



DAYSPRING LODGE

Tonga



**Investment
Case Study**

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DAYSPRING LODGE

Country

Tonga

Sector

Tourism



Type

Local Investment



Background

Based in Nuku'alofa in Tonga, the Dayspring Lodge is a returning Pasifika investment that is operated by Tongan owner Semisi Taumoepeau from his head office in Auckland, New Zealand. It is a 6-bedroom bed and breakfast lodge that has a 3-star rating and caters to the domestic and international tourism market. New Zealanders make up over 50 percent of the target market, with 20 percent from Australia, 15 percent from Europe and the remainder local and diaspora Pacific Islanders. Guests comprise expatriates, professionals (e.g. doctors, lawyers, teachers and consultants), backpackers, students and voluntourists. Semisi states that guests "look to stay in a place where there is a Tongan element to it". The investment is worth TOP\$400,000 and average daily rates for accommodation are US\$38 for a single room and US\$40 for a double room (depending on seasonality) which includes complimentary breakfast, limited free Wi-Fi and airport transfers. The lodge also offers cultural/marine tours, onsite

rental vehicles and a traditional Sunday meal (umu) as additional services.

With help from his father, Semisi built the accommodation in the early 1980's under the intention that it would be the family home. However, due to Semisi's longstanding service in the public private sector and various senior positions in tourism over a period of 26 years, he was offered a Government house to reside in from 1979 to 2003. As a result of living in another residence, the opportunity arose to transform the family home into a business. It was then decided that the family home would become a rental property and since it is within a short vicinity of the local hospital, there was consistent and ongoing patronage from expatriates such as doctors and nurses. Besides the homestead being a business opportunity, another reason for Semisi's investment in the Tongan tourism industry was because he was heavily involved in tourism thus, had a good under-

standing of the industry and of tourist behaviour. For instance, as Director of Tourism for Tonga (from 1980 to 2003) Semisi played a key role in setting up tourism in Tonga from the planning stages to legislation and policymaking. Further, as C.E.O of the Royal Tongan Airlines (from 2000 to 2002) he also restructured and resurrected the local airline. In addition, he was the Chairman of the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (1982), on the Board of Directors for the Dateline hotels (during the 80's through to the 90's) and Chairman of the Association of the South Pacific Airlines. Later in 2003, Semisi was motivated to move to New Zealand, as there were better education opportunities for his children and the higher income earning potential in New Zealand compared to Tonga. In Auckland, Semisi set up the Auckland Institute of Studies (AIS) degree programme in Tourism and Hospitality.

Whilst in Tonga, the rental property underwent major renovations in 2010. It was converted into a backpacker's accommodation with renovations complete and an accommodation licence granted two years later. In 2012, the Dayspring Lodge was ready for business. As a former Director of Tourism, Semisi felt pressure when he set up his official accommodation as he had a reputation to uphold in the local Tongan community by "leading by example", therefore the expectation was that his accommodation was of a high standard. Currently, most of the business for the lodge is generated through online bookings, which Semisi actively manages from Auckland with assistance from his three children who help with the IT, digital marketing and communications side of the business. Three local Tongan staff are employed at the Dayspring Lodge and consist of the live-in Manager, housekeeper and maintenance man. Another small investment in relation to the Dayspring Lodge is the shuttle bus that was acquired to service the Lodge guests with airline transfers and tours. The goal for the Dayspring Lodge is to provide quality accommodation of 2-3star rating. To date, the Dayspring Lodge has met its objectives but this has come at a high cost.

Semisi considers the accommodation to be a successful investment and thinks it has made a positive contribution to the local Tongan economy through tourism. He enjoys operating his lodge and says, "It's very fulfilling running a small lodge like this".

Semisi refers to his investment experience as "relatively easy". He states that tourism operators are required to apply for a business licence and a tourist license at Tonga's Ministry of Labour, Commerce and Industries and the Chamber of Commerce. For the Dayspring Lodge, registering a company was not necessary because the business is under a sole trader status set up between Semisi, his wife Kalapenia and family. He says an ongoing annual licence for the property is based on Tonga Marks approval after an annual inspection by Officers of the Ministry. He adds that the Inland Revenue department also monitor his business, and request business and financial statements for tax purposes. Semisi highlights the importance of knowing how to operate a

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business prior to investment in the Pacific, "I think the days of setting up a business and hoping for the best are dead and gone. It's a lot of effort, a lot of planning, and a lot of know-how to run a small business in the Pacific". He believes that it is beneficial for investors to have local knowledge in the industry that is being invested in and an understanding of the target market behaviour. For Semisi, the investment process ran smoothly because of his involvement in the Tongan tourism industry, which helped him gain access to key resources that other investors may not have been able to access as easily.

The Tongan Ministry of Labour, Commerce and Industry was a useful resource for Semisi during his investment process. This entity provided information about investment incentives for small busi-

nesses in Tonga. Although the Tongan Government change investment laws and legislations every now and then, Semisi advises that it is best to “continuously seek advice”. Tourism-specific advice that helped with the success of the Lodge was to aim for maximum occupancy and to reconfigure rooms to suit the market. Employment and human relations is another vital area where advice was sought. Semisi manages the online bookings with assistance from his sons and daughter. He takes charge of this responsibility of running the business because as sole investor, he wants to ensure his investment is successful. Much time is spent servicing online bookings as well as enhancing and updating websites. In order to optimise sales and ensure steady business, Semisi engages with a number of online booking agents. Although walk-ins are preferred and attempts have been made to avoid having to pay commission to intermediaries, he states that the majority of bookings come from Booking.com, followed by Hostelworld.com, TripAdvisor, Expedia and Lonely Planet. He further mentions that the sites’ analysis function provides useful information for a tourism investment and that by having a strong presence in online search engines, this helps to increase the likelihood of bookings. On the other hand, Semisi believes the increasing commission rates of up to 15 percent for some agents will have a negative impact on his business. Given that the majority of Dayspring Lodge visitors are from New Zealand, it is interesting to note that the New Zealand-based Trade Me website was found to be an ineffective platform for online bookings. According to Semisi, many online bookings come from European countries such as the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Germany, Italy and Spain. Semisi further understands the importance of delivering good customer service at every touch point of his tourism venture. For example, he acknowledges every online booking and provides helpful tourist information to potential guests.

Online reviews are another crucial element to the

businesses’ success. He recognises there are positives and negatives with online reviews and that they require constant monitoring. He says, “For a couple of years, we have been getting some really fantastic reviews” and a benefit of receiving good reviews is that it drives the Lodge to keep improving its standards. In contrast, he also notes “You have to be very aware of the impact of social media” as guests could post a negative online review and everyone else will read it before you even know it exists. To mitigate the risk of negative reviews, Semisi advises other tourism investors to “make sure that when the guests leave, his or her experience is reflected well with the property”. However, in the case that a negative review emerges at the fault of the investor, his advice is to “be honest and apologise”. In the long run, he believes “the good tends to override the bad” i.e. if there are more positive reviews than negative, most guests will remember the good reviews. Semisi believes a way to encourage positive reviews and to promote tourism websites is by asking guests if they will have their photo taken at the business. He says this is a good way to advertise and guests will share the business with their social media contacts.

Benefits of Investment

Government incentives make investment in Tongan tourism attractive for local investors. The potential gains that returning Pasifika investment can bring to Tonga is that this type of investment generates income for investors, allows businesses to be self-sufficient, facilitates access to affluent tourism markets thus benefits the Tongan economy, and enhances employment and education opportunities for local Tongans.

Semisi believes the Tongan tourism industry is an attractive sector to invest in for a number of reasons. Private sector investment in Tonga is encouraged by the Tongan Government by way of incentives such as concessions in tax, GST and goods

purchased overseas. For instance, businesses pay no duty on imported water tanks. As such, these incentives help to make the investment process easier in Tonga. A gain that Semisi talked of as a returning Pasifika investment in tourism in Tonga is that it enables Tongans living abroad to generate recurring revenue in their home country which primarily benefits the local investor. Considering that the Dayspring Lodge has only been operating effectively for the past 3-4 years, Semisi states that he is "happy with its market place performance" and is "reasonably happy with the return on investment". The Dayspring Lodge has met and somewhat exceeded its investment objectives and this is an indication of its success in the tourism industry in Tonga. Semisi is optimistic about private sector investment in Tongan tourism because he believes "tourism is growing" in Tonga. Tourism businesses are also able to be self-sufficient in Tonga as there is the possibility of growing your own food, which helps investors to save on operating costs. For instance, at the Dayspring Lodge, local fruit such as fresh pawpaw and bananas can be picked from the tropical onsite gardens and it is served for complimentary breakfast. Semisi explains not only does this cut costs but it ignites a positive response from visitors, "The guests - they love it!"

Another benefit of investing in the tourism sector in Tonga is that in comparison to other Pacific Islands, Tonga is positioned in a convenient geographic location. Semisi says "Air New Zealand provides excellent air services to Tonga" and this optimises regular accessibility to an affluent target market (i.e. New Zealand and Australia). For example, flights from

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Auckland to Tonga are only two and a half hours in contrast to the 3-4 hour flights from Auckland to Fiji and the Cook Islands. Ultimately, the tourism industry has a positive influence on the Tongan economy. By way of returning Pasifika investment in tourism in Tonga, employment and educational opportunities are created for local Tongans. The Dayspring Lodge provides jobs for locals and it contributes to the local economy by making frequent purchases of local food and some equipment from local flea markets. Semisi also offers personalised tourism and hospitality training to his staff and children, which is beneficial to Tonga's labour force. He mentions, "There is a sense of satisfaction, that you are giving something to the local community". As an employer of Tongan people, Semisi believes it is important to look after his staff and explains, "The key thing with Tongan staff is to make sure you look after them". He does this by making sure employees are trained, paid a decent wage and he even feeds his staff (breakfast and lunch). Other than the maintenance man, two of the staff are female with one woman who manages the property whilst the other undertakes housekeeping duties. Semisi advises that having staff whom can multi-task help him run a successful investment. For example, the maintenance man is responsible for the upkeep of the property, landscaping and driving guests to desired destinations. The live-in Manager's duties range from administrative tasks to organising meals for guests (such as their complimentary breakfast and optional Sunday umu feast) to being a tour guide when required.

Barriers and Disincentives of Investment

A myriad of barriers make investment in the Tongan tourism industry challenging. Challenges include economic issues, poor infrastructure, high operating costs, supply chain and trade link problems, legal concerns, environmental factors, isolation and limited accessibility and difficulties with employment.

Semisi states that a number of economic factors are potential barriers to investment in Tonga. In particular, the exchange rate. He says when tourism businesses pay bills and commission, the money has to be transferred into overseas currency and Tongans lose money in this process. Since most bookings are online, the guests pay in Tongan soft currency but the commission has to be paid in hard currency. The exchange rate means that about NZD\$200-300 a month is lost on bookings alone. Semisi therefore tries to pay his bills from New Zealand to avoid losing too much money. On the other hand, he says it is good for the guests as NZD and USD is much higher than the Tongan dollar. High interest rates also pose problems as Semisi explains that some banks charge twelve percent and this "can be an issue when you need to borrow money for maintenance and upgrades". However, he says there is now a government scheme in place that allows local Tongans to borrow at a lower interest rate of 4 percent which has somewhat resolved the issue of high interest rates.

Tonga's limited infrastructure in conjunction with

high operating costs is extremely challenging when it comes to investment in tourism. Semisi states that although the water supply from town is good, the water quality is poor in Tonga. He explains that tap water is safe to drink but "the water is hard and contains a lot of salt" and that "it damages items like washing machines because it blocks the pipes". This means that certain appliances need to be replaced frequently, which is costly. Due to the poor water quality, Semisi has had to replace the washing machine at the Dayspring Lodge three times in ten years. Another water-related issue at the Dayspring Lodge is that the water features in the tropical gardens can be expensive to run. Power surges are another factor that can cause problems with electronic items. Furthermore, a major challenge related to infrastructure is the expensive and inefficient Internet in Tonga. Semisi says that although improvements have been made as an undersea cable was installed in 2013 for faster broadband, it is ineffective. He considers Auckland to be a better place from which to conduct business (such as online bookings) as overseas broadband is fast, reliable and a good price. Despite the expen-



Source: Image provided by owner

sive Internet in Tonga, Semisi believes that offering guests limited complimentary Wi-Fi upon arrival is a competitive advantage to other accommodation providers because others do not provide this service. He thinks complimentary Wi-Fi is necessary as nowadays most tourists travel with a device so it allows guests to communicate with friends and family when they first arrive in Tonga.

Semisi says property maintenance is costly in Tonga because in his experience "It's just continuous maintenance in the islands". He explains, "The sun in the islands is pretty hot" therefore "every couple of years.... you need a new coat of paint". He says, "You need to keep repairing things" as he has had to replace numerous items like outdoor umbrellas every year. Back up equipment at the Lodge is also required in case something breaks down so Semisi has made it a habit to take items back with him to Tonga for maintenance purposes. For example, he takes back-up water pumps to Tonga, as these items are cheaper in Auckland. Energy (i.e. electricity and diesel fuel) is also expensive in Tonga. To reduce high-energy costs, the Dayspring Lodge encourages guests to conserve energy by displaying signs asking them to "please turn off the fan and lights when you leave us". Semisi tried installing solar panels on the property but describes them as inefficient because the panels "cost you an arm and a leg" and that "you need to replace the whole lot as they only lasted 4 years". On a positive note, he believes the new renewable energy project in Tonga will be good, as it will assist businesses with their energy costs.

High operating costs and impediments with linking to the local supply chain were cited as challenges in investing in the Tongan tourism industry. Specifically, of concern is the price of imported foods as well as the limited access to some goods. Semisi states that New Zealand dairy products (i.e. butter, milk, cheese and ice cream) are predominantly expensive in Tonga and that this has an effect on revenue if

complimentary breakfast is provided in room rates. He says, "You've got to make sure that the costs in preparing the breakfast is less than the revenue you get from those guests". To reduce such costs, a trick Semisi has learnt is to portion out expensive food products such as butter, milk and jam in complimentary breakfasts. He also advises to avoid featuring ice cream in menus as it is very expensive and instead to offer local watermelon as a dessert alternative. At times, the local food supply in Tonga is inadequate when for example; tropical fruit like watermelon and pawpaw is out of season. Semisi advises that the best way to alleviate this issue is to "grow your own and have your own little farm". In light of this, the Dayspring Lodge grows their own bananas, pawpaw, tomatoes and avocados. In relation to other goods, it is sometimes more economical for returning Pasifika investors to purchase goods from overseas and ship them back to Tonga rather than buying the item in Tonga. For example, although washing machines and furniture can be purchased in Tonga, Semisi says that these items are often too expensive and that sometimes "you have to drive around from village to village looking for one item". He believes the solution to this problem would be to introduce a large Warehouse-type business that sells a range of affordable quality equipment (ranging from furniture to tools and cleaning products) to the Tongan market, as there is demand for it.

In general, legal issues hinder any kind of investment in Tonga. In particular, land in Tonga is a significant barrier to investment in tourism first and foremost because it is very difficult to acquire. Semisi explains, "There is no such thing as free hold land in Tonga, it is all crown land". Fortunately, Semisi applied for and was given a piece of land by the Crown and the Dayspring Lodge investment is based on this land. However, he states that it is "a bit tough on a local investor" because "when you own land in Tonga, you can't sell it. You can sell your business but not the land so it's a bit tricky". He views investment in New Zealand to be more beneficial as investors have the

option of selling their investment with the land it is on. The other concern with land ownership in Tonga is inheritance. Semisi says, "Tonga still has a male society," explaining that only males can own and inherit land in Tonga. Another drawback with land inheritance regulations is that if a landowner has no children and passes away, the land goes back to the Crown. For other investors like those investing in large hotels, he says the Crown allows 45 or 99-year leases under certain circumstances. An additional legal matter that can affect an investment is that Tonga has very strict Sunday laws where nothing is open (e.g. shops, restaurants, cafes) on Sundays. This can be inconvenient for tourism. Semisi says, "It is good to stay at the Dayspring Lodge because meals are provided on Sunday such as a traditional Tongan umu or barbeque". This appears to be a good way for a tourism investment to counteract this religious regulation in Tonga.

Environmental factors such as changing weather patterns and insects can affect the viability of tourism businesses in Tonga. For instance, Semisi says that prior to cyclone season in March when the el nino winds arrive to Tonga, accommodation properties require major maintenance. He reflects back to an experience in 2015 when there was no rain for 5-6 months and highlights the importance for tourism properties to have back up water reserve tanks. He mentions that the Dayspring Lodge has three water tanks. Tropical insects such as mosquitos and flies can also negatively influence the tourism market. For example, the zika virus posed a huge threat to the tourism industry as it is a serious disease and there was a lot of media coverage around the topic. The Dayspring Lodge felt the negative effects of this health-related issue and experienced a few cancellations, particularly from tourists in Europe. In contrast, Semisi says, "the New Zealand market was ok because kiwis know the islands and generally know what to expect when holidaying there, except perhaps pregnant women". To combat the issue of guests catching the virus, the Dayspring Lodge invested in insect control. Semisi says, "There

is a bit of resources that go into insect control". In the case of the Dayspring Lodge, the property is sprayed inside and outside every 3 months, there are mosquito nets over the beds and mosquito screens have been installed around windows and doorways.

Due to the fact that Tonga is an isolated Pacific Island, this can act as a barrier to investment in tourism. Semisi recalls Tonga having problems with accessibility prior to the upgrade of the international runway. He states "tourism is dependent on airlines" and visits to Tonga can be busy during high season (between April and September). In Semisi's time restructuring the Royal Tongan Airlines, he says unprofitable routes to Tonga such as flights from Fiji, LA, Hawaii and Samoa were cut off. In his opinion, Air New Zealand is "a good tourist airline for the Pacific" that provides "world-class" daily services for the New Zealand market to Tonga. However, he believes the Australian market is smaller because air services from Australia to Tonga are expensive, less frequent (only twice a week) and the flight is longer (about four and a half hours) so Australian travellers visit closer destinations such as New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji instead. Seasonality affects tourism businesses in Tonga as well. Low season is a challenge to tourism businesses as patronage is required during this time to sustain investments. Semisi says, "My concern with my small business is the off season. What do I do between October and March?" Fortunately, the Dayspring Lodge's occupancy rate is consistent because there is no shortage of doctors and nurses from the nearby hospital needing accommodation. With relevance to accessibility, a common issue is that Tonga runs out of every day products, Semisi says, "It's a problem typical of small Pacific islands". In the past Tonga ran out of sugar for two whole months as well as instant

"It is important to have good staff"

coffee. These types of goods are necessary to run tourism businesses so this can definitely be a challenge to a tourism investment.

As an employer, Semisi believes that by overcoming employment and labour barriers (lack of skilled workers) this can enhance your tourism investment in Tonga. He stresses the importance of employing and retaining good staff saying, "It is important to have good staff". He believes that from an employer's perspective, "SME's need their staff to be honest and reliable" but at the same time, the needs and commitments of staff must also be understood. For example, he says, "If staff need to attend a funeral within short notice then their needs must be met by their employer". He recommends that for outside employers to be more relatable to Tongan employees, an understanding of the local language and culture is beneficial as well. According to Semisi, there is still a challenge with the lack of training in key areas of tourism and hospitality such as tour guiding, cookery and customer service. He believes it is essential for employees to be able to speak good English in order to effectively communicate and interact with a range of guests. He also feels that with experience, employees will learn how to handle different nationalities such as Japanese clients in comparison to mainland Chinese clients for example. He believes that employees can play a key role in optimising the visitor experience by immersing guests in the local Tongan culture and language as this makes their experience more authentic. Semisi says that as a Tongan "the guests want to learn about you and if you convey it to them, they will appreciate their stay".

Semisi ascertains that there is a need to make the tourism industry in Tonga viable and sustainable. He states, "There are a lot of challenges and issues for small businesses, but you can survive because of your local knowledge and your know-how".

Costs and Risks of Investment

Recently, the Tongan government has facilitated the entrance of new investors to conduct business in Tonga, which has made the market very competitive. Although Semisi believes "competition is good for business in Tonga", he also says, "For the Tongan small business owners, it's a struggle". Thus, the main risk to receiving economies of allowing open investment with new entrants is that it makes it more difficult for local investors to compete. Semisi describes an example of this issue, "90 percent of fale kaloa (i.e. local dairies) are now foreign owned". He believes this is because migrants "have the ability to source cheap goods and sell them at a better price". He adds that some migrant-owned fale kaloa are operating twenty-four hours' six days a week and that local Tongan businessmen cannot compete with this. When comparing the business acumen of local Tongan investors to migrant investors, Semisi notes about migrants, "they can survive off nothing" and that "the Chinese businessman is determined to be successful". As well as entering the tourism and hospitality industry, he says migrant investors are also investing in the agricultural and fishery sectors in Tonga. This trend is evident with migrant investment in other parts of the Pacific, increasing not only in Tonga but in Samoa and Fiji as well.

According to Semisi, there are currently more Tongans living abroad than in Tonga. As of 2012, around 100,000 Tongans live in Tonga and an estimated 300,000 live overseas. Although Semisi says that "it would be nice to have more locals involved" in business in Tonga, he also mentions "it is hard for SME's" because "the market will behave differently, and that's when the big businesses will come and take over". He is of the opinion that it is interesting to see the new Tanoa Hotel in Tonga (a large-scale tourism investment with 125 rooms that is a 4star rating) as he believes that medium sized hotels will be affected by the presence of the Tanoa Hotel. However, he does not think small businesses

like the Dayspring Lodge will be affected by large tourism investments because small tourism investments cater to a different market. To avoid, reduce or manage the risk of being put out of business in Tonga, Semisi advises that it is necessary for businesses to be competitive and to adapt to the current market. For example, he explains that the Dayspring Lodge adapted to changing tourism preferences as there was increased demand for double rooms by reconfiguring its rooms from 4 single rooms and 2 double rooms to 4 double rooms and 2 single rooms. In terms of pricing, he says that although he tries to offer good room rates to stay competitive he also tries not to increase the rates too much. This is because the Lodge has to pay tax, account for

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breakfast costs, washing, maintenance, etc. out of the room rate (NZD\$52 per night for a single room).

Growth and Development

Growth and economic development in Tonga can be enhanced by returning Pasifika investment in tourism. Semisi postulates, “I can see the potential for tourism in Tonga, it will continue to grow” and “it’s a very interesting industry to be involved in”. From a returning Pasifika investor perspective, to have a successful investment in Tonga, Semisi recommends that investors should “1) start small (unless you’ve got plenty of money) 2) learn and know the local conditions and the local people and 3) be prepared to multi-task”. It also pays to know the rules and regulations of the investment climate. He explains that although investors can “learn as you go”, and that prior to investing investors need to know about the tourism industry (e.g. seasonality, events and air services) and understand tourism behaviour. Semisi believes that accommodation

needs to be good quality and investors should be willing to train their staff in tourism and hospitality because customer service is critical in tourism. He further states that a unique tourism attraction to Tonga is the whale watching experiences, which he believes, is a good investment opportunity in the tourism sector, particularly during Tonga’s tourism high season. In addition, he points out that “there are business opportunities in Tonga for Kiwi’s... especially in tourism and hospitality, fishing and farming”. In particular, he believes that the Pacific can play a role in supplying fresh food (i.e. vegetables, fruit and fish) to New Zealand. However, with relevance to agriculture he mentions there are considerable challenges with exporting processes such as strict quarantine regulations in receiving markets (New Zealand / Australia) that can make investment in this sector difficult.

Semisi says the question pertaining to reinvestment in the Dayspring Lodge is “do you expand or not?” Although he has contemplated extending his accommodation to include another four rooms, reinvestment is a serious commitment as this would cost an additional NZD\$400,000 excluding loan and interest costs. Considering that business is growing at the Lodge, it is likely that reinvestment will occur in the next five years especially with the upcoming South Pacific Games in 2019. However, Semisi is not looking to invest in any other business ventures other than the Lodge in Tonga during this time. He says that through tourism, other industries can be tapped into. A potential investment opportunity for the Lodge is to open up a retail store to sell local souvenirs and cultural handicraft products. The diaspora market in Tonga is another segment Semisi would like to make use of. He states that diaspora Tongans are increasingly booking into small places like the Dayspring Lodge because visitors can enjoy a good breakfast, have a hot shower, rent a car to visit their relatives and have the luxury of coming back to their own accommodation (instead of staying with relatives). If Semisi could relive his invest-

ment experience again there are not many things he would change. However, if he was able to select his land he would pick a coastal location to suit tourist preferences, as the Lodge is currently ten minutes' drive from the beach, though this is beyond his control. Another minor improvement with his investment experience would be redoing some of the maintenance work that was done earlier.