

PURA VIDA, THE TRANSLATION INDUSTRY WAY

By Huiping Zhang

In February of 2017, I took my children to Costa Rica for a 15 day cross country adventure. We drove through several climate zones and hiked the dry forest, rain forest, and cloud forest. We snorkelled in the ocean and watched a whale splash its tail. We took a boat ride in the mangroves and impersonated howler monkeys. We stayed at six different hotels, rented a car, and were guided by tour guides from different providers. It was a real eye opener to see the eco system of tourism operators in Costa Rica.

The real journey

In addition to escaping the long Canadian winter and spending time with my children, the trip meant much more to me. It was a soul-searching journey to discover me. To discover what I really like, to examine how I feel about continuing to run my translation company after founding it 18 years ago, and to look at what brings me joy after my divorce was finalized a year earlier.

After many years of putting family interest before my own, and years of single minded focus on growing the business, the trip was a pause, a moment of introspection to see if I am headed in the direction of my own choice in life.

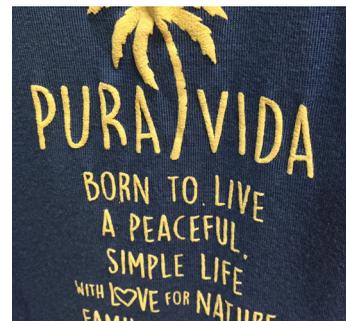
Positioning in a sea of competitors

When I started to research where I would like to visit in Costa Rica, I had lunch with a friend who works as a travel planning expert at a very niche travel company that specializes in unique experiences.

At the top of my friend's list of recommended resorts is Pacuare Lodge, ranked by National Geographic as one of the 25 most unique lodges in the world. On Pacuare Lodge's website, I found out that they also have a self guided cross country tour that would allow us to get a taste of different parts of Costa Rica. Without much further due diligence, in my usual impatient, intuition based style of decision making, I booked a 15 day trip through them. Pacuare Lodge's travel planning consultant helped to arrange six hotels including their own, a rental car, numerous tours and private ground transfers.

What is in getting bigger

In the short 15 days, I witnessed different styles of tour operators – some aim for exclusivity, some strive for volume, some are very focused on customer experience while others not so much (one naturist tour company had a survey done after each guided tour and each ground transfer while most companies did not survey their customers).



The experience very much reminded me of the translation industry where we also have an eco system of large and small players, volume versus niche. Everyone is striving to build a profitable company with plenty of growth. We seem to be in a competition with each other in a race to get bigger. It seems only the small companies claim “small is beautiful” but secretly everyone thinks otherwise.

I am the first one to acknowledge that money and financial security is very important and one of the most practical yardsticks of measuring the achievement of an entrepreneur. But what happens after our basic survival needs are met and quest for purpose starts? What keeps us going once we have bread on the table and our children have shoes on their feet? What does the pursuit of getting bigger brings us? More responsibilities and challenges to keep us up at night? I am sure the answers to these question vary from person to person. We all have our own reason for continuing. Some people have examined it more than others. The stay at Pacuare Lodge gave me clarity as to why I keep doing what I do after 18 years and my own dialogue of small versus big.

A 19 room hotel

After getting lost in the mountains along the Pacuare River, we were picked up by our driver. He drove us to a human crank powered zip line ferry near the very shallow Pacuare River. A golf cart picked us up after crossing the river via the zip line. The manager greeted us to the Congo House that we stayed at (at first we thought she was the receptionist but it turned out she is the manager). A welcome board with our names sat in front of our lodge and fresh mango smoothies were served to us as welcome drinks.

The rest of our stay at Pacuare Lodge was characterized by eye opening uniqueness and top notch hospitality. All the lodges were candle lit only (my kids begrudgingly put down their iPods and computers); we ate candle lit dinners every day but had to wear head lamps to see what we were eating; we had a rain forest themed bath-



room including an unforgettable outdoor shower; there were always extra guides to ensure our safety and enjoyment (at the canopy and hiking into the forest); gourmet meals every day including seared tuna (although my children were secretly hoping for chicken fingers).

Beyond unparalleled emphasis on the beauty and lushness of the lodges, grounds and guest enjoyment, I noticed how happy and content the servers, cooks, maids, tour guides and front desk staff are. Because the guest experience is so amazing, the staff is tipped generously. The lodge is off the tourist beaten path and offers employment to people who live in a village nearby. Because jobs are harder to come by in a remote area, people value their opportunities and getting generous tips are icing on the cake. The existence of an employee gym at their staff lodging makes me think their owner cares about their well being on multiple levels.

The smart lodge owners also make the best of the resources available to them. In the absence of ocean waves and beaches, Pacuare finds its own unique way of creating “deep” travel experiences for its customers. It offers several variations of eight hour or multi-day hikes deep into the jungle (some to a native reserve only accessible by a very narrow foot path).

All the waste at the Pacuare Lodge was sorted so that the operation of the lodge leaves the least number of footprints. A portion of the profit goes toward the purchase of primary forest for the sole purpose of preserving them.

As I soak in my experience at the Pacuare Lodge, my brain kept absorbing and digesting what I was seeing and how everything I was learning was relevant to me and the translation industry.

The Pacuare Lodge leveraged the resources available to them. (proximity to native reserve – hiking, nature education, more personal attention- three people at the zip line as opposed to the norm of two everywhere else, two guides at the hikes as opposed to one, very personal attention everywhere). How could I use the resources already available to me to improve and grow my business? How

can I expand the number of resources available to promote growth, efficiency and even better customer satisfaction?

The Pacuare Lodge was built off the beaten tourist path (cost of land, labour lower than built up areas)- What would be the equivalent of “off the beaten path” for the translation industry? What fresh new ways can we offer our services to clients and still get the same results?

While guests are given an exclusive experience, they feel a great sense of value. Guest feel safer at all the hikes and tours, have gourmet meals included in their stay, and much more. How can we make our clients in the translation industry feel the same? What could we learn from this? How can we give that sense of value and safety to our translators and employees as well as our clients?

Balance of profitability and sense of purpose (well being and caring of the environment, its employees, and guests while running a profitable, vibrant business). Don't we feel good for making all the stake holders prosperous?

During my trip, I came to realize that quality trumps quantity. Isn't it better to run an amazing 19 room hotel than a lousy 500 room one? If we can find all the ingredients of what makes us feel alive and happy, do we really need other people to tell us what we do is enough?

Pura Vida

In Spanish, the literal translation of Pura Vida means pure life. It has a lot of cultural connotations for Costa Ricans. It represents their love of nature, friends and family and the longing for a simple, peaceful life. It represents the quintessential spirits of its culture – which probably explains why Costa Ricans are some of the happiest people on the planet. We could all learn from the essential teaching of Pura Vida – clarity of what is important to us; at peace with the bounds of our geniuses and be fully present in life.

The journey to Costa Rica was a Pura Vida moment to me. Now every time I feel I am in a rat race, I remind myself of the 19 room hotel and how I would like to build my own version of it so I could reach my full potential while in full harmony with my environment – providing well being to people that I come in contact with, my children, my employees and clients, the environment and the universe at large. I know now why I do what I do and how I am going to continue my entrepreneurial journey.

May you find your Pura Vida moment too.

