

Lodged in the wilderness

In these ecologically conscious times it is fashionable for properties to play up their eco credentials. But as **Justin Wastnage** reports, there are some tell tale signs that separate the real eco lodges from the pretenders

Geoff Murray / Tourism Tasmania

In the middle of the Tasmanian wilderness, 13km from the nearest sealed road and well out of mobile phone range, stands a power station. This is not some controversial ecological disaster, but rather a small scale scheme that has been heralded as a pioneer in green circles.

The power station is a basic water turbine harnessing the abundant rain waters in north western Tasmania. The generator powers the Lemon Thyme Lodge in Moina, close to the Cradle Mountain National Park. The site, which includes the largest log cabin in the southern hemisphere, is too far away from civilisation to have mains electricity, but rather than powering the site with a diesel

generator, environmentalist Darryl Stafford instead set about the arduous task of building the turbine high up in the temperate rainforest when he started building the wilderness lodge in the 1990s.

In recent years there has been a rise in properties claiming the eco-lodge name. Many were previously wilderness retreats and built with sound ecological foundations, others are resorts masquerading. As the Lemon Thyme example illustrates, being a true eco lodge involves much more than merely being located in a pretty, rural location and nailing a few bits of timber to the buildings. How can travel agents pick the real deal from the charlatans for their demanding clients?

US agents already know the lucrative appeal of eco lodges. Richard Ryel, president of the US-based Ecotourism Society says typical guests are “higher-than-average income professionals and retirees with an appreciation for nature”. In her epochal book on ecotourism in the Daintree region of Queensland, Sue Beeton said average room rates were almost double comparable properties in urban areas, and even allowing for higher construction costs due to ecological safeguards, yields were still “considerably higher” than elsewhere. Moreover, their location often makes them inaccessible, raising sales opportunities for commissionable transfers rather than self-drive.

THREE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES OF ECO-LODGE DESIGN

1. Some portion of any money made by the hotel from tourism must go toward protecting the local environment
2. The establishment must be doing something beyond employment to benefit the local population
3. The lodge must provide tourists with a rich, interpretive experience that introduces them to local culture and ecology

Costa Rica, a small but prosperous country in central America has been the US eco tourism destination of choice for over a decade and led the way in eco lodge design, said Michael Kaye, chief executive of Costa Rica Expeditions. He says many developers misunderstood the clientele and built upscale luxury resorts in the middle of pristine rainforest. "Eco tourists want the lodge to reflect the place," he said. He points to a hotelier who "stuffed a lodge full of European antiques" and is struggling as a result.

This does not mean that luxury is completely eschewed. "Guests want the hotels to be luxurious in a way that fits with nature and the setting, but never decadent. Make the rooms very comfortable. Make the gardens luxurious," Kaye said.

He added that one agent gripe about short stays at lodges is being addressed. "Guests want things to do, both on and off property. One of the most important factors in profitability is the ability to increase length of stay by providing things to do." Wildlife viewing is obvious, he said, but in itself is not enough.

A useful guideline for agents comparing lodges for their clients is whether it was built in accordance with international norms. Hitesh Mehta, former Kenyan national cricketer and now landscape architect with the US firm Edward D Stone & Associates, is considered the world's leading expert on eco lodge design. He wrote much of the International Ecology Guidelines, the bible for developers of new resorts. He will speak at

Ecotourism Australia's 17th annual Global Eco Asia-Pacific conference taking place at the Alice Springs Convention Centre in the Northern Territory in December.

According to the guidelines, an ecolodge should be landscaped to have minimal visual impact on its natural surroundings. To do this, water acquisition as well as disposal of waste and sewage needs to be done in better ways than at standard resorts. The lodge should also exclusively use renewable energy sources, the Ecotourism Society says.

Finally, the lodge is not just a building project; the lodge must involve local communities in its development, providing economic and educational benefits. "In other words, an eco lodge refers to small-scale tourism development that through planning minimises impacts to the environment and maximises benefits to local communities and conservation," The Nature Conservancy, a US think tank, sums up.

Justin Henderson, photographer and writer of the first coffee table book on eco lodges, *Jungle Luxe*, sums up many environmentalists' fears. "Resort tourists too often see what cannot naturally occur, an idyllic, insulated retreat with all the amenities of a Beverly Hills hotel. It is for these deep pockets that the resorts are built – trees felled, swamps drained, rivers dammed, and villages shoved aside to preserve the natural feel of this contrived paradise." It is all too easy to be in a fool's paradise rather than a true paradise. ■



Tourism Queensland

Left: Lemon Thyme Lodge is an eco friendly property in Tasmania
Above: The Daintree was a pioneering Australian region for eco lodges

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