

PONANT Foundation: first stone laid for school in Bijagós



Building has just started on a long-awaited school in Anipoc on Caravela island. Working closely with a local association ESCama, the PONANT Foundation has been involved with people on the Bijagós archipelago for several years now to support education on this island.

Off the coast of Guinea-Bissau, 88 islands make up the Bijagós archipelago, classified by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve. Named after the animist ethnic group who inhabit these islands, it is still one of the world's remotest and most isolated places. The Bijagós people are famous for their strong character and determination. With mangrove forests, palm trees, savannahs and extensive sand banks, the archipelago is also home to one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the North Atlantic.

Instant attraction to the Bijagós people

In October 2019, PONANT organised a reconnoitring mission to the islands with the aim being to prepare a cruise itinerary to the region. It involved meeting local people and authorities, carrying out an environmental and societal impact study and taking accurate soundings of the seabed with a view to putting together a coherent, responsible and sustainable circuit. *“During these recces, we were developing the tourist offer with the local communities. They are the ones who tell us what they want to show us and we help them to showcase their culture,”* explains Nicolas Dubreuil, PONANT'S Expeditions Expert who was part of the reconnoitring team.

It was during this trip that he met Sónia and Laurent Durrís who run a small eco-lodge. The couple have big plans to contribute to the development of their adopted land which is why they set up the ESCama Foundation, which means “scale”. It focuses on Education (E), Santé (S - health) and Community (C) in Bijagós. Nicolas Dubreuil, remembers: *“Sónia showed me a school that was totally in ruins on Caravela island in a village called Anipoc. The two teachers had not been paid for two years. When you understand the importance of education, you realise how vital it was to rebuild the school”.*

The PONANT team are setting off again to finalise the cruise itinerary but also confirm their commitment to this beautiful, wild archipelago and its inhabitants.

A long-term project to support education in the Bijagós

Construction has now begun to build the new ‘Mantchacadé’ school on Caravela island in Anipoc, along with housing for the teachers which will provide the only sanitation facilities in the village. With PONANT’s support they can now have a kindergarten and the four levels of primary education required by the Guinea-Bissau system, as well as literacy classes for adults, a garden and awareness programme for sorting and recycling rubbish. PONANT has also helped fund access to drinking water and solar-powered electricity. *“Currently, 97 pupils, 180 adults and three teachers are waiting impatiently to see this project come to fruition. Our first grant gave the community access to drinking water and funded the start of the school’s reconstruction,”* explains Wassim Daoud, Head of Sustainability and CSR at PONANT.

Sónia and Laurent have some wonderful projects in the pipeline for ‘Mantchacadé’, such as teaching them how to grow Artemisia in collaboration with ‘La Maison de L’Artemisia’ in France, as this plant is very useful in the battle against malaria and other diseases. *“We want to educate young people so they can help protect their archipelago’s wealth of biodiversity and the nature that surrounds them,”* says Sónia Durris.

ABOUT THE ESCAMA FOUNDATION

The ESCama (Ecole - Santé – Communauté) Foundation is a non-partisan, secular, non-profit national institution based in Guinea-Bissau. The Foundation focuses on the Bijagós archipelago. Due to its isolation and lack of transport, the archipelago does not have many of the public services to which all inhabitants should be entitled, such as quality education, health care, clean drinking water, electricity and transport. Hence why a Foundation was set up, with the help of Kéré Hotel and various donations and funding, to meet the needs of island communities, in collaboration with local authorities.

ABOUT THE PONANT FOUNDATION

For over 30 years, PONANT has been taking guests to the most secret places on the planet where nature reigns supreme. This choice brings with it responsibilities towards the environment and the indigenous people encountered on expedition cruises. Not only does it take its profession and commitment to promote sustainable tourism seriously, PONANT also wants to further its efforts in areas that are close to the company’s heart. That is why the PONANT Foundation was set up in 2019 to protect the oceans and polar regions and encourage exchanges between peoples. Its aim is to support projects focusing on research, awareness-raising and conservation.

ABOUT PONANT

Created in 1988, by officers of the French Merchant Navy, PONANT has created a new style of cruising, under the French flag, through a unique conception of sea travel and a commitment to promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. Accessing exceptional territories aboard yachts featuring refined design, on which the art of living and excellent cuisine take pride of place: such is the promise of a unique and authentic PONANT voyage.

For more information, visit www.ponant.com

Press contacts | Laure Foulatier +33(0)4 88 66 64 38 | Justine Fraticelli +33(0)4 88 91 35 56 | presse@ponant.com

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