



LODDON VALLEY TOURS

Loddon Shire Council

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Great ideas for destination development don't always require huge investment. Some of the most innovative approaches grow out of adversity and the need to count the pennies.

Loddon Shire Council, about an hour from Bendigo in Victoria's north-west, is not a mainstream tourism area, but the stories, the characters and the enterprise in some of the towns is the stuff that many city people love to hear.

The small towns of Wedderburn, Inglewood Tarnagulla and Bridgewater have a gold heritage, while Pyramid Hill and Boort have grown-up on the prosperity that irrigation brought to rural Australia. There's also a significant indigenous heritage.

Former tourism operator, Robyn Vella, began Loddon Valley Tours several years ago as a way to attract greater visitation to her family's Eucalyptus distillery in Wedderburn. She soon found that her groups were as much interested in the lifestyle of



the local area as they were in gold and heritage. For urban-based people it was often their first real contact with small rural communities and they were fascinated to learn how the locals lived, worked and coped with trauma such as prolonged drought.

The simple tourism based tours grew into overnight visits, which included extended drives through the farming district. Guests arrange their own charter bus and stay at the town's only motel.

With almost no marketing budget to spread the word, Robyn uses her best assets to promote the tours – her personality and unbounded enthusiasm. She regularly visits Melbourne's Probus clubs to provide their members with a free talk on 'surviving life in a country town'.



GROWING DESTINATIONS



TOURISM EXCELLENCE

Her positive attitude and ability to connect with people generates an increasing number of bookings for the two and three night group tour packages.

Loddon Valley Tours became important to the Shire's image and was a new economic injector, so much so that the council agreed to take over the concept and bring Robyn onto their staff to manage the program. The tours are revenue-positive for the Council and they enable the area to present itself to the outside world as a dynamic community that has managed to survive the economic rationalism of the 90s and the drought of this decade.



The tour programs have flexible components to suit the budget, time frame and interests of each group. Step-on guides accompany the bus each day to highlight the particular towns and features. These can range from the vast expanse of Aboriginal canoe trees in Boort's Big Lake to the largest olive groves in the Southern Hemisphere along the Charlton Road. Each guide is a likeable and knowledgeable local person who takes great pride in showcasing their area to the city visitors.

Key findings:

Innovation in destination management and marketing can grow from adversity and even a lack of funds.

Many urban people – particularly in the older age group – are interested in authentic places and people of rural Australia, and revel in their stories.

Promotion of a destination can only do so much; to clinch the sale it helps to have a well developed product to buy.

Know your target market/s very well. Carefully match the product to the market segment and vice-versa