

TO DO! 2010

Contest Socially Responsible Tourism



Award Winner

CENTRO HISTÓRICO Y EDUCATIVO RIIJ IB'OOY

Represented by:

Sebastián Iboy

**Coordinator of HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE (CHE)
Río Negro**

and

Sucely Ical Lam

**Centro Comunitario Educativo Pokomchi (CECEP)
San Cristóbal**

Guatemala

Rationale for the Award

by

Angela Giraldo



"At Río Negro, the confluence of the brightest and darkest stories of life, lives a community that has managed to convert pain into life."
Exhibition on Río Negro

1 INTRODUCTION

The research regarding the application by the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY (CENTRO HISTÓRICO Y EDUCATIVO RIIJ IB'OOY – CHE) was carried out from 18th to 25th November 2010, on site at Río Negro, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. On behalf of Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V. (Institute for Tourism and Development), the information provided in the application regarding the concept and the objectives of the project could be verified without any problem. The author recommends awarding the project HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY a TO DO! 2010.

2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Guatemala is a part of Central America, bordering Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico and Belize. Guatemala has two coastlines. In the east, there is a narrow access to the Caribbean, in the south-west a long Pacific coastline. With an area of 109.021 km², Guatemala is of a similar size as the former East Germany, or the US-American state of Tennessee. With more than 14 million inhabitants, Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America. It has one of the highest annual growth rates in Latin America (2.4 per cent, 2004)¹.

About 61 percent of the population are descendants of the Mayas². According to the cultural diversity and the languages spoken, there are four population groups in Guatemala: the "Ladinos" (descendants of indigenous and Spanish people), the Mayas, the Garifunas (Caribbean region) and the Xincas, a white minority which has the economic power in the country. The majority of the population is Catholic, but different forms of syncretism (combinations) with the Mayan religion are being practised. Over the past few years, a number of sects have been spreading. Spanish is the official language, while in their daily lives the Mayas mainly speak one of their 22 Mayan languages.

In 2009, the average per capita income in Guatemala was 3,200 € – in Germany 24,600 €. The minimum monthly income is 1,500 quetzales (about 150 €/ 1€ = about 10 quetzales). In the Human Development Index³, Guatemala ranks 116th in a list of 169 states (Germany: rank 10).

Political Situation

From 1960, a civil war raged in Guatemala, which was formally declared over only in 1996 when a peace accord was signed. Guatemala experienced the most tragic and the most destructive era of her history, with enormous losses of lives and major damage. More than 200,000 women, men and children (83 percent of them indigenous) were victims of extrajudicial executions, or got abducted; more than one million people had to flee. Especially under

¹ Guia del Mundo, 2007, Instituto del Tercer Mundo, Uruguay, <http://www.guiadelmundo.org.uy/cd/index.html>

² Guia del Mundo, 2007, Instituto del Tercer Mundo, Uruguay , <http://www.guiadelmundo.org.uy/cd/index.html>

³ Human Development Index (HDI)/ UNDP 2010. The HDI measures the state of human development in a country on the basis of the average data for indicators in three areas: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge/education and an adequate standard of living.

the dictatorship of General Ríos Montt who came to power in a coup d'état in March 1982, the war against the indigenous population bore the markings of genocide. Whole areas were being bombed. The majority of those who were responsible for the human rights violations during the civil war (1960-96) were not held accountable. They continue to be found everywhere in the Guatemalan judicial system; there has been no (judicial) attempt to come to terms with the country's violent past – and the indigenous population in particular continues to suffer.

Since 1996, there have been major efforts to reform the military forces. Until the peace treaty was signed in 1996, the Guatemalan military had a total of 44,200 men. In the years that followed, their number was consecutively reduced considerably, down to 15,000 men and women. Nowadays, the military mainly supports the national police in combating crime.⁴

Since 1996, Guatemala has been governed democratically. Peace has been maintained and the economic conditions have improved. However, the Mayan and other local ethnic groups in the region continue to be discriminated against, both economically and culturally.

Violence against women and the lack of possibilities for women to take legal action against it continue to give rise to major concerns. Quite a few human rights defenders have been threatened and attacked.⁵

Tourism Development

"Bienvenidos a Guatemala, Corazón del Mundo Maya" (*Welcome to Guatemala, Heart of the Mayan World*). Guatemala lures visitors mainly with her Mayan culture, her archaeological ruins and her old traditions which have remained alive even today. Furthermore, the country has fascinating monuments, towns and villages dating back to the Spanish colonial era. In 2009, almost 1.7 million foreign tourists visited the country. The Guatemalan Tourism Institute (INGUAT) expects about two million visitors in 2010.

Tourism highlights⁶ in the country include Lake Atitlán, the old capital Antigua Guatemala, the antique Mayan town of Tikal in Petén, Lago Izabal with the Río Dulce and Livingston on the Caribbean coast, as well as a few other towns worth seeing, such as Quetzaltenango and Chichicastenango in the highlands.

Río Negro is situated in the centre of the country, in the province of Baja Verapaz. The Verapaces (Alta and Baja Verapaz) with an area of almost 12,000 km² have a high diversity of climate zones: subtropical region, rain forest, cloud forest. The Guatemalan regions of the Verapaces are a nature paradise, says INGUAT. Tourist activities include trekking tours, cave explorations, bird watching, canoe tours, and rafting.

⁴ Wikipedia

⁵ Amnesty International Report 2010 – The most recent case is the murder of a 33 year old female human rights activist in the North West of the country who had been working for the surviving victims of the civil war and against the influences of Mafia organisations (cf. taz of 10/12/2010)

⁶ Wikipedia, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guatemala>

3 RÍO NEGRO: ANCIENT MAYAN CIVILISATION, TRAGIC HISTORY AND HOPE

3.1 History of Río Negro (Black River)

For more than 2700 years, Mayas have been living in the region of Baja Verapaz. Río Negro is not just a place that stands for an ancient civilisation long gone, but it is also a place where atrocities were committed against this people in recent history in connection with the construction of a dam at Río Chixoy⁷:

In 1978, before the Chixoy Dam was built, the community of Río Negro with 115 families was the second largest in the Río Chixoy valley. In that year, the river between Rabinal and Cobán was dammed up at Santa Ana, and a big hydro-electric power plant was built. To make way for the Chixoy reservoir with a size of 140 km² (slightly smaller than the state of Liechtenstein), several local communities were forcefully evicted. Between 1980 and 1982, the protests led to several massacres of the indigenous population. Government forces accused the local population of supporting the leftist guerrilla in the civil war. The village of Río Negro was particularly affected. In 1982, after four massacres within a year, 440 people had been killed, more than half of the members of the community. The survivors took refuge in the mountains where they lived for up to two and a half years, and from where they had to witness their holy sites being submerged by the water. In search for work and a possible new beginning, some of them later settled in the surrounding villages and small towns, others migrated to the capital.

At the beginning of the 1990s, some of the villagers decided to return, to reclaim the fields that belonged to their parents and grandparents, and to start a new life. 14 families (about 140 persons) now form the community of Río Negro. They mainly live on subsistence farming. The community lived for years without any significant communication with the outside world.

3.2 The HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY

In 2007, the community of Río Negro started to build the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY, supported by the German Development Service (DED). DED had already been active in the region since 2004, for example in the process of peace-building⁸. Apart from other measures, they financed the construction of the centre, which continues to be supported by DED paying the centre's coordinator, Sebastián Iboy.

The HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY provides a space to recall the past of this region and to present its culture. The objective of the centre is to combine tourism with an educational approach, e.g. to learn about the ancient and the more recent history of the region, to get to know the people who live here today, and to find recreation in the beautiful surroundings.

In Río Negro, visitors get an appropriate impression of how the Mayan community has turned the pain of the past into a positive attitude towards life. Visitors can get illustrative information on what happened to this people in the 1980s. They can also learn a lot about the loss of holy sites that were submerged. Apart from traditions, the centre also shows today's daily life in the

⁷ The headwaters of Río Chixoy, a river of about 400 km length, are also called Río Negro (above the reservoir), the middle reaches Río Chixoy, and the lower reaches Río Salinas.

⁸ German development cooperation concentrates on peace building and conflict prevention. The objective is to empower marginalised communities, to support democracy and to build capacities for non-violent conflict resolution. DED concentrates on supporting civil society, improving people's participation and strengthening networks. Source: <http://www.ded.de/de/partnerlaender/laenderuebersicht/guatemala.html>

village, the happiness of the inhabitants. Excursions to the surroundings allow visitors to experience the beauty of nature in this region.

The HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY is situated on a hill, in between the two parts of the village, about 15 minutes walk from either direction. It consists of two components, the House of Remembrance and the traditional village:

- House of Remembrance: The House of Remembrance has a hall that is used for exhibitions and functions. It shows exhibits of historical events from the pre-Columbian and colonial eras up to the most recent history and the time of the civil war. Visitors may use the library with books and videos on the history and culture of the region. A memorial room commemorates the victims of the massacre of Río Negro. Photographs of all the victims have been put up on a large wall. There are always candles burning.
On the second floor, there is a dormitory for 14 to 16 guests. A kitchen is also there and can be used by the visitors. The House of Remembrance was built using natural materials, and it nicely fits into the landscape.
- The traditional village: The houses in this village are built in traditional style. There is a central, open house used for events or joint meals, and two more houses that offer accommodation for six to eight persons each, as well as a kitchen (so there are three houses in total).

All in all, the centre provides accommodation for a maximum of 30 persons. Sanitary facilities with toilets and showers are available. Electricity for the lights is supplied by solar panels. The whole centre uses energy-saving bulbs. For large events such as community meetings or video programmes, diesel generators will be switched on. In the kitchen, there is a gas stove that uses propane gas. There is no fridge. The water comes from nearby sources. In order to ensure the centre's water supply, large water tanks have been set up.

The centre is connected to the outside world by radio. There is no telephone connection.

The House of Remembrance (the main building) has a terrace all around, with a wonderful view over the river valley. The terrace also serves as a place to sit and spend time. Small groups can also have their meals there.

The centre is directly managed by the families of the village. All the income benefits the community.

Tourism Products and Services:

- Path of Remembrance: "El sol renace en Pak'oxom" ("The sun rises again in Pak'oxom"), which tells about the history of one of the massacres committed at Río Negro. Accompanied by a community member of Río Negro, a hiking tour to the various stations is being offered, which takes about 45 minutes.
- Hiking trails and tours around the village and surroundings
- Boat excursions to archaeological sites
- Cave tours
- Roping
- Traditional food

From the capital Guatemala-City, a four hours' drive up to Pueblo Viejo takes visitors to the boat jetty on the bank of the Río Negro, where a representative of the community of Río Negro would be waiting with a motor boat. The boat jetty belongs to the dam area. In order to pass here, permission is required from the National Electrification Institute (INDE). It is always granted, but visitors are required to go through a bureaucratic process.

The boat ride on the lake is scenic and attractive, especially after the rainy season, when the lake is full. The noise of the boat is the only noise one can hear on the lake surrounded by mountains. There is something mysterious about the landscape. After a trip of about 45 minutes, the boat reaches Río Negro. From the jetty, one has to ascend another 200 metres.

Those who don't know the history of Río Negro have no idea what has happened here. The people living here are cheerful, friendly and open. Without forgetting the past, they optimistically look ahead. But they are struggling for an official acknowledgement of what had been done to them.

CECEP, the community education centre "Centro Comunitario Educativo Pokomchi" in San Cristóbal, about an hour away, supports Río Negro in marketing their products and services. This partner organisation also handles organisational matters for the visitors (e.g. obtaining permission to pass, as mentioned above).

CECEP has published a catalogue with community based tourism products and services, offering 12 routes in the region. One of them is the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY at Río Negro.

4 ASSESSMENT

The comparison of the activities conducted by HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY with the six TO DO! contest criteria and three additional questions leads to the following assessment:

Evaluation against the TODO! contest criteria

4.1 Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation

The HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY was from the beginning planned, developed and set up with equal participation of the community of Río Negro and the German Development Service (DED). The owner and beneficiary is the community of Río Negro. The material needed was financed by DED, the construction work was done by the men in the community.

When the inhabitants of Río Negro – after they had fled, as described above – resettled near their former place, they were once again left to their own devices. A high degree of self-organisation is therefore indispensable. The participation of all the families in their community life is the basis of their culture and at the same time a survival strategy in this remote region.

Almost all community members have a role to play in the community. There is a community council on development (Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo – COCODES). It represents the highest authority in the community. Representatives of other groups come together in this council, such as the president of the school's parents' council and the president of the women's organisation. The COCODES of Río Negro has a president, a vice president and a cashier. They are elected by the community in a democratic manner. The community meets in regular intervals in order to discuss current problems and work to be done.

The community has also reflected on how to involve young people in the project. The idea emerged to develop and organise a training programme for guides. During the author's visit, this programme just happened to end. All the young people in the community had been invited to participate. Eight young men had come forward and took part in the training which consisted of 12 units over a period of several months. The training included guiding excursions, visiting caves, and roping. In this way, the young generation also gets a financial benefit from the centre and can support the parents. The eight young guides organise themselves independently. They are responsible for the necessary equipment such as helmets, radio, ropes and hooks, and they see to it very diligently.

The income from the visitors directly benefits the community (see point 4.3), the "profit" – after deducting all the services – remains with the centre itself. Discussions on how it is to be used take place in the community meetings (e.g. redecoration of the centre, new purchases).

4.2 Enhancing the awareness of the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development in their everyday economic, social and cultural lives

The tourism activities of Río Negro stand for a form of tourism that focuses on local identity and culture: Tourism is a *means* to enhance people's self-esteem.

The families of Río Negro have in various meetings discussed some of the aspects of tourism development, especially the social cohesion of the community. Tourism-related activities in the community are not supposed to create internal imbalances, e.g. by some community members earning more than others.

During the planning period of the centre and with the support of a DED consultant, community members mainly discussed the new situation that the community was going to face once tourism starts.

4.3 Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism

An important aspect of developing the centre was to generate additional income for the families. By setting up the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY, new tasks and areas of work have emerged for the community, which benefit all of them: accommodation, food, housekeeping, sale of handicraft, transportation by boat, maintenance, tour guiding, etc. The work is organised on a rotational basis, so that the income is distributed among all the families as fairly as possible. The young generation is getting remuneration for their work as guides.

When groups have booked a visit, a list of names will be written in which the women of the community can mark if and when they would like to do the cooking and washing. The same procedure will be used if maintenance work is required for which several people are needed (e.g. to repair footpaths).

When the centre was being built, the families were already able to generate an additional income. To furnish the rooms, palm fronds were woven into mats to be kept under the mattresses, as traditionally done by the families, and hammocks were knotted.

The women exhibit their handicraft at the centre, e.g. woven bags, belts and mats, crocheted shoulder bags from recycled materials as well as painted calabashes. Visitors may buy any of these.

The centre's vision and objective is to contribute to a culture of peace in Guatemala. The central focus is first of all on coming to terms with the past, on establishing the truth, and on compensation for the victims of the massacres. Several measures were developed, involving all the villagers. The women, men and children who had hardly ever talked about the massacres found a possibility to express their agony and pain.

After this process of coming to terms with the past, they are now even able to talk to the visitors about what had happened. They also like to talk about their customs passed on to them by their parents and grandparents, and about the importance of these traditions in their culture. The contacts and the interest and sympathies expressed by the guests reassured the community of Río Negro and strengthened the villagers' cultural identity. It has also been

helping them to continue their struggle for the truth, for justice and for an official acknowledgement of the injustice done to them⁹.

The centre is not just meant to provide information about the events of Río Negro's recent past but also about the rich Achí Mayan culture (Achí' is the name of an indigenous Mayan people, speaking a language by the same name, in the Baja Verapaz region).

4.4 Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improving working conditions relative to payment, social security, working hours as well as education and training

Only when the centre was built the villagers did get jobs and additional sources of income. The community of Río Negro mainly lives on subsistence farming and fishing. Services for tourists such as accommodation, food and excursions, or the sale of handicraft – also on the local markets – are the only additional sources of income. The latter, however, is no longer worth it, as the middlemen pay only very little, which is sometimes just about enough to cover costs for the material. At the centre itself, the products fetch better prices.

The daily wage for providing food for the guests at the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY is 50 quetzales (= 5 €) and corresponds to the minimum wage in Guatemala of 1,500 quetzales per month. In the region of Río Negro, however, 50 quetzales mean a lot of money. For washing bed sheets, for example, the washerwomen gets 2.50 quetzales (= 0.40 €).

The training as guides makes it attractive for young people to stay in their village. For financial reasons, many of them would otherwise feel forced to leave their families and find a job in the city. The training as guides has strengthened their self-confidence. They are needed, they have got responsibility and they enjoy this work. In addition, this training is also meant to qualify young people for future leading positions in their community.

The people of Río Negro can do the additional work related to the centre parallel to their traditional occupations in agriculture and fishing.

4.5 Strengthening the local culture and the cultural identity of people living in tourism destination areas

The tourism activities in connection with the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY at Río Negro contribute to strengthening the local culture and cultural identity (see point 4.3). Strengthening the Achí Mayan culture is central to all the tourism activities. At the centre itself, there is an exhibition of finds of Mayan culture. Furthermore, the centre also has displays of historical events from the colonial era up to the recent history and the civil war. The exhibition entitled "*Sendero Cultural Maya-Achí*" (cultural path Maya-Achí) is shown both at the centre in Río Negro and in the capital, Guatemala-City. A library with books and videos on the history and culture of the region may also be used by the visitors. Most of the books are in Spanish, some of the videos are in Mayan-Achí language.

The local culture is also visible in the architecture of the centre (see also point 3.2). The food provided includes only local dishes.

⁹ For example, the human rights violations suffered were brought before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ("Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos" based in Costa Rica).

The women proudly wear their typical "*huipiles*", tops with beautiful, colourful embroidery, and long wrap-around skirts. The bags, belts and mats produced by the women are displayed at the centre and sold to visitors.

Spanish is spoken with the guests. Among themselves, the inhabitants of Río Negro speak their own Mayan language, Achí, – including the children who have learned Spanish at school.

4.6 Avoiding and minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism in tourism destination areas

The community of Río Negro is located in a remote area and is not accessible by public transport. Therefore, there are no tourists passing by "by chance". They must actually take a decision to visit Río Negro. The concept of the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY addresses a target group that is not really to be found in mass tourism. The visitors at Río Negro are mainly people who are interested in the community's culture and history. The foreign visitors are students on internships in Guatemala, or representatives of human rights organisations. The domestic visitors are mostly school groups or church communities.

The limited number of rooms allows for only a maximum number of 30 persons to be received at a time. This number of visitors has not been reached yet. Large groups so far (i.e. before the author's visit) only came as excursionists from the same area and were catered in the centre.

In 2008, about 160 guests visited the centre at Río Negro. In 2009, there were a few more than 250. By November 2010, 350 guests had visited the centre, about 40 percent more than in the previous year.

The visitors of the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY do not affect the villagers' family lives in any way. When constructing the centre, it was ensured that there is a sufficient distance between the centre and the houses of the community.

Evaluation against the TODO! additional questions

A) Could you give some examples which document that your project/measure is in line with environmental compatibility?

The centre was built using local materials from the nearby surroundings. Attention was paid to local architectural style.

Energy consumption is low. There is no electricity. At the House of Remembrance and at the houses in the "traditional village", energy is produced by solar panels. All the buildings use energy-saving bulbs. Solar torches are available for the guests.

The building techniques ensure comfortable indoor temperatures. There is no fridge. The stove uses propane gas. There is a small generator that runs on diesel, which is used only for large events such as community meetings and film screenings.

Fresh water comes from a source higher up in the mountains. It is transported to the houses through pipes. Waste water from the toilets and showers is being collected in a sink pit; other water is being recycled.

The centre produced little waste. Glass and plastic bottles are being reused, biodegradable waste is being composted, and the remaining waste is being buried in a pit dug for this purpose, so there is no waste lying about.

There are hardly any packaged food stuffs, which means there is hardly any packaging waste. Shopping can be done at the market in neighbouring Taktik, about two hours from Río Negro. Fresh fish comes from the lake, "*Tortillas*" (corn pancakes) are made every day from freshly ground corn.

As part of a reforestation project in the community, local trees and bushes have been planted on the compound of the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY.

B) Are there any examples in the framework of the project which make clear that a just participation of women and men has been taken into account during the planning/implementation phase of your project/measure? Considering gender relation, can be found any improvement of the status/situation of women within your project/measure?

Mayan culture mainly has a traditional allocation of roles between men and women. The centre, however, contributes to more gender equality. The women are organised, they meet and exchange. The women's group has a president. In the women's group, the women discuss and coordinate the work to be done at the centre. They also meet in various groups to produce handicraft.

In the community meetings, the women contribute their opinions (mainly in their own Mayan-Achí language, which they use among themselves). Most of the women can neither read nor write, but they have gained a lot of self-confidence. Even if they do not speak good Spanish, they have the heart to use this language in order to communicate with the visitors. They tell (female) visitors about birth and marriage in their culture, or about family planning. They ask questions regarding the customs and traditions in the visitors' home countries. The women laugh a lot and have a lot of fun together.

C) Through which measures/mechanisms is the economic and institutional sustainability of the project guaranteed?

The community did not have to bear any initial investment costs, as the construction of the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY was funded by DED.

The marketing channels have been strengthened by various partnerships:

- Cooperation with the Centre for Mesoamerican Research (Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica – CIRMA)¹⁰ in Antigua. Students from all over the world can do their internship here. Several times a year, CIRMA sends students to Río Negro for a couple of weeks.
- The community education centre "Centro Comunitario Educativo Pokomchi" (CECEP) in San Cristóbal, an hour from Río Negro, has listed HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY in Río Negro in its catalogue featuring community-based tourism programmes.
- Partnership with a company in Antigua offering adventure tourism and sports such as roping or cave explorations. It takes travellers to Río Negro. This company has conducted the training programmes for the guides.
- Membership in the association of community based tourism organisations in Guatemala. Thanks to this membership, the centre can participate in certain travel trade fairs.
- On the website of the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (INGUAT) there is a section on community based tourism ("Turismo Comunitario"). It advertises the region of Verapaz as a natural paradise.

Every income generated by the centre is an additional support for the community. All the villagers of Río Negro identify with the centre. Each of them can be involved in various ways and can earn an additional income.

5 CONCLUSION

Río Negro will not become a tourist destination with large numbers of visitors. Only travellers who purposely select this place will find their way to the HISTORIC AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE RIIJ IB'OOY, and to this tragic place which has suffered so many atrocities, but has also become a source of joy of living and hope for the future.

The people of Río Negro deserve the TO DO! award without any reservation, as they represent a positive example of a community taking a human rights approach, coming to terms with the past, and jointly organising tourism while distributing their income in an absolutely fair manner.

English translation: Christina Kamp

¹⁰ "Mesoamerica" includes Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

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