The Sun Sparkles, Palm Fronds Sway, Disk Drives Whir

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Club Med's Dominican Branch Offers Its Guests Courses In How to Run Computers

By Erik Larson
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PUNTA CANA, Dominican Republic— White coconut crabs skitter across the sand. Trade winds, warm and moist, stir the Caribbean and set palm fronds swaying. It seems to be the kind of place where one might easily forget work, traffic and computers.

Well, maybe work and traffic. But just a few yards up from the beach are two computers, each encased in an all-weather glass-fiber kiosk. Dozens of other computers are nearby—all in the unlikely setting of Club Med. For today, along with tans, stuffed bellies and whatever else one picks up at Club Med, guests at the resort chain's Dominican branch can also pick up a quick computer education.

Pierre Schemla, a club official given to wearing a hot-pink hibiscus behind his ear, says the club simply wants to help people overcome their fears of the computer and not become its slave. "We want to be the masters of that machine," he says. But what the concept boils down to is the soft sell, practiced in this case by Atari Inc., the Warner Communications Inc. unit whose computers—57 of them—are strewn about this remote vacationers' village.

The Club Med environment makes people more receptive to learning about computers, says Linda S. Gordon, Atari's vice president for special projects. She hopes that "because they are learning on an Atari, they'll have good feelings for our products."

'Great Selling Tool'

And the good feelings generated by that experience can mean sales. "I hope people will buy our machines after having that experience, certainly yes," she says. Asked whether Club Med had bought the machines from Atari or whether some other business agreement existed, she would only say: "We work jointly together. . . . It's the one accurate description that can encompass our relationship."

"They (Atari) are trying to capture clientele while they're in a relaxed mood," says David Crockett, who manages the technology-research division of Dataquest Inc., a San Jose, Calif., market-research firm, and was formerly computer-strategy manager for Hewlett-Packard Co. Christopher Bowman, the manager of education and home marketing for Apple Computer Inc., says, "When you put computers in a setting where people are in a pleasant environment and where learning about them is pleasurable, it's a great selling tool."

The strategy is a racy extension of marketing techniques used by computer makers well before the first personal computers made their debuts. The idea is for a company to get people to learn about computers by using *its* computers, which it often donates, along with employees' time, to schools and universities. "You learn on a particular computer, you become comfortable with a particular computer, all other things being equal you're likely to buy that computer," says Apple's Mr. Bowman. "This is a truism about the whole marketplace."

Apple ardently pursues the educational market and successfully lobbied for a change in California's tax laws in its campaign to donate computers to every elementary and secondary school in the state. Other companies offer workshops and summer camps. This summer, for example, Tandy Corp.'s Radio Shack Computer Centers are running weekly day camps, costing about $50 for 10 hours of instruction.

"The reasons have always been the same," says Chris Christiansen, senior analyst with Yankee Group, a Boston market-research concern. "You get 'em young."

Steak Barbecues

But now companies are trying similar tactics to get 'em old. Texas Instruments Inc., for example, is operating a "Computer Resort" this summer at a hotel complex in Chico, Calif. For $370 a week, customers get computer instruction, access to tennis courts and a swimming pool, three meals a day, and steak barbecues around the pool. "It's not a summer camp, one of those junky places where you have to walk to the bathroom," says Helene Kane, a spokesperson for the project.

But computers at Club Med? "I get horrified at the thought of going away on vacation to stare at computers," says Michael Killen, the president of Strategic Inc., a San Jose, Calif., market-research concern. He also questions the club's choice of equipment. "I find it hard to believe that you or I am going to Club Med to learn about word processing or spreadsheets and all on Atari computers. That's a real turnoff to me."

Club Med's Punta Cana village stands on

Branch of Club Med Offers Guests Courses in How to Use Computers

the coast about a 2½-hour drive from Santo Domingo, the nation's capital. The roads to the club pass sugar-cane fields and poor little villages of aquamarine houses. Where the club grounds begin, the real world recedes. Every flower bed bears fresh rake marks. Locals in aquamarine uniforms sweep the beach. It is the kind of place where one can leave one's more rigid inhibitions behind.

The club operates computer workshops at other villages around the world. It is opening a new one this year in Senegal. But only here has it tried to make the machines part of everyday village life. At the tennis courts, an Atari computer organizes and ranks players for village tournaments; in the bar, another computer plays video tennis. Over at the boathouse, guests can race in a digitized regatta on a computer programmed for "Microsailing"; during races the wind shifts, and players can choose calm or stormy weather.

Of course, there are the arcade games: Gravitar, Black Widow, Millipede, and Food Fight. What's more, these machines are free, Club Med being a cashless society where the only items not included in the room rate are drinks, and those are bought with beads snapped off a necklace.

The more serious computer work takes place in an airy passageway near the disco and also in a building with a thatched, conical roof. Here guests learn the rudiments of word processing and programming and get a brief look at VisiCalc, a sophisticated electronic spreadsheet program, which mimics the sheets corporate planners use to see how changes in costs, prices and other factors affect financial forecasts. There is also a kids' club here, where children can learn elementary programming. (The top child from each of the republic's 29 provinces gets a free week at the club to learn computing.)

It isn't what could be called a threatening learning environment. For example, four computers, with printers and video screens, stand on a shaded walkway by the village disco. Warm tradewinds blow in from the Caribbean, about 15 yards to the left; pupils wear bathing suits. One is Nina Dova, a middle-aged actress who hadn't used computers before coming to this village. She sits in a canvas chair wearing a turquoise turban and green bathing suit.

"Oh, God, we did it," she says, having just executed a word-processing maneuver. "I'm so thrilled."

Then she pauses and looks earnestly at her instructor: "I don't know how we did it though."

She and Stan Koor, her husband, have gone to Club Med villages before but this time wanted one that had computer workshops. They chose Punta Cana for two important reasons: It had the most computers, and it had a shady beach.

"I might as well go to a club that gives me something back," says Mr. Koor, drying off in a pool chair as palms sway nearby. "I mean, look around you; what better way to learn about computers?"

But even in paradise, computers can be cantankerous. During an introductory lesson, one machine refuses to print a message. "That's another lesson—computers can at times be frustrating," says instructor Brad Larson. And in the thatched building, another machine likewise fails to do as ordered. "Whenever I'm *demonstrating*, this is what happens," says the frustrated instructor.

At first, club staff members seemed to resent the machines, says James Dunion, an Atari research scientist. "They said, 'This isn't Club Med,' " he says. The staff finally warmed up to the machines. But people still tend to be intimidated by technology and computing, he says. "I know this is a business arrangement between Club Med and Atari, but this might be just interesting enough an environment to let people give it a try."