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THE GREEN ISSUE

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Natural Selection

Environmental awareness fuels tourism's big green travel machine.

BY DEBRA BOKUR

Norway has become a model for environmental tourism, with a host of certification categories that exceed government regulations.

ANYONE WHO'S SEEN those astonishing photos of the floating garbage island of Thilafushi near Malé knows no matter where you travel, there's no escaping environmental issues. In fact, studies show the bulk of the trash that finds its way daily to this area of the sea is generated not by residents but by visitors to nearby resorts and parks.

The situation near Malé may be startling in its extreme, but it isn't unique. In response to the outcry for responsible tourism infrastructure, a multitude of hoteliers, airlines, cruise lines and

outfitters around the globe are making strides to address the consequences of travel's dark side with initiatives that lessen negative impacts on the planet and its waning resources.

THE INDUSTRY IS keen to be green. As the eco-travel market sector grows, a host of different definitions surface to describe what "green tourism" actually means. This can be a challenge for travelers trying to decipher claims before choosing where to invest their travel dollars.

"There are too many terms flying around — sustainable tourism, ecotourism, geotourism, green tourism, conservation tourism, etc.," says Ted Martens, vice president, marketing & sustainability, Natural Habitat Adventures. "While industry folks will debate the fine nuances between these terms until they are blue in the face, it is our perspective [at Natural Habitat Adventures] to get past the semantics and focus on the core intention of these terms: travel that has a positive impact on the people and destinations where it occurs."



Before certification became a popular delimiter for measuring sustainable practices, the country of Norway — even when layered with sparkling white snow — was a solid shade of green. A collection of six labels that exceed government demands takes in energy, waste production and management, use of chemicals, transportation and demands for subcontractors in order to determine the viability of sustainable practices. As a result, travelers can experience impressive environmental stewardship across the country in places including the UNESCO-protected Vega Islands south of the Arctic Circle, in the town of Geilo between Oslo and Bergen, in the mountainous area near the Setesdal Valley and in the historic wooden village of Røros — an entire town functioning as a living museum that bears the exalted Sustainable Destination certificate.

The environmental tourism movement has definitely grown in scope and sophistication. Back in 1997, the Costa Rica Tourism Board created a Certification for Sustainable Tourism program that incorporated customer service and community involvement with principles of waste management and interaction with the

environment. Today that's grown to include 358 businesses dedicated to promoting ecological and environmental awareness — an achievement recognized by the United Nations' World Tourism Organization as the model for sustainable tourism practices throughout Latin America.

Turning to Europe, the European Commissioner for the Environment named the city of Essen, Germany, the 2017 European Green Capital for its huge strides in recreating itself as a leader in sustainable practices. These include the creation of green and blue corridors, performance in climate change, waste management and energy performance — a triumph for what was once a center for coal mining and proof that entire urban centers can be reinvented as green destinations.

FLY THE EMERALD skies. Transportation remains one of the largest travel-related sectors affecting the environment. Again, a Norwegian company leads the way: Norwegian Airlines boasts one of the world's youngest and most fuel-efficient fleets and was named in 2015 by the International Council on Clean Transporta-

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:
Plastic waste dumping site at Thilafushi in the Maldives (far left); Røros, an old mining town in Norway, a certified Sustainable Destination (middle); and White Magic Waterfall in Costa Rica, a country recognized for sustainable tourism practices (right)

PHOTOS: © MALDIVES001 | DREAMSTIME.COM, © ED FRANCISSEN | DREAMSTIME.COM, © LINNETTE ENGLER | DREAMSTIME.COM

ENVIRONMENTAL EMPHASIS:

Finnair (top), Sunriver Resort golf course (middle), and The Allison Inn & Spa (bottom)

PHOTOS: © FINNAIR, © SUNRIVER RESORT, © ALLISON INN & SPA



tion as the Most Fuel Efficient Airline on Transatlantic Routes.

“Being a Scandinavian company, corporate social responsibility and environmental focus is already one of the key elements of our general approach to both business and customer focus,” explains Anders Lindström, director of communications USA, Norwegian Airlines. Lindström adds the company has seen a massive increase in environmentally conscious travelers who place increasing emphasis on prioritizing sustainability.

Recent innovations within the airline industry with regard to sustainable, environmentally responsible travel initiatives include the October 2016 approval by the 39th Assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, or ICAO, of a historic resolution on the implementation of a Global Market-Based Measure for international aviation in 2021.

“The ICAO resolution creates an offsetting system for international aviation to cap aviation emissions at 2020 levels,” explains Kati Ihamäki, director, corporate sustainability, Finnair. “The CORSIA (Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation) agreement complements the other emission reduction measures used in aviation. Biofuels is one of the most promising of the measures, and Finnair is also working for a Helsinki Green Hub initiative. Now, the green light is on the horizon — a diesel type of the fuel should be approved for aviation use in the first half of 2017.”

Finnair’s commitment to environmentally responsible practices also includes a renewed sustainability and strategy program focusing on a “Cleaner, Caring and Collaborative” future. In the “cleaner” category, this includes measures to reduce environmental impact such as noise and emissions, waste, de-icing fluids and packaging.

“Openness and respect for the environment and human rights are intrinsic to our Nordic mindset,” continues Ihamäki. “Looking at the world from our unique viewpoint, we see a need for change. There’s a need for a more caring approach toward our planet and its people.”

SLUMBER BENEATH a sustainably supported roof. Perception, at the very least, of a destination’s ecological practices influences countless would-be tourists every day. A growing number of properties have chosen to embrace the challenge of environmental impact rather than gloss over the issue or ignore it altogether, and it’s a definite sign of progress that there are far too many addresses to mention. Some of the brighter stars in environmentally progressive lodging include the Renaissance Montreal Downtown Hotel in Canada, Tierra Atacama in the northern Chilean desert and Sunriver Resort in Oregon, a property that includes four golf courses —





quite often an eco-contentious topic.

“At Sunriver, we’ve taken great measures to ensure our four golf courses were built and currently maintained with the highest care to sustainability practices,” says Tom O’Shea, managing director, Sunriver Resort. “For example, we use recycled water for the courses, organic chemicals for treatment of the grasses, and take great care to ensure the safety and sanctuary of local wildlife found in the area. With eco-friendly travel and tourism continuing to grow as trends in the travel and adventure industry, I believe we’ll continue to see golf courses around the world debunking the myth that golf courses are not eco-friendly and finding new ways to continue to make the sport ‘green.’”

Also located in Oregon, deep within the state’s wine country, **The Allison Inn & Spa** earned LEED Gold certification for landscape restoration with native plants, water and energy conservation, and the use of green building materials. In addition to providing wildlife habitat in restored woodland and a planted sedum roof that reduces solar heat buildup and stormwater runoff, the resort also offers alternative transportation options to both guests and employees.

An increasing number of green-themed experiences like those offered by Natural Habitat Adventures includes opportunities for travelers to get a little closer to the environment through an array of experiential journeys. At Redwoods Treewalk in New Zealand’s Redwood Forest in Rotorua, visitors are immersed in the forest environment along the world’s longest suspended walkway. In San Francisco visitors can explore the bay aboard the only hybrid passenger fleet in North America. Operated by Alcatraz Cruises, part of Hornblower Cruises & Events, the state-of-the-art hybrid fleet

is powered by sun, wind, grid electricity and an onboard battery bank and hydrogen fuel cell technology approved by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Green encounters even extend to dining. In Indianapolis, Farm 360 boasts a 61,000-square-foot hydroponic garden using LED lights to nurture 25 different greens and herbs, with crop expansion planned in the near future. The farm is developing plans to supply local schools, various corporate entities and local restaurants including Garden Table. Also in the city, a 5,000-square-foot rooftop garden called Sky Farm atop the Sidney & Lois Eskenazi Hospital produced more than 2,200 pounds of fresh produce in its first year of operation.

AS FOR THE FUTURE of green travel, Martens believes we’ll see more tourism companies place increasing emphasis on philanthropic efforts and expanding their contributions to environmental and community development initiatives in the places where they operate.

“Third-party certification would be a phenomenal tool for the travel industry if the industry could come to consensus on how to define ‘green’ and [agree] on a scheme that accurately assesses it,” Martens offers. “Unfortunately, we’ve seen failure after failure of green certification programs for travel. There are dozens of programs around the world, but very few here in North America. Until the industry can come up with a cohesive approach, there will never be enough recognition to create demand for it. And unfortunately, without that consumer demand, the industry will have a hard time rallying around a cohesive approach. It’s a bit of a chicken and egg problem.”

INTO THE WOODS:
Redwoods Treewalk,
New Zealand

PHOTOS: © BILL HEDGES