

using {GREEN} in design

Sustainable solutions for spas are more than just about how it looks

Sustainability is a bandwagon that seemingly everyone wants to be on. Yet by its very definition, sustainability is like an onion – it is a complex entity with interconnected layers that make up the whole. As tourism becomes more accessible, an emerging segment of the population is demanding intelligent, well-designed facilities that not only have minimal impact upon the environment, but also give back to the communities where they are situated. Green design is about much more than using bamboo flooring or dual flush toilets; it is a way of designing that ensures what is given back is more than what is taken. Designers and developers may be tasked with implementing socially responsible design, but the drive must come from consumers who want to make a difference.

writer **Rebecca Lo**

Ecotourism is currently the fastest growing sector of the tourism business, with ecolodges providing the comfort and luxury of traditional resorts with the added dimension of sustainability. While traditional tourism means that 80 percent of its profit goes back to the hotel's headquarters, the opposite is true of ecotourism: 80 percent of the profit stays in the facility's host country. "We help protect mountain gorillas in Africa, tigers in India and giant pandas in China," says Hitesh Mehta of Fort Lauderdale-based HM Design. "Ecotourism and ecolodges are investments in alternative energy. The gains are all long term ones."

Mehta is a self-proclaimed ecowarrior, who happens to be a landscape architect by profession. Along with master planning and overseeing some of the most spectacular ecolodges across the globe, he is a passionate writer, editor and speaker on sustainable design. He feels that ecolodge development in Asia faces a number of challenges. "There is a lack of environmental awareness," Mehta says. "The culture of development in Asia means that the project needs to be done tomorrow – long term planning is difficult. There also lacks a history of community involvement." In particular, he believes that sustainable spas face unique challenges in Asia. "Balinese spa practises have a foothold

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in Asia and everyone wants to use them," he notes. "There is not much creativity in using local materials except for the Ayurvedic treatments. And some treatments like the Aquatonic seawater pool at The Ritz-Carlton in Bali uses an incredible amount of energy."

"It is important to be open minded and willing to explore," says J. Lee Rofkind, a Hong Kong-based Chicago architect who specialises in hospitality interiors. Her company Buz Design worked with Mehta on Crosswaters Ecolodge in the Kankun Mountain Reserve 90 minutes northeast of Guangzhou. Phase two, which includes a wellness centre and bamboo villages, is slated to open at the end of 2008. "We did not cut down any trees for Crosswaters, and took into account natural resources." She is currently designing a Hainan spa for Starwood that will include extensive use of coconut, in plentiful supply on the island. "It will be used in the treatments and in meals," Rofkind states. "We based our design concept on the coconut."

"There are fewer 'green' materials to choose from – we can't use bamboo flooring all the time because they all look the same," notes Ariane Steinbeck, managing director at Gettys' Hong Kong office. The Cornell-trained hospitality expert is a founding partner with Gettys and a firm believer in "guerilla green" tactics. "It means 'under the radar' green," explains Steinbeck. "Such as specifying local

materials, or non-toxic chemicals, without our clients necessarily asking for them. We want to have a positive impact on the environment, and as long as what we are using isn't three times more expensive – green is very much bottom line-driven. But even small things make a big difference."

Along with firms such as landscape architect EDAA and hospitality architect WATG, Gettys conducted the first Hotel of Tomorrow session on green design in June 2007. The think tank came up with a number of solutions to address sustainability issues by asking themselves: "what is truly innovative for the hotel industry," recalls Steinbeck. "We need to get real data on how a hotel impacts upon its destination. What is it doing to the surrounding villages that will make a true difference?" She thinks that the only way to speed up sustainable design being a given rather than an option is if the consuming public demands it. "People need to adopt it on a larger scale."

THIS PAGE: Crosswater sketch of the honeymoon suite by J. Lee Rofkind, Niihivatu spa detail.

OPENING PAGE: Crosswater River Villas.

for more information:

Buz Design www.buzdesign.biz

Gettys www.gettys.com

HM Design www.hmdesign.com/index.htm



what is an ecolodge?

According to Hitesh Mehta, the contemporary definition of an ecolodge is a 5 to 75-room, low-impact, nature based, financially sustainable accommodation facility that helps protect sensitive neighbouring areas; involves and helps benefit local communities, offers tourists an interpretative and interactive participatory experience; provides a spiritual communion with nature and culture; and is planned, designed, constructed and operated in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner."

It must satisfy five of the following 10 criteria, with three embodying the three main principles of ecotourism: protection of nature, benefits to local people and availability of interpretative programmes:

1. Help in the conservation of the surrounding flora and fauna.
2. Have minimal impact on the natural surroundings during construction.
3. Fit into its specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and colour, as well as the use of vernacular architecture.
4. Use alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduce water consumption.
5. Provide for careful handling and disposal of solid waste and sewage.
6. Meet its energy needs through passive design and renewable energy sources.
7. Use traditional building technology and materials wherever possible and combine these with their modern counterparts for greater sustainability.
8. Endeavour to work together with the local community.
9. Offer interpretive programmes to educate both its employees and tourists about the surrounding natural and cultural environments.
10. Contribute to sustainable local development through education programmes and research. 