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Changing Direction

A new approach to acknowledging employee excellence has resulted in higher engagement scores at Siemens Corporation

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Susan Brown, director of compensation, Siemens Corporation, successfully merged numerous recognition initiatives into one flexible program

TRAVEL

Mexico

Two American expats open their home to incentive groups

Mi Casa Es Su Casa

By Andrea Doyle

Some incentive groups are giving up a day at the beach to tour the meticulously restored Casa de los Venados, a 400-year-old hacienda-style house in Valladolid, Mexico. The house is a showplace for the more than 3,000-piece collection of Mexican folk and contemporary art that has been amassed by John Venator, who was president and CEO of CompTIA for 22 years, the leading trade association for the world's information technology industry, and his wife Dorianne, a former association and corporate meeting planner.

It may seem ironic that two Americans who are still perfecting their Spanish have become two of Mexico tourism's biggest ambassadors. But Dorianne, born and bred in Chicago, and John, born in Portland, OR and raised in Chicago, have had a lifelong love affair with the country.

The Mexico Tourist Board recently tapped into their passion to produce a video featur-



Mexico has two unlikely ambassadors: Americans Dorianne and John Venator

ing the two and Casa de los Venados. In the video, John says, "Mexico is warm, friendly, and embracing. We feel extremely safe here. Mexico is about celebrating time together. The people of this country value relaxing and enjoying life. In America we don't spend enough time smelling the roses. You get to smell the roses here."

Conference Burnout Lands Him in Cancun

John's passion for Mexico was ignited during his first year at Lewis and Clark College in Portland in 1962 where he took advantage of a pilot program that allowed freshmen to study abroad. He spent the year in a "home stay" with a family in Puebla, Mexico. Years later, after a hectic conference in Miami in the late 1970s, John walked into an Eastern Airlines office, asking about specials for a long weekend getaway. "The agent told me about a

\$102 roundtrip ticket to Cancun. The funny thing was I had lived in Mexico but had never heard of Cancun, a destination that had just been developed. I stayed at one of the six hotels that existed there then and that trip rekindled my love of Mexico and the Yucatan."

John and Dorianne talked about living in Mexico and agreed they would want to live in a hacienda-style house with "history."

House Hunting While on Vacation

The couple explored the country during vacations for seven years. While Dorianne was off planning a meeting, John visited Valladolid, a tranquil city of approximately 70,000 that is halfway between Merida and Cancun. "I found a time capsule of wonderful old buildings just waiting for someone to come along and nurse them back to their full glory and historical identity," says John.

An 18,000-square-foot, high walled house on Calle 40, caught his eye. On the facade, someone had taken a paintbrush



TRAVEL

Mexico

Casa de los Venados has more than 3,000 pieces in its collection



The dining room includes 16 chairs, each with a unique portrait

Mexican Handicrafts Enhance Incentive Trips

Mexico's art history dates back to the Mayan era. Handicrafts are produced according to the region and the available raw materials. The prime materials used in the production of Mexican arts and crafts are clay, wrought iron, metal, wood, ceramics, Talavera pottery, glass, thread, woven palm, wax, and leather.

Each region of Mexico offers art that is reflective of that particular area, making these products the ideal room gifts for incentive groups.

Many objects are favorites among tourists, but one style that attracts a lot of attention is Huichol art, with its animal forms covered with chaquiras (small colorful beads); Chiapas offers crafts made from wool and colorful textiles as well as jewelry and figurines made from amber and other precious stones. Oaxaca is known for its black clay pottery, its dolls, and fantastic alebrije figures. Also not to be missed are the silverware of Guerrero or the beautiful embroidery from the center and south of the country. There are the ceramics of Jalisco or Puebla and the leather goods manufactured in the north.

In Colima, Manzanillo, beautiful crafts are made from natural materials. The most popular are figures made from coconut shells, colimotes (straw hats), jewelry made from shells, and engraved mother of pearl.

and roughly painted, "Se Vende Esta Casa," (this house for sale.) He called the number on the sign and was allowed in by the caretaker. No one had lived there since 1964 and it was a total ruin. However, John was smitten by the 55-square-foot central courtyard and the 25-foot tall ceilings and meter-thick stone walls. He saw potential. After a month of negotiating, the Venators owned the house.

"We were very fortunate in who we selected as our construction contractor, project manager, and architect. Everything went so smoothly," he explains. The international architectural community has honored the home with four first prize awards in three major regional, national, and international architectural competitions.

Casa de los Venados Impresses

Today, their home features five duplex guest suites with an additional self-contained two-story suite for the couple. There is a large landscaped garden in the back, the house complete with a 32' x 50' pool, fitness center, three bars, pergolas, and a landscaped courtyard.

The art collection is more than 50 years in the making. Most pieces have been purchased directly from the artists. "We generally don't buy things from a gallery in Mexico City. We go into rural villages in various parts of Mexico where artists are working in their rudimentary houses, with cement floors and a bare lightbulb. We buy things we have a passion for and to support the artists. Folk art is something many do during the off-season when they are not planting or harvesting their corn. They sell their pieces to help augment their income."

John laughs as he explains that his new home has also turned into a pro bono job as an event planner. Having an event at Casa de los Venados and need a mariachi band? No problem. Cooking demonstration? A cocktail buffet or a sit-down meal? He has made contacts for all these things and more. The home can accommodate up to 300 for special events encompassing its sala



grande, central patio courtyard, and rooftop terrace and bar. Valladolid is very close to Chichen Itza and an event at the private house-museum could be a great way to top off a tour of the ruins. That's exactly what an international trade association headquartered in Paris did in November of 2011 after a visit to Chichen Itza — they had a sit down luncheon at the house for a group of more than a hundred attendees.

Cultural Tourism

The Mexican Tourist Board and the Secretariat of Tourism are very close to promoting Casa de los Venados as its latest promotion focuses on "cultural tourism." The Venators are thrilled. "Collectors like nothing more than to share their collection with others," John says.

Gloria Guevara, Mexico's Tourism Secretary, who has been to the home twice for special events, invited John to be part of the inaugural World Travel & Tourism Council Americas Summit in Riviera Maya, Mexico this May.

John, a full time staff of six, and seven volunteer docents run tours daily at 10 a.m. and arrange special events as a way of raising money for charity. "We are not a business, but rather a private 501C3 organization and we donate the money to needy and worthwhile not-for-profit organizations," says John. The suggested minimum donation for a tour is \$5 per person or 60 pesos. ■

For a virtual tour of the Casa de los Venados, go to www.casadelosvenados.org.