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'Tourism Can Change the World': One-on-One with Perillo's Carol Dimopoulos

TOUR OPERATOR | PERILLO TOURS | DAVID COGSWELL | SEPTEMBER 04, 2014



PHOTO: Carol Dimopoulos during a fam trip in Costa Rica. (Photo by David Cogswell)

Carol Dimopoulos, who joined Perillo Tours three years ago, is president of Perillo Learning Journeys. In August she led a travel agent fam tour of Costa Rica to help participants learn about Perillo's Costa Rica escorted tour and also its Learning Journeys program.

TravelPulse spoke with Dimopoulos in Santa Juana, Costa Rica, after she conducted a yoga class near a waterfall for a group of travel agents who were participating in a Perillo fam trip.

TravelPulse: What makes Perillo's Costa Rica program unique?

Carol Dimopoulos: At Perillo we believe that tourism can really change the world, through projects we do with Learning Journeys Sustainability through Perillo, and by giving people unique experiences that aren't cookie cutter. We don't believe that you can really see culture if you're given a mass market experience.

For us it is about going into the communities, working and giving back, coming into the rural communities so people can see what life is really like more than your typical touristic rural community adventure. We really take the time to look for places where we can benefit the community. We have such a passion for what we do. We really believe we can change the world by bringing



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people to places like Costa Rica, showing them an authentic experience, being in the culture with a farm community like this, and working on projects to give back into the community. It comes full circle.

You could see it with these people who had that yoga class here in this environment. They went away touched. They were moved by their experience in the waterfall, by the yoga class. Particularly at Learning Journeys, that's the kind of experience you're not going to get in general tourism. It just makes such an impact. When you make an impact on one person, you make an impact on global society, because it does start with one. And above all we believe in what we do.

I personally have a passion for my job. This job is my life. I don't consider it a job. It's a way of life. Through that channel I'm able to give back and channel these experiences for other people. That's the core of who I am and who we are at Perillo and at Learning Journeys. And I'm honored and blessed to have partners like Fabio [Salas, Perillo's ground manager in Costa Rica] and Jim [Damalas, general manager of Greentique Hotels] and our other partners around the world.

We do sustainable projects around the world. In Greece we work with the battered women shelter. You never hear about domestic violence in Europe. We go into the communities and really try to find a way we can give back by being there, not just taking and seeing the beautiful islands and coming in on a huge cruise ship, ruining the environment. We're always looking for ways to give back.



TP: Are you seeing more response to these concerns as people evolve?




CD: Yeah. I think evolve is a good word because I do find that more and more people are evolving. In the yoga and wellness community, four years ago 8 million people did yoga. Now 16 million people are yogis who consider themselves to be regular practitioners. Maybe this is why that Yoga, Wellness and Community series has become so popular.

People who have a specific interest don't want to go on a general tour. They're never going to get what they need that way. They want to travel with like-minded people. They want to feel like when they are in an environment they are learning something profound in their own interest, changing their own lives. But they also want to give back. They don't want to just take. They want to leave something behind when they leave the environment.

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There are many more travelers interested in these things in all demographics, including families. Families are looking more for this. They want to give more to their kids. They don't want to just take them on a typical cruise or vacation. How is that kid going to get into college?

Families are looking more for this... They don't want to just take them on a typical cruise or vacation... We find that a lot more people are interested in learning, giving back to the environment.

What's going to give him a competitive advantage? We find that a lot more people are interested in learning, giving back to the environment. People know we're not going to have a world, we're not going to have a planet to live on if we don't change. I think more and more people are becoming tuned into that. I think people are evolving. That's a great way to put it.

These are the cutting edges of tourism. You can go to Guanacaste and that's what a lot of people think Costa Rica is, but you're not going to see this [Santa Juana] or the cloudforest we saw. If you just stay in one place you're not going to see the different biodiversities. It's a shame.

TP: What is different about Perillo's escorted tours?

CD: One thing that's different about Perillo is that we include mostly everything. We don't offer a lot of options. We want people to have a hands-on experience in the destination. Also important is the passion of our managers, our guides – we don't just hire general guides. Everyone is native to the land. In Italy everyone is Italian. In Costa Rica, Greece and Hawaii, same thing. The people really make us different.

And we choose properties no one else uses. We look for those different kinds of experiences. Like here in Costa Rica, no tour series uses Villa Blanca, or the Parador Hotel. And in Costa Rica we include the meals. So you may be paying a little bit more of a price point up front, but in the end your clients are getting more value. They're seeing the real Costa Rica because they're not spending a lot of time on the coach.

I think our itinerary has the least driving time for an escorted tour of Costa Rica. The Costa Rican roads can be very difficult. Instead of going to Monteverde, Perillo-style we found a closer cloudforest at Villa Blanca. So they can have that same experience and be in that environment but not have to ride in the coach as long.

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On the Learning Journeys side it's all about the learning experience you're getting. Where G Adventures is about adventure, Learning Journeys is about the learning experience. We like to give people the opportunity when they travel to also live their passion. Everybody has some kind of passion they enjoy.

It just enhances somebody's trip. Nobody really has the time to take extended vacations and sit on the beach anymore. So delivering these life changing experiences in the touristic way does both. It allows people to grow and evolve and also have that new experience in a new land, something you can't get. The combination is life changing.

TP: How are you helping agents understand how to sell the product?

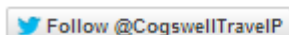
CD: We have a Learning Journeys Certification Program that can be found on the website. Travel agents can go on and get certified to sell Learning Journeys. They don't really understand it just yet. They have to do an online program. It takes about two hours.

It's all about the experience. So when I train travel agents on Learning Journeys I tell them, when you have a new client sit down in front of you, stop asking, "Where do you want to go?" Ask, "What are your interests? What do you want to do?" And then we can work with you to really deliver that experience to that client. It's still in the realm of tourism.

If they tell you they're into photography, that's going to tell you a lot of things. You ask them what kind of photography. If they say art photography, you can send them to Europe. If they're talking about nature, you know you're going to send them to Costa Rica, India or somewhere you could send someone interested in wildlife photography. That gives you a good insight into what that client is looking for. And you're going to retain that client forever.

Destinations are fickle. People want to go to different places every year. But their interests generally remain the same. So it's interest-driven as the number one focus.

On the Costa Rica escorted tour we give them a language lesson, a cooking lesson, so even on the escorted tour series we're starting to incorporate those learning experiences. So it really crosses the brands, because we're all Perillo.



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