

Village Business - The Lopinot experience, Pt I

A village as a business? Country-style community tourism as a means of sustainable employment? In July, 2015 the sleepy village of Lopinot, nestled in the valley among the foothills of Arouca, east Trinidad, was completely transformed when these questions were answered in the affirmative.

Since the early 1950s, there had been an appeal by the villagers to have the ecologically important valley with its fascinating history declared a “heritage village”. However this declaration was never made until last year when the National Trust listed the 18th Century estate house there, popularly referred to as “Count Lopinot’s house”, as a national heritage site, and simultaneously facilitated the five-day “Villages As Businesses” workshop. The training was conducted by regional Countrystyle Community Tourism Consultant, Diana McIntyre-Pike and sponsored by TDC (the Tourism Development Company). In excess of 55 families chose to happily participate in the workshop.

The village is the beneficiary of a vast array of cultural traditions derived from its ethnically diverse population, which today stands at just about 3000 - being mostly comprised of families who have lived there for generations - and an environment that continues to garner the interest of historians, nature lovers and leisure seekers.

No one could believe that the old estate house, with its very basic museum, rustic cocoa drying house, dirt oven and picturesquely landscaped grounds with a wooden walk-over bridge, is visited by over 100,000 people each year - and that’s just the ones who sign the Guest Book!

Lopinot is in fact able to offer the perfect heritage tourism product but to its abundance of built, natural and cultural heritage assets. The main natural attraction is the Arouca river (aka the Lopinot River) flowing right through the middle of the village and passing just beside Count Lopinot’s house. It has huge bathing pools that are flanked by comfortable sheds for cooking and relaxing on the river bank. The lush green valley is hugely popular for bird watching, cave exploration and trail walking, which extends all the way north into Brasso Seco and Blanchisseusse and west to the Caura valley.

The village derives its name from the owner of the once-upon-a-time La Reconnaissance estate. Legend has it that a very cruel Count Joseph Lopinot rode his horse up the river with his 100 African slaves in tow and settled in the area to develop a cocoa and coffee estate. Those who tried to escape his agricultural endeavor were tied to an infamous cashew tree and punished. Later on, some sugar cane was also planted and indentured Indians arrived. Eventually, the estate’s labour force included ‘coco panyols’ from Venezuela, augmented by an influx from the nearby Caura valley, for which plans had been drawn up to construct a dam, leading to the resettlement of some of its villagers in Lopinot.

Within the past decade, archaeological digs have revealed that a significant First People’s population also inhabited the valley. Numerous artefacts were unearthed and taken abroad for carbon date testing by Dr. Neal Lopinot, archaeological researcher at the Centre for Archaeological Research at Missouri State University in the USA and a direct descendant of the

Count. Professor Lopinot has however, expressed reluctance to return the artefacts to the valley until there is a space properly designed to display and preserve them.

The village has a festive appeal all year round, but is especially known for its joyful Parang music and tasty Pastelles both during and outside of the Christmas season. Miss Daniella Fuller, dubbed the “Pastelle Queen” announced her intention to take Pastelles to the world at one of the workshop sessions. The labour intensive business of Pastelle making can be a viable niche export product, providing sustainable employment while earning foreign exchange. The same principle obtains for the fresh green seasonings grown within the valley as well as the signature ingredient of a Lopinot Pastelle, which is the flavoring made from the Rou Cou plant. They can all be liquefied and bottled for export since they enhance the taste of meats and seafood. Parang has developed into a meaningful industry both for the musical entertainer and the craftsman who skillfully produces the associated musical instruments.

Thriving also, is the historical economic mainstay of the valley. Cocoa harvested in the Lopinot valley is graded in quality amongst the top 3 percent in the world. Cocoa innovation has spawned a host of entrepreneurs and there are delicacies and desserts made in Lopinot that have won awards internationally and are now patented so they cannot be reproduced anywhere else without first going through certain legal formalities. From chocolate Ponche de Crème to dark chocolate dips, chocolate bread pudding and various meats cooked in secret cocoa sauce recipes, many families have a resident chocolatier and have created their family brand of eating and drinking chocolate delights.

To be concluded next week

The T&T Chamber of Industry and Commerce thanks Michele D. Celestine for her contribution of this article.