

The lapse of luxury

With luxury hotels booming around the world, **Matthew Brace** reviews what this rapidly growing sector of the Australian tourism industry is doing to reduce its appreciable environmental impact, and educate its guests.

Poolside at Voyages' eco-awarded five-star Lizard Island Resort. Voyages



International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM), the global exhibition that monitors and promotes the top end of the travel market, says the luxury sector is growing at 'more than 10 per cent per annum, more than double that of the mainstream travel sector'.

According to ILTM's Marketing Manager, Tim Latimer, '20 years ago booking a five-star hotel was the preserve of the few. Nowadays a culture of "treating" has evolved, meaning that even those without a high disposable income will save up to indulge themselves'.

'As for the very affluent – the sky is the limit – they are looking for more and more personalised exclusive experiences,' he said.

The result is a bewildering array of increasingly extravagant five-star hotels opening around the world, offering dazzling examples of decadence: private butlers, sports cars for hire, airport pick-ups in Rolls Royces and helicopters, private swimming pools on private islands, and cellars full of vintage wine and champagne in the middle of deserts or on remote tropical atolls.

But this acceleration in luxury, and consumption, has also coincided with the increase in our awareness of global warming and the urgent need to embrace all things environmentally sustainable. So what are luxury hotels and resorts doing to handle these two seemingly conflicting trends?

Nowhere near enough says Ecotourism Australia, a national organisation for the ecotourism industry that also covers luxury operations. Its Chairman, Alastair McCracken, who has more than 35 years of management experience in the luxury end of the market, told *Ecos*, 'I don't want people thinking luxury hotels are doing their bit to be sustainable because they are not.'

'There is still so much more that hotels, especially at the luxury end, can do. Luxury hotels are the great sinners when it comes to the environment.

'I know exactly how much they use in terms of resources. They are not mature about sustainability at all.

'At what point are people prepared to forego the luxury in hotels and move towards recognising that we can no longer live the way we have for the past half a century?' he said.

With a high daily turnover of guests paying for the highest standards, multiple choices and generous allocations in personalised services, room furnishings, laundry, food and appliance usage, luxury hotel operations use significant amounts of water and energy, and produce large amounts of waste.

Few hotels or resorts have comprehensively attended to their immediate environmental efficiency, and fewer still have extended that assessment

and commitment to their broader supply chains and life cycle partnerships.

Many research and sustainability groups believe that one of the fundamental reasons why the luxury hotel industry's approach to sustainability is not more mature is the lack of legislation. There are no laws to regulate sustainability within hotels, whether they are servicing leisure or business markets.

Even basic definitions of the key concepts have been hard to agree on, causing confusion in the industry. For example, 'ecotourism' and 'sustainable tourism' are often used as interchangeable terms. Although they have largely mutual objectives, they are not identical notions.

Ecotourism generally involves minimal-impact activity in ecologically sensitive areas, such as Tasmania's World Heritage Area, rather than downtown Sydney. But sustainable tourism is a wider concept that can be adopted industry wide, in remote conservation area luxury lodges as well as big urban five-star hotels. Ecotourism is essentially one example of how the much broader notion of sustainable tourism can be implemented.

The task for change-motivated groups, such as Green Globe,¹ the worldwide

¹ Update: Green Globe is soon to re-launch under the management of a new company called EC3 Global.

benchmarking and certification program for the travel and tourism industry, is to convince all luxury hotels and resorts that they should adopt sustainable practices, regardless of where they are located.

Without the enforcement offered by legislation, such promoters of sustainability can only rely on hotels and resorts signing up to voluntary schemes and their recommendations. This makes authenticating any green claims by operators very difficult because there is no independent auditor. Pretty much any tourism operation can call itself 'eco' or 'sustainable', with minimal commitment, and get away with 'greenwash'.

But things are changing.

A shift in thinking

Green Globe's Australian branch says it has noticed during the past year more and more big luxury hotels in Australia signing up to voluntary sustainability schemes designed to provide a framework and benchmarks for environmental and social performance.

Of central importance to these schemes is the element that monitors exactly what initiatives hotels are employing to become more sustainable. It must be able to astutely compare hotels' water recycling or waste minimisation schemes, for example, otherwise genuine moves towards sustainability have no measurable authenticity.

This is where the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre (STCRC) has played a vital role. Its researchers have devised software called Earthcheck,² which is being used by Green Globe as an independent environmental auditing tool.

The CRC's CEO, Professor Terry De Lacy, explained that Earthcheck 'consists of indicators that measure performance in energy use, water consumption, waste production, resource conservation and organisational commitment to the local community'.

'Results provide objective, quantitative feedback on activities. The system also delivers reports gauging baseline and best practice levels appropriate to the type, activity, market and location of an enterprise. Performance indicators are used as benchmark figures, which are compared to similar businesses to gauge sustainable environmental performance.

'The international business community's use of triple bottom line accounting

is driving the need for organisations to operate in a socially and environmentally sustainable way. To help meet that need, enterprises in over 50 countries are now using our internationally patented Earthcheck software,' he said.

Earthcheck is also being put to good use in the City of Melbourne, through a program called 'Savings in the City'³ designed specifically to help city hotels reduce energy, water and waste. The hospitality sector generates up to 18 per cent of all waste in the city, and hotels are the first sector targeted by the program.

Thirty hotels are participating, including the Grand Hotel by Sofitel, the Grand Hyatt and the Hilton on the Park. The City collects and submits the hotels' data online using the software. Earthcheck then reports on the performance of each hotel, comparing it to other hotels in the program.

Green Globe has also teamed up with the Australian Hotels Association (AHA), an industry body that represents five-star hotels as well as more modest properties, to implement an AHA environmental award for excellence, using the benchmarking process as the assessment criteria.

The AHA's Director for National Affairs, Bill Healey, said, 'When it comes to sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR), we are moving from a position where hotels are at a competitive advantage if they do this to a position where it is a competitive *disadvantage* if they don't.'

'Our challenge is to sell the commercial benefits to our members. Unless you can entrench CSR as being good for business as well as the environment it will only be a passing fad.



Luxury hotel rooms should be able to offer the same experience at greater environmental efficiency. Marius Hainal

'Through the Green Globe collaboration, hotels can assess their environmental position in a holistic way, see how they rate against the norm when measured against an independent process, work out how to reduce costs and get recognition for being responsible,' Mr Healey said.

Ecotourism Australia's Alastair McCracken believes Green Globe 'could well be the saviour for hotels becoming genuinely sustainable, as it is offering a chance for them to measure accurately and then publish exactly what their environmental footprint is, and what they are doing to be sustainable.'

'It's bringing some transparency to the issue, and allowing hotels to become places where people can learn about being sustainable. Tourism can be a great educator as well as actually making a difference by limiting energy use or water use, or waste to landfill.'



Voyages' Kings Canyon Resort runs partially on solar power and recycled groundwater. Voyages

2 www.earthcheck.org

3 www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=218&pg=2546

Setting the example



High-impact experience, low-impact footprint. Whitepod resort sets the standard for simple, sustainable, breath-taking luxury. Whitepod

Luxury hotels eager to make their operations more sustainable could look for guidance to Switzerland and the Great Ocean Road in Victoria where two examples of best practice offer ideas that can be adopted.

Half way up a Swiss mountain sits Whitepod resort,¹ a cluster of white geodesic canvas domes hardly visible against the snow. This eco-award-winning project is the brainchild of local business-woman Sofia de Meyer, who through sheer determination has delivered a very rare breed: a luxury resort designed entirely on sustainable principles.

No cement is used. Instead the pods' wooden platforms are pitched on the night of the first

autumn frosts. The weight of the first snowfall secures them.

The pods have no electricity or running water. Guests shower in the central chalet, and use logs to fuel a pot-bellied stove that heats the pod in minutes. The chalet has a sauna that de Meyer is hoping to have hooked up soon to a geothermal energy source directly underneath it.

Whitepod sources 95 per cent of its food locally (within a two-hour drive) and has a no-plastic policy, insisting all produce arrives in wooden crates – recycled if possible. Because Swiss farming strictly limits the use of pesticides, most of the food served is organic.

Guests keep their bed linen for the duration of their stay, and



The Great Ocean Ecolodge offers sustainable luxury – just about everything is taken care of: on-site rainwater, green power and the latest waste management principles. Cape Otway Centre

even their napkins too, which are colour coded so they don't use someone else's. This keeps laundry to a bare minimum.

There is a sure-fire way of limiting waste – everybody gets seconds, or thirds, at the communal supper each evening, and guests are encouraged to take all rubbish with them when they leave.

De Meyer believes the current ecotourism guidelines she received were 'a good starting point' but needed considerable development.

'The business world believes ecology equals failure and bad quality, and surely cannot be luxurious,' she told *Ecos*. 'I think we can turn this around. Whitepod proves it. You can sleep in a spacious and low-impact pod which is warm, comfortable and luxurious.'

Closer to home is the Great Ocean Ecolodge² at The Cape Otway Centre for Conservation Ecology, near Apollo Bay in Victoria.

The property uses solar energy and rainwater, serves locally grown organic food and leaves virtually no footprint on the earth. As a result it was benchmarked by Green Globe and certified by Ecotourism Australia as an Advanced Ecotourism product.

Natural resource management

specialist, Shayne Neal, and his wife, zoologist Lizzie Corke, the 2005 Prime Minister's Environmentalist of the Year award winner, created the Ecolodge.

'We wanted to conserve the natural environment for the indigenous flora and fauna, and to share this with people so they can gain understanding and spread awareness, so the ecological systems remain protected forever, and so public admiration for them will never be lost,' Lizzie Corke told *Ecos*.

The passive solar buildings are post, beam and mud-brick structures; water use is, amazingly, all from rainwater; all waste is treated on site; and power comes from a purpose-designed remote area solar power system funded through partnerships with BP Solar, Plasmatronics and Power Solutions Australia.

The Cape Otway Centre is also a wildlife shelter, operating a 24-hour service to injured and orphaned native animals.

And the couple's close work with Parks Victoria to monitor biodiversity and environmental impacts has meant continuing increases in biodiversity on the property.

¹ www.whitepod.com
² www.greatoceanecolodge.com.au

Best practice

Two of the sustainable tourism front-runners among Australia's top-end hotel operators are Accor Hotels and Voyages Hotels & Resorts.

Accor is a French company with more than 4000 hotels in 90 countries and a significant presence in Australia. It owns a variety of brands including the luxury Sofitels.

Accor has re-written its Environmental Charter⁴ to include 60 environmentally sustainable actions that each of its hotels can and should take. The Charter, part of Accor's 'Earth Guest' program, has received considerable backing from the United Nations.

The Director of the UN Environment Program's Technology, Industry and Economics Division, Monique Barbut, said, 'The Accor Hotels Environment Charter gives you [Accor] the opportunity to show your guests in concrete terms that another way of consuming is possible, combining environmental demands and quality of service.'

The group is now implementing these actions throughout its hotels, including an Ozone Laundry System that reduces harmful emissions and reduces the very high water use associated with hotel linen servicing. According to Accor, the integrated system 'washes at a much lower water temperature (reducing fuel or gas by 85-95 per cent), while decreasing chemical residue in fabrics (by 50 per cent) and minimising water use.'

Voyages, meanwhile, runs some of Australia's most lavish properties in exotic but sensitive locations, including Cradle Mountain Lodge in Tasmania, and Lizard Island on the Great Barrier Reef, both of which are among a small handful of Australian luxury resorts to have been certified by Ecotourism Australia.

The resort company designed an Environmental Management Plan (EMP), in accordance with the ISO14000 standards for environmental management, to minimise environmental impacts and maximise performance in its locations.

'Voyages can develop corporate initiatives for cultural and environmental management, but we rely greatly on our staff to put these into practice on a daily basis,' Voyages' Environmental Manager Mark Erlingham said.

'As such our teams are educated in these issues and are provided with forums where



Hotel guests' children take in a marine survey talk on Heron Island. Voyages

they are encouraged to provide constant feedback which contributes to best practice techniques.'

Voyages signed a Greenhouse Challenge Agreement in early 2000 to reduce electricity consumption, LPG use and disposal to landfill through eliminating plastic bags and using biodegradable bin liners.

Twenty per cent of Voyages' Kings Canyon Resort, 200 km from Uluru, is solar-powered, and the facility also utilises local groundwater and mines wastewater from sewage for re-use as irrigation.

And at Heron Island Resort, one of the most popular guest activities is also playing a major role in monitoring the ecological state of the Great Barrier Reef. Guest divers and snorkellers swim out and record the colours and quality of the coral. This information is then used by CoralWatch (a joint STCRC and University of Queensland project) to compile a coral bleaching database to allow scientists to get a more accurate picture of the reef's condition.

Where next?

So is this recent shift in thinking towards sustainability the beginning of something more concrete?

Alastair McCracken believes hotels will only change if the consumer does.

'When hotels started putting their cards in bathrooms 10 years ago saying "if you want to save water please hang your towels up", guests were cynical and thought it was

merely a cost-cutting measure. Now they know sustainability is a crucial issue and they are aware,' he said.

'I'd like to think that luxury is soon going to mean not being ensconced in marble palaces and sleeping between 1000 thread-count cotton sheets, but staying close to nature, with space to move and breathe, and have peace and quiet, and partaking in a sustainable experience.'

Recent initiatives by 'first movers' in the hotel and resort sector in Australia bode well. While guests are becoming more aware of environmental imperatives, the onus is squarely on operators to take action. As the obvious financial benefits of better efficiency in water, energy, waste and other elements of hotel operations filter through, we can hopefully expect luxury stays to become more environmentally conscious.

● Matthew Brace is a freelance specialist on luxury travel. His latest book, *Hotel Heaven: Confessions of a Luxury Hotel Addict*, was recently published.

More information:

Ecotourism Australia: www.ecotourism.org.au

Green Globe: www.greenglobe.org

Sustainable Tourism CRC:

www.crctourism.com.au

Australian Hotels Association:

www.aha.org.au

⁴ www.accor.com/gb/groupe/dev_durable/engagement.asp