



# Faint Footprints

Tourism is the largest industry in the world, with ecotourism the fastest growing niche market within that industry. Which means that if you choose carefully, you can have a wonderful holiday, conserve nature and benefit local people all at the same time.

By HITESH MEHTA

**M**y family has been vegetarian for over 40 generations, and the practice of Jainism and the principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence) were instilled in my everyday life from a very early age. My childhood experiences, conditioning and travel all influenced the way I think and live today; my work as an environmental planner, architect and landscape architect helps me reduce my carbon footprint and the footprint of those around me.

Ecotourism started in my home country, Kenya, in the late 1970s when biologist David Western attempted to link tourism and community conservation in Amboseli National Park, located at the base of Mt Kilimanjaro. His concept was to use tourism as a way to conserve the floral and faunal biodiversity of the park, while at the same time helping to benefit the local Maasai communities that had been living on the land for hundreds of years.

This “holistic” concept of tourism then spread worldwide, with Costa Rica being one of the first countries to latch on. Today, compared to even five years ago, ecotourism has become a major force thanks to greater awareness of low-impact travelling, climate change, global warming and corporate social responsibility. People are realising that it is the right thing to do and this has led to a significant growth in both ecotourism and ecolodges.

## Staying in Touch

With indigenous cultures, native languages, and local customs and rituals all under threat, it is cru-

cial that ecotourism companies are involved with the local community and offer sustainable benefits. Ecolodges are “low-impact, nature-based accommodations of five to 75 rooms that protect the surrounding environment; benefit the local community; offer tourists an interpretative and interactive participatory experience; provide a spiritual communion with nature and culture and are designed, constructed and operated in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner”.

Nihiwatu Resort in Indonesia has achieved this by drastically reducing the number of malaria cases amongst local Sumbanese people through hiring a malaria expert, distributing mosquito nets and offering medical check-ups at their clinics. Wilderness Safaris in southern Africa runs a successful project, called “Children of the Wilderness”, which aims to expose underprivileged local children to their own wildlife heritage, teach them the importance of conservation and equip them with life skills.

Similarly, the ecolodge Campi ya Kanzi in Kenya is owned and run by local Maasais, and the owners of Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica have helped build classrooms for the local primary school and provides scholarships to local students. Over the past two and a half years, I have seen a growing number of community-owned and -operated projects that respect the local cultures and architecture.

As for the future, I see the following technologies shaping ecofriendly resorts: fuel cells, solar, wind and tidal power providing efficient energy; low-impact light fittings that give out a warm glow; and





environmentally friendly materials made from recycled products for use in interior design. It is my hope that locally owned and run organisations continue to grow, and that there will be public and private partnerships when it comes to owning and managing these special places.

## It's Down to You

But you can also do your part and make a difference. As a traveller, you have the responsibility to help promote ecotourism and ecolodges. When travelling to another country, do respect the local culture, understand the politics, read up about the destination, and learn some important phrases of the local language. And it's always good to keep the environment pristine by not littering or driving off designated routes.

When planning your trip it's also wise to choose an environmentally friendly tour operator and low carbon or carbon neutral mode of transportation if you can. In my opinion, carbon offsetting for airline travel is better done by donating directly to the ecolodge itself if it has a carbon offsetting programme.

If your chosen destination doesn't run such a programme, you can donate to companies such as NativeEnergy or Atmosfair, the latter of which funds alternative energy projects in countries like India, China and Honduras. Having said that, airlines only generate two per cent of global carbon emissions, whereas cows spew out nearly three times that - but every little helps.

While staying at a resort, keep your personal impact down too. It is important to be frugal when using water in showers, bathtubs and sinks. Switch on lights only when necessary, and take your rubbish home for proper disposal. And do not leave any food on the plate at the end of a meal; this is just as wasteful as leaving a tap running. Most importantly, whatever activities you take part in, leave a faint footprint. n

*Pioneering landscape architect, environmental planner and architect Hitesh S Mehta, president of Florida-based HM Design, spent the last two and a half years travelling to 46 countries to research his new book Authentic Ecolodges, to be published by Harper Collins in August 2010. Mehta is a board member of The International Ecotourism Society and the author of International Ecolodge Guidelines.*



## Top Ecolodges Saving the Planet

Next time you plan a getaway, bear these ecolodges in mind - they're good for the environment and for your conscience.



### SAADANI SAFARI LODGE, TANZANIA

Solar panels provide electricity, with hot water coming from solar water heaters. Water is boiled using biogas. Septic tanks collect grey water and the solid waste is used as fertiliser. Prod-

ucts in the lodge are made from natural bio-degradable materials. The lodge sponsors a sustainable charcoal project and has given the village a wind-powered pump.

### BAN PAKO ECO LODGE, LAOS

Runs a development programme for the surrounding villages, including growing vegetables and improving schools. Money from tours goes to the village fund. The lodge is solar powered and built from eucalyptus trees and bamboo from the plantations. Food served is grown by farmers living nearby.



### KAPAWI ECOLODGE AND RESERVE, ECUADOR

Only accessible by air, the lodge works with the Achuar people of the Amazon rainforest to protect their way of life. Local guides teach visitors about the

rainforest. The lodge, built entirely using Achuar architecture, is raised on stilts to reduce impact to the vegetation. Canoes are equipped with outboard engines that reduce pollution.



# Travelling the Eco Way

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as: "Responsible travel to areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." A few simple steps can help make sure that your visit achieves just that.

By MALLIKA NAGURAN



## 2 CARRY YOUR RUBBISH

Many places do not have safe landfills or recycling facilities, so it's a good idea to pack as few disposables as possible when travelling. Remove wrappers from battery packs before you leave and take dead batteries home. Drinking bottled water can prevent stomach problems but squash the bottles and take them with you for proper recycling. Any wrappers or waste paper should be packed for the journey home.



## 1 SUPPORT LOCAL TRADES

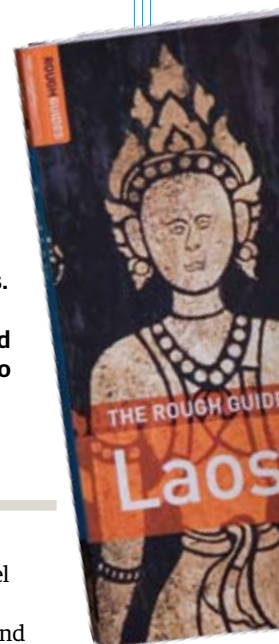
Buying local crafts, food items and clothing at markets or small shops can be great fun. By doing this, you also know your money is supporting indigenous trades. Even if you don't need the item, buy it anyway as a spare Christmas or birthday gift. Your souvenir will raise awareness of foreign cultures for the people back home.

## 3 GO LOCAL

Big hotels are nice but often only a fraction of the traveller's money goes directly to the local staff, and sometimes none at all to the environment. By staying in a locally run lodge or homestay in a village, the community benefits much more from your visit. It's also a great way to mingle, share their resources and learn their culture. If you do have to stay in a big hotel, choose one that blends in with the natural surroundings and is constructed from native materials.

## 5 SHARE EXPERIENCES

Learning common words and phrases in the local language can go a long way in establishing communication and rapport with your hosts. Remember, some of the people you meet may not have ventured beyond their village. You can also donate your phrase book when you leave as it may help other travellers to communicate.



## 4 TAKE GIFTS

Pack some gifts for the people you meet. Children love pens, pencils, crayons, picture books, storybooks and blank notepads. Conversational tapes or CDs are great too, in places where language teachers are scarce. Other things you could take include books for libraries, basic wound dressings and antiseptic cream, mosquito nets for malaria zones, water sterilisation tablets, clothing for orphanages and postcards of your home for your host.

## 6 DISCOURAGE ILLEGAL TRADES

If you see any wildlife or prohibited goods on display, such as endangered species of flora and fauna, say no. Better still, explain to the seller why it's wrong to trade in these products and try to help promote an understanding of conservation issues. If you can do it safely, take a discreet photo and send it to the authorities when you get back home.

## 7 GREEN GUIDE

Book with a "green" travel agency by verifying its environmental policies and contributions. Questions you should ask include:

- n Does it promote sustainable tourism and do all it can to reduce the travel impact on the environment?
- n Does it have tour packages that promote conservation?
- n Does it offer lodgings that interact with local cultures?
- n Are its key staff and guides locally hired?
- n Is it sensitive to the environment and culture when conducting tours to wildlife sanctuaries and local villages?

