



BAMEX PRELIMINARY TOURISM STRATEGY

Madagascar Business and Market Expansion Project

April 14, 2005

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**BAMEX
PRELIMINARY TOURISM STRATEGY**

Deliverable for Task 1: Ecotourism
MSI Subcontract to Chemonics

Submitted by
Deborah Orsini, MSI
April 14, 2005

Under its subcontract to Chemonics, MSI was asked to identify a US tourism expert to participate in the April 5, 2005 meeting in Madagascar on tourism development and promotion, in the context of the release of the Dreamworks Animation Studios film "Madagascar." MSI was to brief this expert on tourism potential, issues and marketing in Madagascar, in advance of the meeting. This report is the deliverable required for the above task, described in the subcontract as a 5-page report, outlining the results of the tourism contacts made, recommendations on the segment of the U.S. tourism market that Madagascar should target, and suggestions for actions to take in the near future.

1. Results of contacts made in advance of the April 5, 2005 tourism meeting

A total of five corporate entities in the U.S. tourism market were contacted. Feedback from each of the contacts was very positive. The key contact from each company expressed interest in the potential market and willingness to make the long trip to Madagascar to consult with BAMEX. Several individuals had time constraints with the proposed date of the meeting, but all expressed interest in remaining involved. The groups contacted, in alphabetical order, included:

1. Abercrombie and Kent- the largest of the luxury tour operators in the U.S. John Webley is the marketing manager for Africa, Abercrombie and Kent, Inc., 1520 Kensington Road #212, Oak Brook IL 60523-2141. Toll Free: 800-323-7308. Website: www.abercrombiekent.com (see tours under "Africa and Egypt")
2. Henderson Travel Service - the oldest and most experienced African-American owned tour operator for tours to Africa, now based in the Washington, D.C. area. Henderson has long-term experience in Ghana, Senegal and South Africa and is a two-time recipient of the ASTA Africa Trophy. Gaynelle Henderson-Bailey is the President and CEO, 7961 Eastern Ave, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Henderson also operates a management consulting division that specializes in event management, marketing, public relations and tourism development.
www.hendersontravel.com

3. Kartagener Associates Inc (KAI)- KAI specializes in US based sales and marketing strategies with a focus on promotion of long haul international travel products seeking to enter the US market. KAI's clientele includes National Tourism Boards, hotels and airlines in countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi. Henry Kartagener, President, worked for South African Airways for many years before starting his own travel promotion office. KAI, 631 Commack Rd, Suite 1A, Commack, NY 11725. www.kai.com
4. New Canaan Travel World- a boutique travel agency outside NYC that specializes in tours to South Africa. Susan Ragland is the CEO, 12 East Maple St, New Canaan, CT 06840. Website www.nctw.com Susan is an active member of the Association for the Promotion of Travel to Africa (APTA- www.apta.net - see list of corporate members).
5. Smithsonian Journeys, organization of customized itineraries worldwide. Washington DC office 202 786-3269. Website: www.smithsonianjourneys.org Note: Smithsonian now includes Madagascar on its 3-week \$43,000 special air tour of Africa. Two days are dedicated to visiting (choice of one) Andasibe, Anjajavy or Berenty (see Annex 3)

At the time of my contact, it was too late for A and K to reorganize prior commitments to attend. Smithsonian noted that it organizes custom tours only, working through other tour operators. New Canaan is a small boutique agency, with a limited market. Henderson's market focuses on West Africa and targets primarily African heritage groups. KAI, given its in-depth knowledge of Southern Africa and the tour operators servicing that market, appeared to be the best choice for the kind of advice the BAMEX working group is seeking at the present.

It was agreed that BAMEX would sponsor the travel to Madagascar of KAI president Henry Kartagener for a 5-day stay. Mr. Kartagener was to visit as many close-in attractions to Tana as possible during his stay, including both the Andasibe Reserve and a beach location. He was to meet also with key public and private sector officials in the tourism sector and present his recommendations at the tourism conference on April 5, 2005.

From feedback received from participants at the conference, Mr. Kartagener made a very valuable contribution to the discussion of strategies to promote Madagascar to the U.S. tourism market. His suggestions were well-received and USAID and BAMEX are examining ways of ensuring that his services can be made available to support the Madagascar tourism sector, at least over a one-year period.

2. Recommendations on the segments of the U.S. tourism market that Madagascar should target

The target market segments in the U.S. that were identified by Mr. Kartagener included the FIT, Special Interest Groups and Adventure Travel markets. These have proven to be the segments that currently visit the other major African destinations.

FIT:

The individual traveler is the single largest market segment currently visiting Africa at this time. The FIT market actually has a number of sub-market segments. However, the focus for Madagascar would be to reach out to those travelers who have visited at least two other African destinations on previous visits to Africa.

The FIT traveler is seeking to purchase a fully inclusive tour that offers value for money. These travelers currently comprise approximately 60,000 passengers per annum to South Africa and 35,000 to Kenya. This will continue to be the fastest growing segment of the U.S. market to Africa.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS:

This market segment should prove to be the area in which Madagascar can experience the most immediate results. The development of a relationship with the leading US tour operators that are focused on promotion to zoos and conservation groups will lead to incremental business.

Virtually every USA zoo has led a group of its members to either South Africa or Kenya. They cannot continue to take their members to the same African destinations without losing support for their African trips. These trips are important opportunities to raise funds for zoos that face chronic financial difficulties. A tour to Madagascar will give them the diversity required, while simultaneously exposing their members to a totally different African experience.

Since his return, Mr. Kartagener has already had preliminary discussions with two major US tour operators that are focused on the zoo business. They are very interested in working with him in developing new itineraries and seeking his assistance in developing relationships with operators on the ground in Madagascar. This market segment has been exceptionally good to Kenya.

ADVENTURE TRAVEL:

This market segment is clearly ideal for Madagascar given its significant advantages over Kenya, South Africa and Botswana in this area. The less

developed infrastructure of Madagascar turns into a positive when addressing the adventure traveler.

Adventure travelers tend to spend far less on their trips than the traditional FIT traveler or special interest groups. The adventure traveler focus is on the destination and the surrounding environment. They are less concerned with the quality of accommodation, although they still require clean rooms and a comfortable bed. These travelers would be very content with the two and three star hotels that represent the majority of available beds in Madagascar.

There are numerous US and Canadian tour operators who focus exclusively on adventure travel. Some are already offering packages to Madagascar. With support from the Madagascar Tourism Board, it should be possible to increase those numbers dramatically.

3. Suggested next steps

Immediate:

1. Ensure a Malagasy presence at Indaba Tourism 2005 (7 to 10 May 2005) to market Madagascar and to take note of marketing techniques and tools used by other Southern African countries
2. Form a Task Force in Madagascar to continue to follow up on marketing, including a small group of the best Malagasy tour operators and ensuring representation of the best tourism associations. Include a representative of the Ministry of Tourism and the President's tourism advisor, to ensure networking and coordination. Ensure adequate funds available for actions to be taken in Madagascar.
3. Create an advisory board in the U.S. that will assist in vetting ideas and helping with tourism promotion. All of the original candidates for the tourism conference would participate in such an advisory group. Other potential members who could help build synergies would include an adventure tourism operator, the president of the APTA and Iain Christie, the World Bank's tourism consultant who produced the World Bank's report on tourism, dated November 2003.
4. Contract for support services from KAI, including
 - a dedicated 800 number for Madagascar Tourism
 - preparation of a travel product description to be included in the 2006 travel brochures from major operators- this product would need to be prepared immediately for sale to tour operators in order to be included in the catalogs printed in June and July and distributed in September 2005 for tours taking place in 2006

- sales solicitation and information to wholesale and retail travel agents in the long haul leisure travel market
 - development of a high quality, professionally produced generic brochure on Madagascar that can be used to respond to information requests and be given also to the Malagasy Embassy in Washington; distribution of same on demand
 - travel education of wholesalers, retailers and the press, through conferences and workshops
 - relationship development with major airlines, especially United and American, to determine interest in routes to Madagascar in the context of the release of the film and of the new Open Skies policy.
 - participation in travel industry functions and trade shows organization
5. Negotiate preferential rates with Air Madagascar Antananarivo for travel to Madagascar by US travelers, both for the tourism marketing tours and for general tourist travel; discuss ways of increasing outreach and improving communications with the Air Madagascar North America office

Short term:

6. Organize a pilot tour to Madagascar in October 2005 of 10-15 key U.S. tour operators to participate in a 10 day circuit to Andasibe, Isalo, Nosy Be and Tana, with a full debrief of this group at the end of its stay, to determine priority actions for larger-scale tour groups.
7. Organize a second phase paid tour for a larger (50-100) group of retail travel agents in November/early December 2005, with individual groups no larger than 15. (See outline in KAI's proposal- note that a higher group size was recommended in that report).
8. Organize attendance of Malagasy tour operators at the Adventure Travel Show in Chicago in February 2006. A national booth should be designed and staffed by Malagasy operators, with support from KAI and the advisory board. Invite a U.S. tour operator having visited Madagascar to join the booth and speak to potential clients.
9. Organize travel to the island including a visit to the Relais de la Reine and Andasibe by a travel writer. One possibility is Michelle Green of People Magazine and free lancer for the NY Times (see her article in Annex 4 on Francis Ford Coppola's ecotourism retreats in Belize and Guatemala).

Longer term:

10. Discuss potential investment in a high-end eco-tourism lodge with USMBC members interested in such opportunities (see again Annex 4 for a model high-end lodge).
11. Produce a DVD or rework the USAID A New Vision DVD to outline tourism opportunities.
12. Discuss with PGRM and with Gemstone Adventures the possibility of creating a small gemstone museum in the Ilakaka/Isalo area along with a gemstone market for tourists in that region.

ANNEX 1
BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Henry Kartagener
President
KARTAGENER ASSOCIATES INC.

Henry Kartagener has comprehensive experience in the development and implementation of sales and marketing strategies for international travel products wishing to enter the North American market. He has focused his efforts on products and destinations that face great barriers in their efforts to seek sustainable market shares at acceptable cost to revenue ratios.

Mr. Kartagener has been providing comprehensive marketing and sales services to National Tourism Boards, hotels and airlines since 1995. These services have been inclusive of advertising, public relations and the production of collateral materials where required.

Prior to providing these services through a marketing organization, Mr. Kartagener served as the Director of Marketing & Sales for South African Airways (SAA) for 12 years. The position was based in New York and included responsibility for both North and Central America.

The major accomplishment at SAA was during the sanctions years of 1986-91. During this period, SAA lost traffic rights to the USA as a result of sanctions being imposed on South Africa. This necessitated that passengers were required to travel to London or Frankfurt to connect with SAA. Despite this barrier, SAA retained over 50% of the USA market in 1987, and generated in excess of USD23 million.

Kartagener currently represents products and destinations that offer great value, however, do not have high name recognition in the travel market place among consumers or the travel trade. Furthermore, these clients do not have sufficient resources to independently penetrate the market. Botswana Tourism, Legacy Hotels & Resorts, Rovos Rail and Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, Sabi Sabi Game Reserve are some of the major clients who fall into this category.

Kartagener has developed marketing plans that enable these destinations and properties to have greater reach without increasing their respective marketing budgets. He developed strategies that focus on relationship marketing. This has brought together suppliers who have consolidated their marketing budget for the purpose of achieving a common objective; selling the destination.

These initiatives have successfully brought competitors together in major marketing activities. Poorly funded tourism boards and suppliers must implement a relationship marketing program if they are to successfully penetrate the US market.

Kartagener has served as the president of the New York Airline Sales Managers Association in 1983/84. This position was held while serving as the Sales Manager for TAP-Air Portugal in New York. Kartagener was also recognized by Vice President Al Gore for his contribution to the USA – South Africa Conference on Democracy & Economic Development in Atlanta in 1994.

Mr. Kartagener enjoys the outdoors and resides in Dix Hills, New York

ANNEX 2
PRELIMINARY KAI DRAFT PROPOSAL TO REPRESENT MADAGASCAR



**PROPOSAL TO REPRESENT
MADAGASCAR TOURISM**

MARKETING

If appointed as the representative for **MADAGASCAR TOURISM**, KAI would undertake the following activities:

A. COMMUNICATIONS

A dedicated telephone line could be installed at our New York office which would be answered **MADAGASCAR TOURISM**. This permits Madagascar to be separated from KAI with respect to identity. This is an essential aspect of the marketing strategy.

B. SALES SUPPORT

The infrastructure of our office would support the activities of our sales staff in the field. Our inside support team have a wealth of travel industry experience to handle questions and problems in a professional manner. They would also handle the distribution of promotional materials as requested by the trade or consumers.

C. SALES SOLICITATION

Our sales staff would personally visit wholesalers and retail travel agents that have been identified as producers of long haul leisure travel. We are currently in possession of a database identifying these accounts. (7,000)

A portion of our database is comprised of the member agents to the consortiums of GIANTS and VIRTUOSO. A direct mail campaign is undertaken to these member agents twice a year.

D. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

One of the major priorities is to increase the number of wholesalers who feature the products represented by KAI. Our sales team will undertake to have Madagascar featured in the programs of the USA and Canadian wholesalers that

currently market Africa. A specific focus will be made to reach the following segments of the market:

Market Segments:

- FIT
- Special Interest Groups
- Adventure Travelers

I wish to point out that when KAI began representing Namibia there was only one US wholesaler who featured Namibia in their tour brochure. Today over 60 wholesalers are selling Namibia. We have also had similar success with the promotion of the British Channel Islands, although not to the magnitude as Namibia. The Channel Islands also were sold by a single wholesaler when we began handling the account. Today, the Islands are featured in the brochures of many major US and Canadian wholesalers.

KAI is a member of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA), which visited South Africa in May 1999. I was very involved in the lobbying process to get their annual out of country conference for active members to be held in South Africa. A number of their members subsequently added South Africa to their product line. Furthermore, I led a group of six owners of tour companies that are USTOA members to the Channel Islands on June 15, 2000. Two of the participants subsequently committed to developing a new tour program to include the Islands.

KAI would endeavor to bring a small group of North American tour operators to Madagascar as soon as possible.

E. PUBLIC RELATIONS

It would be our intention to bring small groups of writers and individuals to visit Madagascar as our guests in accordance with the available budget for such initiatives. During the calendar year 2004, we secured exposure for Botswana Tourism in trade and consumer publications that would have had a value of USD822,000 if purchased as advertising space. The cost to Botswana Tourism for this exposure was under USD5000. Final costs for press trips are predicated on the level of support received from air carriers serving the destination from the USA.

TRAVEL AGENT EDUCATION

Unfortunately, the American travel agent has an extremely poor understanding of geography. They would be in great need of education on the destination, product, political and social environment. One of our major responsibilities would be to educate the travel trade. KAI has a proven track record in organizing and conducting travel agent workshops and seminars throughout the USA and Canada.

As a result of the number of quality products and destinations that we currently represent, KAI will be conducting travel agent seminars throughout 2005. It is our intention to offer seminars to agents that will be conducted in a classroom atmosphere. The traditional trade shows where agents collect brochures are no longer satisfactory as the lone method of educating the travel trade. Our philosophy is to provide a basic education on the respective products and destinations that we represent. The size of our portfolio is sufficiently diverse for an agent to justify three hours out of their office.

In addition to the larger seminars, we also conduct smaller seminars and functions exclusively for some of our clients. This is based on each client's respective marketing budget and appeal to the trade. We have found that many of our clients do not have adequate appeal to the trade in isolation. However, when presented with other non-competing products, there is sufficient product to warrant an agent spending 3 to 4 hours out of the office.

Today's travel agent must realize a financial return on the time they spend attending the many seminars, trade shows and conferences that are offered by the suppliers throughout the world. In years past the supplier who put out the most shrimp and cocktails was assured a good agent turnout. This is clearly no longer the way business is conducted today.

We are also an advocate in Travel Agent Educational visits to the products we represent. We work very closely with the airlines that serve our destinations.

KAI brought 57 travel agents to Botswana at one time from November 11 – 20, 2003. This was the single largest agents group to ever visit Botswana. The Director of Tourism for Botswana was so pleased that she has requested that this become a semi-annual event. Although Madagascar does not lend itself to bringing large numbers at one time, we will endeavor to bring a group of 50-100 and break them into smaller groups of 25 each. (Details on this initiative further in proposal)

TRADE SHOWS & EXHIBITIONS

KAI will represent Madagascar at all trade shows, exhibitions, seminars, conferences, etc. Participation will be predicated on budgets and projected return on investment.

AGENTS EDUCATIONAL TOUR

It is our belief that a major educational tour needs to be organized in an effort to bring greater awareness to the destination among the travel trade community. Providing we are able to secure the necessary support from all the stake holders, it is suggested we bring 50-100 agents and tour operators to Madagascar in late October or early November 2005.

The itinerary should include seven nights in Madagascar with the exact program to be determined by the local tourism infrastructure and KAI. The success of this initiative is contingent exclusively with the level of support received from all the key components of the tourism infrastructure. The following would be required

- Highly reduced rate air from carriers serving Antananarivo
- Reduced rate air for domestic travel
- Highly discounted accommodation in hotels
- Subsidy for food costs at hotels and other venues
- Land transport provided by local tour operators at cost

The following is a general idea of the itinerary I have in mind for this educational visit:

Day 01: All agents arrive Antananarivo and stay at Hotel Colbert. Welcome Dinner.

Day 02: Large group breaks into as many groups of 25 as necessary. Each group would visit a different region of the country.

Day 03: Each group is touring on their respective itinerary.

Day 04: Groups are all touring

Day 05: Groups are still touring

Day 06: We must move all the respective groups to Nosey Be where they all will be housed at one hotel. The logistics of this movement will be coordinated with Air Madagascar. It may require all the groups to meet in Antananarivo and then fly on one flight to Nosey Be.

Day 07: A trade show and seminar will be organized for all the agents to meet the local tourism infrastructure. The day ends with a farewell dinner to be attended by all, including dignitaries from government.

Day 08: All agents depart from Nosey Be by air for Antananarivo and connecting flights home.

The selling price of this trip should not exceed USD1000. This can be achieved with the support of all suppliers and some small contribution from the Madagascar Department of Tourism.

BROCHURE PRODUCTION

It is the recommendation of KAI that a generic brochure of Madagascar be produced quickly to serve as the fulfillment piece for all consumer and trade inquiries received. It is anticipated that the movie Madagascar will generate substantial interest in Madagascar as a possible tourist destination.

Unfortunately, a suitable collateral piece does not currently exist that will be suitable for the American market. The necessary brochure can be produced by KAI within eight weeks of receiving the required authorization to proceed.

(Budget attached)

KAI ORGANIZATION

The following is a list of the KAI team that supports our marketing efforts and is directed by Henry Kartagener:

Warren Green: Assumed the role of Vice President of Sales and Marketing in September 2000.

Warren brings 17 years of travel experience that include responsibilities from a General Manager of a hotel in Africa and the Marketing & Sales Manager of a Game Lodge.

Kirsten Reichert: Responsible for all sales activities in the Northeastern USA She has been with KAI since 1995. Prior to joining KAI she was the Vice President of Sales for New York Helicopter from 1982 until their demise in 1994.

Cindy Tanenbaum: Responsible for all public relations activities. Cindy has been with KAI since October 2004. Her work experience includes seven years with Patrice Tanaka & Company, a major New York based public relations firm. Cindy has an excellent relationship with all the major consumer travel and trade publications.

Mikki May: Manager of our call center and provides inside sales support for our field staff.

Josephine Chiodo: Responsible for inside sales support and handles telephone inquiries from the travel trade and consumers.

Claire Kartagener: She handles all the accounting and administrative activities in the office.

BROCHURE FULFILLMENT:

KAI now operates a warehouse at which we store all of our brochures and handle all consumer and trade fulfillments internally. This permits us to distribute brochures more cost effectively for our clients. We do not pass on a handling charge for the distribution of brochures. The only charges incurred are the actual postage costs.

REPORTING

KAI would provide relevant marketing information and reports on a quarterly basis. These reports would provide the **MADAGASCAR DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM** a clear understanding of the North American market place. It is essential to have a clear and open line of communication between our respective offices if we are to achieve the mutually agreed upon goals and objectives.

SUMMARY

I believe that KAI can deliver the professional representation that you are seeking, in a cost effective manner. KAI is a small organization that is focused on selling long haul leisure products.

Furthermore, our sales staff are familiar with the North American market and have a close working relationship with the key players in the retail, wholesale and consortium segments in every region of the USA and Canada.

The following is a summary of services KAI will provide:

- Professional & Knowledgeable Marketing Representatives
- Experienced Support System
- Established Relationship with the Press, Trade & Suppliers
- Established Relationship with all the Major Airlines
- Impute & Implementation of Marketing Strategy
- Develop Tour Product with Wholesalers
- Establish Educational Seminars & Familiarizations
- Representation at Travel Industry Functions & Trade Shows
- Sales Solicitation of Retail Agents & Wholesalers
- Attain Mutually Agreed Upon Goals & Objectives

All of the activities will be carried out under the supervision of Henry Kartagener who has 31 years of experience in travel marketing to Africa in the USA and Canada..

CONTRACT

KAI would request a contract to be valid for a period not less than one year. KAI would receive compensation at a level as reflected in the budget portion of this document. It is important to note that our monthly fee is inclusive of ALL costs related to air transportation, hotels and per diems that are incurred during the normal pattern of sales solicitation. These costs are not covered, only when we are requested by you to visit a specific account or undertake a specific promotion for Madagascar, which falls outside of our planned call pattern.

In addition to the monthly marketing fee, **MADAGASCAR TOURISM** would be responsible for all postage and communications costs directly related to the promotion of Madagascar. Included in this cost would be the toll free telephone line. The costs for all of the services (postage, telephone) is not forecasted to be very great, however, is reflected in the attached budget. Furthermore, all costs for trade shows, seminars and conferences would be billed accordingly. However, no expenditures would be incurred without prior approval.

REFERENCES

Mr. Robert Whitley, President
United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA)
275 Madison Avenue
Suite 2014

New York, NY 10016
Tel: 212-599-6599
Fax: 212-599-6744
E-mail: ustoaman1@aol.com

Mr. Bruce Epstein, President
ODYSSEYS UNLIMITED
85 Main Street
Suite 101
Watertown, MA 02472
Tel: 781-370-3601
E-mail: bepstein@odysseys-unlimited.com

Ms. Lucille Sive, President
LION WORLD TRAVEL
1491 Yonge Street
Suite 300
Toronto, Ontario
Canada
Tel: 416-920-5466
Fax: 416-920-9560
E-mail: lsive@earthlink.net

CLIENT LIST

Botswana

- . Botswana Tourism
- . Kwando Safaris
- . Chobe Safari Lodge
- . GameTrails
- . Deception Valley Lodge

Global:

- . Swan Hellenic Cruises

South Africa

- . Legacy Hotels & Resorts
- . Sabi Sabi Private Game Lodge
- . Rovos Rail
- . AVIS Rent a Car
- . Mateya Safari Lodge
- . Grootbos

Namibia

- . Air Namibia

Zimbabwe

- . Victoria Falls Safari Lodge

Zambia

- . Mfuwe Lodge
- . Bush Camps

Malawi

- . Club Makokola

Kenya

- . Sarova Hotels
- . Across Africa Safaris
- . Cheli & Peacock Game Lodges

ANNEX 3
SMITHSONIAN JOURNEYS TWO-DAY EXCURSION TO MADAGASCAR

Antananarivo, Madagascar

Wednesday & Thursday, September 14 & 15

<i>Depart/Arrive</i>	<i>Flight Time</i>	<i>Elapsed Time</i>
Livingstone/Antananarivo	1200/1515	2 hrs, 15 min

Madagascar is a living laboratory, spawning myriad species of unique plants and animals, including more than 30 species of lemurs. Choose to visit either remote Anjajavy with its beautiful beaches, deep-sea fishing and water sports, where you see Coquerel's sifaka and brown lemurs, baobab trees, unique birds, chameleons, geckos and frogs; or trek through the rugged eastern mountain rain forest to see Malagasy wildlife in Perinet Reserve and Mantadia National Park and hear the eerie song of the Indri, the largest lemur; or explore Berenty Reserve in the southern spiny desert, taking guided night walks that reveal exotic lemurs, birds, carnivorous plants and reptiles. *Anjajavy l'Hotel; Vakona Forest Reserve; or Berenty Lodge*

<i>Depart/Arrive</i>	<i>Flight Time</i>	<i>Elapsed Time</i>
Antananarivo/Kilimanjaro	0900/1145	2 hrs, 45 min

ANNEX 4
ECO-TOURISM: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT
By Michelle Green, People's Magazine
Published in the NY Times, April 2, 2005

This scene is good enough to fulfill almost any woman's chuck-it-all fantasies: Riding a handsome mahogany mare, I'm following my machete-packing guide, Jason Smith, through a rain forest in Belize. Absurdly oversized ferns gently swipe my sandy boots as we negotiate the green-canopied trail; to our right is an anthill the size of a child's igloo; rising from our left are trumpet trees, great oaks and vertical palms splayed out like a giantess's fan. Here are puckery crimson blossoms called hot lips; here, too, black orchids, clay-colored robins and madre de cacao flowers that cure pink eye. Mr. Smith, who works for Francis Ford Coppola at Blancaneaux Lodge, the most spectacular of Mr. Coppola's Central American properties, crushes a small green leaf and reaches back over his horse's rump to hand it to me. It's rich and complex: allspice.

As my horse picks her way down a stream bank and scrabbles back up again, her hooves making scraping sounds on the stones, I'm doing a little dance inside: Tomorrow, I can hop a hand-cranked ferry across the Mopán River to Xunantunich, a Mayan site known for its commanding view of the jungle. Or I can take a private canoe trip into a remote cave where the Maya buried their dead. All this, and I can still have room service. And a massage from a Thai genius named Prasert. And a loll in the hot pool near the Privassion River, at the foot of the hill upon which my personal cabana is perched.

Because this moment was created by Mr. Coppola -- director, producer, writer, winemaker and hotelier -- it feels slightly unreal, but in the nicest possible way. In my experience, this sort of outing has been synonymous with slogging, sleeping on the ground and feeling like a contestant in a reality show. In order to see the Himalayas, for example, I once trekked for eight days in August with two guides and four ponies -- chugging water that reeked of iodine and breakfasting on raw apples. And when I went to Camiguin, a volcanic island in the Philippines, the only time I wasn't slicked in grease and sweat was when I was paddling in a reef with sea snakes.

But here at Blancaneaux and at Mr. Coppola's other Central American properties -- Turtle Inn, in the village of Placencia on the coast of Belize, and La Lancha, on Lake Petén Itzá in Guatemala - - travelers who might have been backpackers in another era can enter an authentic but sensually gratifying version of the third world stage-managed by a master. The feeling at Blancaneaux Lodge and at La Lancha, which I also visited, is that of being at a private club for experienced travelers hip to the notion of exploring, preserving and celebrating the indigenous culture without sacrificing laundry service and a wine list.

With handmade textiles, furniture and folk art collected by Mr. Coppola and his wife, Eleanor, across Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, guest quarters are free of telephones and, of course, TV's or DVD players (though Internet access is available at the front desks). International cellphones don't work, and you'll have to stand in line to use the house telephone -- not that anyone seems to mind. You're free to tune in to the scratching sounds of thatch-colored lizards or the ticking of woodpeckers or to the screams of howler monkeys staking out their territory in the dead of night.

But it's the charm factor that puts Mr. Coppola's resorts over the top. When I wake at sunrise, craving sustenance, I press the switch on an intercom by my bed; it's concealed by a conch shell that promptly lights up. Room service arrives 10 minutes later. (Later, Mr. Coppola tells me via e-mail that the device, which he calls the shellphone, "was an idea I had for years. I love its eccentricity.")

Adding to the general sense of well-being at Mr. Coppola's resorts is the fact that they are designed not to leave a huge footprint on the environment. Ninety percent of the power for Blancaneaux comes from a hydroelectric plant built by Mr. Coppola to harness the water of the Privassion -- a river "so pure you can drink while you swim," he tells me. In place of air-conditioning, there are wooden ceiling fans and louvered windows; on cool evenings (at 1,500 feet, nighttime temperatures drop into the 60's) you can snuggle under hand-woven bedspreads.

Like Mr. Coppola's Napa Valley vineyards, the garden and citrus orchards at Blancaneaux are organic -- no small feat in these buggy parts. They produce enough fruit and vegetables for Blancaneaux's kitchen (which turns scraps into compost), with the overflow going to La Lancha.

Of the two properties I visited, Blancaneaux Lodge, opened as a hotel in 1993, is the more luxurious. Deep in the 300-square-mile Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve in the Cayo District, it began with a few cabanas and a stone lodge that were deserted when Mr. Coppola bought them and the 10 surrounding acres as a hideaway just after this sliver of a country (formerly British Honduras) claimed its independence in 1981. As Mr. Coppola described it in an e-mail message, "the site itself is the star it was like discovering a hidden valley, an isolated place where one could hide, write, think or get to know your wife even better."

Now, there are 10 cabanas and 7 rustic villas on artfully landscaped grounds that include a croquet lawn (soon to be a swimming pool). The palmetto and adobe hideaways are built on stilts and have ceilings that soar as high as 40 feet; inside the villas are kitchenettes, open-air living rooms and Japanese-style soaking tubs.

Built in 1950, the lodge that charmed Mr. Coppola has been converted into a reception area, dining room and bar. Deep sofas and chairs are arranged around a stone fireplace in the lounge; oversized volumes on Mayan architecture and tropical birds (there are more than 500 species in Belize) are close at hand.

The restaurant has the air of a cheerful colonial outpost: the food is inspired by Italy and by Belize's multicult-cuisine. Impeccable ceviche and fish chowder, fresh French bread -- everything is healthy and hearty without being dull. (Breakfast, however, is decadent: johnnycakes, fry jacks, cinnamon rolls and freshly baked bread, along with pineapple, watermelon, papaya, bananas and lime, plus steamed milk and exemplary coffee.) Offerings from the Coppola vineyards top the wine list, but the house drink is Jaguar Juice, a blend of local rums and a liqueur made from the craboo berry, which is said to be an aphrodisiac.

For aperitifs, there's the deck or the Jaguar Bar; with its polished mahogany and slate bar inscribed with Maya symbols, it looks like a place where Indiana Jones might spar with Lara Croft over a Belikin (the local brew). As it happens, the ceiling fan in the bar was salvaged from the set of "Apocalypse Now"; on the wall are glamorous-looking black-and-whites of the excavation of Carocol, a Mayan ruin nearby. So is this where Hollywood comes for offscreen adventure? Reported sightings include Robert DeNiro, Claudia Schiffer, Keanu Reeves and Brooke Shields -- but the visitors I spy include only a group of Germans, a pair of aristos-with-child straight out of Tatler, and three Americans chattering about an excursion to Morocco.

Even so, one of the brilliant aspects of Mr. Coppola's resorts is that, for a time, anyone can be in the land of the all-access pass. Want to stay in the director's own villa at Blancaneaux? It's yours for \$500 a night (for two) in peak season. Want to slip into the place incognito? A private landing strip is on the property, and the Sophia, Mr. Coppola's own eight-seater, can fly you in from Belize City. At Blancaneaux, you're behind the velvet rope. And nowhere are there signs forbidding anything at all.

On my second day at the lodge, I make a point of poking about. Late in the afternoon, I explore the cove in front of Mr. Coppola's villa; it's at a slight bend in the river, so it feels as though no one can see me. Eventually, I walk up the road and slip into the garden, which appears to be deserted. Rows of voluptuous eggplant are ripening near cherry tomatoes and saffron-colored mangoes. I am ravenous. Though I devoured breakfast, I hiked for hours at midday on a trail leading to a 100-foot waterfall called Big Rock and, somehow, I forgot to have lunch.

I survey a grapefruit tree with cream-colored flowers whose sticky scent reminds me of gift shops in Florida. When I step closer, the tree rustles and, one by one, citrus-colored birds flap away. A tree bearing several enormous ripe oranges seems to be unguarded. Jumping as high as I can and then some, I snatch a pretty specimen. A man's voice, speaking in startled (but not angry) Spanish, emerges from the ether; I have no idea what he is saying, but there is no sign of him -- no sign at all.

After dinner, I waft down the hill to the Thai-style hut where Prasert administers something called a papaya body polish. The warm, fruity mixture is slathered quickly into every cranny, and then I'm wrapped in heated towels while he massages my face. By the time he's done, I can't feel my body at all. I shower and loll in the crescent-shaped hot pool, watching steam rise toward the stars and pretending to be a jungle animal.

My mood plunges the next day when I head toward La Lancha on dramatically rutted roads. The stifling trip takes more than three hours, and my driver crosses himself before we begin. Dramamine would be nice, but I have none, and it took forever for the kitchen to produce my boxed lunch, though I ordered it the previous night and again with breakfast via shellphone. ("Watch?" croaked the conch. "You want watch tomorrow?")

But a Xanax takes the edge off the irritation and the potholes so I can focus on the scenes passing by: ancient VW minibuses bursting with passengers; entire families bathing in emerald creeks; a boy on a bicycle herding Brahmin cattle; rifle-toting guards searching trucks coming from Guatemala into Belize ("Looking for drugs," says my driver). The road here is a hangout; horses and pigs the size of puppies stand as if posing for photographs; kids pile on bikes and careen straight down hills and around blind curves. Every so often I catch sight of festive-looking village burial grounds done up in candy colors; they look like fairy homes.

Near La Lancha, where the foliage is powdered khaki with limestone dust, it's clear that eco-tourism is catching on. By the roadways are hand-lettered signs touting horseback tours of the rain forest, along with a billboard portraying a blond hiker in skimpy shorts navigating a suspension bridge slung across the treetops for what's described as a "Skyway total adventure enjoy more canopy tour." (Eco-tourism seems to be defined broadly, however; one news release touts "tractor rides" and A.T.V. rentals along with bird-watching and mountain-biking.)

La Lancha itself looks like a place where you might be greeted by a Zen monk. Simpler and smaller than Blancaneaux, it's all about the transporting view. The open-sided dining room, the two-tiered pool that looks like a pond, the 10 casitas with their clay wind chimes -- all overlook glorious, glassy Lake Petén Itzá. In the daytime, nothing seems to move on the lake, which perfectly reflects the endless sky. At night, when the darkness is absolute, I watch the opposite shore, where a smudgy fire signals that cropland is being cleared for the next planting.

Owned by a French couple before the Coppolas bought it in 2003, La Lancha was renovated before being reopened that December. This resort, Mr. Coppola said, "may be my favorite, but it is very rustic." With their white-tiled floors, charming folk art and roughly carved furniture, the casitas are anything but austere; lolling on my porch, soaking in a stillness broken only by fantastic birds levitating from the underbrush, I am insanely content.

The high continues through dinner, which is guacamole and blackened fish caught in the lake. Making the rounds, La Lancha's concierge is chatting with guests, scheduling tomorrow's outings. Along with guided hikes through the nearby Cerro Cahui National Reserve, La Lancha's activity pamphlet lists private Skyway tours, fishing expeditions and trips to small Mayan ruins including Uaxactún, along with Spanish lessons taught in the village of San Andrés.

The major attractions here, however, are the wildlife and the ruins at Tikal, a legendary Mayan city that, by A.D. 500, had a population of about 100,000. As many as 3,000 stunning limestone palaces, temples and other structures have been excavated there since archaeologists ventured to the site in the 19th century.

Painted in garish colors when King Great Jaguar Paw and his ilk held sway, the great temples are inside the pristine Tikal National Park, where 22 types of snakes (including the lethal fer de lance), 5 kinds of cats and exotica including tapirs, silver fox and spider monkeys can be found.

My own expedition begins at 8 a.m. Luis Oliveros, a guide who works with La Lancha, grew up here and takes care to point out every little wondrous thing. At the clear lake that was a Mayan quarry, there are walking catfish; we see alligators lurking under the lily pads and parrots and toucans screeching in the trees. Beneath the shelf of a vast, flat rock, there is a tarantula that extends a hairy leg when Mr. Olivera slides a stalk into the crevice. And far above us are long-limbed spider monkeys feeding lazily, looking in no way like the tortured creatures I've seen in zoos.

Under the leaves of one tree are minute snail eggs; nestled under the leaves of another are tiny honeycombs. And wafting from everywhere are scents that I cannot identify. "They change every hour, every minute," Mr. Oliveros says. "The smell of the night -- it's a smell like a liana, like a perfume."

When we reach the Great Plaza, we climb to the top of Temple II, known as the Temple of the Masks. There, you can sit as if on a monumental throne and imagine staring into the eyes of rival royals seated in Temple I, directly opposite. There's a sense of holiness here; though Tikal was abandoned around A.D. 900, exploring it feels like trespassing, in some ways. I want to tread lightly, because who knows how King Great Jaguar Paw would be with all of this?

And treading lightly has its rewards, as I discover that night. Still damp from a shower, I fall asleep at about 9 p.m. in my hammock, because this time around, I'd rather sleep under the stars than on a mattress. Hours later, I am startled awake by a wall of sound. I heard it at Tikal in the afternoon. Rushing, hooting, frenzied screaming -- all at the decibel level of a 747, revving up all around me. I'm all alone, and I laugh out loud: It's the howler monkeys, and they sound exactly like creatures from a movie.

NOTE ON COSTS:

RT air travel from NY to Guatemala City or Belize ranges from \$625 to \$1020 on US carriers.

Lodges require special travel arrangements, organized through the lodge.

Room rates for a double at Blancaneaux Lodge in Belize start at \$180/night in low season to \$240 in high season.

At La Lancha, Guatemala, discounted rates till Dec when finishing touches on the villas will be completed range from \$95 in low season to \$150 in high season.