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Former local couple opens eco lodge in Panama

Telluride is 'exact demographic' for Traveler's Choice Award-winning resort

By Amy M. Peters Planet Contributor

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Former Telluride residents Ryan and Cari Mackey, the owners and operators of the Morrillo Beach Eco Resort in Panama. (Courtesy photo)

Twenty years ago, Ryan and Cari Mackey epitomized the definition of 20-somethings “working to live” in Telluride. Ryan worked snowmaking for Telski and at A1 Auto Glass and Cari was a sawyer on the Telski trail crew while working retail at Jagged Edge and Horny Toad. At night and on weekends, they hand-built a self-sustainable home where they lived off-grid on Hastings Mesa.

Like many locals, at the end of ski season, they'd load up their car with kayaks and surf boards and head to beaches in Mexico, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Dominican Republic with the hope of one day opening a business that they could support while sharing the adventurous lifestyle they craved.

“We judged countries based on the price of beer and the health of their dogs,” Cari said. “The day we landed in our current location, Morrillo Beach in Panama, we knew this was the place: Oceanfront, beautiful mountains, an estuary, kind and friendly people, uncrowded beaches, and most important, a place with incredible surf for all ages and a safe place to teach surfing.”



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She points out that Panama uses the U.S. dollar, electrical outlets are the same, it's "the safest country in Latin America," the U.S. has an embassy in Panama because of the canal, it's accessible within a day's flight from Montrose and has direct flights from many U.S. cities.

In 2015 the Mackeys hired an architect and a contracting team who worked with the surrounding landscape to build Morrillo Beach Eco Resort which they opened three years later along the shores of the Azuero Peninsula.

Cari said the definition of eco lodge is rooted in environmental sustainability and conservation, green-building materials and supporting the local community. While they don't have access to alternative building materials like they did in Telluride, the Mackeys use solar power, their own well, and they embrace reforestation.

"What sets us apart is that we're small with a team of employees who want to learn," she said. "It's our entire way of life: How we treat our 14 employees, support our community, live with animals, reforest the surrounding landscape, the way we get our foods and conduct waste control. It's extremely important to help people understand the magic of the surrounding jungle but also the unfortunate threats it faces too. This is the best part of eco travel. If people don't experience it, they'll never feel compelled to protect it."

Industry experts have taken notice: Morrillo Beach Eco Resort earned a 2023 "Best of the Best" Traveler's Choice Award from Trip Advisor and a 2022 Traveler's Choice Award for its restaurant.



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"To be considered in the top 1% of world hotels is an astounding feat for us," Cari said. "And for the restaurant to be in the top 10% blows my mind. It goes to show how authenticity and passion resonate with our guests."

Old world authentic Mexican food is Cari's passion, but she said sourcing is the secret.

"Our animals are raised free ranging, eat natural grasses and are out in the jungles all day. I help with the butchering, and we carry the animal out on horse to my car where I take it home," she explained. "We process the entire animal ourselves, render our own fats and bone broths, raise our

own chickens, and line-catch our own fish. Our veggies are almost all local. We make everything from scratch: Our own sauces, tortillas, breads, tortilla chips, and we slow cook our meats. It's a labor-intensive kitchen and the food is awesome."

During the day guests may enjoy adventures including surfing, paddle-boarding, snorkeling, boat trips, hiking to waterfalls, kayaking and cultural excursions alongside local artisans. The lodge's adventure guides, primarily from Panama and Italy, are (usually) certified to teach surfing and have first-aid certifications to keep guests safe.

"We built this place to appeal to the exact demographic as Telluride, for families who would absolutely love it here," Cari enthused.



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Since opening, the eco resort has hosted nearly 2,000 guests, approximately 30 of whom hail from Telluride, including potential mayor-elect Teddy Errico who visited the lodge in 2021.

"I went to surf, and it's such a unique location, very peaceful and quiet. We went fishing on a small boat, and we all caught fish that we ate later," Errico recounted. "The other day trip was to learn about the lodge's turtle conservation program."

He added, "It's exciting to see Telluride people doing great things in the world like Ryan and Cari are."

Overall, 36% of Morrillo Beach Eco Resort's guests are from the U.S., 27% are Panama expats, 9% are from Germany and 3% are a mix of Canadians and Europeans.

The hotel is two floors with three rooms on each level. Each room has its own private bathroom and viewing balcony that Cari said "makes you feel like you're in your own tree house" with picturesque views of the ocean, estuary and the lush surrounding jungle.



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For more information on Morrillo Beach Eco Resort, visit morrillobeachresort.com.