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**InnerViews** / Ecoarchitect Hitesh Mehta designs some of the world's most environmentally friendly lodges and resorts. He preserves local environments while accommodating guests who want to make a difference with their travel dollars. / By Trish Riley / Illustration by Monica Hellström

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## The Ecolodge Advantage

Hitesh Mehta calls himself a global citizen. “My soul is from India, my heart is from Kenya, and I live and work in America.” Many regard him as the world’s foremost authority on ecolodges, and he sees his work as an opportunity to improve the earth for all.

Raised in Kenya by Indian parents, Mehta enthusiastically describes his childhood as modest, moral, and set against a truly magical backdrop. “There used to be leopards in my neighborhood. I saw nature just outside my door. My whole environmental philosophy goes back 50 to 60 generations—all vegetarians. I grew up in a Jain family, a philosophy that is all about respect for living things.”

Mehta excelled as an athlete, playing cricket through high school, college, and beyond—helping to earn three World Cups and a place in the World Hall of Fame. He graduated from the University of Nairobi and earned a master’s degree at the University of California at Berkeley. He returned to teach landscape architecture at Nairobi to help build local community awareness and establish an educational resource to protect the African natural environment.

“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, my office building still in view on the horizon,” Mehta says. “I left Berkeley to go back to Kenya and teach at the university to give back to my country. I try to be the change I want to see in the world.”

Today, Mehta heads the ecolodge division of Fort Lauderdale-based EDSA Landscape Architects and Planners, creating rustic hotels in remote areas. He designs places that cater to ecotourists—travelers who want to learn about other places and people rather than just escape their familiar surroundings. But more important, ecolodges are designed to protect the natural environment and support their communities.

He’s the editor and a coauthor of *International Ecolodge Guidelines*, the definitive guide to building ecolodges used at universities around the world, and a board member of the International Ecotourism Society, which promotes sustainable travel. Hemispheres recently talked with Mehta about his ideas.

**Q:** Why are ecolodges so important to you?

**A:** When I was traveling through national parks in Kenya, I saw these very ugly buildings being built. I went

### Hitesh Mehta’s List of Leading Ecolodges and Ecoresorts

#### Ecolodges:

1 / Crosswaters Ecolodge, China

2 / The Lodge at Chaa Creek, Belize  
([chaacreek.com](http://chaacreek.com))

3 / Coconut Lagoon, India ([cgearth.com/coconut\\_lagoon\\_kerala\\_kumarakom\\_1.htm](http://cgearth.com/coconut_lagoon_kerala_kumarakom_1.htm))

#### Ecoresorts:

1 / Kingfisher Bay Resort, Australia  
([kingfisherbay.com](http://kingfisherbay.com))

2 / Hotel Punta Islita, Costa Rica  
([hotelpuntaislita.com](http://hotelpuntaislita.com))

3 / Praia do forte Ecoresort, Brazil  
([praiadoforteecoresort.com.br/ing/index.asp](http://praiadoforteecoresort.com.br/ing/index.asp))

to study the landscape side of things so I could show by example that you can have harmonious lodges in natural places. They don't have to be ugly. They don't need to pollute the environment. They need to be at peace with it.

**Q:** When people think about eco-travel, they often associate it with nature and adventure travel, and they might think of ecoresorts as back-to-nature type places. Is that necessarily the case?

**A:** It depends. There are many differences between ecolodges and ecoresorts, but the main difference is that ecolodges have between five and 75 rooms and ecoresorts have between 75 and 150.

An ecoresort is a hybrid product. It is the best of both worlds, where you'll find flat-screen TVs, air-conditioning systems, state-of-the-art materials, and furnishings that are not environmental. It borders on ecotourism. This is the biggest trend right now: upscale, higher-end, environmentally friendly, socially friendly resorts. You can go on a medicinal-plant tour of the forest with a local person or go to the village and get a very professional tour.

Ecoresorts are specifically designed for people in an upscale market who like to have luxury but who also want to help these cultures and to be experience-seekers who go to the desert or the forest. People get the best of both worlds, and they want to make a difference with their dollars.

An example of an ecoresort would be Kingfisher Ecoresort on Fisher Island in Queensland, Australia. It's built on a World Heritage Site, and the way developers went about construction was very sensitive. They considered every detail of the island. They did not introduce any topsoil onto the island for ecological reasons; they made sure all construction waste from the project was either reused or taken off the island for use on the mainland. A wonderful thing about the project is that before they began building, they picked up all the trees and small plants, placed them in a nursery, and took care of them while construction was going on. Then, when construction was finished, they replaced them around the resort.

**Q:** How would you describe ecolodges?

**A:** An ecolodge is authentic, what you might call the most pure thought of lodging. It helps conserve the local forest, with some of your money going to benefit local communities. You'll get superb, high-level interpretation, and most of the staff is local. The material with which the lodges have been built is environmentally friendly.

Ecolodges are more for people like me who want to go for an authentic experience, who don't care about flat-screen TVs, air-conditioning, or wi-fi access.

A good example of an ecolodge is Crosswater Ecolodge at Nankun Mountain Reserve in Guangdong Province, South China, for which we've won the Oscar in our field, an award from the American Society of Landscape Architects. We worked with the local people to create a place that would benefit them, putting much-needed capital into the area's economy. We built in an area that had already been environmentally damaged—so we didn't cause further harm—using local materials such as bamboo, recycled tiles, and railroad ties. We brought in a feng shui master to analyze the plans to ensure the best energy flows, to respect the spirit of the place, and to enrich it through thoughtful, sensitive, sustainable planning and design.

**Q:** What makes a lodge ecofriendly?

**A:** I've established these 10 criteria:

1 / Conserve the natural environment.

2 / Work with the local community.

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3 / Offer educational interpretive programs to employees and tourists about the natural and cultural environment.

4 / Conserve water by reducing consumption and waste.

5 / Carefully manage solid waste and sewage.

6 / Use renewable energies and passive-solar and wind design.

7 / Use local, sustainable building materials and techniques when possible.

8 / Protect the site from unnecessary environmental destruction during construction.

9 / Blend harmoniously into the environment.

10 / Contribute to the sustainable local community through education and research.

To call a place an ecolodge, you have to satisfy three of the criteria for sure: It has to protect the local environment, benefit the local community, and it needs to have a good interpretation program. If one of those is missing, you don't have an ecolodge. Then you need to satisfy at least two of the other seven criteria, such as by using environmentally friendly materials such as biodegradable shampoos, soaps, whatever you use in the kitchen. If you use organic cottons for bedsheets, pillowcases and curtains; fantastic. Interior design is a very important part of the whole thing – furnishings are often overlooked.

**Q:** Does it cost more to create an ecofriendly lodge or resort than a conventional facility?

**A:** Recent studies have shown that if you think green from day one, then through passive-design techniques your ecoresorts and ecolodges will end up costing just about the same in the short term and saving money over the long run through reduced operation costs.

**Q:** Where do you see the science of ecoarchitecture going?

**A:** EDSA is the largest hotel- and resort-planning office in the world. We've worked for Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons; we do the whole thing. But the market segment that I am running, ecotourism, is the only one of its kind in the world. We are using these principles in the general resort industry as well. We're going to see more and more of this—as awareness happens, as the market segment grows, and as people begin to see there's money to be made in this and that they're also going to be good to the environment.

Europe has been at the forefront of green buildings, Germany especially. You'll find that every other roof there is green, so to speak. Now, we have a roof that's made of photovoltaic cells [which produce energy from light]. The U.S. is really growing in green buildings. New York and Chicago are at the forefront of green architecture. The town hall in Austin, Texas, is made of photovoltaic cells—you can have photovoltaic windows now. You can get glass that is heat-resistant; you can get beautiful tiles made from recycled light bulbs.

The science is unbelievable right now. It's changing and getting cheaper as well.

**Q:** How has the trend evolved, and where do you see it going?

**A:** It's amazing how ecotravel has grown over the past five years, and it's going to increase. Only about 5 percent of tourists go to a place because it's environmentally friendly, but there will come a time where there is no more space. Some resort areas are damaging the very places that people are coming to visit.

The world could be such a better place. If we can help protect nature and live with environmental materials, this is what good living is.

**Trish Riley** is an award-winning investigative reporter, environmental journalist, and travel author who looks forward to exploring ecolodges near and far.

Where will Three Perfect Days take you next? **Sign up** for our newsletter and be the first to know.



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