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MONKEY BUSINESS

A primate primer on niche marketing for 2016

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11 JAN 2016: The 9th cycle of the 12-year Chinese Zodiac begins on February 8th 2016 as the year of the Monkey. Astrologists are preparing their horoscopic predictions; souvenir manufacturers are readying the T-shirts, posters and fridge magnets; and post offices are printing Year of the

Monkey stamps. Many of us grew up with monkeys depicted as mischievous, funny, lovable, clever and cuddly. We think of the Curious George series of children's books, the human-like personality of 'Cheetah' in the Tarzan Movies, and visions of King Kong fighting bomber planes on top of New York's Empire State Building.



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We have monkey tunes running through our heads, from Chuck Berry's "Too much monkey business", to the Beatles' "Everybody's got something to hide except for me and my monkey"; not to mention two different Monkey Man songs by the Rolling Stones and the Specials.

In various mythologies, monkeys have a significant influence that includes the Hindu legend of Hanuman, the Chinese parable of the monkey catching the moon's reflection in a pool of water, and the Japanese carving of the three monkeys that See No Evil (Mizaru), Hear No Evil (Kikazaru) and Speak No Evil (Iwazaru). While travellers visit the Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, about 2 hours north of Tokyo, to see the famous carving of the three wise monkeys, it's still those encounters with real

live monkeys that add a thrilling dynamic of excitement, adventure, playfulness, intrigue, caution and nature to the travel equation.

My first 'up close and personal' primate experience was on a school excursion in 1967 when we visited the Ape's Den on the Rock of Gibraltar to see the Barbary Macaques. We ignored the advice about getting too close and when one macaque jumped on my back I quickly handed my camera to a friend and asked him to take a photo. Weeks later when I had the film developed, there I was, facing the camera...but the macaque was facing the opposite direction. It was my face lined up perfectly with the macaque's butt. Still, it was an exciting day that I remember vividly.



On a visit to Japan in December, 2004, we set our sights on photographing the snow monkeys at Jigokudani, literally "Hell Valley", due to the hot springs and steaming vents in the area. From Nagano you take a local bus to the Monkey Park sign and then follow a trail through the woods for about 30 minutes to the Park entrance. The hot springs inside are filled with red-faced, fluffy, white-furred macaques, with the elders soaking peacefully in the warm waters while the adolescents splash in the water and jump on their mothers' backs. While an attendant is close by to ensure that the tourists behave, you can still get fairly close for photos.

After a few hours of shivering in the wintery weather we headed to the Korakukan Ryokan, just outside the park. This B & B style accommodation has a few 'people' hot springs but we were informed that if we wanted to soak in the outdoor 'onsen', we would have to share it with a few visiting macaques. As the proper clothing etiquette for a Japanese hot spring is "nothing" (you bring a very small washcloth with you and nothing more) we decided to let the macaques have the outdoor bath to themselves.

Sometimes monkey business changes from light-hearted antics to seemingly cold-hearted mischief, especially in destinations where the monkeys are routinely teased, tormented and tempted by locals and visitors.



At the Batu Caves, about 30 minutes outside of Kuala Lumpur, the prospect of climbing the 272 steps to the temple seems daunting until visitors catch glimpses of cute monkeys scampering up and down the stairs. Many locals bring food for the monkeys and over the years, the monkeys have learned that plastic and cloth boxes and bags contain food or bottled water. What might start out as photogenic hand to monkey feeding, ends up with the monkey grabbing all the food or tearing into the bags.

At Mt. Popa, about an hour drive from Bagan in Myanmar, the attraction is the Buddhist Monastery

on the summit of this ancient volcano. The macaques encountered along the climbing route only add to the adventure. And the same holds true at the Dambulla Cave Temple complex, about 45 miles north of Kandy in Sri Lanka. After visitors climb to the entrance of the complex, the monkeys line up to check them out, pose for photos and eye any items that possibly contain monkey treasures.

And at Uluwatu in Bali, visitors come in droves to see the famous Kecak Dance that takes place at sunset. Many arrive early to wander the cliffs and enjoy breathtaking views of the crashing waves of the Indian Ocean. But as they start to move toward the amphitheatre for the performance, the monkeys emerge. These monkeys prefer, well, anything that's not theirs. It's not unusual to hear someone yelling and then see a visitor chasing the monkey that stole a purse, hat, camera or eye glasses.

Of course the mother of all monkey experiences takes place in destinations where you can observe them in a relatively wild state. The image of gorilla-trekking in Uganda is only one example. On safari in Kenya, Baboon troops can be seen just about everywhere. Here there is no feeding or interacting...Baboons have serious canine teeth. But the thrill of watching them is priceless education.

We had a similar experience in Soberania National Park, just outside of Panama City where our guide stopped suddenly and whispered that we should listen. In the distance we could hear barking and roaring and he explained that these were Howler Monkeys. When we asked if we could get closer to see them, Gonzalo pointed to an overhanging tree branch, about 10 meters away, and asked if this was close enough. The Howler was lying on the

branch like a Hollywood Diva, casually checking us out.

In Malaysia, there are Orangutan Sanctuaries and Rehabilitation Centres outside of Kuching as well as in Kota Kinabalu, where visitors can watch the Orangutans swinging and climbing on branches as they approach the feeding platforms. Orphaned babies are fed by hand in a separate area. And along the nearby Kinabatangan River, visual serendipity is in the form of Proboscis Monkeys feeding in the overhead canopy.



Promoting the monkey niche in the Year of the Monkey can be good for monkey business. Capture the imagination of travellers of all generations as you market educational and eye-opening adventures that are exotic, natural, adventurous, mind-boggling, photogenic, contemplative, emotional, amazing and memorable.

Travel specialists live, eat and breathe their area of specialty. In 2016, take monkeys to the next level. Make them your prime mate in creative marketing.

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Monkeys

