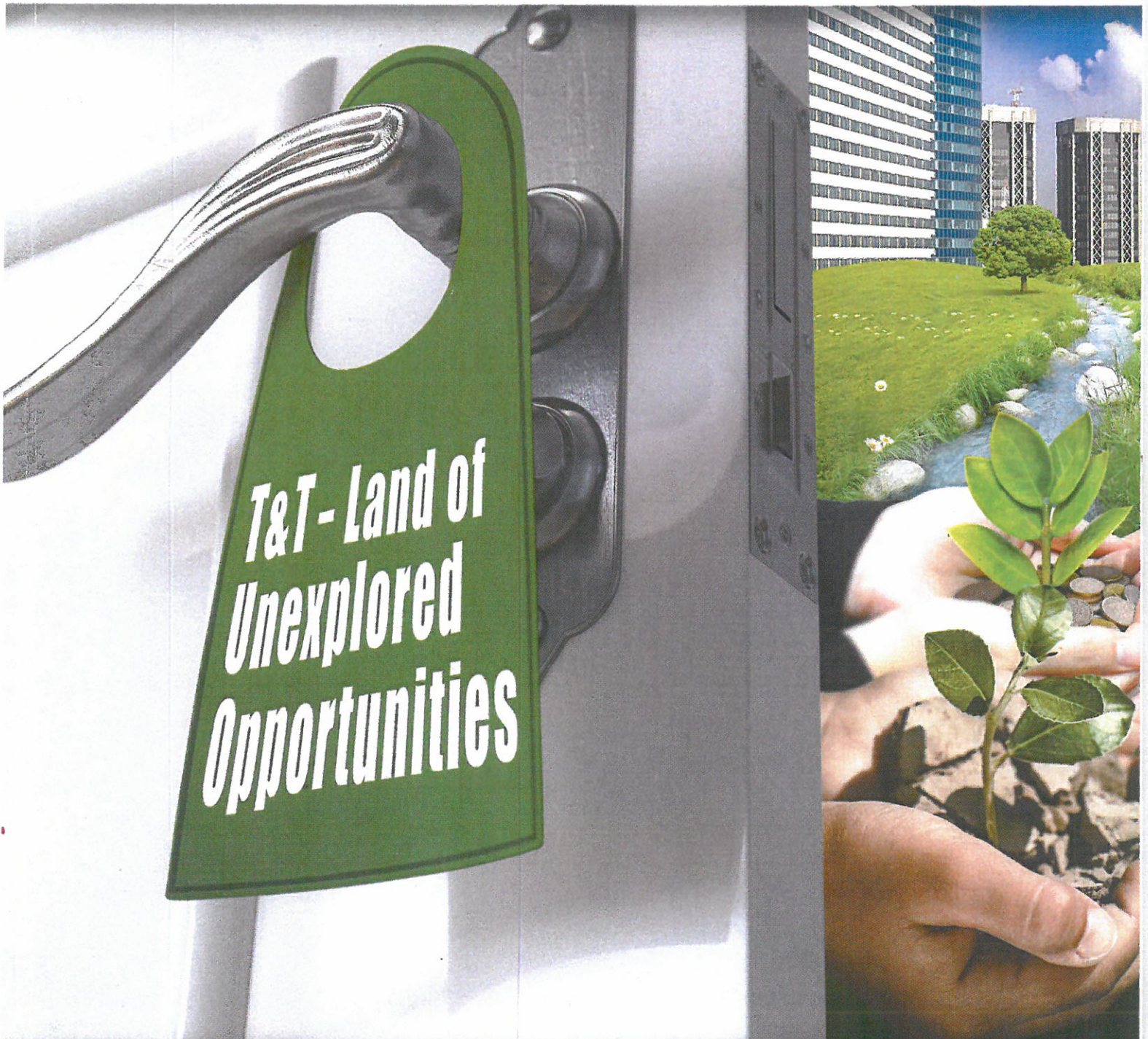


# Contact

Magazine





# Case study: Villages as Businesses - The Lopinot experience

By Michelle D. Celestine



Photos courtesy Joshua Liu

**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 17th Century estate house there, still known 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).

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 picturesque, landscaped grounds with its 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. The main natural attraction is the Arouca river flowing right through the middle of the village and passing

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 Blanchisseuse 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. 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 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 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. During the workshop, young Daniella Fuller, dubbed the "Pastelle Queen" announced her intention to take Pastelles to the world. The labour intensive business of Pastelle making can be a viable niche export product, providing sustainable employment while earning foreign exchange. Parang has developed into a thriving 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 innovation has spawned a host of entrepreneurs and there are delicacies and desserts made in Lopinot that have won awards internationally and cannot be sampled anywhere else in Trinidad and Tobago. From chocolate Ponche de Crème to dark chocolate dips, chocolate bread pudding and various meats cooked in a secret cocoa sauce recipe, many families have a resident chocolatier and have created their family brand of eating and drinking chocolate delights.

With all of that on offer, the villagers were taught during the workshop 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 accredited by the TDC and are now promoted by tour operators locally and abroad, with a minimum of six families from within the village benefitting 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





A Calendar of Events within the valley has been established by the interim Lopinot Countrystyle Community Tourism Committee (LCCTC) chaired by Marcia Guerrero, 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 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 being executed in late March, even as this article was being written, with one of the highlights being cocoa pork - an entire pig lathered in chocolate roasted on an outside fireplace! 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.

The next event will be the "May Fest" scheduled for Sunday May 1st, 2016 and the villagers of Lopinot are waiting to welcome you! A great contributor to the overall success of the initiative has been the free advice provided to the LCCTC by Mrs. Maureen Boneo Thomas, FCCA, MSc., BSc., CA, who is a Senior Audit

Manager with one of the 'Big 4' accounting firms. The LCCTC is 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 TDC to seek an allocation from Central Government to finance the most urgently required restoration works. The Lopinot experience is a viable model which can be replicated throughout Trinidad and Tobago, especially in our rural communities. 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 for a 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.

## KEX LIMITED

### Professional Floor Mat Service



- ✓ We Replace Your Soiled Mats With Clean & Functional Mats On A Scheduled Basis
- ✓ We Supply Customised Logo Mats Under Our Service

**674-MATS (6278) www.kexlimited.com**





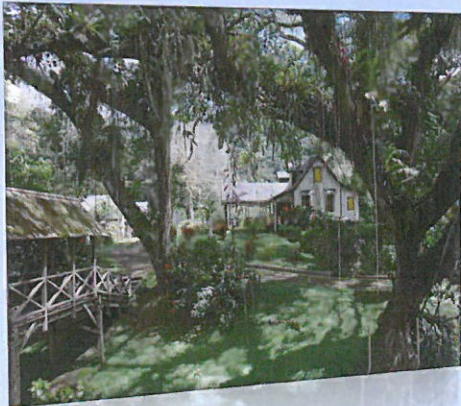


**THE NATIONAL TRUST  
OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

# **LOPINOT – A HERITAGE VILLAGE**

## **WHY IS LOPINOT A HERITAGE VILLAGE?**

- \* Historic sites – “Count Lopinot’s house”, the old cocoa shed, the shrine, aspects of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church.
- \* Natural sites – the river, the springs, the caves, the archaeological finds, lush flora and fauna.
- \* Cultural activities – Parang music and the making of parang instruments, folk music, traditional medicine, delicious traditional foods e.g. paimé, pastelles plus a range of cocoa desserts.
- \* Birthplace of important people – Victor Mc Intyre, senior Public Servant; Fr. Robert Rivas, Archbishop of Castries St. Lucia who has written a Biography which narrates his formative years in Lopinot; and Martin Gomez, local Entertainer extraordinaire.



## **WHAT IS COUNTRY STYLE COMMUNITY TOURISM?**

Regional expert Dr. Diana McIntyre-Pike describes it as: ***“The assessment, development and marketing of natural and cultural community resources which seeks to add value to the experience of local and foreign visitors, and simultaneously improve the quality of life in communities”.***

## **CAN A VILLAGE BE A BUSINESS?**

Yes. Promoting your village as a Heritage Village with interesting things to do and see, can create jobs and earn you income.

## **HOW DO YOU MANAGE IT?**

What aspects of the heritage of the village can I promote and be a part of? Should we have fixed date events each year as a community – how do we promote them? How do we distribute the income?

**LET US FIND THE ANSWERS  
TOGETHER!**

