

## **Origin and Development of the Pacuare Lodge Project**

The vision for Pacuare Lodge came from Roberto Fernandez and Daniel Peyer. Fernandez grew up in the Turrialba region, where the Pacuare River is located. Before his work with the lodge, he was a researcher in tropical agriculture. Peyer was born and raised in Switzerland, where he worked in different areas of the tourism business (from operational levels to top management positions). In 1987 the two founded Aventuras Naturales,<sup>1</sup> one of the earliest companies to specialize in adventure travel. The company has operated continuously under this experienced management team for 12 years. Shortly after Aventuras Naturales was established, Fernandez and Peyer began envisioning the Pacuare Lodge project. After careful planning, this dream became reality in the mid-1990s, with funds exclusively from the founders. Aventuras Naturales is fully licensed by the Costa Rican Tourist Board and is proud of its enviable track record in providing one of the best adventure travel experiences in Costa Rica.

## **Methods and Criteria for Site Selection**

**The Pacuare Lodge & Private Preserve** is nestled in the jungle near the Pacuare River, Costa Rica's most popular white-water rafting destination. Near the lodge, the company has purchased nearly 30 hectares of primary rainforest that was in danger of being cleared. Because the goal of the company is to preserve this untouched virgin forest, no visitors are allowed in this area.

Site selection was based on criteria including scenic beauty, accessibility, biological importance, and existing conditions at the time of purchase. The property is surrounded by 10,000 hectares of protected area, which was so-designated by the Costa Rican government in 1982. This status

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<sup>1</sup> As a travel agency, Aventuras Naturales has gained a prominent market presence as a niche-oriented, special-interest-group tour operator. Polls taken by the company for the last 6 years show a consistently high level of

establishes controls on how the land is used. The area is extremely important in terms of its biodiversity, including tropical forests, endemic animals, and other species in danger of extinction. Because of this, the Pacuare region draws conservationists and scientists from around the globe.

When Aventuras Naturales was first searching for a suitable site, the current location was also very attractive because there was a pressing need for conservation. Some subsistence level farming was already present in the form of a small field of cacao and a pasture for cows, and the larger area was in danger of significant deforestation to provide only marginal farm production. The prior existence of these clearings allowed us to design and construct a lodge without any need to clear new area, and allowed the company to replant some of the native species that had already been removed.

### **Materials and Building Methods Used to Ensure Minimal Harm to the Environment**

The design principles of the Pacuare Lodge are built upon a dedication to minimal environmental impact and the lodge's remote location. The lodge site is inaccessible by road, and all building materials had to be brought in on rafts via the Pacuare River. Though we could have cut and used trees from the property, we chose to purchase wood from a sustainable reforestation project operated by small farmers—the Centro de Diversificación Agrícola de Turrialba—and transport it to the construction site. We can proudly say that no trees from the rainforest were cut to build the bungalows or main lodge. Roofs are made from palm leaves and were constructed by Cabecar Indians living in the area, using their traditional building style. These organic materials blend in with the natural colored wood materials that have been used.

### **Designing an Environmentally Friendly Facility**

The site and layout of the property were chosen to ensure harmony with the existing conditions. For example, in placing the lodge and bungalows, we chose an area where there were no existing trees. Buildings are on stilts, and each bungalow is located some 100 meters from the next

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customer satisfaction. In the specific white-water river rafting segment, Aventuras Naturales holds a 35% market share.

bungalow to reduce building density and to take advantage of natural cooling breezes that ensure excellent air flow.

Water needs and usage were also carefully planned in the design. Water comes from a spring located on the mountain above the lodge, and is transported using hidden pipes buried in the forest. In order to avoid wastage, the lodge uses the most efficient toilet systems available, which minimize the amount of water stored in the tanks and discharged from them. We are in the process of installing solar panels in the bungalows in order to make hot water available. Liquid soap and shampoo is available from dispensers in each shower, to avoid unnecessary waste, and all cleaning products, including those that we provide for personal hygiene are biodegradable. Paper products purchased are from recycled paper.

The lodge has no electricity—lanterns and candles provide light for guests and staff.

Though any site will have some impact on the natural environment in which it is placed, the design and maintenance of the lodge have at their very core our commitment to minimal impact and maximum education (and enjoyment!). We believe that the careful planning and management of the Pacuare Lodge has ensured a greater positive than negative impact due to increase knowledge of and respect for the environment from our guests, and the involvement and benefits seen by our native staff and the surrounding community.

### **Preserving and Sustaining the Area's Biodiversity and Pristine Environment**

One of the major problems in this zone is illegal hunting and harvesting of plant species, with the latter focusing mainly on orchids. The most effective way we have found to combat this serious problem has been to employ local people and individuals from the indigenous tribe in the area to work at the lodge. Little by little, in a process of environmental education and interaction with the tourists who are attracted by the biological richness of the rainforest, staff take to heart the urgent need to protect the natural resources. An example of this transformation is the person who is currently head of groups and maintenance. Prior to his work with us he was employed as a logger, cutting down trees, and now he is a lover and protector of nature. This has also been the case with many of the Cabecar Indians who are involved with the lodge—through a process of interaction with the guests and education, they are placing a higher importance on natural resources and their preservation.

Parallel to this individualized and experiential work, we also have a continual process of exchange with community members in the form of talks about conservation and protection of flora and fauna. We recognize the importance of this ongoing exchange since the cultural practices of hunting and harvesting have been in place for generations. An example of this community involvement has been the Bajo del Tigre school, at which the environmental education director has developed programs for the children, which are supported with materials donated by the company.

### **The Role of Education in Wildlife Preservation**

We believe in guest and employee education as the primary mechanism for respecting wildlife. We have clearly marked trails, which are the only areas of the forest where hiking is offered. . Since much of the rainforest activity is nocturnal, we limit hiking and other activities to the daytime. We also work to ensure that guests understand the importance of not feeding or touching the animals, nor creating noise that could alter the ecosystem.

### **Monitoring Positive and Negative Environmental Impacts**

We recently established a program that includes goals for conserving energy and resources. Official monitoring is carried out monthly and we expect to be able to obtain the first statistically viable results by the end of 2004. We have plans to invest in water consumption meters so that we may set goals based on real data.

At the offices located in San Jose (Costa Rica), we keep record and monitor paper usage and energy consumption. This has motivated staff to conserve our own resources, and to invest in such items as more efficient lamps.

### **Resource Use and Disposal**

The water for drinking and cleaning is obtained from a natural spring and is captured at the source. Wastewater is treated in septic tanks without adding any synthetic chemicals—an absolutely state of the art system.

Organic waste is used for creating organic fertilizer in a controlled environment. The small amount of inorganic waste produced is accumulated and transported to the town of Siquirres, where it goes into the municipal garbage system. There is a program for separating plastic, metal, and glass waste, in which guests are invited to participate. Aluminum and glass are transported to San Jose to be recycled at institutions dedicated to doing so. We minimize waste from the very moment of purchasing groceries by acquiring goods in large recyclable containers.

### **Electricity and Energy Consumption**

There is no electric energy used at the Pacuare Lodge. We utilize a 1 KW Honda generator (4 stroke power plant) for small kitchen needs (like a blender to produce juice for the guests), for emergencies, and for back-up in the event that the solar panels we use to recharge communications equipment experience problems. This generator plant is the most efficient available on the market, and was selected especially because of this after we carried out careful research.

### **Interaction with Local Communities**

All of our resident staff members are hired locally; save the lodge's chef. The positions of head of maintenance and resident guide are local people, with two staff members from the Cabecar tribe of indigenous peoples.

### **Employee Environmental Awareness**

We use ongoing training as a tool for instilling a commitment to the environment in our employees. We encourage them to properly dispose of wastes and to maintain and protect the environment. As they educate guests about procedures and the richness of the area, their learning becomes solidified. In addition, and as previously noted, one of the most effective ways we have found to achieve goals in environmental education has been to facilitate interaction between the environmentally conscious guests and our employees. By experiencing these guests' interest in, and appreciation for, the environment, our employees take to heart a sense of pride in being protectors of such biological richness. Our employees in turn are motivated by this interaction to learn more about the environment and to share it with other guests and with their communities.

We also have training sessions with visitors and external consultants. Finally, a dendrological guide (forest species composition) was created to better inform the staff and visitors.

## **Employee Benefits**

All of the staff members at Pacuare Lodge are insured against on the job injury and their employee benefits are guaranteed, including the right to vacation, a year-end bonus, and overtime pay. They have received training in conducting canopy tours. We provide lodging to the chef and the person in charge of maintenance. The Pacuare Lodge is an equal opportunity employer and promotes employee advancement without regard to race or ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, marital status or sexual orientation. We are proud that our staff represents these many diversities.

## **Community Support Program**

Consistent with our belief that responsible tourism should benefit and respect local communities, the Pacuare Lodge works directly with people and institutions in the area in a variety of ways.

### **Primary school assistance**

The Bajo del Tigre school is where local children receive their first years of instruction. The Pacuare Lodge has an ongoing commitment to assist this school economically, and a percentage of each reservation made via Internet is donated directly to this effort.

### **Additional projects**

We have improved and maintained roads, which were previously almost abandoned, as well as the cable car local residents use to cross the river. We have placed our cellular telephone at the service of the community for emergencies—prior to this there was no easy communication available for locals. Our sponsoring of a local soccer team has been one of our most enthusiastically received efforts.

In addition to financial contributions to the local school, we donate the equivalent of approximately 2% of our profits to the Renacer Project in in-kind contributions, an arrangement we have had for two years. On a monthly basis, we provide personal hygiene products, food, and cleaning materials to the project's center, which has a comprehensive and effective program to

rescue street children. We also organize and provide transportation once a month to this center for the children's recreational activities—a human need that these children have so often had to do without. Finally, we make monthly donations of bedding, diapers, and other necessities to a local center for orphaned and abandoned children.

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**Environmental or Humanitarian Organizations We Support:**

- Pacuare Lodge, through its parent company Aventuras Naturales, is affiliated with the International Ecotourism Society ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)).
- We support several children's food pantries (San Miguel de Porres Comedor Infantil, tel./fax 011 506 258-1245, and the Curridabat Comedor Infantil, San Francisco de Dos Rios, 330 meters west and 100 meters north of La Colina Depot) through in-kind donations.

**Benefiting Local Businesses**

Pacuare Lodge hires local guides for tours. We purchase groceries in the nearby towns of Siquirres and Turrialba, and we hire local residents to provide laundry services.

**Ensuring Minimal Impact to the Local Culture**

Pacuare Lodge is located very close to an indigenous reserve and these communities are advised in advance of any visits and receive an explanation about the scope of the excursion. We always wait until we have permission from the local heads of the communities prior to doing the tour. Relations with the indigenous communities have been very good since the beginning of operations.

Lodge guests are advised of the prohibition on photographing the indigenous people and educated about their anthropological features and rituals, to ensure a high level of respect. Lodge guests are encouraged to make the tour respectful and low-key.

### **Guest Education and Awareness**

Trained guides orient the guests when they arrive at the facilities, describing the lodge itself as well as important features of the surrounding site. The tourists are not allowed to leave the immediate area of the Pacuare Lodge without a specialized guide. In addition, visitors and staff are trained regarding the proper disposal of wastes. In addition to the orientation provided to guests when they arrive at the lodge, we pride ourselves on the strong relationships that develop over two or three days between our guests and guides in programmed events and informal settings. In this way, a wide range of information is communicated and discussed informally with guests, and it is tailored to their interests and curiosity.

### **Employee Training**

Ongoing professional development is provided to guides through formal courses in such areas as swift-water rescue, search and rescue, first aid, quality assurance, conservation, and flora and fauna. Some peer training occurs via more experienced guides and the local indigenous communities.

The Pacuare Lodge has a full-time naturalist with more than 10 years of experience in bio-prospecting. He is in charge of designing and coordinating tours and educating tourists. He is also in charge of communications between the lodge and the indigenous communities in the region.

### **Successful and Innovative Practices**

- We have successfully combined extraordinary guest comfort and service with state-of-the-art best practice in ecotourism. On the one hand the Pacuare Lodge is an exemplary low-energy-consumption complex, with no electricity usage. On the other, we provide highly

personalized service and guest extras like gourmet meals with wine and other beverages served by candlelight.

- Pacuare Lodge is part of the “Rafting Plus” concept and can only be reached by boat. While we do provide for emergency evacuation, the very remoteness and limited ground access to the lodge ensure an ecological environment that is unique.
- Pacuare Lodge has the only canopy tour in the Pacuare zone. This custom-designed canopy tour, which was created especially for the Pacuare Lodge setting, allows guests to learn more about life in the forest canopy, as well as providing an ingredient of “adventure.” The latter strengthens teamwork and individual self-confidence.
- At Pacuare Lodge, we have specialized in comprehensive handling of goods, with control over the whole chain of supply. We minimize waste from the very moment of purchasing groceries (by acquiring goods in large recyclable containers) and make rational use of them without sacrificing quality for the guest.
- We have a very strict environmental and social policy and are concerned with and take actions to ensure conservation of the neighboring lands. Though we are a for-profit business, we model a responsible (and successful) business practice that invests not only in revenue producing activities, but also in the conserving of lands that are held in protection.
- We are a model project for environmental appreciation and conservation for the communities of Turrialba, Siquirres and Bajo del Tigre, hometowns for over 90% of our staff. The multiple manners in which we promote employee professional development in ecotourism, including formal instruction and informal peer learning from knowledgeable guests, work to bolster knowledge and motivate staff to further learning. The staff also takes this learning back to their communities and ecological efforts are multiplied.

### **Successful Problem Solving**

- Logistical problems were encountered at the beginning of our operations with regard to the special cargo boats used to transport goods on the Pacuare River. We later made changes that let us improve the service offered to tourists, such as gas refrigeration, installing solar panels, and broadening the signal to facilitate communications.

- Later barriers were overcome by educating the staff and nearby communities with regard to environmental practices that they had previously been unaware of.
- A major problem is the deforestation produced in the upper river valley by logging. In order to fight this we have lobbied at governmental level, as this problem could cause serious disruptions to the entire Pacuare River Valley.

### **Ecotourism Awards and Certificates**

- Exemplary Tourism Practice, World Tourism Organization 2003
- First Pilot Program for Ecodesign in Central America, developed by the Delf University, Holland.

The Pacuare Lodge is in the CST (Certification for Sustainable Tourism) certification process. We are confident that we will receive a high classification.

Other distinctions received:

- Outside Travel Guide Magazine's 2002 Top Ten Finds
- Outside Traveler Magazine's 2003 "World's Sporty 40" Selection
- Condé Nast "Room With a View", February 2004 edition

## **POLICY FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

### **Objectives**

The Pacuare Lodge has a specific Policy for Social Responsibility, based in the following four pillars:

- **Accomplishment:** The Pacuare Lodge will assure respect and observation of all labor standards, at both the national and international levels.
- **Reach:** Our social commitment is evidenced through the sponsoring of social programs in the Bajo del Tigre Community.
- **Participation:** The Pacuare Lodge seeks open and appropriate communication among the members of the organization. We support the proactive participation of personnel in the social commitments of the company.

- **Communication:** We make information available to all interested parties about our Policy for Social Responsibility.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY**

### **Objectives**

The Pacuare Lodge was conceived as a sustainable project. Reaching certain environmental, social, and financial goals are central reasons for its existence.

The Environmental Policy of the Pacuare Lodge is composed of four key elements:

- **Pollution Prevention:** We effectively control those of our activities that could produce human health risks and environmental risks. We aim to minimize the impact of such activities by applying appropriate technologies and procedures.
- **Accomplishment:** We set procedures and programs to ensure adherence to all applicable laws and regulations, as well as additional voluntary commitments.
- **Continuous Improvement:** We have a program for periodic evaluation of our activities. Results of this review are used to optimize our environmental management system whenever necessary.
- **Communication:** Information about our commitment to environmental protection is made available to any interested party.