

Helping India to showcase its heritage to a growing tourism market

Australian Sue Hodges has developed an unusual and highly successful business: she creates and manages heritage projects around the world, including India.

'India is emerging as a leader in heritage interpretation, particularly in rights-based heritage,' says Sue Hodges, Managing Director, Sue Hodges Productions Pty Ltd (SHP). 'We have focused on gaining work in India, not only because of the depth and beauty of the country's heritage, but also because of the possibilities to establish new ways of presenting heritage with receptive Indian partners.'

She says that many states in India are now seeing heritage interpretation as a source of economic growth and social renewal.

'Our heritage interpretation work adds value to a project,' she explains. 'For example, if you want to get tourists to stay a little longer at a site – then we can help. Or, if a client has an idea for a heritage museum or a visitor attraction, then we can guide them through the process that makes the idea a reality.'

Sue Hodges's company, SHP (Sue Hodges Productions Pty Ltd), encompasses all aspects of heritage work, from concept plans to implementation. Over the past thirteen years, SHP has produced heritage interpretation at a wide variety of sites, from historic buildings and real estate developments to parks, gardens, museums, zoos and marine environments.

'We've put together Visitors' Centres, multi-media heritage-themed installations, heritage trails, exhibitions, films, publications, tourist trails, public art... the list is endless,' says Ms Hodges.

Current projects in India

SHP has worked internationally since 2011, particularly in Malaysia, and is entering the Indian market after participating in five trade missions.



Moorish Mosque in Kapurthala (*Illustrative image of a heritage site in India*)

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Sue Hodges, Managing Director, SHP

The company has just been selected as the first-ranked firm for two Asian Development Bank tenders in India for cultural and natural heritage interpretation in the Punjab State and is currently in the process of contract signature with the Department of Tourism, Punjab Government.

SHP is also awaiting signature on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Victorian State Government and the Tourism Department at the Government of Karnataka for work on several major interpretation projects in that state.

In other developments, SHP has formed a joint venture with the architectural firm Kapoor and Associates to tender for a wide range of museum and war memorial projects around the country. 'Kapoor and Associates approached us after we participated in a Victorian Government Trade Mission,' says Ms Hodges.

'We work in a highly specialised industry, which means that once people hear about our services we often don't have to tender or compete for work,' she notes. 'Our main challenge in winning work in India has been in dealing with bureaucratic issues surrounding tendering.'

Ms Hodges says that because this type of work often comes with a fixed price, such as the job about to be finalised in the Punjab, the company tenders for the amounts nominated in the tenders. 'With other work we establish the budget with the client before submitting our final quotation.'

Frequent market visits

'Whenever you do business overseas you have to be sure that you understand your market,' says Ms Hodges, 'and this is particularly the case in India.'

'For us, that means frequent market visits. In fact, my team now makes so many visits to Asia that you could almost say we are commuting. We are there every month or so at the moment, with the visits about to increase'.

Sue Hodges says that while traditional heritage interpretation has focused largely on tourism, SHP also takes into account the importance of heritage sites to the people who live there.

A lot of emphasis is put into understanding the local culture. For SHP's work in Malaysia, for example, Ms Hodges created a world-first methodology for building economic and social capacity through heritage interpretation based on the 'rights-based' approaches to heritage recommended by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

On each project, SHP employs local people where possible. 'We work with local experts to make sure that we really understand the local culture,' Sue Hodges says. 'That's vital; otherwise we are doing the work in a western-centric way that is really inappropriate and outdated. And we put a huge amount of effort into relationship building.'

SHP uses a reverse brief with clients. 'We ask them what they want and then we respond with a reverse brief so that the client understands exactly what we are offering.'

'We have 95 per cent repeat business,' says Ms Hodges. 'A lot of the work we have had in Asia has come about because people have come to us.' She notes that Austrade and the Victorian Government 'have been a wonderful help here'.

Doing business in India

Sue Hodges' advice to other Australian companies thinking of entering the Indian market is to go with the attitude that it's a skills transfer. 'You have to work out what you want to get out of it and what you want to give back, and you also need to establish a point of difference in what you are offering.'

Ms Hodges says that there are enormous opportunities in India – 'but you have to understand how the country operates to be able to work there.'

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