Walking the Talk of Responsible Tourism
Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji

On April 11, I attended the presentation by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) of the 2006 Tourism for Tomorrow Awards at the Sixth Global Travel & Tourism Summit in Washington, D.C. The winners included Hotel Punta Islita, which is located in a remote, pristine, tropical dry forest on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The hotel won the “Investor in People Award” for its “strong symbiotic ties with the surrounding villages.” By working closely with local communities, the hotel has provided “tangible benefits, educational programs and economic opportunities and transformed an impoverished … agricultural area into a thriving collective of local tourism professionals and entrepreneurs.”

The story of Hotel Punta Islita sounded to me much like the tale of the Outrigger on the Lagoon Fiji where Outrigger Hotels & Resorts and our partner Geoff Shaw have worked closely with area residents to create a successful blend of natural beauty, cultural authenticity and economic opportunity within a framework of responsible tourism. It is a wonderful story that is not widely known.

Our company’s involvement in Fiji began in 1999 when we partnered with Geoff Shaw’s Australian company to demolish and redevelop the former Reef Hotel on the Coral Coast of Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest and most populous island, about an hour’s drive from Nadi International Airport. At that point, Fiji had emerged from the period of economic difficulties that followed the 1987 military coup, which had frightened visitors away from Fiji for a two- to three-year period.

By 1997, the new interim government, realizing the potential economic benefits from tourism, encouraged increased air service to Fiji and provided incentives for hotel development. These included introduction of the Short Life Investment Policy (SLIP), which provided for a 20-year “tax holiday,” and the elimination of import duties on goods and materials associated with the construction of a F$40 million (minimum) hotel of at least 200 rooms, subject to completion of the hotel by June 2000.

In addition, to facilitate this redevelopment project, the government moved the main arterial road that cut off the existing Reef Hotel from the rest of its land to the north, thus creating a 60-acre beachfront development site.

These steps encouraged our partnership to move forward with the redevelopment, upgrading and expansion of the Reef Hotel from 72 to 254 rooms.

The Reef Hotel lay between two villages, Malevu and Korotogo, and equal opportunity and recognition of both villages was a challenge of diplomacy for the general manager, but a keystone in maintaining the support of the local populace.

Although it was unheard of in Fiji when the old Reef Hotel closed in March 1999, Geoff Shaw, acting in accord with his values, gave all employees one week’s pay for each year of service and offered them continued employment during the reconstruction of the hotel. All but eight employees, who elected either to stop working or to do something else, were given work on the site, and were subsequently hired to staff the new hotel.

In addition to maintaining a positive relationship with the community, involving future employees in the construction gave the new hotel a core group that really felt ownership in the project, since they had helped with its creation from the ground up. The villages came to see the hotel development as a community improvement project, and in their interests.

Working with the architects and builders, Shaw ensured that as many locally made components as possible were used in the construction and outfitting of the hotel. These included a tapa ceiling...
covering for the bures (rooms), thatch for roofs, art in rooms and public areas, in-room furniture and amenities, and public-area furniture that was manufactured at a nearby factory using wood harvested with environmental sensitivity only from dead or dying coconut trees. Grounds staff members from the old Reef Hotel were employed during the construction in an on-property nursery where plants and trees were nurtured for replanting as part of the landscaping of the new hotel, which reopened in October 2000.

Initially, it was a difficult time. Another military coup in May 2000, which was accompanied by some intimidation of visitors, even though none were harmed, brought tourism to a screeching halt throughout Fiji. Gradually, tourism got back on its feet and is once again booming. Our property, now called the Outrigger on the Lagoon Fiji, has been awarded five stars by the Australian Automobile Association, the only resort on Viti Levu to achieve such recognition.

The hotel's philosophy of being part of the community remains very much alive today. Here are a few examples:

• Over 500 villagers, along with government and tribal dignitaries, attended the hotel’s grand opening. A traditional kava ceremony was performed, as well as local music and dancing, and the village elders blessed the building. It was a show of pride by the local villagers and a welcome to a new neighbor.

• The hotel currently employs about 400 people, 70 percent of whom still come from the two neighboring villages. From the beginning, the policy has been to employ as few expatriates as possible. To accomplish this goal, the strategy has been one of training and internal advancement. All the supervisors and middle managers are local residents.

• Outrigger on the Lagoon’s chefs have swept Fiji culinary competitions, winning all three major categories in 2005: Fiji Chef of the Year, Junior Chef, and Pastry Chef of the Year. They won a total of 12 medals. Shalish Nadu, Executive Sous Chef, won Gold and Bronze medals in an international culinary competition in Western Australia. Just last month, Chef Vinay Ram won a Silver Medal at the Junior Chefs Challenge in New Zealand.

• Even before hotel construction began, housing was built on site for supervisors and employees. Currently, approximately 25 employees and their families live on the property.

• The hotel has established a scholarship for extended education for six villagers per year. In the early years, it was hard to find six who could contemplate going on to higher education but that has changed, and there are now many applicants.

• The hotel also provides training for unemployed young people in the villages to help them acquire jobs at the hotel.

• The hotel supports community projects in the villages such as playgrounds and building maintenance, donating paint and materials as well as technical assistance.

• Residents of the two villages, including church choirs, frequently provide cultural programs and entertainment for our guests in the hotel, further integrating the hotel into the local community.

• The hotel provides benefits for its employees beyond what is customary for Fiji hotels, including tax-free contributions to a providence (retirement) fund and health insurance for each employee. It is the only large hotel in Fiji where the employees do not rely on an outside party to represent their
workplace interests; it has remained union-free since its opening. Geoff Shaw’s Castaway Island in Fiji’s outer Mamanuca Islands is similarly structured.

- In addition to the hotel, new retail businesses have sprung up in the area to provide goods needed by employees, as well as handicraft shops and businesses providing tours, food, and transportation to guests.

The story of the Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji is not simply heartwarming but is an outstanding example of how to create social, as well as economic value.

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