



A LEGEND IN THE MAKING:

The Mystic Powers of ATLANTIS

by Maria A. Erspamer

All photos by Vision Photography

Left: Atlantean divers unfurl the VIASYS banner at the Mystic Powers evening gala; Right: Divers ascend with crystals for a special portion the VIASYS Mystic Powers gala.

In Sept. 2002, Harith Productions and Atlantis Paradise Island Resort invited me to attend the VIASYS' Chairman's Club incentive trip to Paradise Island, Bahamas. A fan of the incentive event genre, and all its layered intricacy, I eagerly agreed to be part of this exclusive opportunity. I was about to witness firsthand the moxie of Harith Wikrema, president of Harith Productions and 2002 Spotlight Awards' Planner of the Year and SITE Crystal Award winner, as well as a whole host of other event industry heavy hitters.

In addition to planning the incentive, Harith Productions coordinated an ambitious familiarization of the Bahamas and the Atlantis resort for trade press and meeting planners. In three days, we toured and experienced the Atlantis; met with the Bahamas' Ministry of Tourism; and got a behind-the-scenes look at the execution of this extraordinary incentive, and its signature event, *The Mystic Powers of Atlantis (Mystic Powers)*. Originally designed for the 40-person VIASYS group on Friday, *Mystic Powers* would be scaled-up and held again on Saturday for 850 attendees of the Michael Jordan Celebrity [Golf] Invitational. As part of their incentive experience, VIASYS' chairman's club winners would be invited to attend this star-studded evening too.

From the onset, I was treated like an actual incentive recipient with all the perks and privileges. Pre-event, I received a teaser package with a sampling of materials given to actual attendees. Nestled in a box, covered corner to corner with a depiction of the Mayan temple of Atlantis, were a program of the event and my travel information.

When I arrived at the property, I was treated to a stress-free, no-waiting VIP check-in, and I received my own, personalized Atlantis room keycard, emblazoned with my name, VIASYS and "The Mystic

Powers of Atlantis." Says Wickrema, "Atlantis had never issued a personalized room keycard before, but we thought it would be a nice, personalized touch and a unique memento. John Conway, vice president and general manager of Atlantis, agreed and helped us make that happen."

VIASYS attendees were already settled in and beginning their version of this luxurious incentive weekend. I had arrived late, so I headed straight for my room, which was stocked with goodies for my stay: a welcome note; a traditional Bahamian rum cake; note cards with beautiful drawings by local artists; and a scroll inscribed with an invitation to the following night's gala. Wickrema, himself, later arrived with more incentive keepsakes all stuffed in a colorful underwater-print shoulder bag from a local manufacturer.

And, this star treatment was not just bestowed upon me because I'm a member of the press. According to Randy Thurman, chairman and CEO, VIASYS Healthcare, Inc., "I think what was really special about this incentive event was that it was special to each individual. Harith made everyone feel as if the event was being put on for him or





Clockwise from top left: A centerpiece representing the sun; A creative desert confection fashioned as the moon; Soup in coconuts nestled on metal chargers festooned with sand-and-sea-colored salt; A configuration of four tables, representing the sun, wind, sea and earth; Duck confit and foie gras terrine as the "Temple of the Sun."

tions I was experiencing, starting with those created during the Friday night *Mystic Powers*' cocktail reception, which kicked off the VIASYS gala. Inside The Dig, Atlantis's underground underwater viewing station, attendees were greeted with blue, Atlantean-inspired rum concoctions dotted with egg-white fizzle reminiscent of sea foam.

Then, as the excitement began to build, Neptune appeared and gave his blessings over the group and their year's accomplishments. Simultaneously, Atlantean divers descended the underwater viewing station and thrust open a sunken chest, unfurling a VIASYS banner. Neptune continued to praise the group as the divers grabbed handfuls of shining blown glass crystals from inside the chest.

At this point, attendees were led into the Grand Ballroom and seated at a configuration of four tables that touched in the center. Harkening back to the scrolled invitation left in each attendee's rooms before they arrived: A sun-like centerpiece was on one; a wind-like one on another; a sea-like one on the next; and an earth-like one on the last. The actual center of the four tables was a table round, covered in a golden fern, whose tentacle-like arms were reminiscent of sunrays. And, across the back of the room, a spandex mural of the Sun God was stretched.

On stage at the front, the New Century Dancers in Greek robes danced and entertained guests, as they mingled and found their seats. About fifteen minutes into the program, the chest from The Dig appeared on stage, and a voiceover, rumbling like Neptune from the depths, explained that the "mystic" crystals within had been brought forth to bring them good fortune and increased sales. With that, the dancers plucked the crystals from the chest and descended the stage to bestow them on attendees. It's touches like these—that truly sealed the theme and made attendees feel special.

The five-course feast was then announced, and the wait staff (one for every two guests) presented themselves at the front of the room and then circled back around to pick up the first course and simultaneously serve it to attendees. This course, a duck confit and foie gras terrine called "Temple of the Sun," was paired with entertainment to match: the high priest of fire, Ra, God of the Sun, danced and ate fire! Each of the next four courses were similarly paired in a magnificent layering of gastronomic and visual sensations to reinforce the *Mystic Powers* theme; most notably the fourth course, "Apollo's Eclipse of the Sun," an upscale, exotic twist on the surf and turf combo paired with a performance piece, featuring two dancers who rolled out a brilliantly lit azure globe, representing the moon. The globe then fell away, revealing the next round of entertainment: a singer.

And, the next evening would reveal an equally as impressive version of the *Mystical Powers of Atlantis*. Obviously larger in scale—850 attendees versus 40 attendees—this event had to be scaled up in certain areas and scaled down in others. For example, the room set was altered to ensure that it was equally as visually stimulating when spread out. Sean Freitas, owner and president, Designs by Sean, Miami, accommodated this request with multiple large-format spandex treatments depicting underwater themes and two screens on either side of the stage, which, during dinner, displayed a soothing blue, liquid-inspired projection. And, the food presentation was reworked to allow the higher volume of guests to be served with ease. Consider the "Temple of the Sea"

her, personally. He knows how to make anyone feel special."

This kind of customer service is signature Harith Productions. In the July 2002 *Event Solutions* article "Fit for a King: The Anatomy of Incentive Travel," Wickrema elaborates on his formula for incentive event success. He shares, "It's important to make sure a participant's mind is at ease, and you can create that by anticipating what they will need next...so they don't have anything to want for."

VIASYS wanted for nothing the entire trip. On Friday, trip winners were invited to snorkel in the resort's private lagoon, part of the world's largest man-made marine habitat; enjoy a day at the full-service spa; hit the links next door at the Ocean Club golf course; set off on the Seahorse catamaran cruise; or simply enjoy a day exploring Atlantis.

And, while VIASYS trip recipients were out enjoying themselves, Harith's staff and his production team were kicking into high gear in the Atlantis' Grand Ballroom. I dropped by for a "Meet the Press" session where Wickrema introduced and gave props to the staff of the Atlantis, as well as Sean and Alex of Designs by Sean, T. Skorman Entertainment, Absolute Amusements, ZAMAR Audiovisual, BBJ Linen, Laser International, Floral Arts, High Lite and the New Century Dancers, for all their time and effort on the upcoming evenings' events.

Probably without irony for those who know Wickrema or are familiar with that roster of suppliers, "amazing" is not an accurate description of the following two evenings. To put it plainly, I was sad to be occupied with taking notes both evenings because what transpired was nothing short of spectacular. I could barely keep up with the sensa-



Clockwise from top left: Ceremonious and elegant entertainment lead into dinner; The New Century Dancers setting the night on fire; Davonda Anthony emerges from the sphere and raises the audience; Dancers rolling in the next "circling" of entertainment.

enjoying the opportunity to join celebrities like Michael Jordan, Julius Erving, Maury Povich, Connie Chung, Wayne Gretzky, Angie Everhart, Beyonce Knowles, etc., in experiencing *The Mystic Powers of Atlantis*. And, these celebrities seemed to be equally enjoying the event, especially the Brian McKnight performance.

And yet, the biggest smiles in the house came from the house, itself. Sol Kerzner, chairman of Kerzner International Ltd., took the opportunity to publicly thank Harith Wickrema and his team before McKnight took the stage. Then, in a private interview with Herman Russell, Atlantis' senior director of catering and convention services and a long-time colleague and supporter of Wickrema and his DMC events at the Atlantis, said this about their collaboration, "No one does it better than the Atlantis and Harith. It's a relationship that keeps on getting better."

Wickrema agreed with Russell, "Whether it is a group of 1,000 or 36, Atlantis makes you feel special and important by being attentive. There is no other resort in the world that provides the experience that Atlantis offers, and it's their staff, like Dotty McGowan, Herman Russell, Tim Roby, John Conway, Ian Reid, Andy Gardner and Darnel Ward to name a few, that make it all happen."

And, Wickrema would sure know about being attentive and making it all happen...The VIASYS *Mystic Powers of Atlantis* Incentive trip was dotted with both of these Harith Productions' signatures.

soup course: on Friday night, it was served in coconuts nestled on metal chargers festooned with sand and sea colored salt; on Saturday, it was pre-plated with the salt, so the servers could tray-up and deliver more coconuts quickly.

Although the VIASYS group had experienced a more intimate version of the event the previous night, you could tell that they were