

Village Business - The Lopinot experience, Pt II

(Part I appeared last week)

With all of that is offer, the villagers of Lopinot who participated in the “Villages as Businesses” workshop were taught to collaborate and provide a series of enjoyable and affordable tour packages combining all aspects of their heritage – built, natural and cultural. Apart from the Count Lopinot house there is a shrine dedicated to La Divina Pastora further up the valley which was carved out of the hillside, as well as the old Anglican Church both of which are over 100 years old. Mr. Cyril’s cocoa estate is still operational and dancing the cocoa in an authentic cocoa drying house to live parang music is an unforgettable experience. These tours have been endorsed by the Tourism Development Company and are now promoted by tour operators locally and abroad, with a minimum of six families from within the village benefitting economically from each tour. The verdant valley has already spawned a few guest houses with restaurants that serve local organic fare, and, since the workshop, ‘home stays’ are being encouraged for those visitors who want a ‘Trini family’ experience, especially at Christmas time. After all, “Trini Christmas is de best”!

A Calendar of Events within the valley has been established by the interim Lopinot Countrystyle Community Tourism Committee (LCCTC”) chaired by Marcia Guerrerro, who holds a Bachelors of Arts in Tourism and Hospitality Management (BBATHM). Its first project, the “Ole Time Christmas Market” was a huge success after being heavily promoted by a very supportive local media. The village was filled with enticing smells and sounds for that event. It provided the opportunity to experience the tradition of seeing and smelling ham boiling in a biscuit tin/ pitch oil pan over a fireside fed with cinnamon and bay logs. Many visitors remarked that they had only read or heard about this practice. The dirt oven at the side of the historical house was reactivated on the day and generated hundreds of rolls of delicious baked cassava bread. Market produce, traditional sweets, drinks and craft items were all on sale with continuous live Parang music throughout. The second project, an “Easter Market” was executed in late March, 2016 with one of the highlights being cocoa pork - an entire pig lathered in chocolate roasted on an outside fireplace! Only last week the “Cruz de Mayo festival” was held on May 7th under the patronage of the Venezuelan Embassy. Readers wishing to view pictures of the event or find out more about the project can find “Lopinot Heritage Village – Country style Community Tourism” on Facebook.

A great contributor to the overall success of the initiative has been the vision and commitment of Mr. Bryan Salina deputy chair of the LCCTC. This vision was bolstered by free advice by Mrs. Maureen Boneo Thomas, FCCA, MSc., BSc., CA, who is a Senior Audit Manager with one of the ‘Big 4’ accounting firms. She ensured the LCCTC became a registered NGO with an account at Republic Bank and functions in accordance with clear written guidelines for transparency and accountability. Citizens for Conservation also rendered voluntary assistance in assessing the structural condition of Count Lopinot’s house and provided a report that enabled a State Agency to seek an allocation from Central Government to finance the most urgently required restoration works. As the initiative becomes profitable the villagers expect to finance ongoing

work themselves. The workers at the site deserve commendation for their dedication to its upkeep even when their remuneration from the Forestry Division was not forthcoming.

The Lopinot experience is a viable model which can be replicated throughout Trinidad and Tobago, especially in our rural communities. Apart from essential specialist construction work to restore and maintain the historic estate house, the heritage villages will all require an Information Booth for ease of disseminating information to and collecting payments from visitors. In this instance, a plan for the booth has been donated which is similar in architectural design to the historic house so that the 18th century theme is maintained. These construction and restoration projects will create additional sustainable employment within the community. The grounds are already maintained by Forestry Division workers. In promoting the Countrystyle Community Tourism Network (CCTN) as a concept and brand, regional expert Diana McIntyre-Pike identified that “The assessment, and marketing of natural and cultural community resources can add value to the experience of local and foreign visitors and simultaneously improve the quality of life in communities.”

As this country charts its way through the current economic straits, it is timely that the National Trust should initiate such a venture and encourage the creation of heritage tourism products that will sustain rural communities in a holistic manner. The preservation of our historic sites, cultural traditions and peoples’ ability to earn a livelihood are all imperative to our strong national identity and positive psyche.

Let’s support local business. “When our Carnival ends our Community Fun begins” can be one of many slogans to encourage Community Tourism activities. An increase in “staycations” and growth of the local food production industry can only have a positive result.

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