

# Liberia's New Lap of Luxury

Robert Johnson Plans Posh Resort in West Africa

By Anita Huslin

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, July 25, 2008; D01

Typically, you might expect hotel owner Robert L. Johnson to leave the spiel about bed linens and room decor to his marketing types.

But here he is, the BET founder-turned-billionaire developer/financier (among other things), perched casually at the foot of a California king, patting the poofy white duvet, noting the colorful mudcloth laid across it, pointing out the antique tribal African masks on the walls.

This is his model showroom, if you will, and on Monday he plans to unveil it to potential investors and guests. RLJ Kendeja Resorts & Villas will be an \$8 million, 85-room, four-star resort on the Atlantic coast of northern Africa, near the capital of Liberia. Whatever images the world might have of an impoverished country that is still trying to recover from 13 years of civil war, Johnson wants this project to provide a new one.

"There is no hotel in West Africa like this," he says, sitting straight-backed on the edge of the bed in a crisp blue suit. "This will be a Class-A beachfront property, with great views from the bar and restaurant out to the ocean. This really is going to be something."

Johnson is unreservedly enthusiastic about being the first to take on such a risky, upscale project in a country that has not seen a new hotel room built in 20 years. Slated to open in March, with rates of \$150 to \$200 a night, [Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#) is expected to host the first guests. And, if all goes as planned, she will be followed by ambassadors, multinational corporate executives, foundations and others looking to fuel Liberia's growth.

"There is a window of opportunity, and we have to make sure that the opportunity is



your kid gets  
the phone  
you get peace  
of mind

realized," Johnson said.

He started thinking about how he might help the country after hearing Johnson Sirleaf talk about its dire needs. That was two years ago, at an annual meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative, a project founded by former president [Bill Clinton](#) to bring together heads of state, top business executives, scholars and leaders of nongovernmental organizations to try to solve some of the world's pressing problems. At that meeting, Johnson pledged to mobilize a \$30 million fund to help Liberia get back on its feet.

Johnson hired Witney Schneidman, a deputy assistant secretary of state under Clinton, to help define possible projects the fund would target. Schneidman suggested that Johnson focus on helping small and medium-size businesses. He also suggested reaching out to the Overseas Private Investment Corp., a U.S. agency that specializes in helping businesses invest in emerging international markets. With Johnson's assurance that he would put \$3 million of his own money toward the fund, OPIC agreed to provide \$20 million in debt financing. The U.S. Africa Development Foundation also made a \$3 million commitment; and Johnson hired a Bethesda nongovernment agency, CHF International, to manage the lending process.

In early 2007, about a year after the Clinton Global Initiative meeting, Johnson visited Liberia, and Johnson Sirleaf asked him to consider building a hotel.

"Given the long historical relationship between our two countries," he said, referring to the fact that Liberia was settled by freed U.S. slaves. "I believe passionately that African Americans have a responsibility to support Liberia much like Jewish Americans back Israel."

The Liberian government helped find a site on the Atlantic coastline, one that a Saudi prince had expressed interest in but never committed to. Ground was broken in March, and with a labor force of 500 Liberian workers, Johnson said, it should be done within 12 months.

Back home, Johnson plans to host energy, airline and mining executives, diplomats and potential investors at the hotel room in Bethesda, to talk about the project and raise their interest in setting up operations in the country.

Once people understand the dearth of existing accommodations in Liberia and what Kendeja will offer, in contrast, Johnson said, "we're confident that people will reserve these rooms for long periods of time."

When completed, the resort property, about 20 miles north of Monrovia, will feature a wide expanse of Atlantic beachfront, with palm trees, tennis courts, a spa, health club and swimming pool. Less obvious will be the round-the-clock guards and security center, bulletproof glass, infrared motion detectors and biometric clocks to track employees'

comings and goings from the resort.

Steven Radelet, senior fellow at the [Center for Global Development](#) who has served as an economic adviser to Johnson Sirleaf but is not involved in the Kendeja project, said security will be a major factor in Liberia's recovery. Still, large projects like Johnson's and the \$30 million fund help signal that the country is open for business.

"It's not like all the bad guys just disappeared. They're still there. A lot of them," Radelet said. "But the more people invest, the more jobs are created. . . . The more jobs that are created, the safer the environment is for everybody."

Accessibility is an issue for the Kendeja resort, Johnson acknowledged. The hotel will meet [U.S. State Department](#) security standards, but the nearest airport, Roberts Field, is not up to [Federal Aviation Administration](#) standards and no U.S. carriers fly into it. (The resort will feature tennis courts that can be converted into a helipad in case of emergency.)

Last year, when Johnson visited the country, Liberians welcomed him warmly but with a note of skepticism.

"Is this the beginning of foreign investment boom for Liberia or is it just a showbiz?" asked the Analyst, a newspaper in the capital.

Johnson says his hotel plans will answer that.

"This is a philanthropic effort that will make money," he said. Those returns, he said, will help spur reconstruction of the country's schools, roads, hospitals, utilities and businesses.

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