



Title of the Best Practices Story: Santa Rita de Cássia - The Monument that Transformed a City.

Destination: Santa Cruz – RN

Country: Brasil

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Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business and Marketing

Destination description:

The municipality of Santa Cruz, located in the northeast region of Brazil, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, occupies an area of 624,356 km² with an estimated population of 37,313 inhabitants (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE, 2022). Located approximately 114 km from the capital Natal, Santa Cruz is in the Trairi region, in the interior of the state, and is recognized mainly for its strong religious tradition. The municipality's objective is by 2028 to be recognized as the main religious tourism destination in the Brazilian Northeast.

In 2023, Santa Cruz joined the DEL Turismo program, a participatory planning methodology that is divided into working groups through Technical Chambers (CTs), allowing active popular participation with a focus on sustainability.

In 2010, Santa Cruz, which previously did not have significant potential to guarantee the permanence of its residents in the locality, took a big step towards local development through tourism by installing the Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia, aiming to attract tourists and preserve the local intangible cultural heritage through religious tourism.

As part of an innovative initiative, the monument of Saint Rita of Cássia, the largest Catholic statue in the world, measuring 56 meters in height, was installed at the top of Mount Carmel. This installation transformed Santa Cruz into a religious destination of national and international recognition.

Summary of the history of good practices:

The Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia was designed by the then mayor Luiz Antônio Lourenço de Farias (Tomba Farias), who, upon identifying local development problems, joined forces with various social and political bodies to create a religious tourist attraction. Since 1835, Santa Rita has been the patron saint of the municipality, a common tradition in Brazilian cities.

Santa Cruz, located in the Trairi region, between the coast and the hinterland of Rio Grande do Norte, faced serious water resource problems that hampered traditional economic activities, such as livestock and agriculture. Realizing the need to strengthen the local economy, municipal management saw tourism as an opportunity, especially due to the strategic geographic location of the municipality. To attract tourists, it was decided to build a Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia with the largest Catholic statue in the world. In just over two years, the project was completed and, in 2010, the Religious Tourist Complex became a reality, transforming Santa Cruz into the largest religious destination in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. This project not only attracted national and international tourists, but also promoted local growth and development, improving the quality of life and increasing the community's sense of belonging.

Problems faced:

Until the mid-1970s, Santa Cruz's economy was traditionally focused on agriculture, raising cattle and planting cotton, supporting the community. However, the boll weevil pest (an insect with the greatest potential for damaging cotton crops) devastated cotton production, and the community faced great economic difficulties. In 1981, Santa Cruz suffered a natural disaster caused by a major flood, once again requiring economic adaptation.

To recover, the city invested in the poultry slaughtering industry and sewing workshops, but faced challenges, especially related to water resources, even with the installation of a pipeline in 1999. It was in this context that municipal management decided to invest in a new economic segment: religious tourism, uniting the community's faith with a new development opportunity.

Even with budgetary challenges and the need for strong political articulation, the management conceived the installation of the largest Catholic monument in the world. The objective was to constantly attract tourists, encouraging the opening of new companies and promoting the sustainable development of the local economy, anchored in faith and devotion to Santa Rita de Cássia.

With the installation of the monument, Santa Cruz became known as the Sanctuary City, attracting visitors and fostering economic growth through religious tourism.

Methods, steps and tools applied:

In order for the project for the Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia to be carried out, it was necessary to adjust decisive points, such as:

- Idealization of a new segment of economic activity focusing on religious tourism;
- Coordination with the Catholic Church;
- Coordination with public bodies;
- Hiring a specialist professional;
- Community involvement;
- Creation of a tourist attraction;
- Appointment of a technical professional to manage local tourism activities;

From a visit to Christ the Redeemer (RJ), the then mayor Tomba Farias saw the monument of a Saint on a large scale in the municipality of Santa Cruz, with a view to the idea of seeking a new economic activity for the destination. The manager got in touch with different sectors of society, seeking support and partnership for the audacious project. As it was a Catholic image, the then local parish priest, Father Aerton, was approached, showing interest, as well as senators, deputies, governor and vice-governor, as it was a work that would be carried out with public resources, due to its project being aimed at benefiting the local population and the state of Rio Grande do Norte. The project had a budget of three million reais and, due to the written project being completed and the manager's efforts to seek parliamentary amendments, the resource was released.

The union of municipal, state and federal public administration, together with the support of the Catholic Church, represented by Father Aerton who, together with the Vatican, obtained from Pope Benedict XVI the donation of the land where Mount Carmel (site of the Sanctuary) is located, allowed the execution of the work on the Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia. Based on these initiatives, Alexandre Azedo (Architect and Urban Planner, Sculptor and retired Professor of the Architecture course at the Federal University of Paraíba) was hired to execute the statue and Sanctuary project. The construction of the statue was carried out in a rustic manner, receiving support from the community, including the evangelical community, according to the sculptor mentioned above, who lived in the city during the entire construction period and used his own technique and logistics to assemble the monument. The work took just over two years to complete, with 120

professionals hired to carry it out, primarily residents of the destination. The construction of the sanctuary and the statue were carried out simultaneously. The space of the Sanctuary is large, open to the public and from there you can see a charming sunset consisting of structured environments with a room of promises, chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, pilgrims' square, parking lot, chapel where masses are celebrated, craft and souvenir shops, snack bar, candle room and bathrooms. In addition to the place where the monument was installed, there was a warehouse where the full-size pieces were started and tested and, soon after this phase, they were transported and assembled with interwoven wood, clay, plaster and concrete, with plaster pieces that weighed an average of 200kg, marked in levels of letters and numbers and erected every 5 meters.

In 2010, the Religious Tourist Complex: Sanctuary of Santa Rita de Cássia was inaugurated, bringing to the city of Santa Cruz the largest Catholic statue in the world built in reinforced concrete, measuring 56 meters high, being larger than Christ the Redeemer (RJ) and larger than the Statue of Liberty (NYC). The initiative allowed a new economic segment for the locality, awakening pride in residents and a feeling of belonging to the place, strengthening the intangible cultural heritage based on the Christian faith. In addition to this, a tourism specialist was appointed to take over the Tourism Secretariat who, using planning tools to monitor development and encourage local tourism, presented a tourism alternative with a focus on sustainability, as guided by the Sustainable Development Goals – ODS.

Solution:

With the installation of the largest Catholic statue in the world, visible from more than 5 km away, the municipality of Santa Cruz emerged as a prominent religious tourism destination. The municipality's projection and credibility increased significantly in 2012, when, through the Gemellaggio between Santa Cruz and Cascia (Italy), the tourist and religious complex received from the Italian parish, now its "sister", a relic of the body of Saint Rita, which It became part of the Sanctuary's heritage, strengthening cultural development.

Concerned with environmental development, municipal management installed a controlled landfill, solving part of the problems related to the environment. In the lower part of Mount Carmel there was an open dump, which became more visible with the increase in the flow of tourists and workers in the complex. Understanding that tourism can promote and encourage sustainability through specific actions, management also supported the separation of waste through selective collection campaigns and support for the recycling cooperative, solving problems for the environment and the community, until then little noticed.

Achievements and Results:

After the installation of the Sanctuary, the municipality showed significant development, consolidating itself as a religious tourist destination and the main tourist destination in the rural/trairi region. In just 14 years, he became known and referenced both nationally and internationally. Receiving an average of 300 thousand tourists per year, municipal management invests in tourism marketing, participating in tourism fairs to promote the destination and attract more visitors. In 10 years, three tourist inventories were carried out, proving the exponential growth of the segment.

Comparing the inventories carried out, in 2013 Santa Cruz had 9 accommodation facilities with 165 Housing Units (HUs) and 361 beds. In 2023, the tourist inventory indicated 14 accommodation facilities, offering 243 UH's and 663 beds, a growth of almost 100% in the sector. In the food and beverage segment, the municipality had 17 establishments in 2013, while in 2023 this number increased to 76, able to serve 4,725 people per day, an increase of more than four times in the number of companies in a registration period 10 years.

Due to investment in religious tourism, several other sectors of the economy also grew. New colleges and universities were installed, as well as pharmacies, chain supermarkets and branches of large companies, generating more opportunities for citizens and improving social development. Several scientific works were carried out, addressing tourism as a striking feature of Santa Cruz.

In addition to these results, there is still a project awaited by the local community: the installation of the cable car. The work is more recent and continues the tourist complex project, expanding its potential and being seen as a great opportunity to further increase tourism, providing greater job and income opportunities for the population.

Lessons learned and advice:

The creation of a tourist attraction in Santa Cruz proves that any destination can invest in tourism and transform its reality. Despite the challenges, it is possible to implement a new economic segment as long as there is focus, social and political articulation, community involvement and specific management in tourism. This process involves planning, directing and controlling the activity, projecting the city for the future.

The case of Santa Rita de Cássia is already inspiring other destinations, such as the municipality of São Miguel Arcanjo (SP), which is in the process of installing a statue of the saint. Representatives of local public management claim that the example of Santa Cruz boosted the effort to build the statue in their municipality. Today, Santa Cruz is a prominent point in Rio Grande do Norte thanks to the Religious Tourist Complex: Santuário de Santa Rita de Cássia, gaining prominence in national media, with an estimated audience of 90,000 faithful participating in the procession on the patron saint's festival in May 2024 confirming the demand and success of a project that presented a new reality for Santa Cruz, proving that Santa Rita de Cássia is a monument that transformed a city.

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