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Connecting with the Culture: A Case Study in Sustainable Tourism

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Connecting with the Culture: A Case Study in Sustainable Tourism

Abstract

In a destination dominated by all-inclusive resorts, a different tourism venture seeks to offer guests a genuine connection to the community. “VillageLife Tourism” and its associated “Okra Inn” demonstrate how tourism can be sustainable and can benefit both tourists and local purveyors. This message has so far gone largely unheard in a market that celebrates sand, sun, and service—in resorts that operate in fenced-off compounds. This case study analyzes VillageLife’s challenges and prospects, the most promising of which is partnering with the all-inclusive properties.

Keywords

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Connecting with the Culture

A Case Study in Sustainable Tourism

by ETHAN HAWKES and ROBERT J. KWORTNIK JR.

In a destination dominated by all-inclusive resorts, a different tourism venture seeks to offer guests a genuine connection to the community. “VillageLife Tourism” and its associated “Okra Inn” demonstrate how tourism can be sustainable and can benefit both tourists and local purveyors. This message has so far gone largely unheard in a market that celebrates sand, sun, and service—in resorts that operate in fenced-off compounds. This case study analyzes VillageLife’s challenges and prospects, the most promising of which is partnering with the all-inclusive properties.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; all-inclusive resorts; Jamaica

Travelers who visit the “Burkestown” marketplace in the mountainous region of central Jamaica experience a raucous carnival of colors, novel fruits, goods, and people.¹ The air is rife

with the scent of ganja and sounds of an unfamiliar patois rising above the pressing din. A quick step is needed to avoid a rumbling pushcart propelled by a Rastafarian with dreadlocks to his waist and wearing a disheveled t-shirt with the faded words “Good morning, Momma Africa.” It takes fifteen minutes of striding past shouting vendors before agreeing to begin the sport of bartering. Nearby at Treasure Beach, local fishermen slap their tables in heated games of dominos with rounds of Red Stripe beer as the blazing sun hangs above the Caribbean. When the lanterns come out, reggae and dance hall beats fuel a frenzied, rhythmic pace that invites visitors to develop their dance skills in imitation of the local moves. Treasure Beach and the Burkestown marketplace are authentic Jamaica—the Jamaica that few outsiders see in person or in travel brochures.

The type of travel experience we recount above is illustrative of what “Susanna Williams” proposes to

offer guests of her “VillageLife Tourism,” one of the early programs introduced in the Caribbean region that seek to develop sustainable tourism. She describes her vision of sustainability as operating a tourism effort that does not act as an exploiter of resources but helps to sustain environment and local culture. However, expanding her vision for grassroots exchange and community tourism to its full potential has been difficult. VillageLife’s greatest success is, arguably, its longevity, especially in the face of the dominant tourism model in Jamaica—the all-inclusive beach resort. Despite its longevity, however, VillageLife struggles with limited program patronage and low occupancy at its home base, the “Okra Inn.”

Although tourism scholars and practitioners contend that sustainable tourism is a good thing and that a balanced approach to tourism is needed to protect host cultures and environments, sustainable tourism is effective only if it is, in fact, sustainable.² That is, the organizations that constitute a sustainable-tourism system must generate enough demand and revenues to support their operations and growth—or they must rely on host governments to prop up the system through policy and funding. But this challenge raises a related issue: though tourists state that they seek authentic, uncontrived travel experiences, actual demand for such community tourism is hard to assess and harder still to influence.³ This case study examines the challenges associated with marketing a sustainable-tourism venture by profiling and analyzing the program of the company we dub VillageLife and its twenty-seven-room Okra Inn, which we have set in fictitious Burkestown.

The Jamaica Tourism Experience

Tourism in Jamaica is most obviously represented by the remarkable growth of

all-inclusive resorts.⁴ The first of these properties, the Negril Beach Village Resort, appeared in Jamaica in 1976 (now known as Hedonism II, operated by Superclubs) and was founded by Abe and John Issa.⁵ In 1981, Gordon “Butch” Stewart bought Bay Roc, a small, dilapidated property, which he renovated to create Sandals. Both Superclubs and Sandals are Jamaican-owned companies that also operate elsewhere in the Caribbean. By 2004, there were thirty-nine all-inclusive resorts in Jamaica, representing 53 percent of Jamaica’s 14,388 hotel rooms.⁶ Of the hotels in the category of 100 rooms or more, 80 percent were all-inclusive.⁷ Large locally owned resorts, such as Sandals, and internationally owned resorts, such as Spanish-owned Riu Hotels, continue to drive tourism in Jamaica. As a result, the image of sand and sun pervades most visitors’ impressions of the island.

Critics of the all-inclusive concept in Jamaica observe that little of the revenue generated by the resorts actually goes to improving Jamaica’s standard of living.⁸ Even though Sandals and Superclubs are locally owned, the considerable presence of foreign-owned resorts generates leakage of money back to the developed countries. A 1996 UN report found that 40 percent of tourism revenues leave Jamaica. A closer look at the all-inclusive concept reveals that “for most all-inclusive package tours, about 80 percent of travelers’ expenditures go to the airlines, hotels, and other international companies . . . and not to local businesses or workers.”⁹

Leisure and holiday are the purposes of visit of almost 80 percent of tourists visiting Jamaica, and the all-inclusive resorts are particularly popular.¹⁰ Extensive buffets, refreshing pools, open bars, and inviting beach chairs abound. For most vacationers, these resorts provide the ultimate form of rest and recuperation. Many guests describe

an appreciation for the diversity of activities and entertainment found within the resorts' walls. Yet others express frustration at not being able to see a broader environment and meet the people of Jamaica, and they report feeling intimidated by the restrictions that prevent them from seeing the country. Those restrictions are both physical (walls, guards, location of the resort, and exorbitant taxi fares) and psychological (fear for safety and concern for missing out on paid-for food and entertainment). When guests do venture outside the resort compound, they usually do so only on escorted excursions with approved tour operators to designated tourist attractions and gated shopping districts.

For some areas of Jamaica, though, tourism takes the form of independent businesses that typically are family owned. For example, in the cool mountains of Burkestown, Susanna Williams has transformed a passion for the region into a type of business that she hopes will take root across Jamaica. She explains that tourists want a true Jamaican experience: "They want the real McCoy, and so we must change the scope of tourism so that it is no longer characterized by a subservient host-visitor relationship, but becomes a tool to build cross-cultural bonds, respect and understanding."

Williams has championed simple approaches to integrating tourists with local businesses, and she seeks to support her ideas by running an assemblage of altruistic organizations. Although she categorically states that she is not running a philanthropy, visitors soon suspect that making ends meet is a challenge for VillageLife Tourism.

VillageLife Tourism

Opened in 1978, two years after Jamaica's first all-inclusive resort, VillageLife had seen little of the growth experienced in the

intervening years by its now-dominant counterpart. Nevertheless, Williams had received acclaim in articles in *National Geographic* and *Lonely Planet* as the catalyst behind efforts to provide opportunities for locals to participate in Jamaica's tourism industry. VillageLife sought to entice tourists to venture beyond the all-inclusive resorts and beaches to experience the vibrant cuisine, people, and culture of Jamaica. Williams demonstrated a deep awareness of her country and a faith that her approach to tourism is a sustainable model for both guests and their Jamaican hosts. However, some guests, even those who would like to explore more of Jamaica's culture, found that their idea of a vacation differed from that advocated by Williams. For example, she often urged guests to experience Jamaica by interacting with locals and even doing volunteer work during their stay. While guests usually honored such requests and found the experiences enlightening, some commented that it would be nice to slow down and just lie on the beach for a day.

Williams is no hospitality novice. In the early 1960s, her family was a developer of a Jamaican resort. In the 1970s, the Williams family purchased the Okra Inn in Burkestown. In the mid-1970s, Williams departed from a junior management position at a Jamaican property of a well-known U.S. brand hotel chain. She recalled being reprimanded by the general manager of that property for recommending local Jamaican restaurants to guests when the hotel offered its own restaurant that catered to American tastes. Seeking a new approach, in 1978, Williams established VillageLife Tourism. She felt strongly that Jamaica, with its diverse geography and people, was the destination tourists came to see and that efforts to keep guests on the premises and entertain them with nonnative dances, fire-breathing performances, foreign

food, and nude beaches did little to portray the real Jamaica in a favorable, cultured, and civilized light.

Williams also felt that stories of crime, which rarely involved tourists, should not deter visitors from roaming the island. She advocated community tourism as a means to “assist in alleviating harassment, social problems, crime, and the present perception in communities that tourism is only for the hotels, resort areas, and the ‘big man.’” In a national psyche aware of a turbulent past that included slavery and colonialism, the *big man* generally refers to the large foreign investors who are seen as profiting from the island’s resources and people. Such investors have claimed and developed the prime beach tracts in Negril, Ocho Rios, and Montego Bay, often to the exclusion of most locals who cannot afford to use those beaches or facilities. In contrast, small local hoteliers and businesses have struggled to maintain successful ventures in the face of large developments that enjoy economies of scale and marketing power. Williams positioned her product to rely on local knowledge and networks—a model that larger properties could not emulate so readily but also one that was difficult to market with limited resources.

Williams created VillageLife as a specialist in community visits that allowed guests to see Jamaica personally. Guests were encouraged to visit local schools, churches, historic sites, private homes, nightclubs, and roadside stands. Williams’s network of friends, family, and community partners allowed her to offer experiences, such as a home stay, that guests may not feel comfortable arranging independently. Such a stay might involve a guest’s spending the night at a local residence, the owner of which would provide conversation, lodging, and sustenance. This sense of family and connection established between

tourists and members of the local community generally created a deep emotional reaction. One American woman described her experience to an employee as follows:

When I got off the bus and that lady came to me and hugged me and rubbed my shoulder, I had never met my grandmother, but I think I just [did] because I can feel the same love coming from her. When she hugged me—she opened her arms and received me into the community as though she knew me from birth.

Upon leaving Burkestown, guests reported feeling they were “leaving their Jamaican family.” Williams embraced this mind-set with a generous and sincere hug and an insistence that they not forget about their times with families in Jamaica.

The Okra Country Inn

The physical anchor of VillageLife Tourism was the Okra Inn, a property that was both a blessing and a curse for operating a tourism business. Located a few minutes’ walk from the center of Burkestown, the inn was well over an hour by car from the Montego Bay airport and was over an hour’s drive from the nearest beach. As a result, the Okra’s location excluded most adventurers seeking a day trip from the resorts. This location also meant that most visitors had to come expressly for the VillageLife tourism experience.

A large pothole at the inn’s entry continued the theme of Jamaican roads, and guests were welcomed at the Okra Inn in a lobby that included framed posters of endemic fruits and birds. The adjacent guestrooms stretched out behind the lobby and thirty-seat restaurant and shared this warmth of color and local décor. The inn was far from a destination in itself, though it offered guests a comfortable place to sleep and a rarely used pool for \$45 to

\$115 per night. While the hotel did not have air conditioning, the relatively cool Burkestown climate made most nights comfortable, aside from sporadic mosquitoes. The roof was reattached to the guest-rooms following Hurricane Ivan in 2004, but much of the property still showed damage from the storm. A contractor noted that most of the infrastructure was original and might not survive the next hurricane or even the next five years of normal weather.

Despite creating an experience for guests that offered a distinctive glimpse into the culture and charm of the country, business at the Okra was inconsistent, averaging thirty guests a month coming for tours or volunteer projects in the community. The Okra supplemented these revenues by selling rooms to Jamaicans seeking lodging at a discount, although on numerous occasions, the Okra had no paying guests. The Okra employed nine local residents, hosted four or five local high school or college interns studying hospitality, and served as a training ground for Jamaican hospitality students. Operated out of the Okra, an intensive four-month training program was formed by Williams for unemployed Jamaicans seeking to work in hotels or restaurants. The training program had developed an excellent reputation among nearby communities and resorts for producing dedicated and competent employees. The program director estimated that three thousand students had passed through the program, with employment rates a year after receiving certification reaching 80 percent.

Williams found it difficult to retain her best employees at the Okra. While employees expressed respect and appreciation for her vision, some did not feel challenged or empowered to meaningfully contribute to the operation. As one example, Williams hired Mr. Blake, a former sales and operations

manager at a large resort property, to serve as a tour guide and trip organizer for VillageLife. However, with current business levels, Williams insisted on leading most of the tours, and Mr. Blake was left to assume the role of front-desk assistant and supervisor, a symptom of micromanagement.

Mr. Blake's entrepreneurial ambitions remained intent on organizing and leading tours; he expressed that if he did not have the necessary support or business with VillageLife, he himself would try to set up the tours.

Marketing VillageLife Tourism

Williams believed that the VillageLife product, with a focus on meeting the specific interests of each guest, was strong enough to draw more visitors. However, determining how best to reach tourists with a marketing message and overcoming their concerns about embarking beyond the walls of the resorts were difficult. Williams knew that guests venturing out on the back roads and into the hills were entering a vibrant Jamaica, but she also knew that marketing these attractions and countering guests' aversions posed a challenge.

VillageLife Tourism's market is difficult to classify by any demographic or psychographic standard. For example, guests in the summer of 2005 included twenty college students, who were part of a missionary group from Indiana and had come to work in local orphanages for a week; a forty-something couple from Australia, who were vacationing in Jamaica to fulfill a lifelong dream of seeing the Rastafarian lifestyle and visiting the birthplace of Bob Marley; and a group of fifteen students from the University of Michigan, who came as part of a class project to learn about Jamaica and study social services as they exist in a developing country. Williams believed that a person in almost any age group seeking to do anything related to

visiting the community could be identified as a potential client. She explained, “Eco-tourism, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism are a few examples of the types of special interest markets under the community-tourism banner.”

VillageLife had not advertised extensively outside Jamaica. Guests usually heard about the operation from local word of mouth or by reading articles in travel magazines or guides.¹¹ VillageLife had yet to develop a presence online, aside from a brief listing among Jamaican hospitality ventures. The Okra, like VillageLife, relied primarily on word of mouth and local reputation. While mentioned in a few travel guides and online directories, the Okra was not distributed by professional travel agents, tour operators, or Internet travel intermediaries.

In promotional messages in local media, VillageLife invokes many of Jamaica’s tourist attractions, including numerous rural villages, YS Falls, the lengthy Black River, and the so-called Lovers Leap, where two young slaves purportedly threw themselves 1,700 feet to their deaths after learning that they would be forever separated. Prices range from about \$40 per person to over \$1,500 for packages that include staying at inns, farms, and cottages.¹²

For the occasional guest passing through and seeking a day excursion, VillageLife also offered a guided highlights tour of Burkestown for a per-person price of \$10 an hour. Full-day tours were priced at \$40 per person including lunch. Group packages and discounts were also available.

The Downside to Discovering the Real Jamaica

Venturing out into a developing country carries risks that some travelers are not willing to take. For Jamaica, in particular,

concerns about driving conditions, crime, and poverty prevent many travelers from wanting to experience the real Jamaica.¹³ For example, driving or riding on the left side of Jamaica’s winding roads requires a tolerance for peril, and for some, it is enough reason to venture no further than the shuttle run between the resort and the airport. Williams took pride in her driving skills and a record free of any “mash ups.” She gladly offered to arrange airport transfer via minibus for groups. In this and other regards, managing the risk of entering real Jamaica while maximizing the reward was an important function of VillageLife Tourism.

Travelers who explored more than Jamaica’s beaches noted the striking economic disparity between the excesses of the resorts and the penury of many roadside abodes. According to 2004 estimates, Jamaica struggled with a 15 percent unemployment rate, and 20 percent of the population lived below the poverty line.¹⁴ Crime was also an issue, particularly gang violence in the capital city of Kingston. On the other hand, communities such as Burkestown were reasonably affluent and relatively crime free. Despite facing some resentment about tourism, visitors with common sense and thick skin could enjoy relative physical security outside the resort. Williams was frank when asked questions surrounding culture or crime: “We struggle with crime, primarily in Kingston but rarely towards tourists. Keep your wits and wallet with you in the marketplace, travel with an open mind, and you will find Jamaicans are a very warm and gifted people.”

Experiences such as that offered by VillageLife Tourism helped replace visitors’ trepidation regarding crime with understanding and even some comfort after encountering the warmth pervasive among Jamaicans.¹⁵ Williams noted that

no ill fortune or crime had befallen her guests, and she attributed this to having sensitized the community to the benefits of tourism with educational opportunities and a positive reputation.

Building a Sustainable Future for VillageLife

Augmenting her efforts to manage and market VillageLife, the Okra Country Inn, and the training program, Williams constantly developed new ideas for what tourists might like to do, such as setting up a VillageLife backpacking trail or organizing bird-watching tours. She also assisted surrounding communities in improving their appeal to tourists. Williams also served several organizations promoting cultural exchange through tourism in the Caribbean, which strived to market Jamaica as a destination rather than as a collection of resorts. When explaining why she was involved in so many efforts, Williams stated that each activity provided an opportunity to promote community tourism, establish community links, and create new entrepreneurial opportunities for VillageLife.

Ultimately, a sustainable future for VillageLife (and the Okra Inn) depended on driving demand for the community tourism experience—or adapting the experience to meet the needs and wants of Jamaica's visitors. VillageLife's guests expressed satisfaction in the realization that they were among the few visitors to Jamaica who connected with the culture. The challenge remained for Susanna Williams to find how best to expand this cultural connection.

Authors' Analysis

While the majority of tourism operations in Jamaica are built on catering to guests' needs, Williams's vision is that

tourism can address economic, social, and environmental problems in Jamaica as business opportunities. She is a champion for the Jamaican communities and marginalized local suppliers of tourism products. This approach has proved successful with specific applications such as the training program. As is all too common with entrepreneurial ventures, though, the vision is often not supported by sound marketing planning and implementation. Using her vision, Williams must also speak to and incorporate potential guests of VillageLife. That is, she must better market the VillageLife experience to generate needed business.

We suggest a formal marketing-planning approach. In our analysis, we emphasize the importance and value of conducting ongoing market research, focus on how producing a formal marketing plan can add needed focus and discipline to a vision, and propose tactics for communicating the VillageLife experience given the constraints of a small business.

Conducting Ongoing Market Research

Many entrepreneurs assume that their acquired experience represents sufficient market research and understanding. A common result of not venturing beyond one's experience for gathering input about the market is offering a product that may not match what consumers seek. Williams has developed strong convictions that guests seek what she provides in her vision for tourism in Jamaica. Despite her considerable exposure to the tourism industry, though, generating demand for the VillageLife product remains a struggle. This suggests shortcomings of some element or combination of elements in VillageLife's marketing mix. Its service bundle might be failing to meet expectations, its marketing message may have

inadequate reach or impact, or its lack of tourist industry connections may mean insufficient distribution. A starting point for marketing planning is to diagnose problems—by talking to customers and prospects.

Both primary research (e.g., surveys, interviews, and participation in and mining of qualitative data from online chat zones and discussion boards) and secondary research (e.g., reports and studies already prepared by government, travel associations, or other businesses) can help provide needed data for VillageLife to profile customers and make subsequent marketing decisions. Sustainable-tourism ventures typically attract an assortment of customers.¹⁶ Indeed, VillageLife has attracted environmentalists, cultural tourists, intellectuals, social theorists and researchers, explorers, travelers, heritage seekers, religious pilgrims, church groups, and many other types of travelers. While most marketing theory recommends targeting a specific market niche, VillageLife can succeed in drawing demand from multiple niches if it can identify particular aspects of the experience that appeal to its diverse travelers.¹⁷ For example, many guests expressed appreciation for the chance to become immersed in the culture rather than just view it as a tourist. Also, guests focused on those moments when they did something unusual, such as when they were the only foreigners lunching in a local restaurant. In sum, the first critical steps for VillageLife are to develop an understanding of its several market segments and then to decide how to approach each of those segments with offers that are attractive yet still true to the original vision and the organization's ability to deliver.

Developing a Formal Marketing Plan

Williams should develop a formal marketing plan to force discipline on her

vision. In this section, we outline how a marketing plan would apply to her enterprises: namely, writing out a vision and mission, setting marketing objectives, and using the four *Ps* of marketing (product, price, place, and promotion) to aid in structuring the strategy-development process.

Articulating the organization's vision in terms of a set of values and a mission statement, even if these seem clear to the entrepreneur, helps to provide direction for the organization and forces choices about how to direct resources. Williams can be succinct in describing the values and mission of VillageLife, which she says allows one to see the roots of Jamaica, hear the people's stories, and share their lives. To her, Jamaican tourism is beyond the beachfront resorts.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis. Once the vision is clear and brought to the forefront, organizations and entrepreneurs must have a firm understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Specifically, the strengths and weaknesses sections speak to internal factors, while weaknesses and opportunities focus on competition and market forces (see Exhibit 1). After developing this awareness, continual environmental scanning will help the entrepreneur to stay abreast of market trends and surrounding product developments.

Marketing objectives. Next, Williams should translate the articulated vision into marketing objectives that are realistic, measurable, and specific. For example, objectives should include quantitative responses to the following questions: What kind of volume is needed for VillageLife to break even? How must operations be complemented by occupancy and RevPAR (revenue per available room) targets at the Okra Inn? Without

Exhibit 1:

SWOT Analysis for VillageLife Tourism

| <i>Strengths</i> | <i>Weaknesses</i> |
|---|---|
| <p>Strong community network and local knowledge</p> <p>Accumulated understanding and implementation of hospitality services in Jamaica (e.g., arranging lodging, dining, touring)</p> <p>Developed credibility, vision, and passion for sharing the best of Jamaica</p> <p>Entrepreneurial ability to identify new opportunities related to sustainable community tourism</p> <p>Product enables a distinctive experience and creates value for guests seeking to experience the culture and country from a more authentic perspective than that offered by other tourism suppliers</p> | <p>Need detailed marketing plan and additional marketing expertise</p> <p>Capital investment required for the Okra Country Inn</p> <p>Difficulty in clearly and consistently communicating product to potential guests</p> <p>Market demand, price sensitivity, and interests for sustainable-community tourism not yet fully assessed</p> <p>Lack of focus on core competencies when allocating time and resources</p> |
| <i>Opportunities</i> | <i>Threats</i> |
| <p>Growing consumer awareness and interest in alternative tourism</p> <p>Packaging with all-inclusive resorts</p> <p>Communicating effectively with a diverse group of travelers through a strong presence on Web sites, forums, e-mail, and public-relations feature stories</p> <p>Attaining government or NGO support for projects given socially, environmentally, and economically responsible mission and approach</p> | <p>Real and perceived threat of crime, risk of driving accidents, and inability to control for all potential guest situations</p> <p>Vulnerable to both foreign and Jamaican political and economic instability</p> <p>Government policies and financing that typically favor large competitors and foreign investment</p> <p>Difficulty competing for traditional distribution channels including travel agents or online intermediaries</p> |

such measures, it becomes difficult to identify how well the concept is performing or how planned changes might affect operations. Setting target objectives may seem difficult, especially given that business for VillageLife is irregular, but doing so provides needed discipline, goals, and means for checking progress.

Marketing Mix Strategy

Product strategy. Our analysis of VillageLife's marketing mix suggests that its product strategy demands attention. We identified areas where the product is not clearly defined or necessarily desirable to the potential consumer. For example, it is

not clear to the market what VillageLife offers beyond an opportunity to interact with the community. Williams must consider how to construct and convey the tangible and intangible elements of the VillageLife experience, even when guests have varying interests. At an abstract level, VillageLife enables self-development by providing access to novel cultural experiences and opportunities to participate in and even contribute to the community. More specifically, providing relative insulation from city-based crime is one of VillageLife's real, marketable value propositions.

The product's aspects must be made clear and illustrated in the guest's mind. VillageLife has to package its knowledge and network as an experiential product that is not otherwise available to the independent traveler. A solid first step would be to assemble a set of featured tour packages that include travel elements—that is, transportation, attractions, activities, lodging, and dining—which research reveals to be valued by potential customers.

Leisure-time activities are another area in which the VillageLife product does not fully meet guests' needs. Many vacationers do not envision being continually on the go, and the beaches of Jamaica hold a special allure for travelers coming from cold, stressful environs. Our site research revealed that the current VillageLife product does not expressly promote such leisure time—though if guests ask, Williams will accommodate the request. A balance between time at the beach and time in the community appealed to many tourists whom we interviewed both at the Okra Inn and at the resorts. VillageLife may find that guests are more excited by exploring after they have spent several days at the beach, or they may desire downtime at the end of their stays to relax and reflect on the VillageLife experience before returning home.

Continuing the theme of a leisure experience balanced with other activities, and drawing on VillageLife's strategy of using local partnerships, we encourage extended partnerships with the resorts themselves. VillageLife might partner to develop guest-experience offerings (e.g., packages that combine resort and community tourism experiences) to allow both ventures to remain focused on their own strengths. Partnerships with resorts may mean more commerce at VillageLife. On one hand, the resorts have the lion's share of market, resources, and marketing reach. On the other hand, Williams is able to provide an experience that clearly appeals to some guests. Furthermore, Jamaica's all-inclusive resorts face mounting pressure from concerned locals, governments, and travelers to embrace sustainability.¹⁸ Partnership with a local enterprise that has a vision of sustainability and community contribution would help to defuse this pressure, as well as provide marketing opportunities for another travel experience for resort guests. That is, resorts have the opportunity to develop a reputation of being interested in the local community while providing guests with options beyond contrived excursions.¹⁹ By the same token, such partnerships would allow VillageLife to create a more complete product while gaining credibility and market access without additional infrastructure or expertise.

To be entrusted with resort guests, though, VillageLife still must demonstrate what it can provide for the resort as a partner. A formal marketing plan provides evidence of VillageLife's value that could convince a resort's operators that the concept is both viable and well thought out. It may be ironic that the market forces of mass tourism and sustainable tourism should need to seek such common ground, but it seems unlikely that one model will

thrive over the long term without elements of the other. The real way forward certainly seems to come from a product based on cooperation rather than competition between these two models.

Pricing strategy. VillageLife's prices for vacation packages are relatively high, even by the standards of the all-inclusive resorts, though the company offers discounts based on group size. When the packages include a stay in the Okra, though, guests may question VillageLife's value proposition compared with the offerings of the all-inclusive resorts. Our research did not reveal a process by which prices are determined, which suggests that prices are set by historical performance rather than by current analysis of the market and competitive set.

Place strategy. Like many small hospitality ventures, VillageLife and the Okra Inn have little distribution through Internet intermediaries (e.g., Expedia and Travelocity) and traditional travel agents. Instead, guests telephone VillageLife at the Okra for additional information and to clarify the details of their stay. The concept of an extended resort partnership again seems attractive for expanding the inn's distribution network with minimal investment.

Promotion strategy. Similarly, VillageLife's promotion is largely nonexistent except for word of mouth, occasional mentions in travel publications, and product awareness generated at regional conferences. With the idea that VillageLife's potential guests would expect to obtain information from the Internet, we searched for VillageLife, indirectly at first, by entering general search terms (e.g., *Jamaica cultural tours* and *authentic Jamaica*). Finding that VillageLife did not appear on the first page of search engines, we decided that the only way to find it was to search by name—meaning that the searcher has to know about VillageLife to

search for it. Making more use of the Internet, VillageLife could use opt-in e-mail marketing campaigns that alert previous and potential guests to package specials or current events in Jamaica from reggae festivals to culinary expositions. The Internet can also facilitate promotion campaigns that would otherwise be too expensive. Communicating with niche markets from disparate geographic and demographic backgrounds is possible with limited financial investment through the Internet and by involving travel writers and publications. Clearly, though, relying on word of mouth from past guests and attending conferences have not generated sufficient awareness for VillageLife or the Okra.

Based on our analysis, we advocate that Williams use public relations as the primary marketing communications tool. She could, for example, contribute content to Internet forums, Web sites, and chat rooms that serve travelers most likely to value the VillageLife experience. Sites that share information about experiences such as those provided by VillageLife include Thorntree.lonelyplanet.com, TravelPod.com, Igougo.com, and EcoClub.com. Because of her credibility as a voice for sustainable tourism, a well-placed description of VillageLife and link to additional information is less apt to be perceived as a sales pitch than as a valid source of information for travelers. As part of a public-relations initiative, Williams can provide travel and guidebook writers with crafted messages that tell the VillageLife story. For example, VillageLife's entry in a recent issue of *The Lonely Planet* leaves the reader with a sense that the company is doing great things for the community through tourism, but it is not clear what the product offers customers.

Conclusion

Good works can carry an operation only so far. At some point, an operation

needs revenue to fuel the engine of sustainable tourism. While Williams's vision has generated some appeal and continuity, without solid business and marketing planning, the execution of that vision is all too likely to fall short.

Tourism should share its benefits with local communities and marginalized stakeholders. Visitors to Burkestown will notice that the community is relatively friendly, respectful, and willing to share their traditions and country with tourists. Long ago, Williams saw the possibility and need for the community and visitor to benefit from each other in this way, and she became a needed voice for the underrepresented communities and tourism suppliers. While many Jamaican resorts are criticized for their overriding emphasis on profits and pampered guests, growing the VillageLife vision will require a balanced view that not only speaks to the needs of the community but also commands the attention and revenues of guests who find value in connecting with the culture.

Endnotes

1. The experiences that inform the case description and analysis are based on two months of ethnographic field research conducted by the first author, under the direction of the second author. The research involved participant observation as a guest and later as a staff member at the Okra Inn. This was followed by five weeks as a management intern at the Wyndham Rose Hall Resort in Montego Bay. The data record consists of more than 100 pages of field notes, 1,400 digital pictures, 55 in-depth interviews with guests, and 10 interviews with management and employees of the Okra Inn.
2. For example, see Cletus Springer, *Overcoming the Challenges to the Sustainability of Tourism in Caribbean SIDS* (Impact Consultancy Services Report, 2002, chap. 6); David B. Weaver, "Ecotourism as Mass Tourism: Contradiction or Reality?" *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (April 2001): 104-12;
3. Matt A. Casado, "Balancing Urban Growth and Landscape Preservation: The Case of Flagstaff, Arizona," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (August 1999): 64-69; and Edward W. Manning and T. David Dougherty, "Sustainable Tourism: Preserving the Golden Goose," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (April 1995): 29-42.
4. Wendy Hillman, *Searching for Authenticity and Experience: Backpackers Traveling in Australia* (Sydney, Australia: John Wiley, 2001); P. Pearce and G. Moscardo, "The Concept of Authenticity in Tourist Experiences," *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 1 (1986): 121-32; and D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1976).
5. J. J. Issa and C. Jayawardena, "The 'All-inclusive' Concept in the Caribbean," *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 15, no. 3 (April 2003): 167-71.
6. Travel and Tourism Intelligence, *All-inclusive Holidays International 2001—History and Development of Concept* (Intel Market Research Report, 2001).
7. Peter Pearson and Peter Williams, "The Jamaican Hotel Industry," *PwC Industry Report*, 2004, <http://www.pwc.com/cb/images/pdf/jamaicahotel2004.pdf>.
8. *Ibid.*, 4.
9. D. J. Telfer, "Conclusion: Tourism and Development," in *Tourism and Development: Concepts and Issues*, ed. R. Sharpley and D. J. Telfer (Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications, 2002), 338-48.
10. United Nations Environment Program, *Economic Impacts of Tourism, 2002*, <http://www.unepti.org/pc/tourism/sust-tourism/economic.htm>.
11. Travel and Tourism Intelligence, *Jamaican Market Characteristics* (Intel Market Research Report, 2005).
12. Finding an experience like that offered by VillageLife Tourism is difficult; the authors discovered VillageLife only after several months of searching online and in travel guidebooks and references for organizations promoting cultural-tourism initiatives and finally e-mailing several Jamaican scholars familiar with the tourism industry.
13. Desmond Henry, "True Jamaica," *Islands Travel*, November 2004, 30.
14. Ian Boxill, *Crime and Sustainable Tourism in Jamaica* (UWI, Mona, 1995).

14. *CIA World Factbook—Jamaica*, 2005, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/jm.html>.
15. L. D'Amore, "Tourism: A Vital Force for Peace," *Annals of Tourism Research* 15, no. 2 (1983): 269-70.
16. Paul F. J. Eagles, "Understanding the Market for Sustainable Tourism," *National Recreation and Park Association Report*, 1995 in Stephen F. McCool and Alan E. Watson, compilers, *Linking Tourism, the Environment and Sustainability*. Proceedings of a special session of the annual meeting of the National Recreation and Park Association, October 12-14, 1994; Minneapolis, MN (Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-GTR-323).
17. *Ibid.*, 3.
18. Travel and Tourism Intelligence, *All-inclusive Holidays International*.
19. Chukka Safari Tours is one of the more popular excursions where guests depart in zebra-painted expedition jeeps. Jamaican tour guides wear African-safari uniforms, and the tour is organized to feel like a hunt over back roads, with occasional sightings of wildlife, scenery, and natives.



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