Bats swooped overhead. Buckets of citronella smoldered, warding off insects. Colored lights reflected off the underground river next to the stage, where Mayan dancers chanted and blew smoke to rid the area of evil spirits.

The smoke cleared, and Tammy Lee, vice president of corporate affairs at the Mark Travel Corp., stood up with a microphone.

“You can see that the Riviera Maya is open for business, and better than ever before,” she told a camera, which was pointing right at the scene.

An unusual ceremony designed to cast a spell on the travel agent community? Not quite -- just another edition of Funjet Vacations’ “Riviera Maya Live” Webcast.

Earlier this month, Funjet Vacations, a Mark Travel brand, broadcast two daily live shows via the Internet from the Riviera Maya, using an underground amphitheater at Xcaret, the ecological park.

The goal: To convince travel agents that the Riviera Maya is ready for bookings.

**Taking Action**

Hurricane Wilma, which blew into Mexico’s Caribbean coast in October, was an unwelcome guest at the region’s many resorts.

No one at Funjet Vacations wanted this visitor, either. Since the company depends on the Yucatan Peninsula -- especially the Riviera Maya -- for at least 65% of its Mexico business, Wilma’s arrival was a major threat to its bottom line.

The Riviera Maya quickly mobilized to recover from the hurricane. But Funjet also had to get that news across to travel agents, some of whom were leery about sending clients to a storm-torn region. For Funjet Vacations, the answer was to go live -- and fast, before the peak winter travel season.

The plan: Send a production company to the Riviera Maya for nearly two weeks to make videos showing how the region looks today, then air the clips during a live Webcast that agents could access via their computer screens.

“We knew we had to do something,” said Claudio Zboznovits, director of partner marketing for Mark Travel. “This is our bread and butter. We had to do something to stimulate the market, find innovative ways, use technology.

“Our marketing team put this together, we got the backing of the government and the hoteliers, and here we are.”
Funjet has not publicly stated the cost of the project, but participating suppliers and tourism organizations contributed to support it.

“As the largest vacation packager to Mexico, we couldn’t afford to let the first quarter go,” said Lee. “So we had to do something pretty dramatic and bold. It had to be now. That’s why we made this major commitment with this virtual fam trip; we’re the first company to ever do this here. If we take about a million passengers a year here, we can’t afford to have a sharp drop-off in tourism to the region.”

To get the show up and running before the holiday season, they had to move fast.

“The first challenge was just getting people on airplanes,” said Jay Jackson, president and CEO of IBCTV, a Chicago-based company that produced the program. “We had to get visas, we had to write down the serial numbers of all the equipment. And we had to be on planes five days later.

“Down here, the other enormous challenge was just time. We knew we wanted to run these live shows starting on Dec. 5, and we came down a week-and-a-half before. We had 19 properties to shoot, so we really had to do four, five, six of these a day, and it was cut so close to the wire that one day of rain would have sunk us.”

A Chance for Suppliers

On the second day of the Webcast, temperatures crept toward 90 degrees at Xcaret’s open-air amphitheater, the stage for the live portions of Funjet’s Webcast.

At stage left was the “living room” -- three couches where hoteliers and tourism reps chatted while awaiting their turn to join Lee in the center of the stage.

Lee was interviewing Jan McCaughan, business development manager at Iberostar Hotels & Resorts, in the heat of Xcaret’s amphitheater, introducing video clips showing the company’s colorful resort buildings and lush, green landscaping.

Registered Webcast viewers interacted directly with McCaughan and other interviewees by emailing their questions and having them answered live.

Softball questions (none eliciting a negative response or bad news) allowed hotels and attractions to tout their quick recovery. Among the common topics for interviewees: Hotel beaches with more sand than they had before the storm. Renovated attractions, open for the holidays. New restaurants and new resorts opening in 2006. As Lee repeated throughout each Webcast, things in the Riviera Maya are “better than ever.”

“This is a wonderful format to use,” McCaughan said after her on-air interview. “It’s innovative, and travel agents are always looking for innovative ways to show their clients that this is how it is right now. The Riviera Maya, of course, needs some assistance. Agents are afraid to book their clients with confidence -- this is their reputation, as well. Agents need to know when they’re qualifying their clients that it’s safe and it’s all back to normal. This is a great place to showcase that.”

Norma Romero, sales executive at Barcelo Maya Beach Resort, said that through the “Riviera Maya Live” program “we’re gaining audiences that we haven’t been able to get unless they come here to inspect the hotel. I think this will open many doors for us to show them what we have and what condition we’re in, so they’ll see that we’re OK.

“Part of the problem is that when people talk about Cancun, they think it’s the entire region. But this will help us to make people understand that Cancun is one part and the Riviera Maya is another.”
The Webcast also attracted the attention of tourism officials outside the Riviera Maya. Gabriela Verduzco, manager of the Cozumel Hotel & Motel Association, was a member of the audience at an evening performance.

“I was speechless,” she said after the program. “It’s amazing what technology can do these days. They’re looking at videos that, as Tammy said, were taken just 10 days ago. The point is not to tell lies about the status of the destination, to tell the truth and show the truth. I don’t think there’s any better way to do it than this.”

Verduzco said that Cozumel also was considering doing a similar Webcast to get the word out about post-Wilma recovery.

“We have been trying to work on [education] every single day, before and after Wilma,” she said. “But due to the circumstances, I don’t think it’s ever enough. We can tell agents every single day that we’re back, that we’ll be back to 100% by the end of January. However, it’s never enough. We have to keep training, and do things like [the Webcast] and bring agents to see for themselves the real situation.”

Funjet Vacations is considering similar Webcasts for Cancun, Puerto Vallarta and other destinations in Mexico, Lee said.

**Measuring Success**

A few days after the Xcaret Webcast, Lee described the program as a “tremendous success.” “Travel agent bookings over the past week have surged since the start of the virtual fams,” said Lee. “Funjet Vacations has seen an increase of nearly 30% for travel agent bookings, week over week. However, the challenge remains to keep this positive momentum going and a continuous flow of new information, so we can ensure a strong winter booking.” Graziella Vesta Pennington-Evans, director of marketing at Riu Hotels & Resorts, also noted an increase in bookings following the virtual fam.

“We received many e-mails congratulating [us on] the state of our hotels,” she said. “We have also noticed an increase in our booking numbers and have received more calls in our call center and a lot more visits to our Web site.”

Lee said that her team also learned about the challenges of live television, especially when broadcasting from the jungle. Just before the live Thursday night broadcast, for example, Internet service at Xcaret was temporarily disrupted.

We were truly lucky early in the week that none of the Internet switches melted,” Lee said. “If we had asked a question like, ‘By the way, where are your Internet switches? Are they in the searing sun, over the dolphin tanks, or buried in your underground cavern,’ then we would have had other contingencies in place early in the week.”

The show will next be edited into agent and consumer versions, which will be available on demand before Jan 1.

According to IBCTV’s Jackson, the live Webcast is “an idea whose time has come.”

“We’re at the right place at the right time for doing this,” Jackson said. “Your computer and your TV are crashing into one another. I want to do more of these. But to do that, we have to be able to say not only was it cool, but it worked.”

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