





Serve green

Recycling waste, tapping solar and wind power to become energy-efficient, offering linen reuse programmes, and more—hotels are leaving no stone unturned to make sure that they do not take their environment for granted

By: Nisha Verma

Eco-tourism came as a wave a few years ago and has today taken the entire travel industry by storm. Right from destinations to hotels, everyone is trying their best to integrate sustainable practices to be able to play their part in environment conservation. There is an awareness of the fact that with tourism on a rise, there is a greater consumption of natural resources, which in turn could be disastrous to the planet as a whole.

Green certificate

Right from planning a hotel to finally opening its doors to guests, there is a whole list of things that are being taken in account to ensure that a property is eco-friendly in every regard. In fact, hotels in India are looking towards adhering to the guidelines set by LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environment Design)— the internationally recognised third-party verification of green buildings awarded by the United States Green Building Council and the Indian Green Building Council (IGBC).

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In India ECOTEL® is a prestigious environmental certification designed by HVS' Sustainability Services specifically for the hospitality sector, which offers assistance in setting and achieving green targets for hospitality businesses and chains. The ECOTEL® Certification is based on five areas namely environment commitment, waste management, energy management, water management as well as employee education and community involvement.

It's all about experience

CGH Earth is the pioneer of eco-tourism in India. Today, the group has a number of properties across peninsular India and is managing at least a dozen properties, including the exotic Bangaram Island in Lakshwadeep. The man behind it all—Jose Dominic, MD, CGH Earth—shares how he made the group what it is today. A chartered accountant by qualification, Jose joined this family-owned hotel business, which had its first property, Casino Hotel in Wellington Island, Cochin.

“When we started working on Bangaram Island in Lakshadweep, we thought of keeping its natural beauty intact and started working on a model that focussed on providing an environment and service that was as local as possible. We used the local products right from the onset, like using coconut thatched roofs instead of those made with concrete. We recruited people from the island and even served neighbourhood cuisine instead of international food,” says Dominic.

However, he believes that real luxury is to enjoy a holiday in its true essence—acres of space, unspoilt nature and an experience of local culture. Dominic continues, “When the hotel opened in 1988, we quoted a price of US\$180, same as that offered by The Oberoi, Mumbai. Initially, it was difficult to explain to the travel agents, but when guests came to us after experiencing the property, they asked us to stay as we are even if we





decide to increase the price. This gave us confidence and hence shifted the entire paradigm. Today, the definition of luxury has changed. A holiday is not only a memorable experience but a transformative experience."

"In 1991 we opened the Spice Village in Kerala, where we followed the same rules of keeping everything natural," he said. The model found instant success and CGH Earth today has a tagline that reads 'experience hotels' and boasts around 14 properties in India. Dominic reveals why they changed the name Casino Group of Hotels (CGH) to CGH Earth. "We decided to use Earth for our three core values, which are 1) nature is sacred, 2) involving local community, 3) adopting local ethos. CGH, on the other hand, expands to Clean, Green and Healthy."

One would be surprised that none of the properties at CGH Earth have a television, and Dominic is proud of the fact. "It is our most commented on and complained about feature," he laughs. "However, it is essential to the model we work on, offering an experience that makes the simple things in life extraordinary," he said.

Leading the way

Inspired by the green philosophy, ITC hotels have been the torchbearer for ecotourism, truly abiding by their tagline that reads Responsible Luxury. In fact, ITC Hotels is the first hotel chain in the world with all its ten Luxury properties LEED® Platinum certified. "What sets ITC apart is its global acknowledgment as an exemplar in sustainable practices. It is the only company in the world of its size, to achieve the three major global environmental distinction of being carbon positive, water positive and solid recycling waste positive," says Niranjana Khatri, General Manager - Welcomenviron Initiatives, ITC Hotels.

While the decision to follow a green path is exemplary, to be marketing it as luxury is a different ballgame altogether. "The dynamic that combined luxury and sustainability demanded clear vision and resolve. It took serious deliberations and a determined undertaking to demonstrate that the union of luxury and sustainability tapped into the zeitgeist and in fact showed the way ahead for the hospitality industry as a whole," says Khatri.

Ec lodges

A new concept of sustainable tourism has taken shape in the form of ecolodges, not just in India but in other countries as well. Hitesh Mehta, President, HM Design, is one of the world's leading practitioners and researchers on ecotourism physical planning, landscape architectural and architectural aspects of ecolodges. He defines ecolodges as, "low-impact, nature-based accommodations of five to seventy-five 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."

In India Taj Safaris has made a name for itself as far as successful ecolodges are concerned. They provide guests with the ultimate interpretive wildlife experience, based on a proven sustainable ecotourism model.

How to go green?

It takes a lot to put the green ideology into practice and hotels are trying their best to take good care of the environment. Manju Sharma, Director, Jaypee Hotels, agrees, "We at Jaypee hotels believe in creating an environment friendly architectural marvel across all our properties, along with the sustained green initiatives carried on a regular basis by our group." She adds, "At Jaypee Hotels, employees planted saplings and took the responsibility to maintain the plants. The hotel will also be using green foliage, rather than using cut flowers to avoid wastage of water." Apart from this, Jaypee has also taken a number of other initiatives like installation of energy efficient lighting system, waste organic biofuel plant, phasing out of R-22 refrigerant with R-134a. The group has

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also invested in rain water harvesting system and have also taken initiatives for noise management.

ITC manifests responsible luxury in all its properties through many ways. 55 per cent of the total electrical energy demand in ITC is met through renewable sources i.e. wind and solar energy. "The energy we produce through our wind farms is sufficient to light up a 1400 km stretch of highway, for a year," claims Khatri.

Jose Dominic too propagates recycling waste. He says, "At CGH Earth all biodegradable waste is converted in fuel and fertiliser." In fact, the Christmas decorations at CGH Earth were done using recycled paper and waste material.

The Chalets, a Welcome Heritage Resort, located 22kms away from Shimla, has also taken green initiative seriously. Amish Sud, Director, Chalets, Naldehra, says that the entire resort is constructed on mountains without harming or cutting their original structure. "The resort has three green houses and approximately 300 varieties of plants and trees are grown through the winter months and even have plants ready for the summers," he said. Talking

of solar energy, he revealed, "The solar panels help us maintain the water temperature of the swimming pool at no extra cost." Sud further added, "Flooring of restaurant and some rooms has been done by the recycled scrap wood."

The property also has an ATP (affluent treatment plant) and a bio gas plant. ATP recycles waste water from the kitchen, washrooms and laundry. "The ATP regenerates 12000 to 14000 litres of water a day which we use for the gardens and lawn," said Sud.

The naturalist team at Pashan Garh, under Taj Safaris, has created a water recycling system to recycle the grey water from the staff village and further use it for the vegetable garden. Inspired by Ngorongoro Crater Lodge, Pashan Garh also has a garbage incinerator, which provides ash that is combined with the compost to produce organic fertilisers for the vegetable garden.

Another property by Taj Safaris, Banjaar Tola Kanha, in partnership with the Forest Department has undertaken a project aimed at providing training to local 'honey hunters' to educate them about eco-friendly ways to harvest honey.

ecolodge is designed with sustainable construction techniques, then nature-saving equipment would not even be necessary," he said.

In fact, at Banjaar Tola, the tented suites, which open onto private decks overlooking the river, are set on raised structures supported at only seven points on the ground, allowing natural growth and drainage under all of the buildings. Instead of electrical units, the tents are designed with double layers of canvas with insulation materials and air gaps to keep them cool. To warm the tents in winter, hot water destined for the bathrooms is piped under the insulated bamboo floor. Even the environmentally-friendly air conditioning system uses a reversible cycle to efficiently deliver both cooling and heating.



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Design is the key

Design is one of the most important parts of constructing an eco-lodge or a green property, but nature-saving equipment doesn't come cheap. However, it still could be profitable, claims Mehta. "The secret to saving money in ecolodges is through passive design and good design does not need to be expensive. If an





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The up side

"These initiatives were actually taken to become more cost effective in the long run. It has also helped us get in more people but mostly by references given by people who have already stayed at the hotel and seen and experienced the benefits of our green initiatives," said Sud. He also agrees that adopting such green practices results in saving power and money in most cases. "While one cannot clearly say how much percentage is saved in terms of total consumption, but it is a substantial amount. For example, the 30 solar panels heat 3000 litres of water a day at Chalets. It would take approx. 10 litres of diesel to heat 3000 litres of water to the required temperature," he added.

Jose Dominic also shares the same view. "A 60 room solar panel would cost around four crores, but once installed it generates its own power. Thus, it's only an initial investment. We don't spend money in buying luxury cars and Jacuzzis, but we invest in environment friendly

equipment, to offer the best value to the customers," he said.

Niranjan Khatri says that profit and environmental conservation can truly go hand in hand. "We have consciously moved from a single dimension of financial value creation to a triple bottomline philosophy of creating value that encompasses the economic, environmental and social dimension. With a vision to promote 'inclusive growth', we engage with local communities and develop skills, thereby creating sustainable livelihoods," he said.

Hotels are also ensuring that guests find their stay interesting as well as informative. "One of ecolodges' three main pillars is interpretation which is more than just education because it involves the guests into the activities. Many good ecolodges have a nature and conservation centre, which have both interpretive and educative activities. Examples of activities that are interesting as well as informative include— bird-watching, medicinal plant walks, local village tours, guided night forest walks etc.," adds Mehta.

The lodges at Taj Safaris constantly host lessons on conservation for the students from the neighbouring villages. The students are taken on an informative game drive with expert naturalists. Teaching the importance of environmental conservation to children is a first step to securing a healthier future.

It's not an easy road

"Initial setup cost, close monitoring and annual maintenance of these systems are the problems we face,"



says Amish Sud. At ITC, the biggest challenge for the team was to evaluate themselves for retrofitting existing hotels. "A mammoth undertaking, yet one accomplished in the relatively short span of twelve months," says Niranjan Khatri. However, Taj Safaris says, "The challenge lies in creating far more unique vacations, so that each guest leaves with an exclusive experience—and encourages those who've already stayed with us to visit us again."

While setting up equipment to save energy and natural resources is a costly affair, it is equally difficult to promote ecolodges and ecotourism. "Ecolodges should all set up their individual web sites where people from anywhere in the world can make their bookings directly. Ecolodges should also submit their entries for awards such as Tourism for



Tomorrow, Responsible Travel etc., as winning any one of these awards will help get the ecolodges free publicity," stresses Mehta.

India and future in eco tourism

"Ecotourism in India has been somewhat successful, more so in Kerala and Uttarkhand than in any other state. With the amount of tribal people and protected areas around the country, the potential for ecotourism is enormous," says a positive Hitesh Mehta. Jose Dominic too says that "No country in the world is as well endowed as India, thanks to its billion people and the variety it has on offer."

However, Niranjana Khatri says, "While the culture of India in

conservation is embedded, there seems to be a disconnect between what we believe and what we practice, a simple example are our neglected rivers." He insists that ITC is playing its role well. "It is of paramount importance that we work towards a very low resource footprint model, not brick and mortar in eco sensitive zones, and also ensure that carrying capacity is worked out and followed through on the ground. Bhutan is good example of this principle," said Khatri.

"The future bodes well," says Mehta. "Ecotourism is the most holistic of all the various types of tourism and India has many opportunities for ecotourism development," he claimed. **SWI**

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