

Peer to Pier: *conversations with fellow travelers*



Hitesh Mehta, 50, is the director of HM Design, and one of the world's leading authorities, practitioners and researchers on ecotourism physical planning, landscape architecture and architectural aspects of ecolodges. I was introduced to Hitesh by Lucy Fleming of Chaa Creek Lodge in Belize, an earlier "Peer to Pier" subject—fitting for a column about global connections. That theme is reflected in Hitesh's life work and the Jain philosophy that is its foundation.

Our dialogue took place while Hitesh was in China. He refers to himself as a citizen of the world and has travelled to more than 75 countries and consulted in 50, including Egypt, Bali, Dominica, Saudi Arabia, India, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Brazil, DR Congo, Mexico, Turks and Caicos, Madagascar, Galapagos, Gabon, Fiji, Bahamas, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the U.S. and Puerto Rico. In 2006, National Geographic Adventure magazine identified Hitesh as one of five Sustainable Tourism Pioneers in the world.

Hitesh's musings about the interdependency of this "web of life" of which we are all a part resonated with me during the depth of a New England winter, and a personal period of the "dark night of the soul." I was reminded that such fallow periods are followed by new growth. Wherever you might be, physically or spiritually, I think you'll find fascinating Hitesh's reflections on his upbringing in the Jain philosophy in Kenya, the nature of his portfolio of eco-projects around the globe and his views on the principles of harmony, patience, stewardship and Aparigraha. Look for his coffee-table book, "Authentic Ecolodges" being published by Harper Collins in September.

Meg: *Could you tell me a little bit about growing up in Kenya, what your life was like?*

Hitesh: *I feel blessed to have grown up in Kenya which has been for many years a peaceful haven in Africa. Raised in Nairobi by Indian parents, I can enthusiastically describe my childhood as modest, moral, and set against a truly magical backdrop. Even though my mum died when I was only 10 years*



old, I was lucky enough to have been raised by my elder sisters and brother. I grew up in *Parklands*, an Indian suburb designated by the British Colonialists, which was bordered



by the forested City Park. I experienced nature just outside my door: there used to be leopard sightings in my neighborhood and Vervet and Sykes Monkeys were a daily occurrence! My childhood memories are so vivid that even up to today, I can draw the map of my neighborhood with most of the buildings, gardens and trees identified in it! Life was truly beautiful: full of uninhibited fun, lots of playing all kinds of games, and hanging out with friends, several of who I am still very much in contact with and after all these years I consider my best friends.

Meg: *I understand that you are a member of the Cricket Hall of Fame. Tell me a little bit about the sport and your involvement in it.*

Hitesh: I played cricket for my country for a period of over 12 years and have the distinction of having captained my elementary school, high school, university, my club and my country. I also played in three Cricket ICC World Cups, and in my early days actually got invited with others by the Queen for tea at Buckingham Palace!



The game of cricket was invented by the British and it has the second-largest following in the world after football (soccer in the U.S.) It is a team sport, with eleven per side, and widely referred to as the 'brain game!' The cricket captain has to exhibit skills of leadership and team-building while at the same time needs to be intuitive, tactful and shrewd.

I played 20-years of non-stop cricket and my role as captain has greatly helped me over the years as a Design Team Leader. Leading consultant teams from all around the world is a piece of cake for me now and Cricket captaincy has helped me to successfully manage a group of diverse people with varied backgrounds.

Meg: *How do you define landscape architecture?*

Hitesh: Landscape architecture is the design of outdoor and public spaces to achieve environmental, socio-behavioral, and/or aesthetic outcomes. The basic premise of landscape architecture is about stewardship of the land. How to take care of the land while at the same time design it in ways that provide places of rest, meditation, recreation



etc for *all* species. It involves the systematic investigation of existing social, ecological, and geological conditions and processes in the landscape, and the design of interventions that will produce the desired outcome. Landscape architecture is a multi-disciplinary field, incorporating aspects of land use planning, environmental psychology, botany, industrial design and landscape

ecology.

Meg: *How did you become interested in this area, and was where you grew up a factor?*

Hitesh: During high school and university, I began to travel Kenya with a group of intimate friends and before long, we had observed most parts of this amazing country that has some of the most varied landscapes on the planet. Kenya has one of the natural wonders of the world—The Great Rift Valley—snow-capped mountains on the equator, fresh and salt water lakes, rivers, equatorial and montane forests, deserts, savannah, oceans and of course one of the highest concentrations of mammals on the planet. In addition, Nairobi is the only city in the world that has a National Park within its boundaries. Just 30 minutes from my work, I would be in the wild with zebras, lions, and cheetahs, with my office building still in view on the horizon! So, as you can see, the pristine yet fragile landscape around me and my wish to protect it for future generations was an influencing factor of why I chose to pursue a profession of landscape architecture.



Meg: *Landscape architecture related to ecotourism is a specialty of yours—can you describe how that expertise came about and evolved?*



Hitesh: After taking my degree in architecture in Kenya, and a Masters in landscape architecture at Berkeley, an academic career as a Professor of the University of Nairobi followed. But 15 years ago, I felt strongly that I needed to take all my interests—architecture, landscape architecture and conservation—and combine them into one. My ex-wife and now friend Minoo came up with the idea of me focusing on

ecotourism and ecolodges. We both became convinced that there were better ways to integrate sustainability and tourism—protecting both endangered species’ habitats and local communities. I noticed first and foremost the striking disconnect between architecture and the landscape on which the safari lodges were built—ugly, modern buildings that were anything but timeless. I remember asking myself, “As landscape architects and planners, are we truly the stewards of the land and oceans, or are we destroyers?”

It is at this point that I developed a precocious interest in relationships between landscape architecture, environmentalism, local community benefits and tourism. In 1995, I wrote what is considered the first research paper on ecolodges in the world. I decided that my calling was to go deeper than simply helping to control the aesthetical features of my residential house projects. As such, my focus in landscape architecture moved to pristine and fragile natural areas where tourism was uncontrolled, and had large social and environmental impacts and required a new planning paradigm to protect the sanctity of those places. Projects in national parks, for example, would need careful storm water and wastewater discharge, non-invasive plant species, alternative energy sources and energy conservation methods.

Meg: *You spoke of a disconnect between the architecture of the safari lodges and the landscape, and your question to yourself of whether your profession was one of stewards or destroyers. It seems that your reaction propelled you in the direction you now refer to your as your “calling.” How did this transition unfold?*

Hitesh: There was never really one ‘aha’ moment. It was in fact subconscious observations that I had been making over many years that led me into the field of landscape architecture. I always tell my friends that I have a very active guilty conscience but one that is very positive! When I look at my life, I would say that none of my ‘crisis of conscience’ moments have been instant. Whenever in my life I have gotten myself into a comfortable situation, my guilty conscience reins in and forces me to take my life to the next level. My most recent guilt forced me to re-examine my faith and make it stronger. I felt that by being a vegetarian, I was still being responsible for the cruelty and murder of innocent non-humans and I felt that if I wanted to be true to myself and take my low-impact living to the next level, I had to become a vegan. That was four years ago and I

have never looked back since. Life is beautiful...but getting a little comfortable. Maybe it's time to check in with my guilty conscience!

Meg: *Can you share two or three of the principles of landscape architecture that most resonate with you, and how they might be applied to “everyday life”?*

Hitesh: Stewardship—taking care of Mother Earth and all the species that inhabit on it. The concept of being light on the land and respecting other species. Through our lifestyle choices, trying to create the least amount of destruction on the land. Working with the land rather than the homocentric approaches that I see in the profession.



Second is the inclusion of local communities—it is important in daily life to be cognizant of minority communities and respect all people irrespective of caste, creed or race.

Also important is harmony—being in harmony with nature is an important element of human's survival on the planet. Harmony within one's self is as important.

Meg: *Can you give an example of how you have nurtured a sense of harmony within yourself?*



Hitesh: My life has been full of tales of venturing-into-unchartered-waters! One of the main reasons why I have been able to keep my head over water whilst others have failed is because I have had this strong inner belief—and a *lot* of patience!—that the road I have chosen is the correct one. I have managed to nurture a sense of inner harmony by picking the right battles whether it has been with my bosses, my partner or my family and friends.

A classic example is at my previous employment where I continuously got put-down by certain colleagues. Because I was so confident of my ‘sacred contract’ and ‘chosen path’ I decided to maintain my inner harmony by ignoring every comment made on my work by people I did not respect. Every single morning, I wake up, look up at the mirror on the ceiling over my bed and ask myself “Hitesh, what are you going to do today to make the world a better place”? Every night, before I go to bed, I sit in my Jacuzzi and meditate for fifteen minutes and ask myself “Hitesh, what did you do today that made the world a better place”?

Meg: Have you ever had a moment where you felt the Universe was affirming you were “on the right path,” and, if so, could you describe it?



Hitesh: My work has taken me to many countries challenged with diseases, wars, civil unrest, hurricanes, earthquakes etc. And I must say that whilst colleagues have either died from accidents or disease (cerebral malaria) whilst working on projects, I have thankfully remained safe. I see this as an affirmation from the Universe. In spite of the time demands of my book and the brutal effect that the financial crisis has had on many landscape architects, I feel that the universe has been looking over me since I have been pretty successful in my business over the past two years. Not bad considering that most firms have had to reduce their staff by between 40%-60%.

Meg: Do you consider your work to be a spiritual practice?

Hitesh: I see my work as an opportunity to improve the earth for all. Having travelled to over 75 countries and consulted in over 50 of them, I consider myself a global citizen, and describe myself as having a soul from India, a heart from Kenya, and a body that lives in America! However, it is the “Indian” soul that drives my practice. My ‘sacred contract’ is to make this world a better place than when I found it, to protect particular places for future generations. I have been greatly influenced by Gandhi’s spiritual practices and can confidently state that every single day I strive to be “the change I want to see in the world.” Every one of my projects in the last ten years has espoused what I have termed as the “quadruple bottom line” approach to sustainability—financial, social and environmental have for over ten years been the accepted aspects for creating sustainable places *but* I have felt that without the fourth aspect—spiritual—one cannot attain sustainability.



My spiritual practice is very much about giving without any expectations. Unconditional love. Do unto others what I would expect them to do unto me. I spent over five years of

after office-hours on my first book *International Ecolodge Guidelines* and gave it away as a charity to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) because it needed the money. Creating awareness and sharing my experiences and expertise is my goal and I see that as a spiritual approach. A legacy I can leave behind as I move on into the next life, which by the way, I want to become a Hippo! My goal is to attain nirvana without having to sit under the Bodhi tree and go from house to house begging for food as the gurus in India do.

My projects are those that provide guests a spiritual union with nature and culture. I design places that cater to travelers who want to learn about other places and people rather than just escape their familiar surroundings but at the same time make a positive difference to the locations they visit. Ecolodges are designed to protect the natural environment and support their communities and I see this approach as spiritual.

Meg: *I see that your work has spanned the globe. Could you single out three or four of these projects and describe the challenges and opportunities presented by each project's particular landscape?*

Hitesh: I was the facilitator and team leader for the preparation of a desert ecolodge in the Al Ghat National Park, three hours north of Riyadh in Central Saudi Arabia. I facilitated a participatory ecolodge workshop comprising the local community, professionals and members of the Supreme Commission of Tourism and led the team that prepared the final plans for the Shalta Ecolodge. The program includes private accommodation areas, presidential suite, an environmental utility learning area, nature center and public spaces such as reception, lounge and dining.

There was so little rainfall in the desert that it truly was a challenge to figure out how we were going to ensure regular water supply for ecolodge guests. Another challenge was the dust wind storms that occur several times of the year in the desert. We had to orient and protect the buildings such that they would not be affected by the dust. Being a true desert, there were very few plants that had adapted to the harsh conditions. Our plant palette was very limited especially as regards trees!



Another memorable project was leading the development of a tourism plan for the protected area of Virunga Massif along the borders of DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. The area harbors half of the world's mountain gorilla population and eight volcanoes. One of the main purposes of this long term plan was to demonstrate how tourism can help alleviate livelihoods of local people. The overall plan includes hotels and camping sites, ecolodges, visitor centers,

boardwalks, canopy walks, trails, entry gates, park administrative offices, visitor / interpretive center, local crafts markets and tourism information offices.

I wanted to walk the base of the volcanoes of DR Congo but was informed that it had far more human guerrillas—Hutus from Rwanda—than gorillas! It was so dangerous to travel around Eastern Congo that, at any given time, I had five Army guards with AK 47's protecting me as I carried on with my work! That said, Congo landscapes are some of the most magical on the planet.



Because of projects such as these, I introduced in 2004, a new profession in the industry called “Extreme Planning.” It is a profession that cannot be taught in Universities and can only be learnt on the field. A calculated-risk-taking profession where the planner is so passionate about making a difference in the world that he/she is willing to die for a cause. It is planning in areas of civil unrest, deadly diseases, war, political instability; in severe weather conditions – monsoons, sub-freezing, desert; planning that helps conserve the last remaining endangered floral and faunal species; that helps protect indigenous cultures, languages and sacred landscapes and that helps raise living standards for impoverished local peoples.

Another inspiring yet challenging project was the Crosswaters Ecolodge in Guangdong Province, in the mountains of Southern China. I was the project manager for the team that planned, designed and supervised the construction of the first ecolodge and wellness center in China within Nankun Mountain Reserve. The company I worked for, EDSA,



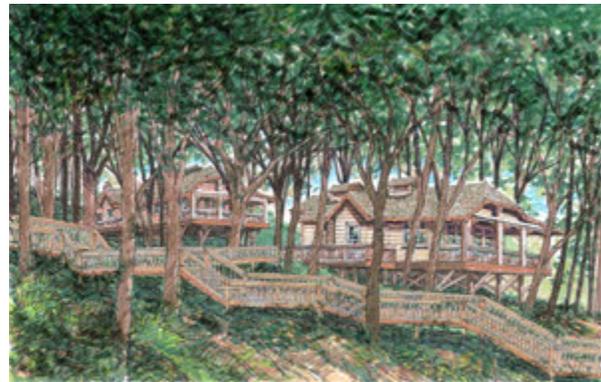
provided full services, from conceptual design to construction documents. The team consisted of well known Australian ecolodge architect Paul Pholeros, the world's leading bamboo architect, Simon Velez from Colombia and Linda Garland, the well-known bamboo interior designer. The master plan included an ecolodge and conference center, wellness center, nature activity center, boutique resort, trails. The project opened in spring 2007 and has already become the most published hotel property in the world over the past three years.

I was the design team leader and there were many challenges. The site is located in a mountainous nature reserve and the forest location had little sun and so we could *not* use any solar panels, which was a bummer! There were also very few flat areas and none that could fit in a car park. However, this was a blessing in

disguise as we ended up having to add a welcome center and car park higher up on the hill and adjacent to the main road. The site for the ecolodge was an already disturbed site. Local people had cut the rainforest and set up an illegal orange and tangerine orchard. They were also using the site to harvest the bamboo. We had to sit down and discuss the project with them and ensure that their routes through the site during construction were not erased.

I am the lead consultant, concept architect and landscape architect for an ecolodge in the eastern part of the Commonwealth of Dominica in the West Indies. It will be the first planned and designed ecolodge in Dominica and there are many benefits to the neighboring Carib Indians. The client will be employing them to construct the grass-thatch roofs of the pavilions and they will be employed in the operations of the lodge as well as receiving ecotourists in their villages. The master plan includes an ecolodge and wellness center, forest and ocean cabins, tree house, swimming pool, library and trails.

Kwanari is the latest ecolodge in the Caribbean. The site is forested and located at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. We are introducing a whole new style of architecture called “Forest Caribbean.” Because of the context of the site—rainforest meets ocean—I felt that a new contextual architecture was necessary so that the buildings blend into the forest. It is where the typical bright-colored Caribbean huts meet the “cabin” in the woods. One of the big challenges



KWANARI ECOLODGE - OCEAN VILLAS

we have had to deal with is salt spray from the ocean. I have been so particular as regards respect for existing trees that I have now visited the site three times just to ensure that the least amount of trees are cut to build the buildings. The other challenge was the fact that the site is very small and so it was not easy to fit the whole building program into the site.

***Meg:** We've been engaged in this dialogue while you are in China—could you share what you are up to there?*

***Hitesh:** I am currently in Zhuhai, a 7-million population city in the Pearl River Delta of Southern China and 1 ½ hr by ferry from Hong Kong. I am leading a team of three consultants and we are here to plan a unique, socially and environmentally friendly new urban village, Qianshan New Village, for a Chinese client. I have not worked on urban projects of this scale but the challenge to create something never created in China is exciting! China is a very hot topic in the design world and much of the press coverage is about the environmental and social degradation going on with the rapid development. In a country where uncontrolled development is causing untold damage and displacing millions of people, Qianshan New Village will be an exemplary study in environmental and social consciousness.*

Meg: Can you explain what “ecopsychology” is?



Hitesh: The basic idea of ecopsychology is that while the human mind is shaped by the modern social and technological world, it can be readily inspired and comforted by the wider natural world, because that is the arena in which it originally evolved. In very simple terms ecopsychology connects psychology and ecology. The political and practical implications are to show humans ways of healing alienation and to build a sane

society and a sustainable culture. Mental health or unhealth cannot be understood simply in the narrow context of only intrapsychic phenomena or social relations. One also has to include the relationship of humans to other species and ecosystems. The destruction of ecosystems means that something in humans also dies. Humans are, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, are part of this web and linked intrinsically with all species of nature. If they destroy nature, they will eventually destroy themselves.

Considering that most of the consultants I worked with came from very traditional educational and professional backgrounds, I felt the need to bring an ecopsychologist into my planning and design team. The ecopsychologist’s contract was to conduct sensorial workshops during the initial phases of my projects and thereby connect the consultants and clients deeply with the spiritual energy of the site and its inhabitants, both floral and faunal.

Meg: What are a couple of the most interesting new trends in ecotourism in your view?

Hitesh: Community owned and operated ecolodges. This concept started in Kenya but now has spread all over the world. These are projects which are entirely owned and operated by the local communities, such as Maasai and Native Americans in the Bolivian Amazon. A second interesting trend is that more and more ecotourism enterprises are adding “wellness centers” to their program of offerings. Another is the expansion into higher quality lodges. The upgrading of facilities is a response to the growing upper middle-class ‘experience seekers’ and ‘metro-spirituals’ market.

Meg: I understand you grew up practicing the Jain philosophy. Could you describe the tenets of the philosophy and its meaning in your life?

Hitesh: My upbringing is in the Indian philosophy of Jainism, which any well educated theologian will tell



you that compared to all other philosophies/religions, has the greatest respect for non-human species. In my family, we have been vegetarians for over 40 generations! One of the main tenets of Jainism is “Ahimsa,” the philosophy of non-violence. Non-violence to your fellow human-beings and non-violence to non-humans alike. I do not call myself a Jain now but I must say that the ‘ahimsa’ ideals have greatly influenced me in my work. I got into ecological planning and design over 15 years ago and have never looked back. It is the right thing to tread lightly on this very fragile earth!

Ecotourism is low-impact, practices non-violence principles and, as a sector of the tourism industry, has played a role in alleviating poverty in several rural parts of the world. It is the one sector of the tourism industry that has the greatest respect for both faunal and floral species as well as the welfare of the local people. Simply put, ecotourism is the ‘Jainism’ of the leisure industry.



The other principles of Jainism are *Satya*, which is speaking truth and avoiding falsehood; *Asteya*, to not steal from others; and *Aparigraha*, which is about detaching from people, places and material things, and avoiding the collection of excessive material possessions, abstaining from over-indulgence, and restricting one’s needs.

Even though I do not consider myself a Jain, I do practice *Satya* and *Asteya* but have found it difficult to practice *Aparigraha*! However, I am now a vegan and live an even more lower-impact life than Jains. Even though I eat mainly organic vegan food at home, use only products that are biodegradable and not tested on animals, and recycle and reuse, I feel that it would be hypocritical to call myself a Jain. However I am

grateful for the ‘Jain’ conditioning I had and credit the Jain influences in my work. I am thankful that I was born a Jain.

Meg: *It would seem to me that a way to view landscape architecture is determining how to allow different elements to be seen “in their best light.” How would you respond to that, and if that view resonates with you, how could this be a metaphor for people’s approach to their own life?*

Hitesh: It is important that through careful planning and design, the landscape architect brings out the best out of every element of the landscape. In life, the same should be true. A good leader should be able to bring out the best from each member of his/her team. Everything and every person have their value and it is the collective approach that creates sustainable projects. I am a big proponent of ego-less design.

Meg: It would seem to me that your work involves acknowledging the interdependencies of all the attributes of a given landscape. Your thoughts?

Hitesh: Everything in the landscape is inter-connected and dependent on each other. The flowers are dependent on the butterflies and bees, the fruit dependent on the flowers getting pollinated, the birds and monkeys dependent on the fruit, the eagles and leopards dependent on the monkeys etc. Every single species is connected in this web of life. It is indeed a metaphor for our lives. As humans, we are dependent on so many things—not only those that are man-made but those things that come from nature. If the natural web-link is destroyed by humans then our own existence will be in peril. In fact, it already is!



Meg: What gives you hope for the planet, with all the current environmental challenges?

Hitesh: There is no question that in my job, the everyday news can be quite depressing but my faith in the Universe keeps me going. It is the small stories that I hear makes me heartened: the fact that mountain gorilla populations are increasing; the fact that new protected areas are being created in Brazil and Borneo; the fact that more and more people are becoming aware of climate change and changing lifestyles. Being a vegan, I have noticed in the past two years the increasing number of Americans who are turning to lower-impact lifestyles.

Meg: Beyond working with the physical landscape, are cultural and spiritual attributes of a given locality also a factor in your work?



Hitesh: Jain values and principles are evident in all my projects – there is respect for animals, plants, local people and the soul of the place. The approach right from the outset is that of low-impact development.

My spiritual upbringing has greatly shaped the way I carry out research, analysis and plan destinations. So much

so that my first book “International Ecology Guidelines” is the only planning book in the world that addresses various metaphysical ways of reading the landscape like feng shui, vastu shastra, native American and aboriginal methods. This book is now

regarded as the most comprehensive book on ecolodges and is currently used as required text by several professors around the world.

The influence of Jainism on my work makes a positive difference, for myself and the actual environment and people who live and use—or are affected by—the areas where I design. It is important to place much thought into planning and design of any development. There is a tendency for people to take their built environment and urban spaces for granted, not realizing that it is the environment that makes people. It is this realization that makes ecotourism planning progressive in its approach to design. All the planning and design principles employed in ecotourism are sustainable in nature.

***Meg:** One of the primary reasons I travel is in search of new vistas that inspire a sense of awe and wonder. I am also working on being able to foster that state of mind locally! Can you describe a specific experience of awe and/or wonder that was particularly powerful for you?*



***Hitesh:** The Maasai Mara Savannah in Kenya never ceases to amaze me! I am in awe of it every single time I visit this one-of-a kind landscape! Even now, I crave to be there! It is one of those few magical places on the planet that has an irresistible spiritual energy. I have already chosen my resting place to be in the southern part of this landscape.*

Photos are courtesy of Hitesh Mehta.

For more information about Hitesh Mehta, Eco-Lodges, the Crosswaters Eco-Lodge and Spa and the sport of Cricket, go to:

www.h-m-design.com Under construction, due in April

www.eco-mon.design.com Under construction, due in April

www.authenticcolodges.com

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