

incentive travel

Go for the Green

How the “responsible” tourism movement is changing meetings and incentive travel

There's a wave growing in the travel industry...and it's green.

Undeniably, travel is big business. According to the International Ecotourism Society, if tourism were a country, it would have the second largest economy in the world, trailing only the United States, and with this huge economy comes huge global implications. Some of the solutions are obvious – fly less, convey information electronically, recycle on the road – but there's more to the responsible tourism movement than just reducing the environmental impact of your next business trip. Truly going green requires us to think about travel, both individual and corporate, in a whole new way.

“Travel gives us a unique chance to see the world from a different perspective,” says Lydia Dean of Travel with Conscience (www.travelwithconscience.com). “Travelers are sick of the same old thing, and there's a shift toward being more conscious, global citizens and to preserving the world instead of conquering it.”

While the phrase “ecotourism” has been around for more than a decade, Dean thinks the term no longer captures the breadth of the movement. “You can call it conscious travel, sustainable travel, responsible travel,” she says. “They all tap into a growing concern for the state of our world and its resources.”

In the past, responsible tourism has been geared more toward individuals, but Dean thinks that group travel, and specifically corporate travel, is the next logical step in the revolution. “Corporations are striving to be more socially conscious,” she says. “They're looking to get involved in the communities where they do business, and they're making sure that their corporate footprint is not only minimal, but positive and proactive. Part of that is booking travel with suppliers who are committed to these principles – supporting the local economy, conserving natural resources, choosing energy-efficient means of transportation. Companies like us, and thankfully we are growing in



number, will make it easy for corporations to do the right thing.”

While planners are becoming more aware of steps they can take to lessen the environmental impact of meetings, the second aspect of corporate travel is responsible incentive trips. Eco-sensitive properties used to be centered in certain parts of the world, such as Belize and Costa Rica, the two countries that basically started the responsible tourism movement as part of their efforts to preserve their extensive nat-

ural habitats. And there is still a preponderance of green properties in Central America, such as the Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica (www.laparios.com), which is tucked in the middle of a 1,000-acre rainforest and offers thatched bungalows perched 350 feet above the ocean. Lapa Rios was the winner of the Rainforest Alliance's 2007 Sustainable Standard-Setter award, but there are now similar properties all over the world.

Joy's Camp, in Kenya's Shaba National Reserve (www.chelipeacock.com), for

example, is built on the game-rich savannah where naturalist and *Born Free* author Joy Adamson made her home. Joy's Camp is a member of Ecotourism Kenya and offers luxurious tent suites in the middle of the African wilderness.

Safari-style tents are also the rage at Montana's Sun Ranch, where guests can play

Pacific, is built with recycled power poles and uses wind power.

One of the best examples of the new wave in ecotourism is the Clayoquot Wilderness Resort (www.wildresort.com) in British Columbia, which provides luxury, adventure, and some of the most breathtakingly beautiful wilderness fron-

turbines generate fuel-less electricity and hot water, toilets compost waste materials into organic matter, and all marine and land adventures are nonintrusive and conservancy-driven.

Whether in Kenya or Canada, what do all these properties have in common? They all use sustainable technologies, offer guests the chance to interact with both nature and locals, and are luxurious. Because for responsible tourism to be more than a passing fad, travel professionals realize they need to address the expectations of their most experienced and discriminating clients.

"Travelers may be sick of the same old thing," says Dean, "but that doesn't mean they don't still value comfort. Of course they want the five-star hotel, gourmet food,

"Many of the five-star hotels we deal with worldwide are models of good citizenship in both environmental and social efforts."

and to have all the details taken care of." Green travel may evoke images of roughing it, but the reality, Dean says, is that "the luxury market is completely stepping up to the plate and, in some instances, leading the way. Many of the five-star hotels we deal with worldwide are models of good citizenship in both environmental and social efforts."

The Leading Hotels of the World group, which features 440 deluxe properties around the globe, has just launched its Leading Green Initiative (www.lhwgreen.com), which highlights hotels that minimize energy consumption. While no one would confuse a stay at the Plaza Athenee in New York or the Metropole Monte Carlo with "roughing it," there are ways to make even the most glamorous big-city weekend environmentally responsible.

Let's say, for example, a top performer wins a weekend for two at the Plaza Athenee. The Leading Green Initiative Web page allows the traveler to estimate the trip's carbon footprint, i.e., the impact this trip will have on the environment in terms



Lapa Rios Ecolodge Hotel
eco-suite in Costa Rica

cowboy in style as part of the Sleeping with the Cattle program or, if the saddle sores are too much to bear, stay in the upscale Pappoose Creek Lodge (www.pappoosecreek.com).

The Posada de Mike Rapu (www.explora.com) on Easter Island is sparsely inhabited by people but rich in flora, fauna, and of course, the famed Easter Island statues. And the Manawa Ridge (www.manawaridge.co.nz) on the North Island of New Zealand, where guests ride horses along cliffs over the

tier left on the planet. The roomy guest tents are built on raised wooden platforms connected by cedar boardwalks. Adirondack-style beds are outfitted with down duvets, and the resort has a full spa. Outdoor activities include horseback riding, kayaking, canoeing, whale and bear watching, hiking, and fishing. But even more impressive than the perks is the resort's dedication to environmental causes. The five-star restaurant highlights food from the resort's organic gardens, gravity-fed

eco-friendly business travel

Think that bottle of water you bought before boarding the plane is too trivial to impact the environment? Think again. With nearly a billion people traveling on business and for pleasure each year, that adds up to a lot of plastic bottles. Furthermore, even environmentally sensitive travelers tend to let their eco-commitments slip when they're on the road. Here's how to make your next business trip a little greener.

- If you're the planner, consider setting up smaller, regional meetings so people don't have to travel as far to attend.
- Instead of flying people from all over the country to a conference center, consider bringing the experts and speakers to your home office.
- Look for "green" hotels that have been certified as environmentally friendly by an independent rating service.
- Use e-tickets and electronic itineraries in lieu of paper documentation.
- Instead of renting a car or taking a taxi upon arrival, consider public transportation. Or carpool with others also attending the meeting.
- If your hotel doesn't have motion sensors, be sure to cut off lights and adjust the AC/heating unit when you leave for the day.
- When you check out, return your plastic key card to the front desk.
- Recycle your newspaper.
- Since hotels often don't recycle garbage, get rid of excess packaging before you pack. (For example, take your toothpaste out of the box and your novel out of the bookstore bag.)
- Indicate to the maid that you wish to reuse linens and towels.

of greenhouse gases produced, measured in units of carbon dioxide. A flight to New York and a four-night hotel stay for two will generate approximately two tons of carbon dioxide and a total carbon offset cost of \$78. The Leading Hotels group makes a modest contribution to Sustainable Travel International to offset the environmental cost of the hotel stay and invites the traveler to make an additional contribution to offset the cost of the plane trip.

Are strategies like this more about offsetting guilt than carbon? The Leading Hotels of the World acknowledges that "offsetting energy isn't an excuse to pollute. It's a way to take responsibility for the pollution that can't be avoided."

The larger purpose behind most initiatives isn't just to address the issue at hand, but to make the traveling public more aware of the impact its decisions can have on the environment. If the travelers visiting New York in the example above decided not to fly, but rather traveled by train or drove the distance in a fuel-efficient car, it would cut the carbon cost of the trip by a whopping 90 percent.

Mammoth theme parks and resorts such as Walt Disney World in Orlando (www.disneymeetings.com) can also be

eco-sensitive. "We've been environmentally sound since Walt's days," says Kari Kron of Disney Worldwide Group and Convention Services, who points out that Disney, who was profoundly interested in animals, was concerned about the environmental impact of construction long before it was fashionable. All Walt Disney World hotels are certified green lodges by the state of Florida, and the resort donates the massive amounts of food left over from group events to Second Harvest. The Disney Institute has also begun tailoring its programs so that they can be brought to businesses, thus cutting down on the need for groups to travel to Orlando in order to participate. And Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park is a hub of conservation activity, providing education about animals and natural habitats and encouraging visitors to contribute to international conservation funds.

Golfing, another classic meeting and incentive activity, is also going green. The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses encourages courses to protect natural areas and wildlife habitats while minimizing the potentially harmful impact of golf operations. "Instead of telling people what to do, we work with them," says program director Joellen Zeh.

"The average golf course has 150 acres, and a good part of that is out-of-play areas which can be enhanced as a habitat. There are ways to conserve water and manage turf grass in an environmentally conscious manner." The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program has certified courses in all 50 states and 26 countries. To find a qualifying course, visit the Website at www.auduboninternational.org.

There's a final component to conscious tourism – not just leaving a smaller environmental footprint, but also doing active good in the world. "Group planners can further educate travelers by making sure their travel programs have cultural components," says Dean. "You can draw guests out of the tourist bubble by providing opportunities for exchange with local communities."

Dean says there are "endless options" for corporations that wish to actively contribute to a worthy cause, such as buying fleets of bicycles for children in rural areas to get to school, building clinics or libraries, or donating computers. Working together on raising the money for these projects is a great idea, but flying everyone out to view the results isn't necessary. Sending one or two people to represent the group is more responsible and could be the reward for a top performer.

"We called our group Travel with Conscience because people are naturally motivated by finding ways to help others," says Dean. "There is tremendous meaning in providing a top performer the opportunity to take a trip to Vietnam and hand-deliver a sampan boat as a donation to a family or village in the name of the corporate team. This top performer not only has a chance to see Vietnam in depth and stay in beautiful, authentic hotels, but he or she gets to carry the torch for the company in doing something good, which is more powerful than winning something that you keep for yourself. That isn't the sort of prize you put on your mantle, but the true value of a trip like this lasts much longer."

– KIM WRIGHT WILEY

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