

Large and wasteful, hotels have a bad rep when it comes to environmental friendliness. But a new breed of smaller, independent properties could be game changers, writes **Adriaane Pielou**

Traditionally, hotels set standards. They were among the first buildings in the world to have hot running water, flushing lavatories, electric lights, central heating and, later, air conditioning. But standards change – and few hotels are at the forefront of showing how sustainability is the way forward.

It's been 30 years since the UN's first Earth Summit took place in Rio in 1992, which prompted the arrival of those little notices on hotel bedside tables explaining the water and energy-saving benefits of not having your sheets changed every day.

In 2011, Four Seasons tapped into the zeitgeist by marking Earth Day – and the brand's 50th anniversary – with its global sapling-planting Million Trees initiative. More recently, footage of turtles choked to death by plastic straws has shamed the world's largest hotel groups, Marriott and InterContinental, as well as Hyatt, Hilton, Accor and others, into using paper or bamboo straws instead. But most hotels have yet to fulfil their massive potential with regards to eco-friendly operations.

Hotels, especially members of large groups, are still wanton users of water, with up to 200 gallons utilised per occupied room per day, even in places where locals eke it out by the bucketful. They are equally profligate with energy – the highest users of energy of any commercial building, according to Washington DC's Urban Land Institute's *Sustainability in Hotels* report. They are serial wasters of food, with buffets and banquets the worst offenders and some kitchens routinely throwing out 40 or 50 per cent of what their chefs buy in, according to a World Wildlife study. And they are responsible for a good part of the unrecyclable plastic that each year packs landfills across the planet, never to decompose, a high proportion in the form of the miniature shampoos and conditioners we all used to like and now hate.

Sustainability is no longer just a trend. It's a necessity. A tenet of the post-Covid "new normal" is that wasteful old ways must stop. And with Google recently introducing a new eco-certification badge, placing it next to the names of hotels whose sustainability efforts have been certified by Green Key or EarthCheck – tourism's leading global scientific ►



An ocean pool overwater villa at Joali Being in the Maldives, which was built according to biophilic design principles

► benchmarking, certification and advisory groups – it’s clear that commercial suicide looms for hotels that don’t start getting up to speed.

Almost 75 per cent of travellers polled for a recent Booking.com survey agreed that everyone should begin to make sustainable travel choices to help conserve the planet for future generations. Hot on the heels of the vaguely eco baby boomers and eco-aware millennials, Greta Thunberg-inspired Gen Zers such as Force of Nature founder Clover Hogan, 22, are eco-hyper-militant. There’s a cohort that will be demanding that any hotel they check into is a paragon of eco-virtue.

Meanwhile, of the 5 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions that the travel industry as a whole produces, hotels are estimated to be responsible for 20 per cent. That’s mostly via heating, air conditioning and restaurant refrigeration. For a hotel to be sustainable in this day and age, as well as being designed with respect for the local environment, built with minimal damage to the area, and with a non-contaminating waste-management plan in place from the start, prudent energy and water use must be a priority.

As much as possible, energy supplies should be renewable, and hotels should operate efficient fresh and grey-water management systems. In addition, properties should support the local community by buying local produce and hiring local people. Furniture should be recycled rather than bought new. All packaging should be reusable, recyclable and biodegradable. Edible unused food should be donated; peelings and scraps composted; and a garden built to supply some kitchen produce and mitigate carbon dioxide emissions. LED lights should be installed and key cards used to automatically switch off lights when guests remove them to exit their room.

Obviously it’s easier to get three or 30 hotels to comply with such demands, rather than 300 or 30,000. Understandably, then, from Aman to Wilderness and Zetter, it’s the hoteliers behind small, independent hotel groups that have been embracing such policies.

Oliver Ripley is the tech and real estate entrepreneur driving the eco-oriented Habitas. After impressing friends with the pop-up shelters he built at Nevada’s Burning Man festival, Ripley became fascinated with the opportunities modular construction, or prefabrication, offered on a larger scale. He opened his first hotel in 2017, the beachside Habitas Tulum, in Mexico. A few months ago, he unveiled his latest, Habitas AlUla, in Saudi Arabia. In the vast emptiness of the north-west of the country, the 96-room Habitas AlUla is, with its yoga deck, swimming pool and wellness centre, almost as novel as its setting.

Unlike a typical hotel, which involves a disruptive, polluting, on-site construction period of four to five years, and “some of the least sustainable and most inefficient practices in the world”, a Habitas hotel can be built in six to nine months. After they are manufactured in a factory in Mexico – from naturally sourced, fully sustainable materials – rooms are flat-packed and delivered via a shipping container.

Assembly on-site then takes four months. “A much more efficient way of building,” Ripley says. “The hospitality industry is a dinosaur. A new approach was long overdue.”

Despite the problems presented by working on the Saudi project during the pandemic, including global supply challenges and the fact the team couldn’t visit the site for six months, thanks to this construction method, the project remained on track. “It was signed and opened in just a little over 12 months. We tapped into the creativity of local Saudi artisans to develop elements inside the hotel – furniture, art, food – to support the community and develop micro-economies, and sourced ingredients for the restaurant and wellness centre from local farmers.”

Luxury used to be “a big lobby and a marble bathroom”, Ripley says. “Now it’s disconnecting, reconnecting, being in nature. Sitting under the stars and having a conversation, connecting with people around amazing experiences. We are living in an age where guests prioritise experiences over material



Left, Bisate Lodge in Rwanda is operated by the conservation-focused Wilderness Safaris
Right, segregated rubbish disposal at Room2 Chiswick
Below, an outdoor bathtub and rainshower in one of Joali Being’s luxury villas



ROOMS AND JACKSON SONEVA FUSHI MALDIVES
ROOM2 CHISWICK KLEINIAN GREENWALD



Left, Room2 Chiswick is the world’s first ‘whole life net zero hotel’
Right, Habitas AlUla in Saudi Arabia
Below, Soneva Fushi Maldives set the standard for sustainability



possessions. We all need to do more to protect our planet, and guests now are choosing to stay in places where sustainability is not an afterthought.”

Elsewhere, the eco measures practised by environmental pioneer Sonu Shivdasani, founder of the Soneva and Six Senses brands, have been especially influential. The “barefoot luxury” ethos he established over 25 years ago at Soneva Fushi in the Maldives, with its palm-thatched roofs, bare sand floors, open-air bathrooms, Flintstone-type sustainable-wood furniture and careful waste-management, has evolved into the sustainable glamour of newer resorts across the tropics.

One such is the Maldives’s \$2,190-a-night Joali. A two-island resort, it opened in 2018, built on biophilic design principles – a system of integrating architecture with nature. The UAE’s Silvena Rowe is its wellness chef consultant, advising on the plant-based menus. Marine biologists have set up floating coral nurseries and a turtle rehab centre. Fish is sourced not from Miami wholesalers, as is typical, but local line fishermen, and there is a commitment to hiring local women.

In India, Veer Singh set a superlative standard in 2014 when he opened his all-organic retreat Vana, no doubt inspiring Pench Tree Lodge with its tree houses and underground wildlife hide. In Bali, the iconoclastic architect Rem Koolhaas and his design company OMO have garnered numerous fans for its Potato Head beach hotels, with furniture made from compressed beach litter, ceilings woven from recycled plastic waste, and zero-waste bamboo bathroom amenity kits.

In Cambodia, long-term advocate of sustainability, Bill Bensley, designed Shinta Mani Wild to minimally disturb its jungle setting. No trees were cut down to make space for the 15 tents. At the Song Saa island retreat, owners Rory and Melita Hunter have raised \$1.5 million for local causes and funded more than 40 US doctors for stays during which they ran pop-up medical clinics for local people.

Elsewhere, forward-thinkers-turned-hoteliers include the team behind the electricity-free Hideout on Koh Yao Noi in Thailand, with four open-air tree houses in the jungle, and, in Egypt, Mounir Neamatalla, who founded the also electricity-free, beeswax-candle and gas-lamp lit Adreere Amellal near Siwa. Here, guests bathe in a spring-fed pool, eat delectable meals sourced from the garden, and sleep in lodges made from kershaf, a traditional mix of clay, sand and salt.

Switzerland has the whizzes behind the geodesic domes of the Whitepod Eco-Luxury resort in the Swiss Alps, which even in the depths of winter require 30 per cent less energy to warm than conventional rooms, and in Basel, the Gaia. A member of Bio Hotels and United Against Waste, the Gaia runs on 100 per cent renewable energy (wind, solar and biomass), uses only organic products, has planted more than 2,000 trees and passes on its stale bread to elephants at the local zoo.

London, too, has its dynamos dedicated to sustainability. Those behind The Corner in Whitechapel claim it’s the greenest hotel in the capital. It opened last autumn in a derelict office block and has a “green leader” to drive eco initiatives. Guest desks are made of reclaimed wood. Air-injecting Hansgrohe Airdrop shower heads reduce water use by 25 per cent without affecting pressure. Filtered water is provided in sanitised, refilled glass bottles, every room has a plant and there are solar panels on the roof – soon to be joined by beehives. All that means the hotel uses 41 per cent less water and produces 67 per cent lower carbon dioxide emissions than a typical London hotel.

Excellent, one thinks, although breakfasts being “made from leftovers to minimise food waste” might give one pause. Already, however, they have competition, with the founders of the even more recently opened Room2 Chiswick, which calls itself the world’s “first whole life net zero hotel”, aiming to outdo all that and claim the “greenest” title.

Onwards and upwards. ■