

Hotelier couple build new life, family in Jaco

By JOHANNA SEVIER

Tom Odom dreamed of moving to Costa Rica to carry on the memory of his father, who died in Costa Rica a few years earlier.

One week before September 11, 2001, he and his fiancée Chrissy quit their jobs and negotiated a verbal contract to buy property in Jaco. After the terrorist attacks, they seriously reconsidered their plan.

"Now, it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But at the time, the world stopped. No one knew what to do for a few weeks," he said.

As they debated their future, the price of the property fell and the terms of negotiation changed in their favor. Ultimately, they decided not to "chicken-out."

"People told us, 'The terrorists will win if you don't do it,'" said Odom.

Five years later, Tom and Chrissy manage Hotel Poseidon, one of Jaco's most popular hotels and restaurants. They have also established a new family, marking the third generation of Odoms to reside in Costa Rica.

The couple married shortly after moving to Jaco. Given their new roles as hotel owners, the wedding was no holiday for Tom and Chrissy.

"We worked our asses off at the wedding," said Odom, explaining the difficulties in hosting over 80 invited guests from the United States.

The wedding was further complicated by an electrical fire at the hotel, which Odom attributes to "fourteen rooms of gringos."

"The electricity had been done by someone who didn't realize gringos would be using hair driers and curling irons simultaneously," he said.

Overall, the fire was just one of many challenges the couple faced during their first year in Costa Rica, which Odom describes as "miserable." They worked 18 to 20 hours a day, facing the array of challenges stemming from adjusting to a new culture and opening a new business.

"We didn't speak Spanish. That was pretty stupid. We had no knowledge of anything except how to be nice to customers," said Odom.

Though the Odoms received frequent emails of support from friends and family, their



financial situation served as the true inspiration in overcoming the unforeseen hurdles.

"Every penny we ever thought we had in our life was sucked into this project. That was the best determination right there," said Odom.

The birth of their first-born son also "changed everything," said Odom, who explained that raising a child shifted their focus away from missing the folks back home.

According to him, the couple now considers the prospect of raising a child in Costa Rica as one of the best reasons to stay.

"That kid is going to be teaching me Spanish for the rest of my life," said Odom.

Also, the Odom's happy marriage is a significant factor in their ability to face the many challenges of life abroad. According to Odom, marital bliss is rare between couples who move to Costa Rica together.

Hotel improvements signify Tom and Chrissy's hard work as a couple; they've transformed Hotel Poseidon from a network of cabins with 2 maids to a fully staffed hotel and

restaurant with 25 employees.

The hotel includes 14 "luxury" rooms with air-conditioning, cable television and stocked mini-bars. The couple recently spent \$4,000 to revamp each room on the bottom floor. In this extensive project, they hired a decorator, refinished the walls and tiled the bathrooms.

Free wireless internet, a swimming pool, a restaurant, two regular bars and one swim-up bar also can be found at Hotel Poseidon.

Referring to itself as a "boutique style hotel," Hotel Poseidon receives many return visitors.

"Folks who don't like chains are going to find us," he said, explaining that the hotel's strives to reach the benchmark set by nearby luxury hotels such as Best Western.

Current projects include the expansion of the "sky-lounge" for air-conditioned dining, taking advantage of the fact that few such places exist in Jaco. The couple used to live in the sky-lounge, but now can afford to live outside their place of work.

In the future, the Odoms hope to build a deck atop the sky-lounge, affording customers views of the town and beach.

Odom is particularly pleased with the success of the restaurant.

"The biggest surprise was the restaurant. If you were in the U.S. and said to anyone in the hotel industry that you were going to build a hotel around a restaurant, they would say you were crazy," he said.

He attributes the restaurant's success to Patricia Ferguson, a good friend of Chrissy's who moved to Costa Rica after the Odoms begged and pleaded for her cooking skills.

Her dishes rotate frequently, with sample menus including "Asian-infused" cuisine such as "nori-wrapped yellow fin tuna with citrus soy" and "beef tenderloin tips with peppercorn oyster sauce and shitake mushrooms."

"Without her food, we wouldn't be what we are," said Odom.

He also attributes the popularity of the restaurant to the friendly wait-staff.

"You walk in the restaurant and you will get good service. If you don't, I want to know about it," he said.

In the process of creating a successful restaurant and hotel, the Odoms have learned many lessons.

"This is not our country. The second you forget that is the day you have one foot out the door," he said.

He believes respect for cultural norms is fundamental for successfully manage a business in Costa Rica. In particular, deference for employees' families and national holidays is of utmost importance.

"Down here, you just can't be harsh," he said.

In his recent return to Colorado, he was shocked to see how much things have changed. He refers to the United States as a "much more serious place."

"I think Americans are becoming aware that we are not liked," said Odom.

"A small part ex-pats can play is being honest with the Costa Ricans we deal with," he continued, offering his suggestion for improving international relations.