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International .com

DAILY TRAVEL & TOURISM NEWS PORTAL
FOR THE INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL TRADE MARKET SINCE 1999

IHIF 2011 Honours Social Entrepreneur with the Young Leader Award

She may be young but she is definitely one of the most respected social entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. **Amy Carter-James**, the young woman who stands out of the crowd, was the recipient 2011 Young Leader award in the closing day of the International Hotel Investment Forum (IHIF) which had exactly this slogan: "Stand out of the Crowd".



The Young Leader 2011 with the award sponsors

Co-sponsored by the International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC), the award is given each year to a young and emerging leader who has great potential. "She was an outstanding candidate in many ways," said **Lori Raleigh**, Executive Director ISHC. "She stood out to us not only due to her tremendous achievements but also for her wonderful personal attributes and commitment to helping make a difference for others through her responsible tourism initiatives as well". **Jonathan Worsley**, Chairman of Bench Events, co-organisers of IHIF added that Amy is a wonderful example for other young leaders in hospitality and we're thrilled to recognize her at this year's IHIF."



Amy Carter-James

Amy and her husband Neal passionately believed that a quality tourism product could be a powerful tool to enable poor, rural communities to work their way out of poverty. They chose Guludo in Mozambique and, with the help of the local community and the architects Cullum & Nightingale, they created the Guludo Beach Lodge with an architecture based on local techniques and a style which is environmentally friendly. They chose the location because of its potential for tourism but also because of its extreme rural poverty; a place they believed they could have maximum impact and bring most benefits.



Guludo Beach Lodge

They also founded Nema, a charity which works in the areas around the lodge to achieve their charitable goals. With all the experience she gained from establishing the lodge working together with the local community and from her Nema projects for alleviating local poverty, Amy went on to found a corporate responsibility consultancy firm, Thin Cats Thinking (thincats.org) to assist hospitality businesses around the world to work more efficiently with local communities and to maximize their positive impact in a commercially viable way.

In an exclusive interview with TDN, Amy shared her vision and dreams.

TDN: *From marine zoology graduate at Bangor University to internationally recognised tourism social entrepreneur in Mozambique, you have come a long way. What was your driver for this admirable 'journey' and what part did Neal play in it?*

Amy Carter-James: After spending time volunteering in Kenya, tourism seemed to be an obvious vehicle to empower disadvantaged communities and protect threatened environments. Neal and I met at university, he loved the idea and we would dream about the day we could make it happen! This came sooner than expected when we realised there weren't enough reasons to hold us back when I graduated in 2002.

When we started, we made a commitment to people living in extreme rural poverty and we desperately wanted to show the rest of the world the potential tourism had for sustainable development. The stakes were far too high to ever let it be anything but a great success.

TDN: *How challenging was it for you and Neal to share your 'dream' with the locals at Guludo? After all, you were two 'young foreigners' for them.*

ACJ: Everything about developing Guludo was challenging – there was certainly no handbook to follow! The first few years were particularly hard; everything was alien, logic never seemed to prevail and tragedy seemed to be round almost every corner.

I'm not sure being young ever counted that heavily against us; initially we seemed so strange and different that looking so young was just viewed as another peculiarity! Although the communities were always very pro-tourism and extremely keen to get involved, people were understandably a little doubtful whether anything would actually happen. There could never be any substitute for time; the longer we worked with the communities, the deeper the trust developed.

TDN: Apart from its responsible design, what makes your Guludo Beach Lodge business model so 'unique' and how replicable is it?

ACJ: The holiday experience is unique because the region is unique. The holiday feels local, authentic and guests form an emotionally link through our amazing staff and work in the local area.

One of the things that make our model so unique is the holistic approach to our business and charity in addressing local issues. We don't just concentrate on saving rhinos or building schools – we empower the local communities to address each and every issue that causes suffering, locks them into poverty and causes environmental harm. Using this approach means that projects overlap and reinforce each other, creating strong foundations for sustainable development.

The model and ethos is completely replicable! There are simple principles that are completely transferable to any hospitality related business. However, working productively with communities does require quite a lot of skill, often good intentions can be destructive in the long term so good, reliable advice should be taken. This advice should ensure that you can help address the most urgent issues first and that projects are sustainable and cost effective.



Nema nutrition project

TDN: How does the Nema foundation work and what did you achieve since the time it was founded?

ACJ: Nema is a local word which signifies the joy someone feels when suffering ends. The Lodge donates 5% of its income to the charity enabling Nema Foundation to implement a wide array of projects which help the communities around Guludo tackle all aspects that keep them locked into poverty. We currently work with 12 communities, approximately 16,000 people, in five main areas: health, water, education, enterprise and environment. To give you some examples, Nema is currently feeding 800 children one nutritious school meal every day and providing clean water for over 12,000 people from 30 water points. We have also provided over 9,000 mosquito nets to mothers of young children (very important health issue in Mozambique). And even more importantly, Nema funds 127 secondary school scholarships.

TDN: How can the Thin Cats help and guide the Fat (and the Not-So-Fat) Cats?

ACJ: Thin Cats helps hotels and resorts to connect more effectively with their local communities. At the International Hotel Investment Forum this week, industry leaders advised hoteliers to invest in emerging markets, to go green to save money, to deliver more 'local and authentic' experiences and with the explosion of social media it is more important than ever to make an emotional connection with clients. We help hotels to develop strong corporate responsibility strategies that also help to deliver on all these fronts. Fundamentally, we help them to realise their potential to bring benefits to their local communities in such a way that also helps to strengthen their brand and product.

TDN: Amy, over the past few years you have won or been the finalist for a series of awards: TWO Conde Nast Traveler World Savers Awards, Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2006, 30 Under 30 London Talent Award, TODO! Award for Socially Responsible Tourism, Travel & Leisure Global Vision Award, Responsible Tourism Award in the category of "Best for Poverty Reduction" - to name a few. Is the IHIF Young Leader Award just another recognition or it has some special significance in your eyes?

ACJ: For the hotel industry and for me personally, it is certainly the most significant and exciting award to date. It signals that the very heart of the hotel industry recognises that corporate responsibility is no longer on the periphery but central to the future of the industry. Winning this award proves that the archaic "fat cat" approach of pursuing wealth at any expense is now fading and experts agree, corporate responsibility is no longer an optional "add-on". Now that is incredibly exciting!



Nema water project

TDN: You are continuously raising your own bar. What should we next expect from you?

ACJ: The next step is to successfully enable the rest of the industry to implement strong and intelligent corporate responsibility strategies that will help the millions of people living in the shadow of tourism to partake and benefit from the industry.

TDN: Closing, what message would you want to send to the key players in the hospitality industry today?

ACJ: Having a successful corporate responsibility strategy is not a luxury it is a necessity. Those who implement intelligent corporate responsibility strategies that are well integrated into their hotels will reap the most rewards - so get going!