the Indian subcontinent. That's why especially in Kerala there is a realistic possibility to help sprout a tourism that respects people's pride and identity and does not violate it.

The Indian government considers the TBY model as so successful that it approved the expansion of the TBY region to 9000 km².

It is being examined whether the model of "The Blue Yonder" can also be adapted to other regions in other continents. Partners in South Africa and Lapland consider the principles as promising in their regions, too. TBY currently forms an internal group of consultants in order to offer the model in other parts of the world in the future.

Jury Members TO DO! 2012

Dr. Christian Adler

Ethologist

Anke Biedenkapp

Free Lance Consultant

Klaus Betz

Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung, Free Lance Journalist

Prof. Dr. Ludwig Ellenberg

Free Lance Consultant

Rika Jean-François

Messe Berlin/ ITB Corporate Social Responsibility

Wolfgang Köster

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Peter-Mario Kubsch

Studiosus Reisen München GmbH

Andreas Müseler

REWE Touristik Gesellschaft mbH

Elena Obreschkow

Swiss Foundation for Solidarity in Tourism (SST)

Sally Rahusen

Forum anders reisen

Armin Vielhaber

Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.

Prof. Dr. Harald Zeiss

TUI Deutschland – Environmental Management

Award Winner's Contact:

Gopinath Parayil
23-24, Sri Guru Nivas, Amar Jyoti Layout
560 094
Sanjaynagar
Bangalore
INDIEN

www.theblueyonder.com

gopi@theblueyonder.com

Organiser of the TO DO! 2012 – Contest Socially Responsible Tourism:

STUDIENKREIS FÜR TOURISMUS  UND ENTWICKLUNG e.V.

Institute for Tourism and Development
(Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.)
Bahnhofstraße 8, 82229 Seefeld, Germany
Phone +49-(0)8152-999010, Fax: +49-(0)8152-9990166
E-Mail: info@studienkreis.org
www.studienkreis.org
www.to-do-contest.org

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