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IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

By Annabelle Strang



Ecotourism has become something of a buzzword within the tourism industry in recent years. Increased awareness of social and environmental issues has undoubtedly influenced tourist mentality, changing the way many tourists view and interact with an area. But how strictly is the classification policed and what industry-wide standards are in place?

One of the main topics at this year's International **Luxury** Travel Market (ILTM) Americas conference is: 'The three most misused words in travel - Ecotourism, Volunteerism & Sustainability'. Ecotourism is defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as a holistic approach to tourism, usually to a natural area and endeavours to conserve not only the environment, but also the well being of the local community.

Whilst this sounds idyllic, there are a few flaws in the path to responsible tourism. Many hotels and resorts claim to be eco-friendly, sustainable or environmentally friendly simply because they incorporate a few small gestures into their otherwise usual daily operations – the ubiquitous organic soaps and little cards that suggest guests re-use their towels. Other times, a hotel may be upfront with certain aspects of management that are eco-friendly, but neglect to declare the other less environmental aspects that effectively negate these eco initiatives. This is called "greenwashing" and is unfortunately rife amongst all the eco and enviro tags that proliferate in the industry. This begs the question: How can we be sure we're making a responsible choice when planning a holiday?

A number of organisations are dedicated to the certification and monitoring of businesses that endeavour to truly become an eco-business. According to TIES, there are as many as 400 certification programs in existence. The sheer number of certification schemes understandably leaves heads spinning amongst consumers and hotel groups alike.

But despite their multitude, there is not one universal standard for certification and accreditation. Sarah Dayboll, Director, Environmental Affairs at Fairmont Hotels & Resorts and speaker at ILTM Americas points out, "Each stakeholder will have a different perspective on the "right" certification or framework to enable ecotourism."

As a rule of thumb, certification programs generally require that environmentally friendly management processes are employed and addressed at all levels of operation, including but certainly not limited to, waste management and energy efficiency power sources. Furthermore, ecotourism aims to educate travellers about local traditions and customs, as well as enlightening them about local issues and even the political situation.

Where, then, does **luxury** travel and accommodation fit in to ecotourism? One would be forgiven for assuming that ecotourism is restricted to tents and sleeping bags and a modest meal cooked over a campfire. However, many **luxury** hotels and resorts are taking seriously their impact on the surrounding environment and are endeavouring to bring about change while delivering five-star accommodations and experiences in some of the most beautiful and pristine settings.

Pikaia Lodge located in the Galapagos Islands is opening in 2013 and promises to be a beacon in sustainable **luxury** travel. There's that word again – sustainable.

Pikaia Lodge has had the environment and sustainability at its core since its inception in 2009. It will be the only carbon neutral property in the Galapagos and one of the most advanced eco lodges in the world. Constructed using sustainable materials throughout and recyclable materials where possible, Pikaia Lodge has successfully melded together nature and **luxury** in its 12 rooms and two luxurious suites. All accommodations are fitted with air conditioning, LED televisions and iPod system (all of which are of the highest



eco-friendly rating), are bathed natural light and feature panoramic views of the Galapagos National Park and the Pacific Ocean. During the day, guests are invited to take part in a number of activities that showcase the spectacular surroundings including the unique wildlife species that inspired Charles Darwin, proving why the Galapagos Islands are frequently referred to as the Last Paradise on Earth.

Furthermore, Pikaia Lodge operates strictly under local law and in accordance with the highest specifications of the LEED Certification program (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a program from the US Green Building Council, and one of the more reputable certification schemes out there.

Pikaia Lodge is also involved with the local population, funding education programs, drawing upon local resources, hiring local staff where possible and inviting local students to participate in ecology or scientific presentations by the scientific resident or guides.

It is no secret that some of the most beautiful environments and ecosystem in the world are as fragile as they are fantastic. Unfortunately, millions of tourists traipsing through and staying in these areas each year are inevitably going to have a negative impact. If we are to continue to enjoy these areas, they must be dealt with responsibly and respectfully.

So, to the aspiring ecotourists out there, sustainable, environmentally friendly **luxury** travel is possible. However, instead of succumbing to the overuse of terms such as ecotourism, volunteerism and sustainability, seek out smarter alternatives. All that is required is a little investigation, awareness and a sense of responsibility and enthusiasm to see ecotourism not as a type (or trend) of tourism, but rather a method of travelling that aims to inspire cultural awareness and appreciation, and encourage environmental responsibility and preservation.

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