

1. Baguio, The Philippines

Reviving the Local Economy through Digital Tourism and Tourist Corridors

Challenges

Baguio is a prime tourist destination and an internationally recognized “Creative City”. The tourism industry, as the largest economic sector in Baguio, is a major economic driver in the city, with tourism revenues contributing to a significant portion of the local economy. The tourism industry is also one of the largest employers since most of the businesses in the city are in that sector. With the outbreak and global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Baguio was totally closed to tourism activities. Only essential tourism-related businesses were initially allowed to operate in a limited capacity, since they had to – and still must – comply with stringent health standards and protocols.

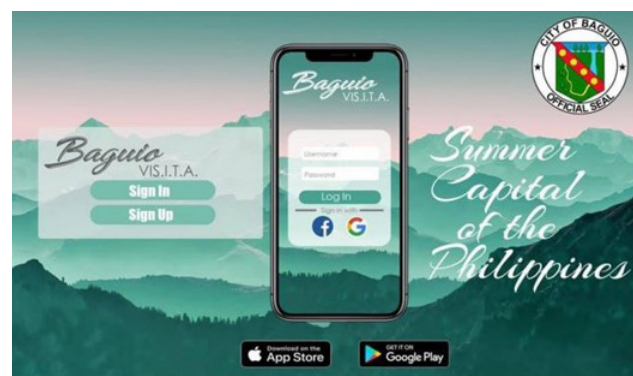
The Baguio tourism industry was hit hard by the drastic measures taken to stop the spread of the virus. For tourist arrivals, there was approximately a 63 per cent decrease during the peak months of January and February 2020. In April 2020, there were no tourist arrivals, which resulted in a loss of more than PhP 375 million (approximately \$7.7 million). The closing of the tourism industry also made it difficult for tourist-related businesses to recover, and the latter continue to face the challenges of a slow recovery despite the progressive lifting of containment measures in the city.

Towards a Solution

To ensure a smooth, accelerated process of revival of safe and sustainable tourism activities and to help businesses to bounce back, the local government, led by the City Tourism Office and the City Tourism Council, crafted programmes, plans and strategies that specified outcomes to restore confidence in tourism activities and the related services, stimulate the local economy, boost travel confidence, and develop e-tourism.

The Government of the City of Baguio designed and developed a tourism portal in preparation for the gradual reopening of

the city’s tourism activities to the public. Travellers from the provinces of La Union, Pangasinan, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte would be able to visit Baguio under the Ridge to Reef Travel Corridor plan and use the Baguio Visitor Information and Travel Assistance (VIS.I.T.A.) portal (<http://visita.baguio.gov.ph/>). The platform acts mainly as a travel guide, a source of travel assistance and a gateway for monitoring visitor mobility. Aside from keeping track of visitors’ activities, the VIS.I.T.A. portal includes a listing of recognized and accredited tourism establishments, services, and sites.



Source: City of Baguio

The Baguio VIS.I.T.A. online registration system was adopted as part of a travel corridor plan, the promotion of tourism, the stimulation of domestic tourism, the gradual and safe reopening of tourist sites to visitors, the promotion of seamless and contactless travel, and the creation of an innovative and adaptive environment. The system uses real-time data analytics for seamless and contactless travel. From 1 October to 31 December 2020, the city was able to accommodate a total of 27,143 tourists. Moreover, a total of 3,329 tourists were expected in Baguio from January to February 2021. That number is based upon the approved travels and potential arrivals found on the city’s registration platform. As reflected in the portal, the highest number of arrivals happened from 21 to 29 December 2020: a total of

7,593 tourists. The VIS.I.T.A. system can also project how many tourists are within the central business district and monitor the hotel and restaurant check-ins of the tourists. The portal is continuously improved to include not only virtual tours but also tourism information through electronic brochures, audio travel guides, photo albums, real-time images and videos, and travel diaries through blogs.

Similarly, the Reef to Ridge Travel Corridor plan promotes tourism in Northern Luzon by creating the Travel Corridor or the Ridge to Reef Bubble, enabling seamless travel for tourists between Baguio and the provinces of La Union, Pangasinan, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte. The Travel Corridor shows "the strong support of the local and provincial leaders to jumpstart tourism, which thousands of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the region rely on."³ The Travel Corridor plan is a result of collaborative work at local levels. For instance, Baguio and the Region 1 provinces expanded their advocacy. Under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between them, local chief executives agreed to carry out research on, among other things, a possible tourism corridor featuring the natural, cultural, and artistic pride of place of each province and city. In addition, the MoU seeks to foster the creation of green lanes for tourists and examine the possible implementation of a unified policy on border control and health and safety protocols, harmonized access, integrated marketing and coordinated destinations. The collaboration would be worth emulating in other parts of the country and beyond because it involves conducting research and implementing other strategies to facilitate the revival of the tourism industry and the recovery of the broader economy from the COVID-19-induced crises.

The Tourism Corridor plan was put in place to link participating provinces or cities across the Philippines and enable them to work together harmoniously to achieve the common goal of boosting tourism and reviving local economies while ensuring a safe environment for tourists and constituents. This innovative approach is now being rolled out in other cities and municipalities across the country to revive and boost local tourism sectors and other productive economic activities, help

businesses to recover, stimulate the economy and improve customer experience.

The use of the VIS.I.T.A. tourism portal makes the process safe, accessible and convenient. The innovative management of the VIS.I.T.A. system had a big impact on the stakeholders. They were empowered because of the promotion of safe and responsible tourism and their involvement in data-driven and information-based management, decision-making and policy information. Moreover, travel confidence among tourists was restored, which led to a gradual economic recovery. The Ridge and Reef Travel Corridor has also created strong partnerships and strengthened the support among other Philippine regions. This initiative was achieved through the Department of Tourism and the Tourism Promotions Board of the Philippines.



Source: City of Baguio

Local strategies went beyond this, however. For example, aside from the social and financial assistance to displaced workers and the stimulus packages offered to MSMEs and tourist-related businesses, other incentives were also provided. They included zero-interest to low-interest loans, tax relief or discounts, waived occupancy taxes, waived accreditation application and renewal fees, and free attendance at seminars, workshops and trade expositions. It was, therefore, a holistic approach to not just limit the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but also accelerate the economic recovery. The success of the initiative led to its expansion and adoption in many other parts of the country.

3. http://www.tourism.gov.ph/news_features/DOTtoScaleupBaguiosRidge.aspx

Project title	Reviving the Local Economy through Digital Tourism and Tourist Corridors
Spatial scale of the initiative	Travellers from La Union, Pangasinan, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte are able to visit Baguio under the Reef to Ridge Travel Corridor plan and use the Baguio Visitor Information and Travel Assistance (VIS.I.T.A.) portal. Baguio is prepared to open its doors to tourists from the entire Luzon area with 38 provinces, 73 cities and 698 municipalities and around 61.5 million people.
Population involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees working in the tourism sector and MSMEs, especially those in tourism-related businesses (tour agents and agencies, tour guides, and employees of food, and entertainment and recreational wellness establishments). • The cultural and creative industries. • Tourists from Region 1 provinces (La Union, Pangasinan, Ilocos Sur and Ilocos Norte). • Citizens of the City of Baguio.
Cities/Provinces/Countries/Territories/Regions involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Region 1 of the Philippines with 4 provinces, 9 cities and 116 municipalities and a population of 5 million. • City of Baguio, with a population of 374,291.
Sustainable Development Goal target(s)	8.2, 8.3, 8.9, 9.3, 9.b, 9.c, 12.b, 17.7, 17.8, 17.17
Supported/Funded by	The Government of the City of Baguio and the Department of Tourism (through the Tourism Promotions Board)
Implementing entities	The Government of the City of Baguio through the City Tourism Council, Region 1 provincial government and the Department of Tourism
Project status	Ongoing
Project period	1 September 2020 until the full reopening of tourism in the city
URL of the practice	http://visita.baguio.gov.ph/