



Case Study

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA GEOTOURISM PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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CONTEXT

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) comprising the four major islands of Chuuk, Pohnpei, Yap and Kosrae, possess substantial tourism assets in the form of natural heritage and distinct cultural traditions and languages represented on each island. FSM's living-history assets, including the famous World War II shipwreck in Chuuk Lagoon, are globally renowned for their high quality and niche offering, drawing scuba diving enthusiasts from as far as the United States, Japan and Europe. FSM's tourism identity, which is based on diving, snorkeling, historical tours and adventure treks, has the opportunity to enhance the current offering by strengthening ties to the islands' historical significance and cultural allure. The unique culinary traditions, artifacts and festivals present in FSM, opens the door for inter-island tourism products that promote longer stays and improved economic spread from tourism. Considering that most tourists visit only one island during their stay, primarily Chuuk and Pohnpei, connectivity, one of the largest hurdles, is envisioned to change the way that tourists experience the islands.

FSM is additionally looking to strengthen its tourism competitiveness through its geotourism attractions, including Nan Madol, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Located on the eastern part of Pohnpei, the site once served as the ceremonial and political seat of the Saudeleur dynasty, uniting Pohnpei's estimated 25,000 people from about AD 500 until 1500, when the centralized system collapsed. The mystery around the sites' magnificent and other-worldly structure is on par with other highly frequented geotourism sites and world wonders like Cambodia's Angkor Wat and Mexico's Chichen Itza. Though significant infrastructural and management improvements are needed to make Nan Madol a world-class attraction, the site has the potential to capture interest from tourists looking to discover a lesser-known wonder, appealing to the type of high-value adventure-seeking tourist that FSM aims to attract.

THE CHALLENGE

In theory, the Federated States of Micronesia should be well positioned to take advantage of the global growth in international tourism arrivals witnessed over the past 20 years. However substantial hurdles have inhibited this.

FSM's extremely remote location, high competition from neighboring island nations, a general lack of funding and/or capacity has inhibited growth and the implementation of tourism-centric policy recommendations. Without intervention to capitalize on tourism assets, visitor numbers will likely continue to stagnate or decline. Between the period of 2012-2019, international arrivals dropped by around 50% from their 2012 high of almost 39,000 per year. Since then, international arrivals fell to virtually zero during the pandemic and the road to recovery has been slow. The overall lack of connectivity has further exacerbated challenges to growth, with the lack of flight options making vacations to the FSM proportionally more expensive and complicated to plan compared with principal competitor destinations. FSM is also less-known for luxury accommodations and amenities, instead developing around adventure, authenticity and its reputation as one of the least visited destinations on the planet: attracting a smaller niche of tourists. However, by developing lucrative tourism products that tap into this appeal, FSM will be able to grow a small stream of niche tourists, inherently helping to maintain the islands' small, but authentic sustainable tourism offering. All while building its reputation organically as a destination worth traveling to the ends of the earth for as a "bucket list" destination.



OUR SCOPE OF WORK

This project scope assessed the tourism competitiveness of Nan Madol as a tourism anchor product, with an additional focus on FSM's potential for tourism differentiation as a means of tourism recovery.

The team began by conducting a literature review, using a SWOT analysis and competitiveness assessment featuring the Ritchie and Crouch (R&C) model (2003) to contextualize FSM's tourism attractiveness and its social and economic capital. This provided the team with a baseline understanding of supporting factors such as a qualified workforce, historical and cultural assets and tourist perception. A policy review and gap analysis further examined past, present and future policies and action plans, revealing gaps and areas for intervention in the current legal tourism framework to enable policy recommendations that support sustainable tourism development. A competitor analysis and best practice case studies on tourism certification and geotourism development, gave additional suggestions on pathways to improving competitiveness by surrounding environmentally and socially sustainable initiatives in the industry.

The following step engaged local tourism industry stakeholders through virtual interviews for the purpose of obtaining additional context and filling remaining gaps on FSM's existing tourism offering including the extent of current capacity and the quality of infrastructure. The step provided the chance for stakeholders to share their vision for tourism and capacity development and their hopes for leveraging tourism for economic growth.





Common themes identified the need for additional government-led infrastructure projects, private sector investment for community-run accommodations and SMEs with support directed toward minority-owned businesses to bridge existing gaps. Nan Madol, was seen as having the potential to generate interest on a destination level, but prior to promotion, requiring substantial improvements to overhauled landscaping, additional infrastructure, enhanced signage, more promotional messaging, streamlined access fees and cohesive site management. Stakeholders of all levels expressed the need for marketing and promotional advertising, both for Nan Madol, but additionally for FSM's authentic natural and cultural features to put the destination on the tourism map.

Taking these insights from the different project phases into account, a "vision" presentation summarized the main opportunities for multi-level tourism growth, focusing on community development as a catalyst for increasing the capacity for a tourism workforce, countering "brain drain" and establishing FSM and a worthy rival side-by-side with its competitors.



Kristin Methlagl Blue Economy Program - Waitt Institute

The Sea Going Green team brought the depth and breadth of knowledge and experience needed to understand the unique geotourism development challenges and opportunities of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). They pulled together a diverse team of experts to develop a vision for the role geotourism can play in the FSM's blue economy.

Throughout our work together, from project design to final deliverables, the team was professional, organized and highly collaborative. They were flexible to meet shifting timelines and availability of key stakeholders while remaining steadfast in their efforts to synthesize insights into valuable deliverables.

I can recommend SGG's service with enthusiasm to others looking for a dedicated and diligent sustainable tourism partner committed to delivering unquestionable value to their clients and positive impact to the world.





OBJECTIVES MET



Undertook literature review and political analyses



Conducted stakeholder interviews



Developed a "vision" for sustainable tourism



Analyzed tourism anchor products




Provided recommendations for intervention

& MORE

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Do you have questions that
you'd like to discuss with us? -
Get in touch!

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