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TO DO! – Contest for Socially Responsible Tourism: The New Award Winners at ITB Berlin

On March 6th, 2013, at ITB Berlin, the Institute for Tourism and Development presents the winners of TO DO!2012- International contest for socially responsible tourism. The winners of the 18th contest round come from India and Uganda.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts! This applies especially for the two TO DO! award winners this year: the travel company THE BLUE YONDER from India and the Community Based Tourism project PEARLS OF UGANDA. As well as in the Southern Indian Kerala as in the East African Uganda, many local initiatives are bundled under one umbrella organisation in order to multiply positive economic and social effects in the region. Only the pooling under one umbrella brand attributes invaluable advantages in terms of competitiveness and marketing for the many local groups. Both award winners are – as their predecessors – good examples for the sustainable success of socially responsible concepts, especially regarding the intensive participation of the local population in tourism planning and development. The visitors get an enriched experience through the innovative and at the same time tradition-based tourism products and finally get the chance for meeting local people at “eye-level”.

The State Secretary of the Federal Ministery for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Hans-Jürgen Beerfeltz, declared in his appraisal: "I am pleased to hold the laudatory speech for a contest that has the same objectives as our ministry: The BMZ, too, promotes sustainable tourism which is socially, ecologically and culturally compatible – yet successful in economic terms. For many of our partner countries, tourism is a key to more economic development – it must not overrun the people, but must take them along, otherwise it will benefit only the tourists and a few tour operators. This is the spirit of sustainability in all respects which the projects of this year's two winners are committed to. My hearty congratulations to them!“

The Pearls of Uganda are a regional network consisting of about 20 "Pearls" offering tourism products and services in various communities in the south-west of Uganda. Visiting the "Pearls" has a special fascination, both in the very unique culture and the lives of the people, and in the surrounding natural diversity. Not only are the dance and drumming performances fascinating, but

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also the practical lessons in what tourists experience as "typically African". Guided walks and hikes through mountains and valleys, fields and forests illustrate the life and work in the village. In passing, the guests learn a bit about traditional healing methods through the medicinal plants in the show garden or during the visit of a traditional healer. They may also participate in handicrafts workshops (e.g. basket weaving, wood carving, pottery) or simply buy locally produced souvenirs. Pampered by safari experiences, also nature lovers are amazed by the extraordinary wildlife and bird sightings – not only about the famous mountain gorillas.

The PEARLS OF UGANDA also offer accommodation and food in restaurants owned by the village community. They thus complement and even represent real alternatives to the tourism products of Uganda, which have so far been concentrated mostly on safari or trekking tourism. These products have up to now hardly included the local population which mostly knew the tourist busses and safari jeeps only from a distance.

Every "Pearl" thus creates incentives for local people to remain in the villages, whether by offering direct or indirect income opportunities in tourism or through a generally more self-determined development that benefits everybody. Water projects, schools and the strengthening of local investment and markets also ensure that fewer people migrate from the villages to the cities. Situated at the edges of national parks, the villagers also take up the idea of nature conservation more strongly, since the tourists also come to visit them because of the pristine nature. Especially women see these
advantages. With two thirds, they make up the large majority of UCOTA members.

As an umbrella organisation of the Pearls of Uganda, the Uganda Community Tourism Association (UCOTA) was founded in 1998 in order to support local communities with their sustainable tourism development – especially in the field of education and training. UCOTA also works to ensure that the products and services offered by the "Pearls" are actually noticed by possible visitors and tour operators, whether by local agencies ("Pearls supporters"), through flyers in large hotels or of course on the internet.

THE BLUE YONDER stands for an innovative Indian travel company founded in 2004 which understands tourism as an instrument for sustainable

regional development. It offers to take very individual care of the travellers in this region and supports the Nila Foundation founded previously, which contributes to addressing major threats such as the declining water level or the inconsiderate extraction of sand. Tourism is meant to contribute to ensuring people's livelihoods and to preserving their traditional culture without dominating

lives and lifestyles.
From time immemorial, the Nila River area has been one of the cultural and economic lifelines in Kerala. Some of the most important poets and musicians hail from this region, and many important temples, mosques, churches and synagogues can be found here. The mix of many cultures and religions has over millennia shaped the region with exceptionally rich and diverse traditions.
A highlight for today's visitors is the experience of the "musical trail" which revives traditions that are millennia old. In a similar manner, this also applies to the "folk expressions" which only take place on location, not in hotels. By now, about 250 persons are active in this field. It is also impressive for the guests to look over the shoulders of traditional craftsmen doing their work. They learn how articles of daily use are being produced in front of their eyes which are still being used nearly everywhere in the area: pottery, oil lamps made of brass or woven cotton or bamboo products.
If the guests agree to this way of travelling, they may also be guests in the house of an old Brahmin family that stipulates their own rules: a minimum duration of stay in order to get to know each other, and the locally produced meals are taken together with all the family members.
All the products and services are developed by the community members themselves and remain with them, are managed and operated by the community. With the help of micro credits, new business ideas can be realised and hence another diversification of income opportunities is created in the long run. One principle is that tourism may only be an addition, but must never be the main source of income. Fishermen thus continue to go fishing, even if they offer boat trips for tourists. Only in his leisure time does the plumber become a story teller, and the electrician becomes a drummer only in the evenings.
The CEO of the company, which is managed as a "social enterprise", is from the region and increasingly linked to other national and international initiatives for sustainable tourism. In 2012, more than 1,500 guests had been attended by The Blue Yonder.

Hansjörg Ruf, president of the board of the Swiss Foundation for Solidarity in Tourism emphasized: "The two TO DO! winners 2012 show in exceptional ways the possible success and sustainability of tourism development when supported by the joint efforts of the population to initiate and implement something themselves. The people are able to not only improve their lives in this way, but can at the same time contribute to a kind of tourism that allows travellers special, authentic insights into the lives and culture of the people. We would like to support these efforts with our prize money and wish the two projects all the best for their further positive development".

Dr. Dietlind von Laßberg, Vice Chairwoman of Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V., took the award ceremony as an opportunity to give sincere thanks to the cooperation partners: “The TO DO! could not be conducted without the financial support from politics, civil organisations and tourism industry. I am very also pleased that new supporters joined this contest round.

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