

Quick facts

- Two brothers from the Vunaspef Village - Michel and Sam Andikar - established Millennium Cave Tours (MCT). In 2012, they enrolled in the tourism course at Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC).
- MCT is now a successful company that employs more than 30 local people. Earning an income means many villagers can now afford to access medical care. Pregnant women are now able to afford to go to hospital to give birth, rather than in their often very basic homes.
- Rated highly on Tripadvisor, Millennium Cave Tours (MCT) are contributing significantly to the tourism industry, which is Vanuatu's main source of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) income (Source: <http://www.vnso.gov.vu/>). Today, tourism operators take tourist groups to visit the caves on a daily basis.
- The community has built three kindergartens and eight village chiefs are working together to build a new local school. The school will mean that children can stay living with their families rather than live away from home to attend schools in other villages.
- With more tourists visiting the village, the local people are motivated to ensure that their village is clean.



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

CREATING SKILLS FOR LIFE

IMPACT Case Study

Millennium Cave Tours



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Guiding the way to a better future

Two Australia-Pacific Technical College students have established a tourism business that has transformed a small village in Vanuatu.



The Millennium Cave



Saint Joseph Kindergarten School, Nambel Village



Sam Andikar with the village chiefs

Brothers Sam and Michel Andikar have converted Millennium Cave Tours from an ad hoc, low-return tour guide service to a thriving, self-sustaining local business.

The business now earns enough income to build and support kindergartens and a school for the community and to employ 30 people from neighbouring villages.

The remote Vunaspef Village on Vanuatu's Espiritu Santo Island is home to 150 people as well as the magnificent Millennium Caves. Hidden in a tropical rainforest, these 4-kilometre-long caves boast 50-metre-high ceilings and are full of bats and swallows. Although the caves have been known to locals for many years, it wasn't until a German television crew broadcast footage of the caves in 1998 that they gained global attention.

Today, tourism operators take groups to visit the caves on a daily basis. To assist these larger operators, two brothers from the Vunaspef Village - Michel and Sam Andikar - established Millennium Cave Tours (MCT) in 2000.

Then in 2012, the Andikar brothers enrolled in the tourism course at Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC), in order to improve their business skills and develop a way for the village to benefit financially from the popularity of the caves.

Since completing the course, MCT is now a successful company that employs more than 30 local people.

"Before I was in the darkness with tourism, but after my study I have realised new things," says Sam Andikar. "After the studies, we started to manage this business now we have more confidence and skills and proven business success."

The company has its own office, a professional website, and takes direct bookings via phone and email. The global travel website TripAdvisor lists the Millennium Caves as one of the top attractions in Vanuatu.

The brothers are also receiving ongoing support for tour guiding, first aid and occupational safety through the Australian Government-funded Technical Vocational Education Training Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP).

"After the APTC training, and with the help of TVET, we can tighten the tour program and turn it into a real business," Michel says.

As part of the training, the pair had the opportunity to improve their accounting skills and this has also been integral to their success.

"My future life is to develop this business to be a professional standard business, and to help the community to survive and find a better life," says Sam.

The success of the business has not only benefited Michel and Sam, but also the village and its people, especially through

employment.

"The people, before when they do the gardening it is hard work and long hours, and sometimes they haven't got money for soap, or school fees or if the kids are sick and need to go to the hospital. But now they have money and that is a big change," says Sam.

This new work has been life changing for many of the MCT employees.

"Before I worked so hard to get the kerosene or soap or rice for my family," says Peter, one of the tour guides. "Now it is easier to pay. Now I feel in my heart that I am very glad because this is the first time that I've worked and being happy."

This employment also has a flow-on effect for the children in the village, providing money to families for their children's education.

"My dad carries bags for the tourists," says Barnaby, a 12-year-old local boy. "He pays our school fees and buy food; we get books and clothes and a pen. I feel happy."

As well as tour guides, many women in the village are employed to serve refreshments for tour guests and to assist with the homestay dinners and cleaning.

"During the past I had no work, but when the tours began it helped," says Estella, one of the village women working with MCT. "Now the tour employs most of us here in the community and it generates income inside the community."

Rosela, who also helps with the homestay and cooks delicious traditional Vanuatu food for guests, is also very positive about the work with MCT.

"This is a change - first we found it difficult to earn money to pay the school fees, but now we get money from the tourists," she says.

In addition to providing employment for local villagers, the company is now returning some of its profits to the community to build a school and kindergartens.

Michel believes it is important for the local children to be educated so that they can become "future leaders".

"With the money that we bring in with the tours we invest in the School Project to accommodate all the kids from the local communities," says Michel. "Our planning is to educate the kids so that in the future they are the ones to carry the business so it will be sustainable."

A rubbish-free business plan

With formal tourism training, the local people have learnt that it is important to keep their village clean, especially because tourists are often visiting on a daily basis.

"The training gave us good ideas for the tourists," says Simon Andikar, Chief of Nambel Village. "It is new thinking for people in the village, and a big change to keep the village clean [with] no rubbish anywhere, we just pick up everything."

"Before we just drop the plastic and rubbish, but now we keep the village clean, and everyone knows to do this, even the children."

Educating for the future

The success of the Millennium Cave Tours (MCT) has provided a unique opportunity for the business to invest in the education of local children.

"The income they are now generating through this tour, means the community is building kindergartens and a school," says Janine McLeod, the APTC tourism teacher who taught Sam and Michel.

The Millennium Cave School Project has funded the building of three local kindergartens, the most recent being Saint Joseph Kindergarten School at Nambel Village. The School Project also helped to fund the construction of a classroom at the new Fanafo Primary School.

These new kindergartens will all feed into the local Lackruja Primary School that opens in February 2014 - in time for the children to start the new school year. This school is an example of a successful local partnership between Millennium Cave School Project and eight village chiefs.

"I am so proud just because of the school," says Moltures Victor, Chief of Tambotal Village. "Before with the education [the children] move around and soon they can come home and join the village again. It is very good, I feel overjoyed."

Before these new schools were built, many children would have to leave home and move to another town to attend school, often living with extended family or guardians. This is expensive and also divides families and communities.

"Before when there is no school here the kids would have to go to Luganville town, so an hour's drive, but most [of the]time we leave them with guardians in the town," explains Raymonde, a teacher at the Nambel Village kindergarten.

The opportunity for children to be educated in their own towns provides the chance for them to connect with their local community and culture.

Abraham John, Chief of Nambauk Village, is thankful to the Australian government for its assistance, especially with helping the MCT business become more successful.

"Through their help the chiefs and people will benefit through this school project," he says. Chief of Beleru Village, Vatu Pierrot, agrees.

"When we start to talk about the school with the communities it looks like a dream, but through our community business, especially the cave tour, it has helped us to develop this dream to become a reality."

Partnering for success

The partnership between Millennium Cave Tour (MCT) and local communities to build a school and kindergartens was made possible by the strategic partnership between Australian Government-funded projects APTC and TVET Sector Strengthening Program (TVETSSP).

Contributing to the success of MCT is the training and ongoing support by APTC and TVETSSP for the MCT operators and staff.

Local villagers working as tour guides received coaching support through the Vanuatu TVETSSP for tour guiding, first aid and to address safety issues. Brothers Sam and Michel were then nominated by the community to apply for more advanced training via the APTC Certificate III in Tourism, where they could focus on communications, managing bookings and other business skills.

"This program is so amazing because so little has been done in the [Vanuatu] rural areas, you can think you are doing something small, but the impact is enormous," says Anna Gibert, Team Leader for the TVETSSP.

"Lives that are changed by relatively small inputs, but when these inputs are targeted, coordinated and strategic, the impact is significant."

Anna believes that the training success is a direct result of the partnership between APTC and TVETSSP.

"We [TVETSSP] provide that first nudge and lower level training and then APTC can come in and provide that higher level, Australian qualification. Then when the students return home, we can provide monitoring and support so the learning is not lost."

Providing money for education is part of Michel and Sam's plan to continue the growth of MCT.