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IS IT SUSTAINABLE?



When TripAdvisor started rating its hotels for their environmental credentials, it seemed clear the public's attitude to travelling 'green' was shifting. Are we getting to a tipping point where 'travel' and 'sustainable' are becoming concepts that naturally go hand in hand?

WORDS: Richard Hammond





The first hotel on Lake Garda to be awarded five stars was Lefay Resort, a spa retreat on the Riviera dei Limoni in Gargnano, one of the prettiest villages around Italy's largest lake. When I visited, the car park was full of gleaming sports cars. In the spa, visiting supermodels were being polished to perfection before soaking up the sun by the resort's infinity pool. And the upper-floor restaurant was filled with wealthy businessmen feasting on truffle tortellini. This might all sound about as green as an old grissini, yet the hotel is one of the most sustainable places to stay in the country.

TripAdvisor has awarded Lefay Resort a platinum award — the highest level in its GreenLeaders scheme, which aims to flag up environmentally friendly accommodation. The website gives over 40 examples of eco initiatives employed by the hotel, including the installation of an energy efficient, combined heat and power system, sensors that adjust the temperature when a guest room is empty, and significantly high proportions of biodegradable toiletries (90%), not forgetting drinks certified as organic or Fair Trade (over 50%).

Given the pressures facing the hospitality industry — not least escalating energy prices and the rising cost of food transportation — it's not surprising many hotels are turning to green practices to reduce their bills, conserve water and manage their waste.

Lefay is one of over 6,000 green hotels and B&Bs in Europe and the US that have been awarded one of those GreenLeaders badges. Yet, according to TripAdvisor, the GreenLeaders programme is based on feedback from users who said they placed an importance on the eco-friendly practices of the places they visit. So is TripAdvisor's move into the green arena a clear acceptance that customers are influenced by their holiday provider's green credentials?

In fact, there's nothing new about certifying green hotels. The TripAdvisor programme may be bringing green tourism businesses to a wider audience, but there are over 140 other environmental certification schemes worldwide, many of which have been assessing hotels on their environmental performance for many years. The most respected include BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Methodology) in the UK, the Green Key eco label in Europe, and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) in the US.

Two other reputable green certification schemes, possibly better known by UK travellers are the Green Tourism Business Scheme (UK), and Travelife (run by ABTA and supported by major European trade associations and tour operators such as Thomas Cook, TUI and Kuoni). These also consider the social and economic impacts tourism has, grading businesses not just on their environmental performance but on how ►

they support local livelihoods, including jobs, wages and living conditions.

This all suggests that where once green travel was considered a niche sector for the socks-and-sandals backpacker, it's now a regular component of mainstream travel. In Sweden, the national accommodation assessment programme — Swedish Welcome — includes sustainability in its core criteria. As well as the quality of the rooms, the food and the facilities, a hotel's grading depends on a range of environmental impacts, including whether the hotel reduces water consumption and has installed smart energy solutions.

The big change that appears to be taking place now is that where, historically, businesses have driven sustainable tourism programmes, it's now travellers who are questioning their holiday's green credentials. Traditionally, certification programmes (often subsidised by local councils or government grants) were used as a tool for businesses to improve their environmental efficiencies. Now they're as much a marketing tool for potential customers.

On the radar

TripAdvisor's GreenLeaders scheme has come along at the right time. According to Jonny Bealby, founder of the adventure travel company, Wild Frontiers, his clients — particularly the younger generation — do show an interest in his company's ethical credentials. Yet their interest is recession dependent.

"We noticed that during the mid-noughties, we would get a lot of questions about what our ethical stance was, how we set up our trips, and what our green credentials were, but with the recession it pretty much fell off the radar," he says. "Now it's starting to come back again."

And this growing interest won't necessarily translate into consumer pressure. Noel Josephides, ABTA's chairman, believes it's still the industry that has to take the lead on putting in place sustainable practices.

"If we have to wait for customers [to put pressure on businesses to operate in greener ways], it will be too late," he says.

The big players seem to agree on that. Jane Ashton, head of sustainable development at TUI Travel, says: "Our research shows that our customers want us to take care of sustainability issues for them. So our challenge is to influence destinations and hotels to supply an infrastructure that allows our customers to be more sustainable."

And this does seem to be happening. According to Josephides, ABTA is currently working with many of the large tour operators and holiday destinations to ensure sustainability is on the agenda of future tourism development. He says at the smaller end of the scale, many niche tour operators have been running businesses in a sustainable fashion for years. What's more, if you look at the companies that have won ethical travel awards over the last decade (Wilderness Scotland, Wild Frontiers ►



Dinner at Grootbos Boma

Five Sustainable Trips

Walk Ethiopia's Tigray mountains

Discover the rock-hewn churches, ancient obelisks, soaring peaks and deep gorges of northern Ethiopia, while staying in local 'hedamo' guesthouses. Immerse yourself in the culture of this ancient civilisation, while genuinely giving something back to the local community. villageways.com

Seek tigers in India's national parks

From the comfort of small private eco-lodges, you'll track tigers (along with leopard, sloth bear and varieties of birds) in three of central India's leading national parks: Satpura, Pench and Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. steppetravel.co.uk

Go slow Holiday Alentejo

The epitome of a slow travel experience. Take a spectacular walk along Portugal's Costa Vicentina — Europe's largest coastal natural park — eating freshly caught fish and drinking locally produced wine along the way, at a variety of locally run

accommodation, from the ranch-style Herdade do Touril to a small townhouse in Vila Nova de Milfontes. inntravel.co.uk

Get festive in Mongolia

Join a group tour that travels out of Ulaanbaatar to experience the rural version of the famous Naadam festival. You'll get there via national parks, vast landscapes and river valleys, calling in at the Mongol Els Sand Dunes, Kharkhorin (the ancient capital of Mongolia) and Erdene Zuu monastery, while discovering Mongolian nomadic culture with visits to local families. wildfrontierstravel.com

Scotland's coast and islands by bike

Spend six days cycling the easy-going roads of the Inner Hebridean islands of Islay, Jura and Arran. The tour is designed to start and finish at a mainline station (in this case Glasgow Central) to encourage low-carbon transport to and from this two-wheeled wilderness adventure. wildernessscotland.com



and Village Ways among them), their businesses have been resilient, and in many cases have flourished during this economically challenging period. This shows there's clearly a demand for the kinds of holidays they offer.

It's not just ethical businesses that are thriving: so, too, are many of the destinations they operate in, and the causes that they support. For example, a recent government census of India's tiger population reported that their numbers rose 30% between 2011 and 2014; Ranthambhore's tiger population has doubled since 2005. Julian Matthews, chairman of Travel Operators for Tigers, is cautious not to attribute this entirely to tourism, but says it's no coincidence that large tiger population increases have been seen in parks with correspondingly large visitor numbers.

"Nature tourism is providing much of the invaluable economic imperative, the majority of local jobs, and the millions of passionate advocates for the parks that still harbour the greatest densities of tigers in India", he says. "There's a rapidly expanding market for nature

travellers, each willing to pay to see their wild heritage. The market is growing at up to 25% per annum in parts of India, with over three million people a year partaking."

There are many other examples around the world of where tourism has helped contribute to population increases of endangered species, such as mountain gorillas in Rwanda and the orangutan in Borneo — and brought much needed income to local communities.

National Geographic recently launched a curated collection of 24 boutique hotels on six continents, all of which meet stringent criteria on sustainability (as well as guest experience and the quality of the accommodation). The portfolio includes Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in Peru, Grootbos Private Nature Reserve in South Africa and Kasbah du Toubkal in Morocco, properties that, 'incorporate innovative sustainability practices into their everyday operations, support natural and cultural heritage, and engage with the local community in tangible ways.'

Closer to home, Inntravel — the self-guided walking and cycling specialist operator in the UK and Western Europe — has rebranded itself as 'the Slow Holiday people'. Over the last 20 years, Inntravel has taken thousands of customers to locally owned hotels, inns and restaurants that have had a long-term beneficial effect on local economies. Yet it has rarely sold itself on sustainability, instead focusing on the 'lesser-taken path'. It defines 'slow holidays' as something that 'eases you into the rhythm and patterns of everyday life as you journey through wonderful landscapes, uncover hidden corners and share authentic encounters with local people'.

Inntravel's success is typical of many sustainable holiday companies whose customers book their trips for the experience. This may be a greener, responsible, ethically driven holiday but isn't necessarily sold as such. Customers simply assume that the operator will ensure the various elements of sustainability are engrained in their trip simply because it's integral to the experience.

Myles Farnbank, one of the head guides at Wilderness Scotland — awarded World's Leading Green Tour Operator, at the World Travel Awards for its low-impact adventure holidays — puts it simply. He attributes their success to "making green products seem normal rather than making normal products seem green."

Richard Hammond is the founder of Greentraveller Limited (@greentraveller) ■

More info

tripadvisor.co.uk/GreenLeaders
tourismconcern.org.uk/ethical-travel-guide
greentraveller.co.uk
nationalgeographiclodges.com
sustainabletravel.org

From top: Sustainable award-winner Kasbah du Toubkal, Morocco; view from the deluxe room at Kasbah du Toubkal