Americans have Bold Vision for Madagascar

By Lindsay Redifer

Americans Sarah LeHoullier and Sondra Fischer love two things: teaching and Madagascar. Now they are combining the two in a project custom-made for Tamatave, a city on the east coast of the Island, a center for learning and cultural exchange for native English speakers and the Malagasy people.

The two lived in Madagascar from 2005 to 2007 when they served as volunteers in the Peace Corps. Once their tours ended, they found themselves at home in the United States and unsettled. Fisher called LeHoullier with an ultimatum-if she got down to her last two thousand dollars and was still without a job she was returning to Madagascar and wanted LeHoullier to come with her. “I thought, why not?” LeHoullier said.

And, they were off. Today, the two friends work constantly to bring their idea of a cultural exchange center to life in Tamatave. “We’re one,” Fisher said of their partnership. The two want the same things for the community, a place to learn English and learn how to benefit from local tourism, an industry on the rise.

Tour guide Fidelys Raharimandimby is one of Fisher and LeHoullier’s biggest cheerleaders, said he’s already worked with many English speaking tourists. He’s noticed English speakers seem more likely to spend more money than French speakers, but only if there’s something special to see.

“I want to show people the hiking trails near the University of Tamatave, waterfalls in the nearby forest, the farmers who sing in their rice fields,” Raharimandimby said. “And the grazing zebu and to taste the amazing fruits in the area.” The Pangalana Canal, which runs through Tamatave, could also be developed as an attraction, he says, and could be made into a one or two-day trip for visitors.

Raharimandimby is one of many who’ve seen some changes take place and anticipate more. Students at the English Learning Institute, (ELI), have also said that English is now an essential for tourism.

Jean-Baptiste Randramario, 45, an eye-doctor; explained that Malagasy people are so accustomed to French foreigners and the French language that English will be a huge change for them.

“It’s not only a matter of speaking,” said Randramario, “but thinking as well. It’s not the same as French.”

Briand Thiophile, 28, full-time student, agreed.. “In a few years,” said Thiophile, “we will see that Madagasca is not the same.”

A major change has already taken place at a local restaurant, Le Bateau Ivre. Formerly known as an exclusively French haunt, the restaurant is now seeing all kinds of new clientele as a result of new mining projects and foreign investors who now live in Tamatave.

Helen Hodgson, a South African and co-owner and manager of the Bateau Ivre with husband Christian Fay d’Herbe, said she loves the new international community. “The other night we had a party on the deck. We had Koreans, Japanese, Norwegians, South Africans, English, Welsh, Scotts, Irish all up there,” she said. “Which is marvelous.”

Like Fisher and LeHoullier, Hodgson adores Tamatave and feels it deserves to be discovered. She spoke of the towns endless coastline and the perfume of cloves and jasmine

that permeates the air. She supports the plans for the center and hopes to see the two Americans find success.

Meanwhile, LeHoullier and Fisher are have dedicated themselves to making their vision happen. Everyday is a series of meetings, real estate hunting, faxes, calls, confirmations and baby steps forward. Its slow going, but they're optimistic.

"Madagascar is beautiful," said LeHoullier, "and the Malagasy people are capable and intelligent. They just need a better structure and a platform for their ideas." The center could be the very place to start hearing what the Malagasy have to tell the rest of the world.