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A pop-up Saira ran for Hotel San Cristobal before it opened in Todos Santos, Mexico, had no turnover rates a year after the hotel launched. The community felt the property and its developers were an additive, and not just taking from the community.



The pop-up hotel

Building a new hotel is an exceptionally tricky business. Aside from operational considerations and putting heads in beds, there's also the need to keep the neighbours and local community happy, as well as hire the right talent to provide service to guests. When you layer on the challenge of opening a property in a remote locale, these problems are exacerbated. Also, once you hire staff, priority number one is retaining them. In times of strong economies and tight labour markets, staff retention is a make or break business metric.

Saira, a school founded by hospitality veteran Harsha Chanrai, bills itself as 'a non-profit enterprise disrupting the traditional hospitality routes to sourcing employees'. The programme establishes pop-up schemes to train local staff for properties set to open. It provides training, jobs, and some much-needed community diplomacy via a link between a property and its surrounding residents.

It differs from other storied hospitality schools like Lausanne or Cornell in that it operates on a temporary basis. The hotel sets up in often remote places for a period of a few months, and trains local people in all aspects of hospitality. Through training modules delivered by hospitality veterans, they are able to take staff from close to zero experience to the ability to work at some of the most storied hospitality brands in the world for demanding guests.

The programme aims to help cultivate what every new property is aiming for: service that feels local to its surroundings, and specific to a culture. A nuanced, sensitive approach that makes a guest feel welcomed and at home.

A recent example can be seen in the program run for Habitas, a hospitality brand in Namibia. Saira came in, selected

the students that had the aptitude, energy and intangibles, often called the 'hospitality gene', and set to work educating them. Erin Muscatelli, one of the team told me, 'the program shed light on the untapped talent in Namibia, particularly with the youth. They are curious and passionate and want to better their lives but have had little to no access to the education and opportunities to obtain employment.'

The programme successfully trained them up, also creating the mindset that this wasn't just a job, but rather a pathway to a longer-term career. And as Namibia's tourism growth continues to grow, with more than a million visitors coming every year, prospects continue to grow both domestically as well as opening up opportunities to work abroad.

The programme works with crawl, walk, and run phases. First, it covers the basics of proving service: hospitality 101 (which fork goes where), and also teaches the students the ethos and nuances of the brand they will be working with on graduation. As the curriculum progresses, perhaps most interesting is how Saira handles the harder parts: cultural and ethical dilemmas and the idea of emotional intelligence. Students are given a variety of scenarios, and deep immersion into the cultural differences they will encounter relative to how they live in their communities – which can diverge widely.

How would a staff member that grew up in a conservative environment interact with a same-sex couple, for example? What about the differences in how a German interacts with staff, rather than a Japanese person? Scenarios that the average person doesn't think of but are encountered by frontline staff every day.

The school also focuses on the 'critical yet sometimes misunderstood difference between sympathy and empathy'. Communication is also a focus, both

within the staff team and with the guests, including unspoken communication such as physical cues and body language. The final module covers on-site technical training with the various areas and departments of a hotel.

It's not all soft diplomacy. There's hard numbers and hard metrics that the programme can benefit. Staff churn is one of the biggest challenges that modern hospitality brands face, with turnover rates for the past few years averaging over 70%, according to data from the National Restaurant Association related to dining and accommodation. When launching a property, relocating trained staff costs money, and poaching from other properties creates a negative cycle, according to Saira, 'creating free agents with little or no brand loyalty'. As the theory goes, investment in local staff, nurturing and making an employee feel like something from the ground up can engender loyalty and lower these rates.

A pop-up Saira ran for the Hotel San Cristobal before it opened in Todos Santos, Mexico, had no turnover rates a year after the hotel launched, and the local community felt like the property and its developers were an additive, and not just taking from the community. When I stayed, the hospitality felt warm, personal and heartfelt, worlds away from the tourism ecosystem of Cabo San Lucas, an hour down the road. While the approach there is a bit more formulaic, the staff at San Cristobal felt genuinely welcoming. Plus, the range of students selected to work full-time were also career pivoters, rebooting their lives by changing roles: a former mechanic now works as a houseman, a furniture maker now works in the business of creating moods and smiles from guests.

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