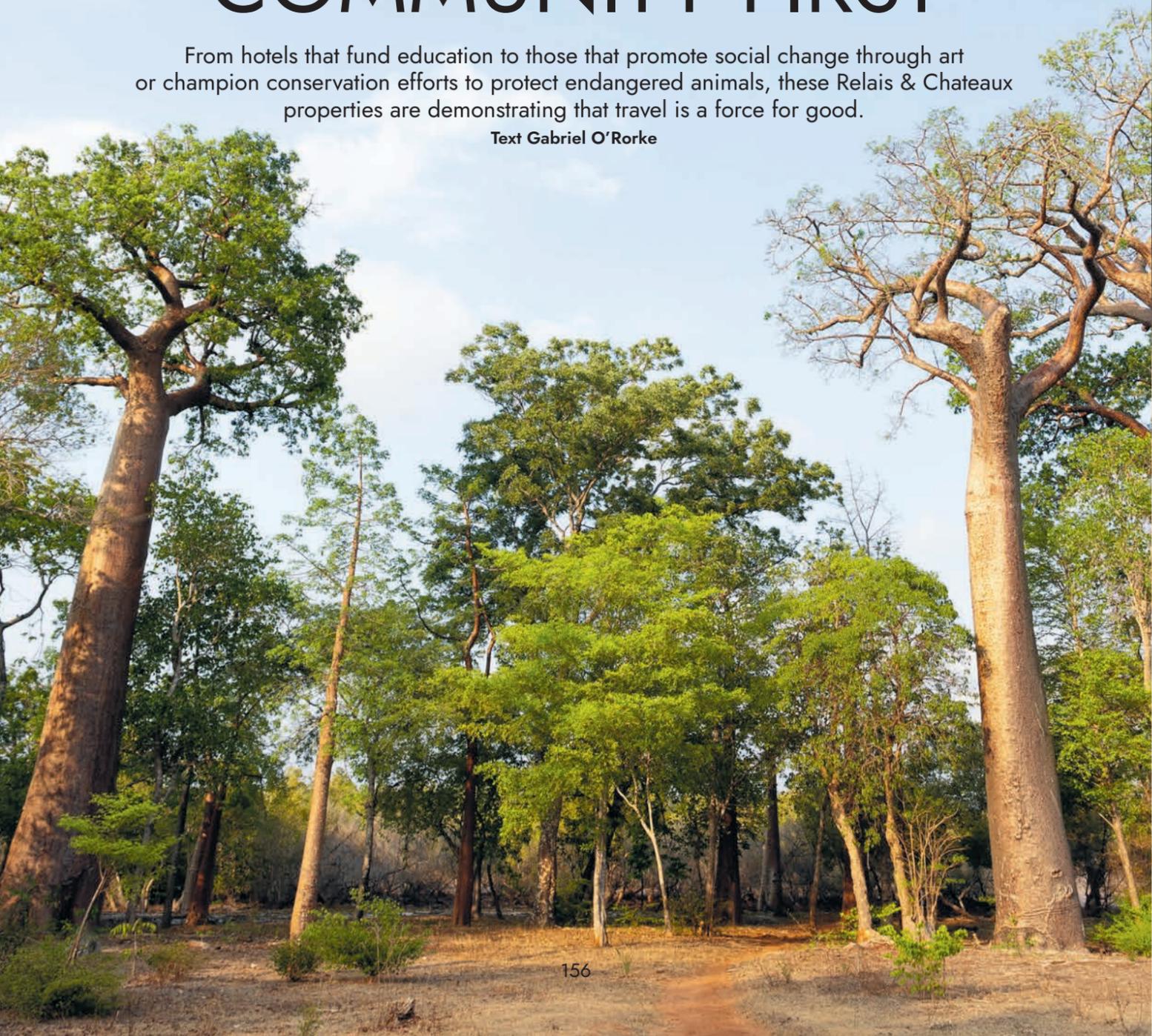


SOCIAL

# PUTTING CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY FIRST

From hotels that fund education to those that promote social change through art or champion conservation efforts to protect endangered animals, these Relais & Chateaux properties are demonstrating that travel is a force for good.

Text Gabriel O'Rorke





Anjavy Le Lodge in Madagascar participates in a World Wildlife Fund project to re-establish giant tortoises on the island. This has seen 12 animals relocated from the Seychelles.

**“I’M THE WORST HOTEL MANAGER IN THE WORLD,”** laughs Frédéric Massoubre, General Manager at Anjavy Le Lodge in Madagascar. “What other hotel would have 24 rooms and 130 employees?” The reason for this ratio is that life at Anjavy Le Lodge revolves around the nature reserve in which it is located. Its first priority is protecting the delicate ecosystems that surround it—from grasslands and wooded areas to mangroves and coral reefs. These are home to Madagascar’s endemic animal life: lemurs, tortoises, chameleons, tropical birds and abundant species of aquatic creatures. To serve that, all profits are ploughed back into the preservation of the island—and almost a quarter of those 130 employees are tasked exclusively with conservation, meaning its staffing roster goes well beyond the usual front- and back-of-house hotel staff roles. *“We have rangers, trackers, vets and those who educate local communities in conservation,”* says Frédéric.

Like all Relais & Châteaux properties, Anjavy Le Lodge is dedicated to environmental conservation and supporting local communities—a position underlined by the vision presented by the Association to UNESCO in November 2014, including pledges to preserve the cultural diversity of the world’s cuisine; to protect its ecosystems and aquatic resources; and to promote local ingredients.

This guest-to-staff ratio in Madagascar may be an extreme example of how that vision comes to life in the real world, but it illustrates how uniquely responsive and flexible an Association of independent hotels and restaurants can be in pursuit of its values, rather than the bottom line. Providing employment in the local community and contributing to a thriving local economy is a crucial plank of preserving local culture. Over 80 per cent of employees at Anjavy Le Lodge are from the local area, including those

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working in managerial roles. At Royal Chundu in Zambia, on the banks of the powerful Zambezi River upstream from Victoria Falls, the proportion is even higher: some 99 per cent of staff are Zambian, with many coming from neighboring villages. *“We have an open policy that anyone who finishes high school can find a job in the hotel,”* says Aggie Maseko, Lodge Manager at Royal Chundu (and Relais & Châteaux’s Woman Of The Year 2023). *“Somebody from the village may not have any experience, but we start slowly, for example with a back-of-house role, then move them up with supervision. We can train people with zero skill to become someone who exemplifies Relais & Châteaux. It takes hard work, but that’s why we are here: for the people, for the local communities. We want our money to go to the villages around us.”* Putting local communities at the heart of the hotel can be achieved in many ways. For those unsure where to start, a good place can be the classroom. In Peru’s Sacred Valley, north of Cusco, Marie Hélène Miribel—known to everyone as Petit—was struck by the inequality, poverty and poor quality education in the region she saw when she moved there in the 1990s, so she started volunteering in local schools, before hatching a plan in which her contribution could become even more impactful: *“I realized that to make a real difference I would need to open a school,”* she says. *“But I needed funding.”* Somewhat unexpectedly, Petit decided to become a hotelier, conceiving a unique business model built specifically to help plug educational gaps in her adopted local community. From the outset, Hotel Sol y Luna’s raison d’être was to provide funds for the Sol y Luna Foundation via guest donations. Set in 25 acres of gardens brimming with flowers and buzzing with hummingbirds, with a ranch breeding Peruvian paso horses and a backdrop of the Andes Mountains, Hotel Sol y Luna became the Sacred Valley’s first hotel—an ideal stopover for tourists passing by on their way to Machu Picchu—and the foundation has been empowering young people ever since.

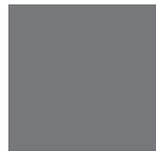


  
**ANJAVY LE LODGE**  
 Anjavy, Madagascar





  
**HOTEL SOL Y LUNA**  
Cusco, Peru



Watch a video  
guide to Hotel  
Sol y Luna

As well as a school for local children (90 per cent of students come from backgrounds of extreme poverty), the foundation supports children with disabilities, runs an orphanage for students who have been abused or abandoned, and since 2022 has been supporting children in further education, with examples of students born into extreme poverty now studying at the best universities in Lima. *“For me, it’s not an obligation to help,”* says Petit. *“It’s an emotion that comes from your heart. It’s part of the balance of life.”* Projects like these contribute to the concept of travel as a force for good—

an approach that’s fundamental to Relais & Châteaux’s own future, and which also serves as a model for the wider travel and hospitality industry to emulate. In the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro in Kenya, Ol Donyo Lodge has developed a similar operating model that supports the local Maasai population and contributes to the preservation of grasslands that are home to giraffes, lions and elephants. Crucial to this is the recognition that the land on which Ol Donyo Lodge sits is part of the Mbirikani Group Ranch, which in turn belongs to 4,600 Maasai families.

Hotel Sol y Luna founder Marie H elene ‘Petit’ Miribel, pictured with students at the school which is funded by guest donations.

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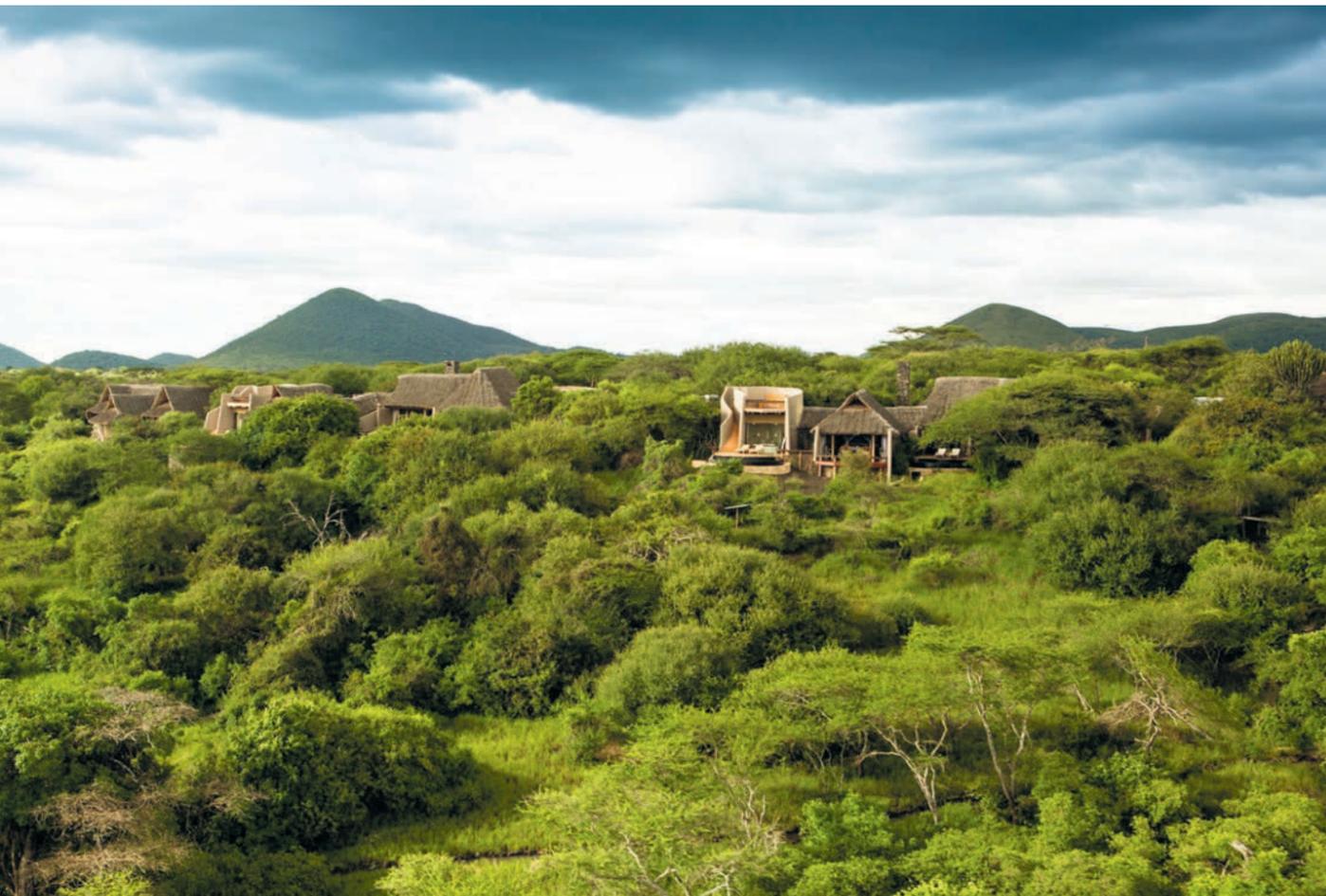
In harmony with the landscape, and in support of local people: Ol Donyo Lodge pays rent and conservation fees to the local Maasai.



The lodge pays the ranch both a fixed fee rent and a conservation fee that places an innate value on protecting the land in perpetuity. The lodge also directly employs 90 people from the community, each of which is the breadwinner for a family of about ten—their jobs directly support 900 people. *“A fundamental philosophy of mine is that we must live life with a healthy mind, body and environment,”* says Dereck Joubert, the hotel’s founder. *“By providing food to communities and helping them help us protect the environment, we are creating a dialogue for the better good of everyone.”* That dialogue works both ways too: in one particular initiative, designed to empower women, Dereck started paying

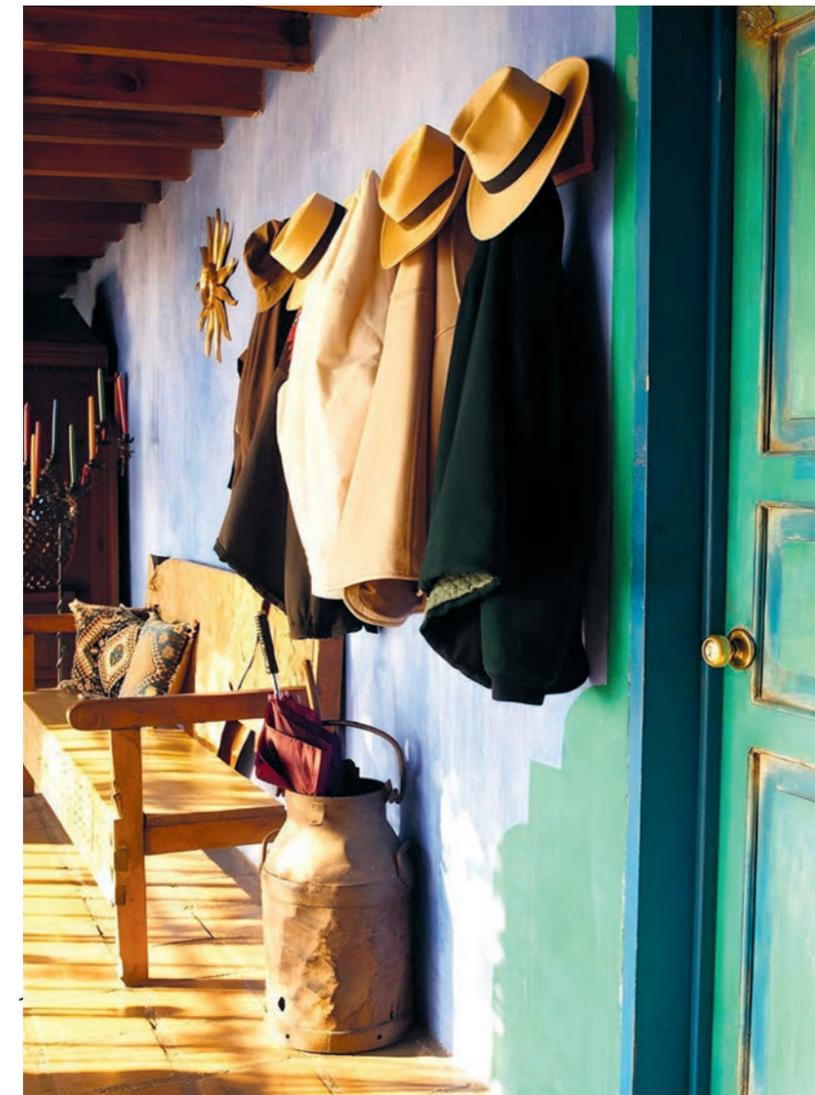


Bright colors, happier people and a thriving local economy: *“The program began with painting houses, but the aim is to make a better community,”* says Claudia Bosch, owner of Hotel Casa Palopo.



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rents directly to women in the communities, instead of men—and every month rather than four times a year. *“It was a grand idea but the men felt disenfranchised,”* he says. So now he pays the men once a month, on market day, when the women buy food, school uniform and pay school tuition. Lesson learned: *“Before we action any new ideas we sit and ask people what they want—and sometimes we’re really surprised.”* Sometimes it’s about being humble and knowing when to change course; at other times, a project starts as one thing, but brings about change that could never have been envisaged. This is the case in Guatemala where Hotel Casa Palopo set out to engage the community by painting 850 homes in its village of Santa Catarina Palopó, on the banks of Lake Atitlan. The idea was to unite the community in a unique collaboration by injecting some color into the village. The founders never imagined it would result in a seventy per cent increase in tourism, or a fifty-six per cent decrease in locals leaving the area. *“The program began with painting houses, but the aim is to make a better community,”* says Claudia Bosch, hotel owner and President of Pintando el Cambio (Painting the Change), a non-profit that promotes art as a tool for social change.





*"The area is a great producer of onions," she adds, "but people don't want to come to see onions growing, so we had to think a little outside the box!"*

Claudia brought together members of the community with Guatemalan artist Diego Olivero to create a scheme of bright colors and designs inspired by patterns typical of traditional Guatemalan textiles. As a quid pro quo, villagers who would like their house to be transformed into a work of art must promise to send their children to school and keep the area around their property free from litter. Some 780 houses have been painted so far, with tourists flocking to the village to photograph it and even pick up a paintbrush themselves to leave their own mark and make a difference. Now, there are 27 new businesses in Santa Catarina, from car parks to a museum, a cultural center and multiple restaurants. *"Before there were hardly any shops because hardly any tourists*

  
**ROYAL CHUNDU**  
 Livingstone, Zambia

*came here," says Sonia Nimacachi, who has opened an art gallery and cafe. "But now lots of tourists come. The village has changed so much with the colours and it's much more joyful now."*

A common thread among Relais & Chateaux properties is that the success of one social or environmental program often spurs them on to the next. Beyond the paintbrush, Pintado el Cambio's associated projects now include supporting children in the early stages of life with education and nutrition, as well as installing wood-burning stoves in houses to save costs in firewood and reduce smoke pollution. Royal Chundu in Zambia is involved in projects ranging from building schools to promoting



Royal Chundu hotel helps fund local schools which educate pupils about sustainable ways of living.

© ROYAL CHUNDU – LUXURY ZAMBEZI LODGES

sustainable fishing and protecting migratory birds, while teaching locals to cultivate fruit and vegetables—in turn providing further local employment and increasing the availability of local produce. Anjavy Le Lodge in Madagascar, in addition to participating in important conservation projects such as reintroducing giant tortoises, also builds wells, supports medical centers, manages a market, runs two schools and supports three others. At Ol Donyo Lodge in Kenya, profits fund 25 teachers in local schools and owner Dereck Joubert has also begun delivering meals to schools, inadvertently incentivizing school attendance during a drought when food was scarce. "The total number of mouths we feed each day is 11,800," he says.

Being transparent to guests about the costs and fees associated with a property's charitable, conservation or social commitments is becoming more

commonplace, as hotels report that more and more guests are deliberately choosing destinations and properties precisely because of their values and the opportunity to contribute to good work. Guests staying at Ol Donyo Lodge pay a conservation fee (\$95 per person per day) as part of their booking, while SUJÁN tented camps in Rajasthan has become the first hotel in India to charge a mandatory conservation fee, per person per night, which is directly donated to social and environmental projects in the vicinity of each camp. *"By simply choosing to stay with us guests are contributing to our foundation and our conservation efforts,"* says Jaisal Singh, SUJÁN's founder. *"Our safari and hospitality experiences allow us to develop and support projects to revive habitat and existing wildlife biomass, whilst benefiting our local communities. The respect for the environment, people and nature is our legacy."*



Incorporating conservation fees that support social and educational initiatives is becoming more commonplace in many Relais & Châteaux hotels.

Their efforts have helped preserve and restore over 100 square kilometers around SUJÁN JAWAI for leopards as well as 30 other recorded species of mammals, 272 avian species and 70 species of flora in the last ten years alone—a clear example of travel and adventure in sympathy to the environment, not at its expense. Scattered across the planet, these properties and others within Relais & Châteaux are united in their aim of protecting their environments and supporting local communities. Part of the joy is that they are planting seeds—literally, in some cases—without being sure exactly how the crop will turn out. Their commitment is to carry on watering.

  
**SUJÁN JAWAI**  
Bisalpur, India



**GABRIEL O'ROURKE**  
Journalist

I'm a British journalist and avid traveler, with a special love for Latin America. This article was a joy to research, each interview opening a window into a life driven by a desire to bring about positive change. I happened to be in Guatemala while writing the piece, on one day exchanging my pen for a paintbrush to create a two-headed bird on a house in Santa Catarina Palopó.



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