
Weed tourism means big business

Author: Denise Slabbert

Marijuana-inspired travel is the next big thing in the global travel industry as the world begins to realise that ganja really is the new tourism gold.

Knowing that cannabis and the tourism dollar are fast friends could have Bob Marley rolling about in his grave. Although Marley's home country of Jamaica may be one of the first "pot destinations" on any stoner's calendar, in reality, that country only legalised weed ("in small amounts") late last year.

The move was inspired by watching states in the US cash in on the legalisation of marijuana. Colorado is a case in point. Cannabis was legalised in 2014, and last year the Denver Post reported a new tourism record, with 7.7 million visitors spending UD\$19.1 billion.

Admittedly, after much speculation as to how the legalisation of cannabis influenced travel to the region, the local tourism office commissioned a survey and then stated that only 4% of visitors actually came because of the legal marijuana.

However one looks at it, the legalisation of the herb has certainly led to a rise in the popularity of Colorado as a travel destination. The Colorado Department of Revenue noted that, since making marijuana legal, the state had received US\$1.3 billion from the sale of legal marijuana and there is no doubt that it is a thriving, billion dollar, cross-industry business – with tourism taking its share of the spoils.

Creative Colorado "ganjapreneurs" were quick to innovate and began selling "420 tours and experiences" (the term 420 basically means the consumption of marijuana) in their own backyards. Guys like Colorado local Jeremy Bamford launched the Colorado Pot Guide and the area saw a steady rise in cannabis tours and "Bud and Breakfast" accommodation options.

The Matador Network says the legalisation of cannabis in Colorado has brought weed and wellness together in tourism offerings, attracting a different kind of customer from the "stoner stereotype".

"As cannabis use becomes the new normal in the Centennial State, it's impossible to generalise about the kinds of people who use it, and for what reasons. The wellness world is turning to cannabis for its application in mindfulness, meditation and even exercise. Leave it to outdoorsy, fitness-loving Colorado to host events like 420 yoga retreats deep in the Rocky Mountains, the annual 420 Games featuring a 5 km run, and a cannabis gym...."

On a spiritual level, the hey-sheewowers are not being ignored: There is also the International Church of Cannabis in Colorado, and whether you're a believer or not, it's definitely one to tick off any traveller's bucket list.

Pot is now legal in Colorado, Oregon, Washington and Alaska and, more recently, Nevada became the fifth US state to legalise marijuana, which may become an added drawcard for tourists beyond the casinos and gambling that is becoming very last season for a millennial audience with cash to spare.

The LA Times reports that legal marijuana could be a US\$5 billion boon to California's economy.

"California is on the verge of creating a legal market for marijuana worth more than \$5 billion that will help make the state a destination for pot-loving tourists, according to a new state-sponsored economic study," the newspaper reported.

A global ganja trend

Further afield, one must acknowledge that “pot tourism” has been thriving in various parts of the globe. The holy ganja grail of Amsterdam is the most obvious place to consider for pot lovers, with its famous coffee shops. Amsterdam is a veteran in this particular game. Although, it’s interesting to note that when it comes to overall consumption, the Netherlands lags behind in the smoking stakes.

The Telegraph reports that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has released data suggesting that, in Iceland, cannabis is used by 18.3% of the population aged between 15 and 64. In the US, the figure sits at 16.2%. Nigeria comes in at 14.3%, with the Netherlands running way behind in 20th place.

You might want to skip the “got the T-shirt” Dutch experience and hop across the border to Christiania in Denmark. Buzzfeed’s “Ultimate Stoner’s Guide to Travel” reports that it’s a great spot to hang out with like-minded holidaymakers. As writer Annie Daly points out: “...marijuana is NOT legal in Denmark, EXCEPT for in this weird little bubble that’s actually within Copenhagen, the capital. Christiania is a self-proclaimed autonomous neighbourhood which basically means that it has its own laws separate from the Danish government — including ‘open cannabis trade.’”

The Stoner’s Guide notes their popular spots for travellers who’d like a little legal spliff on their holiday include Costa Rica (where you can walk around with small amounts of the stuff) and some of the South American favourites: Uruguay, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. Daly says Portugal is a must, with its progressive drug policies. It was one of the first countries to decriminalise drugs and “you can possess up to 25 grams of marijuana for personal use,” which could come in really handy if you intend to do some serious naval gazing for the duration of your stay.

A blogsite called Higher Perspectives touts Iceland as one of the best pot destinations. It notes that Icelanders are among the happiest people on earth – possibly for this very reason?

Canada, Israel and Spain also seem to be popular destinations for the pot-seeking traveller, with Spain cashing in on the industry in a big way – the country is home to Spannabis, the biggest cannabis trade show in Europe.

The Cannabist website agrees that Spain is a good choice, but adds that Albania and Morocco are also to be considered. Morocco, of course, is known for the world’s best hash, according to those who know (in this case the writers for The Cannabist).

Dagga tourism

Closer to home, “dagga tourism” could definitely be a big money spinner in places like Lesotho – where it has been grown for years, but is not “fully legal”. A breakthrough is that Lesotho has recently become the first African country to grant a license for medicinal marijuana.

Swaziland has long been known as a pot lover’s haven and although it is not yet legal, Swaziland’s government is also looking into legalising the use of marijuana to boost the country’s economy. A crop that could bring in an estimated US\$1.63 per year to a region that is impoverished.

Recent statistics say the global market for cannabis sits at US\$3 billion, and experts expect this to rise to over \$56 billion, with many industries gaining serious ground. Who knows what these opportunities could spell for tourism and job creation in the long run? Africa certainly needs to jump on the bandwagon and be part of the world’s new tourism high.