

ECOTOURISM AND AUTHENTIC ECOLODGES

Reconciling the man-made and natural environments
and getting the best of both worlds

Guests of the Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica get to live in the middle of the last remaining lowland tropical rainforest of Central America (Image courtesy of Lapa Rios Ecolodge)



Mehta argues that sense of place and sacredness are important in ecologies so he encourages a metaphysical approach in design. *Feng shui*, literally “wind” and “water,” is an example of this approach. It seeks to harmonize nature with the built environment. The Crosswaters Ecologue, the first ecotourism destination in China, follows *feng shui* in its site plan and building design.

During a holiday in India, architect Emmanuel Miñana chanced upon a limited slot in a tribal mountain cottage within a spice village in Kerala. At 300-400 USD per room per night, the accommodation wasn't cheap yet at those prices, the cottages were surprisingly fully booked. Independent travelers like Miñana demand value for their money, preferring to stay in natural settings even if it means paying more. And they are not a minority. There is a growing number of educated and discerning clientele willing to spend top dollar in places that offer a more authentic and holistic commune with nature and culture. This is the concept of ecotourism.

Inset image from wikipedia.com

What is authentic ecotourism?

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing niche markets of tourism in the world. It accounts for half of all international tourist arrivals in 2011 and is expected to grow rapidly over the next two decades. As a “megadiversity” country, the Philippines has tremendous potential, ranking 25th worldwide in terms of plant specie abundance and fifth with regard to number of endemic animals. According to the government's recently completed National Ecotourism Strategy (NES) and Action Plan 2013-2022, the potential market for Philippine ecotourism ranges from 1.2 million to 14.2 million tourists.

Despite its growing popularity, ecotourism

SOME CURRENT FLAVORS OF TOURISM

Adventure Tourism includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion. (Adventure Travel Trade Association as cited by United Nations World Tourism Organization, Global Report on Adventure Tourism)

Sports Tourism includes travel away from one's primary residence to participate in a sport activity for recreation or competition, travel to observe sport at the grassroots or elite level, and travel to visit a sport attraction such as a sports hall of fame or water park (Gibson, Attle, and Yiannakis, 1997 as cited in *Sport and Adventure Tourism* by Simon Hudson)

VolunTourism is a seamlessly integrated combination of voluntary service to a destination along with the best, traditional elements of travel—arts, culture, geography, history and recreation—in that destination (www.responsibletravelreport.com)



remains one of the least understood concepts of tourism. It is defined by the International Ecotourism Society as responsible travel to areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. For better understanding, it might be useful to examine not only what ecotourism is, but also what it is not. According to Hitesh Mehta, a landscape architect recognized by National Geographic as one of five pioneers of sustainable tourism in the world, ecotourism is often confused with nature tourism. Nature tourism means all tourism dependent on natural resources. This rather simplistic definition is easily distorted to the detriment of nature itself.



According to Mehta, the Lapa Rios Ecolodge is one of the few in the world that met 10 out of 11 principles of authentic ecolodges. So far, no ecolodge has met all the criteria. The only principle that Lapa Rios wasn't able to achieve was the involvement of the local community in the initial planning stages. (Image courtesy of Lapa Rios Ecolodge) **Below:** Finca Exotica Ecolodge in Costa Rica features thatched cabins in a tropical garden. (Image courtesy of Finca Exotica Ecolodge)



Technically, riding a smoke-belching tourist bus to a natural park can be considered nature tourism. So can recreational hunting and fishing. Or driving motorbikes and airboats that disturb surrounding wildlife. All of which defeat the idea of ecological conservation.

Ecotourism, therefore, is non-consumptive and non-extractive. Furthermore, it should not cause behavioral impacts on or affect the emotional well-being of wildlife

and other non-human species in the area. There is a significant body of published literature confirming that animals suffer life-long psychological impacts from death of family members due to hunting.

What is an authentic ecolodge?

Ecotourism poses exciting prospects as well as challenges for the architecture industry as it calls for a specialized and inclusive approach in planning

“TOURISM IS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT ECOLOGY.” – HITESH MEHTA

WHAT IS AN AUTHENTIC ECOLOGDE?

The deceptive business practice of greenwashing—that is, portraying an organization’s corporate practices and products as eco-friendly without them actually benefitting the environment—is rampant in the tourism industry. In 1999, Hitesh Mehta wrote the following 10 principles that separate ecolodges from traditional hotels. An authentic ecolodge must:

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 color, as well as the use of vernacular architecture
4. Use alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduces water consumption
5. Provide for careful handling and disposal of solid waste
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. Endeavor to work together with the local community, and involve them in the initial planning stages
9. Offer interpretive programs to educate both its employees and tourists about the surrounding natural and cultural environments
10. Contribute to sustainable local development through education programs and research

In 2002, Mehta developed a definitive criteria system based on these principles. An authentic ecolodge must satisfy the three basic principles of nature protection, local community benefits, and offering of interpretive programs. In addition to the three, an ecolodge had to satisfy at least two more principles to deserve the name.



and design to provide guests with lodging facilities that integrate well with fragile ecosystems. This is precisely the concept of the ecolodge.

“The ecolodge is the heart of ecotourism,” says former tourism secretary Mina Gabor, one of the organizers of the recently concluded Ecolodge Planning Workshop and Design Charette with Mehta as the speaker. An ecolodge is a 5 to 75-room low-impact, nature-based, financially sustainable accommodation facility that helps protect sensitive neighboring areas; involves and helps benefit local communities; offers tourists an interpretative and participatory experience; provides a spiritual communion with nature and culture; and is planned, designed, constructed and operates in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner.

By this definition, there is clearly more to an ecolodge than just lodging.

Basically, part of the guests’ fees goes to the conservation fund and the improvement projects of the local community. At the grassroots level, ecolodges also provide local employment and deliver a competitive advantage for small enterprises wanting to venture into the tourism business.

Interpretative experience

But what really sets the ecolodge apart from traditional hotels, aside from the environmental and local community benefits, is the high level of interpretation it offers. Interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (Tilden, 1977). Interpretative experience is the main product of ecotourism and the ecolodge *enhances* this. Says Mehta: “Tourism is one of the best ways to educate the public

about ecology.” By providing physical spaces and activities that promote responsible tourism, ecolodges educate travelers, including the ecolodge staff themselves, on the relevance of environmental conservation in property development.

Participatory planning

However, ecotourism planning is a distinct specialty that usually falls outside the training of an architect. It requires a bottom-up approach where the involvement of allied professionals like landscape architects, community leaders, and other stakeholders from the earliest stages of the project development process is crucial. There is tremendous amount of knowledge that these people can bring to the table to help the architect understand the local landscape and culture. As Mehta reasons, “you cannot protect what you cannot understand.”

Take the Kapawi Ecolodge in Ecuador, for example. The developer partnered with the native Achuar tribe to build an ecolodge on the land owned by Achuar Indians.



Using peg construction methodology, not a single nail was used in building the Buddhist Temple-inspired main lodge of the Three Camel Lodge. Featuring traditional Mongolian *gers* or felt-covered tents, this ecolodge was named by National Geographic Traveler as one of the World’s Best Ecolodges in 2013. (Image courtesy of Nomadic Expeditions)

The tribe's knowledge of the site was instrumental in drafting the official maps used as the basis for the site plan. In 2011, the ecolodge was turned over to the Achuar people who are now operating the business on their own.

Setting before structure

An authentic ecolodge is more about the setting than it is about the structure itself. It derives its value from the biodiversity that thrives in the area that is not threatened by over-development and crowding. Maintaining such biodiversity also means integrating with the surrounding landscape and avoiding the introduction of exotic plant species which affects ecological balance. *(This issue is discussed in the article, Extinction Crisis, on pages 46-51).* This is why Mehta advocates that planning for ecolodges begin first and foremost with a metaphysical analysis of



the site. Where the concept of holism engages the five senses, metaphysical site analysis involves six—sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and *feeling*. This allows the designers a few days to “feel” the site and be “one” with the site before conducting the more objective process

Bound by DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, the Virunga Massif is home to half of the world's mountain gorilla population. It is a conflict area but the three countries pledged to work together to promote ecotourism as a means to lasting peace and stability in the area. The Sabyinyo Ecolodge is one of the ecolodges in the Virunga Massif that provides livelihood to local people. (Image courtesy of Hitesh Mehta)

AN AUTHENTIC ECOLODGE IS MORE ABOUT THE SETTING THAN IT IS ABOUT THE STRUCTURE ITSELF.

COMMUNICATION VS. INTERPRETATION

Dr. Roberto Cereno of the UP Los Baños College of Forestry & Natural Resources made a distinction between communication and interpretation. Communication simply means providing information, facts and figures, while interpretation means providing meanings. The Makiling Botanic Gardens at the northeastern slope of Mount Makiling, for example, offers both communication and interpretation. Informational boards are posted along the site's “ecotrail” providing data and facts about the animals and plants in the garden. This is communication. To help tourists understand the significance of conserving those rare and endemic flora and fauna, a group of “ecoguides” known as the Educators for Nature Tourism (ENTs) conduct tours of the area. This is interpretation.

of physical site analysis and data collection. On day three of the ecolodge planning workshop, Mehta had the participants experience the metaphysical exercise for themselves, bringing them to a garden property in the hills of Antipolo, for which they would be tasked to design an eco-friendly resort and event space. Everyone who went through the exercise said that it brought an added dimension to the design process that was to come. *(Excerpts from the participants' metaphysical site analyses on pages 40-44)*

Continuity of the vernacular

The architecture and construction of ecolodges uses locally sourced materials and labor, and adheres to the concept of continuity of the vernacular. This should not be construed as propagating replications. On the contrary, as seen in the examples presented by Mehta during the workshop, the International Ecotourism Society rejects designs that are homogenous, derivative and arbitrary.



This longitudinal section through the Kwanari Ecolodge site demonstrates the low-impact siting of the buildings which are all on stilts and accessed by boardwalks to ensure uninterrupted natural stormwater drainage. It also shows the strong natural connection between forest and sea. (Image courtesy of Hitesh Mehta)

SAMPLE SITE PLANS

The Kwanari Ecolodge Masterplan

Local consultants and the local community played an important role in the preparation of a sustainable master plan for the Kwanari Ecolodge. To ensure low-impact development, the architect and consultants agreed on a cluster-type plan with boardwalks. Individual villas are all oriented to maximize views and allow passive ventilation.



- 1 Arrival road
- 2 Guest parking
- 3 Main lodge building
- 4 Ocean villas
- 5 Forest villas
- 6 Treehouse
- 7 Wellness center
- 8 Recreation center & pool
- 9 Rock beach
- 10 Creek
- 11 Manager's house
- 12 Back of house
- 13 Organic garden



Eco-psychology Analysis: Planning for the Kwanari Ecolodge is based on the concepts of eco-psychology and deep ecology. An eco-psychologist was hired to conduct eco-psychology workshops to help the client and consultants become "one" with the site and understand the interdependence of humans and natural elements. "We want to connect people with all the things that they do that's affecting nature," says Mehta.

SAMPLE SITE PLANS

Echuya Boardwalk Experience

All tourists driving from Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, have to pass through the Echuya Forest Reserve to enter the district of Kisoro. The local community saw this as an ecotourism opportunity so they built boardwalks that traverse the Echuya swamp and bamboo forest, and offered guided walks as a means to earn money and promote environmental awareness.



Sabyinyo Ec lodge

is located at the base of Mount Sabyinyo, an extinct volcano in the Virunga mountains where tourists usually trek to see mountain gorillas. The lodge is operated by locals through a community trust. Proceeds go to the community's socio-economic and conservation initiatives.



- 1 Parking
- 2 Welcome gazebo
- 3 Reception and office
- 4 Nature activity center
- 5 Back-of-house
- 6 Dining and kitchen
- 7 Volcano viewing tower
- 8 Lounge and bar
- 9 Luxury villas
- 10 Tea pavilion
- 11 Organic vegetable garden
- 12 Wellness center
- 13 Massage and meditation pavilions
- 14 Waterfall
- 15 New eucalyptus stand
- 16 Existing farmland
- 17 Existing farmland stand

Since it was mentioned that the ecolodge is more about the site than the structure, then it just follows that the structure itself should be anchored on the local aesthetic language, blend with the physical and cultural context of the site, and contribute in developing a sense of place for the site.

Moreover, continuity of the vernacular goes beyond the skin. It encompasses the use of passive design strategies characteristic of vernacular architecture. That means using eco-friendly materials and sustainable construction methodologies to build spaces that are sensitive to climate, and comfortable even without mechanical ventilation. But more than that, ecolodges must also observe proper water and waste management as most of them are located away from sources of water or within delicate bodies of water.

Not just a building

By now it may be gleaned that an ecolodge is not just a building but also an economic model. It introduces a new and alternative

economy in natural areas to take the place of possible unsustainable enterprises like logging or mining. But could ecolodges generate revenue and add value to businesses? Yes, according to Mehta. The market for ecolodges caters primarily to college graduates between 35-54 years old (the age is dropping now), and willing to spend more than traditional tourists but at the same time are more demanding. And they comprise over 82% of the ecotourism demographics! Moreover, while the concept of ecolodges is geared towards the environment and community, these highly educated tourists enjoy the spillover effects of getting closer to the area's biodiversity, and interacting with local communities.

Though skeptics often argue that the initial investment in building ecolodges cost more than that of conventional hotels, recent studies show that if green building strategies are incorporated from concept to operation—as they should be—then an ecolodge would actually generate significant savings in

the long term due to efficient performance.

Come to think of it, traditional hotels are banking on the surrounding natural environment to attract guests and customers. However, through unsustainable practices, these establishments soon destroy the very environment that tourists—their clients—have travelled long distances to enjoy. The economic question, therefore, is not whether we can afford to do ecolodges but, rather, whether we can afford not to.

Ecolodge as a commitment

Quoting the *International Ecolodge Guidelines*, a book he co-authored and edited, Hitesh Mehta said, "I wish every single building was an ecolodge or was designed or planned like an ecolodge because it's such a holistic and win-win approach in design. You're thinking about nature, you're thinking about local people, and you're thinking about your clients—everything!"

The concept of the ecolodge is relatively new in the Philippines and much remains to be done to promote this ideology.

"We are not yet measuring our success milestones. We are still developing awareness," says Gabor. If that's the case, then the recent Ecolodge Planning Workshop and Design Charette is a major headway.

Asked about their takeaways, a group of participants eloquently said: "The ecolodge is a commitment, a decision, and a mindset for all." Statements like this all the more motivate Mehta to continue this advocacy despite the gargantuan tasks ahead of him. "I'm here on this planet. I want to be useful. I want to make a difference. I want to be the change that Gandhi said I want to see in the world." ■

The Rainforest Ecolodge is the first in Sri Lanka and fifth in the world to be awarded with LEED Platinum for Sustainable Tourism.



SITE EVALUATION AND SELECTION

1. Location and Accessibility

The site should be the compelling reason for the existence of the facility. However, proximity to major transport routes and access to utilities must also be considered.

2. Sacredness of the Place

Many tourism facilities lack a sense of place, adventure, and sacredness. The site must be explored for clues that reveal its spiritual quality, one that allows guests to be in "communion with nature."

3. Local Community and Resources

Careful analysis of local culture is important. Local people could be tapped to help in understanding the site. Later, they could also help during construction and actual operations.

4. Appropriate Technology and Availability of Environmentally Friendly Materials

The availability of locally available construction materials is important as importation of eco-friendly materials may be uneconomical.

5. Impacts of Development

Environmental and cultural impacts should be monitored during the construction and operation phases of development allowing proactive measures to be taken to protect the site from degradation.

Source: Ec lodge Design and Development Workshop, Montreal, by Hitesh Mehta

Right: While the exteriors of the EcoLofts in Endemico Hotel blend well with the hue of the landscape, the interiors are contemporary in style. It features a sleek black-and-white scheme, contrasting sharply with the weathered appearance of the exteriors. The design is inspired by an oyster shell—rough on the outside yet soft and shiny on the inside. (Image courtesy of Design Hotels)



The biggest myth about ecolodges is that it is often equated with sacrifice, so designing and operating in an ecological way is often seen as a trade-off. However, living in ecolodges does not always mean roughing it up. The Endemico Hotel in Baja California offers twenty luxury cabins with private terraces that offer stunning views of the Valle de Guadalupe. (Image courtesy of Design Hotels)

A photograph showing the exterior of the EcoLofts in Endemico Hotel. The structures are modern, dark-colored, and built on a rocky hillside. They have large windows and flat roofs. The surrounding landscape is rocky and arid, with some dry vegetation.

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