

Travel for Heritage: GHF Preserves the World's Most Delicate Sites by Esha Chhabra

California-based nonprofit Global Heritage Fund preserves ancient and historical sites around the world that are otherwise neglected and crumbling. Several of the sites that GHF has rescued have gone on to become UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The idea is simple and straightforward, explains Dr. Vince Michael, Executive Director of GHF:

"Heritage is not a luxury but a basic human need."

Dowser speaks with Michael about GHF's efforts to preserve the stories of the past.

How does GHF determine the sites that they choose to work with?

We have a series of criteria which are reviewed first by a Senior Advisory Board of international experts in conservation, economics, architecture, archaeology, tourism and community development. Then they are reviewed by the Board of Trustees in Committee and voted on by the Board as a whole. Our projects are all 1. World Heritage (or Tentative List), 2.) Endangered, 3.) In developing regions

The criteria embody the various aspects of our Preservation by Design methodology: Each project should have Conservation, Planning, Partnerships (both during our involvement and afterwards) and Community Development. We rate how each project meets these criteria: the ideal project has many partners, promotes community development through conservation, and includes long-term management planning.

Partnerships: An Iraqi flag flies over the ziggurat of Ur during the handover ceremony. GHF is working with Iraqi authorities to ensure the site's long-term sustainability (Photo Courtesy of GHF)

In areas of conflict, such as Syria, how is GHF able to work on preservation?

Often we cannot. We prepare to work in a country in conflict once the conflict ends.

Instead of pouring money into preservation, we're seeing a lot of money go into the development of commercial centres, new shopping complexes, sky high office buildings and more especially in emerging markets. How can you reverse this trend?

We don't need to reverse the trend as much as amend it. You can create shops and offices in a sensitive way that supports the historic architecture of a place, or allows the historic archaeology of a place to shine. Preservation is not opposed to development, in fact preservation is a form of development. It is a form of development that is more sustainable and lasts longer because it is developed in harmony with a community's character. The type of cookie-cutter development you are describing can be a very short-term benefit to a community.

The ancient city of Pingyao (China) has been reasonable well preserved, however there is still much work to be done in order to ensure its structural longevity. (Photo Courtesy of GHF)

How do you have "sustainable tourism" - is that an oxymoron or is that really possible and how so? Doesn't tourism bring its challenges - increased waste, pollution, and construction of resorts?

A responsible plan, such as we have done at Ciudad Perdida in Colombia, calculates the "carrying capacity" of tourism to a site.

Our Community tourism bureau in Cambodia is involved in solid waste management.

Tourism is a good form of economic development if it is done intelligently. I always warn against "catastrophic tourism development" where all other forms of economic activity are suppressed in favor of a tourist monoculture. That is always a bad idea. Resorts separate from the community tend to have a negative effect, while resorts integrated into the community can have a positive effect.

Where are you seeing the greatest neglect of historical sites and has GHF approached these countries about working with them to preserve?

There are many more countries and sites than an organization of our size can handle. Our

Global Heritage Network provides a forum for professionals and community members worldwide to share information about sites. This is a source of finding new projects. We also look for those that are most threatened, often by climate or conflict. We need to work in concert with countries so we often simply show up and ask “How can we help?”

Çatalhöyük, Turkey: In developing new conservation methods, local knowledge is used to understand the maintenance of the mudbrick architecture. Local women and men prepared the wall-capping material, locally available earthen plaster (marl), to apply onto the mudbrick walls. (Photo Courtesy of GHF)

How do you ensure that the local populations have buy in?

We will not do a project unless conservation will be carried out by local workers and the overall project is keyed into local community development. Often this involves training or education as an important part of our work, whether it is in conservation, tourism, or local business development.

Wat Phu (Laos) is still important to the local community, which conducts ceremonies at the site (Photo Courtesy of GHF).

Why do you think preservation is so important?

We want to see the defining elements of a place that describe and contain its history, its heritage. We want to see places with deep stories and deep character. This is not only why tourists go to a place but also why people might choose to live in a place and work to improve it. Heritage is not a luxury but a basic human need: our need to be connected to a place; to define the horizons of our cultural inheritance and to know that the world we inhabit is greater than the boundaries of our individual lives.