Alter do Chão, the Call of the Green Waters: Where the Divine Meets the Enchanted

Alter do Chão - Santarém - Pará, Brazil
Municipal Tourism Department
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
Alter do Chão, a village on Brazil's Tapajós River, is home to the Borari indigenous people whose sacred Sairé ritual was banned by the Catholic Church in 1943 as "demonic," forcing elders to keep it alive secretly in the jungle for 30 years, disguising it with Catholic imagery to avoid punishment. The silence broke in the 1970s when a Borari man discreetly drew the sacred Sairé arch in the beach sand, inspiring resident Seu Argentino to reconstruct it from cedar wood, leading to the festival's triumphant public return in 1973 and the village's transformation into a community-led ecotourism destination while refusing to "decorate their açaí" — diluting their raw ancestral identity for outsiders. The community sustains this through the principle "from where you take and do not put back, it ends," planting over 100 seedlings for every tree cut for a festival mast, and practising Dabakuri, a ritual of sharing abundance rather than hoarding it. This resilience transformed a quiet fishing village into a globally recognised destination supporting local artisans, sweet-makers and guesthouses. The lesson: cultural identity must never be altered to please outsiders — innovation can coexist with tradition, but compromising one's roots to seem more acceptable means losing the collective soul that made the place worth visiting in the first place.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Located on the Tapajós River, it shifts between the "Amazonian winter"—which submerges the mystical Enchanted Forest—and summer, which reveals white beaches and Lago Verde. These waters are treated as a sacred, spiritual territory. The soul of the village belongs to the Borari indigenous people. After their ancient ritual, the Sairé, was banned by the Church in 1943, they kept it alive in secret deep in the jungle for 30 years, forging a local reality rooted in fierce cultural survival. Nature and culture are one. The community lives by the inherited maxim: "From where you take and do not put back, it ends," practicing the Dabakuri (a ritual of abundance and sharing). The village successfully transformed from a quiet fishing community into a global destination through community-led tourism. They welcome the world while refusing to "decorate their açaí"—meaning they protect their raw, ancestral identity from being diluted for outside eyes.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For 30 years, the Borari people faced severe cultural and spiritual repression. Following a 1943 official ban by the Catholic Church—which viewed indigenous worldview and sacred practices (like the Sairé ritual and the Tarubá beverage) as demonic—the community's identity was completely suffocated and forced into hiding. At stake was the very survival of the Borari culture, ancestral dignity, and collective soul. If the silence continued, generations of traditions, spiritual connection to the "enchanted ones," and indigenous identity risked being permanently erased by official society. The turning point arrived in the 1970s, born from a mix of accumulated fear and a powerful collective need to resist. The moment of realization was catalyzed when a Borari man broke the silence by discreetly drawing the shape of the sacred Sairé arch in the beach sand, whispering, "This right here is the Sairé." * Emotions & Conflicts: The core conflict was between the fear of an "Amazonian Inquisition" and the unyielding faith of the elders. This clandestine drawing sparked a transition from hiding in fear to a triumphant, public reclaiming of their identity in 1973, proving that their ancestral roots could no longer be suppressed.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The Borari people and the community of Alter do Chão sought to reclaim their cultural identity, dignity, and ancestral sovereignty through the resurrection of the Sairé festival. This mattered for the future of their place because it allowed them to transition from a quiet, subsistence-based riverside village into a globally recognized sustainable tourism destination without losing their indigenous soul, spiritual essence, or environmental harmony. While the resistance was sustained in secret by village elders and matriarchs (like Maroca Sabina) for 30 years, the catalyst for the public revival in the 1970s was an indigenous Borari man (Seu Argentino), who courageously broke the silence by drawing the sacred Sairé arch in the sand. The community was motivated by an unyielding faith and a refusal to let their culture be erased by historical, religious, and political repression. They were driven by the need to protect their ancestral worldview (cosmovisão), honor the "enchanted spirits" of the forest and waters, and ensure that future generations would grow up rooted in their true identity.

The Journey: How change happened

The journey began with severe cultural and religious suppression. In 1943, the Catholic Church —unable to understand the indigenous worldview—labeled the sacred practices of the Borari people as demonic. The traditional Tarubá drink was condemned, the festival was officially banned inside the village, and the sacred original arch vanished under mysterious circumstances. For 30 long years, the Sairé was forced into hiding. To keep their ancestry alive without facing punishment, the Borari elders adapted. They took the ritual into the dense jungle, celebrating secretly on isolated farms. To safeguard their true indigenous essence from the "Amazonian Inquisition," they innovated by placing Catholic images at the center of the rite as a protective shield. The silence was broken by a small but powerful moment of resistance: a Borari man went to the beach and discreetly drew the shape of the sacred arch in the sand, whispering, "This right here is the Sairé." Guided by that simple drawing, a local resident named Seu Argentino was able to meticulously reconstruct the arch out of cedar wood. In 1973, the Sairé made its triumphant, official return to the village.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The revival of the Sairé in 1973 after 30 years of forced secrecy rebuilt the Borari people's identity, dignity, and ancestral pride. Economically, it transformed a quiet riverside village into a thriving global tourist destination. Local artisans, sweet-makers, and residents successfully adapted, creating new livelihoods and significantly improving their quality of life through a balanced model of community-based tourism. Visitors experience a profound sense of peace and a deep connection to the supernatural "enchanted" elements of the region. The transformation is emotional and physical; the text notes that stressed, sick, and depressed visitors leave the village feeling healed by the area's vital energy, profound silence, and love-infused cuisine. The breakthrough lies in implementing ancestral sustainability practices. The community successfully balances growth with conservation by ensuring that for every single tree cut down to serve as a festival mast, more than 100 seedlings are planted in its place. Alter do Chão evolved from a secluded, subsistence-based village into a globally coveted destination. However, unlike places that lose their soul to tourism, Alter do Chão remains unique because it innovated without losing its essence. It successfully integrated modern tools and new folk festivals (like the Botos) alongside its original, uncompromised ancestral rituals, proving that ancestry and the future can walk hand in hand.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The incredible resilience of the Borari people. Despite severe religious and official prohibition (including a 30-year period of invisibility starting in 1943), the faith and culture of the Sairé survived because the elders secretly kept it alive in the jungle, cleverly adapting it with Catholic imagery to avoid punishment. Do not "decorate" or alter your cultural identity to please outsiders or tourists. If you compromise your roots to appear more acceptable, you lose your collective soul. Innovation is fine, but it must coexist with tradition, not replace it. The loss of the original

sacred arch and the forced silence taught the community that resistance sometimes requires knowing when to quiet down and hide to safeguard tradition. Today, modern technical fundraising projects often only serve institutional interests and fail to reach the actual community members (the fishermen, sweet-makers, and healers). The lesson is that project creators must actively listen to the local people to generate true quality of life. True Sustainability: Nature is a guide; humanity must mimic and respect it. The guiding principle is: "From where you take and do not put back, it ends." For every tree used in the ritual, over 100 seedlings are planted. The Concept of Dabakuri: Abundance is not about hoarding wealth, but about producing in harmony with the environment so you can share and offer hospitality to neighbors and visitors.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The resilience of the Borari people kept the Sairé ritual alive secretly for 30 years. Its return in 1973 restored the community's dignity, transforming a banned indigenous rite into a powerful symbol of cultural resistance. The festival drove Alter do Chão from a quiet fishing village into a world-famous ecotourism hub, fostering local businesses, guesthouses, and handmade crafts. The community blended tradition with new ideas, creating a successful partnership between locals, tourism, and politics, while adding the folkloric Botos festival to the celebrations. Ancient ecological practices became long-term rules, such as planting 100 seedlings for every tree used in the ritual and farming through the concept of Dabakuri (sharing abundance). A deep sense of belonging emerged, uniting bloodline Borari and new residents alike in a fierce commitment to protect their authentic identity from being distorted for tourists. The future of Alter do Chão is safe because its traditions and environmental values are passed directly to the youth. It remains a global example of hope, proving that a destination can embrace the modern world while its ancestry walks hand in hand with the future.

Awards or Certifications

Alter do Chão achieves Silver Award for best practices in sustainable tourism

Web Articles

https://turismo.santarem.pa.gov.br/noticias/turismo/cortejo-dos-mestres-do-saire-e-do-carimbo-abre-as-celebracoes-pelos-268-anos-de-alter-do-chao-dlafst

Other Relevant Links

https://santarem.pa.gov.br/noticias/cultura/exposicao-sobre-o-saire-leva-a-cultura-de-santarem-ao-museu-de-arte-sacra-de-sao-paulo-ri0knd

Quotes or Testimonials

Infelizmente o relato de grande relevância na história , na cultura, no turismo do cacique Osmar Boarari é impossível se encaixar em poucas linha a vida de quem conhe a luta, lutou e sempre lutará pelo anseios ancestrais. Todas as respostas dessa plataforma foram super resumidas de um história linda que poderia ter sido contada. Irião se encantar!

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