



Measuring energy usage, reducing carbon and cutting out food waste are just a few of the ways a hotel can address its sustainability. But the social, economic and cultural impact of a property are equally important in the transparency and accountability of its footprint.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIKOI ISLAND

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From renewable energy to backing communities: how hotels can make a difference

From renewable energy and conservation schemes to supporting communities and managing food waste, there are many ways a hotel can manage its footprint.

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There are usually two camps when it comes to the signs found in hotel bathrooms — the ones that ask you to reuse your towels to ‘help the environment’. The first — let’s call them the cynics — think it’s nothing more than a money-saving exercise and they’ll use as many towels as they want. Then there are the others — the optimists? — who think, ‘yeah, fair enough, I can use this more than once’.

Many of us are in the later camp, although we might question the hotel’s motives. Obviously, cutting back on laundry reduces a hotel’s impact on the environment and does indeed save money — but that’s not the issue. The issue is when hotels stop at that. Sign duly printed, virtue duly signalled, job done. But we, as consumers, know that doesn’t cut it anymore. Not when hotels contribute to 1% of global carbon emissions, according to a WTO report.

As more people become more clued up about what sustainability means, the demand for environmentally friendly accommodation is on the rise. A [global report by Booking.com in 2022](#) showed that 78% of respondents were planning to stay in a sustainable property this year. So far, so positive — but if only it were that simple. The same report said 31% of respondents didn’t even know that sustainable accommodation is an option, while 29% didn’t know how to find sustainable hotels.

So assuming you do know it's an option, how do you find it? How do you choose a hotel that's striving to protect its environment and benefit the local community? How do you spot the do-gooders from the greenwashers?

The best place to start is by asking questions and doing some digging. See if a hotel has a sustainability policy on its website, but check for specifics. Greenwashing is real, even if the EU recently introduced new measures to prevent companies from making unfounded claims. Some things to look out for include the mention of science-backed targets to reduce energy, carbon, water and waste, and details on how they involve and support the local community. If they're taking measurable action on these points, you're onto a winner. If they publish a thorough annual sustainability report, then so much the better.

Short on time? That's where certification comes in. This is where an independent body audits a property and gives it a stamp of approval which in turn lets travellers know it's genuinely sustainable — although even certification can be a form of greenwashing. "To be accountable and transparent, sustainability certification must be science-backed, with carbon measurements and reduction, and an independent expert audit," explains Alexa Poortier, the founder of the [It Must Be Now](#) alliance (NOW), a robust industry body that works with [EarthCheck](#) to help hotels increase their sustainability efforts and work towards becoming climate positive.

For Pride of Britain Hotels, working with NOW is a vital part of proving that its hotels really are striving to become more sustainable. “We need to ensure we can clearly evidence our own work,” explains Kalindi Juneja, CEO of the group. “We recognise that we could lose our credibility in the marketplace in the future if we fail to take action ourselves.” It’s a question of keeping up, in other words, with a changing industry where hotels are expected to do more.

A question of trust

The problem with certification, though, is which ones to trust? There are dozens, from EarthCheck and Green Globe to LEED and Green Key. How do we know that a particular green stamp isn’t greenwashing?

“The myriad of certifications makes it difficult for customers to know which ones to trust,” explains Andrew Dixon, the owner of Nikoi Island in Indonesia. While it’s a good rule of thumb that those approved by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) will be doing the right thing, most travellers won’t know — or have the time or inclination — to find out.

“I have mixed views about certification,” says Dixon. “I see it as being more important for helping improve operations from an internal perspective. When done well, [certification] enables hotels to identify weaknesses and improve efficiencies.” Nikoi has done just that, becoming one of just 10 Global Ecosphere Retreats in the world, the highest rating awarded by umbrella group The Long Run.

The Long Run itself, a 40-strong group of resorts and lodges, is as much about conservation as it is about offering incredible experiences in wild locations. Together, they protect 23 million acres of biodiversity and, through employment and community involvement, work to improve the lives of 750,000 people.

What these places all have in common is size. Small generally means more sustainable, for the simple reason that smaller hotels tend to have more power over their supply chains. “Staying in small, independent hotels goes hand in hand with travelling sustainably,” says Daniel Luddington, VP of development at [Small Luxury Hotels \(SLH\)](#).

In 2021, SLH launched the Considerate Collection, ‘making it easier for customers and the travel trade to make better-considered choices’. Now numbering 46, hotels are chosen for their strong alignment with the GSTC’s framework. One example is [Ballymaloe House Hotel](#) in Ireland, which runs an annual tree-planting plan and designates much of its 300 acres of land for rewilding. Another is zero-waste [Forestis](#), a stylish bolthole in the Dolomites running on 100% renewable energy and that has an on-site organic garden.



Left: Hotels adopting sustainable food principles, such as Ballymaloe House Hotel's farm, Cork, can keep their 'food miles' low with free-range animals, as well as producing their own fruit and vegetables, and sourcing produce from local suppliers.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BALLYMALOE HOUSE

Right: Forestis in Italy has an on-site organic garden as well as a zero-waste ethos. With its own natural spring, wood-heating and steam-cleaning systems, the hotel runs on 100% renewable energy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FORESTIS

While measuring energy usage and reducing carbon are obvious big ticks, another red flag is food waste, the second largest contributor to a trip's carbon footprint, after transport. If a hotel has huge, help-yourself buffets, for example, then you can be sure a big chunk of that food is ending up in the bin. Some hotels measure what guests send back on their plates to get to grips with their food waste. Family-owned Red Carnation Hotels, for

example, uses Winnow technology to identify its biggest culprits, such as vegetable trimmings — those little cherry tomatoes next to your scrambled eggs. Each property is working towards a set of targets; across 11 hotels, they've so far reduced food waste by 34.7 tons, a saving of 149.2 tons of CO₂, and a cost saving of \$91,621 (£76,500). Saving waste, much like saving energy or water, saves money.

What you eat is, of course, just as important as what you send back. CERVO Mountain Resort in Zermatt, for instance, has introduced a meat tax on its menus. Recognising that meat carries a higher carbon footprint than plant-based dishes, everything with meat on the menu has an additional 1 CHF (£0.90) added to it, which is then donated to climate projects at MyClimate.org.

It's worth noting while many of the large hotel brands are jumping on the sustainability bandwagon, big doesn't necessarily mean bad. "Every large hotel group is working hard on energy reduction," explains Xavier Font, professor of sustainability marketing at the University of Surrey.

Spain's largest hotel chain, Meliá Hotels, for example, has used scientific targets to save over \$1.7m (£1.4m) in energy, as well as reducing its drinking water consumption by nearly half a billion litres in the last decade. Marriott, the world's largest hotel company with more than 7,500 hotels, is working with EarthCheck to reduce its environmental impact while also investing in modular construction for its new-builds — which means a reduction in energy consumption and a big drop in construction waste. This might sound like a detail too far for your average traveller, but

when you consider construction contributes to 39% of global carbon emissions, it can't be dismissed. Hilton is dipping its toe, too: Brooklyn Motto Hotel is its first modular hotel, while hipster brand Habitas has been using modular construction since the get go.

At the very top of the scale, each property in the luxurious Six Senses brand monitors its environmental efforts, contributing to Cornell University's Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking Index. The most interesting project is Six Senses Svart, an architectural marvel in Norway's Holandsfjorden opening in 2024, and promising to be the first energy-positive hotel in the world.

To be fair, it seems simple enough to find eco hotels at the luxury end that can afford to invest in certification, for example. But what about budget and mid-range hotels? "The biggest change [in the hotel industry] has been that Booking.com, Google and Expedia have introduced programmes that are customer-facing," explains Font. "Before that, we had a handful of certification programmes that certified around 10,000 properties around the world. That number hadn't changed in 15 years." Using consistent, scientific data, these competitors are now working together under the non-profit Travalyst umbrella to bring sustainability information right under their customers' noses, with simple badges that highlight if a property is sustainable.

This has pushed up that number to 400,000, says Font, within a pool of 1.3 million properties featured on the websites. "This means there's now a critical mass of properties that are doing good stuff. Until now, they've been keeping quiet." By providing customers with transparent information

on booking sites they already know, Travalyst has, in effect, brought sustainability into the mainstream.

Community involvement might be harder to measure than carbon, water or food, but it's no less important. As Glenn Fogel, CEO of Booking.com, said in a recent report from the brand: "Protecting the natural environment isn't the whole story; we must also consider the social, economic and cultural impact." It's something we all want to do more of, too. And according to an American Express poll in 2020, 72% of travellers want to help boost tourism revenue in local economies.



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PHOTOGRAPH BY CERVO MOUNTAIN RESORT.

Asking questions

Community-based tourism is one way of ensuring your tourism dollars are going in the right direction, but so is asking questions and being alert to where you're staying. Does your hotel employ locally, and at all levels including management? Is food locally sourced, rather than flown in, thereby supporting local farmers? Does the gift shop showcase local artisans or stock cheap imports? These might seem like small matters, but together they can have a big impact.

So what's next in the world of sustainable hotels? Mostly, it's about transparency, accountability and language. As the term 'sustainable' becomes mainstream, there's a risk that it's also becoming ubiquitous. Newer terms, such as 'regenerative' or 'purposeful', are becoming more widespread, while 'greenhushing' — when businesses are reluctant to talk about their sustainable initiatives for fear of getting it wrong — is gaining traction.

The main thing, though, is that sustainability has to go together with a good customer experience, too. Thankfully, this is often the case. As Michael Lutzeyer, owner of [Grootbos Private Nature Reserve](#) in South Africa, explains: "We've always operated following the '4Cs': conservation, community, culture and commerce. It's a model that shows it's possible to honour our incredible nature and communities, and integrate this into the guest experience to make each stay unforgettable."

Xavier Font agrees. “Consumers want to be sustainable. But no one goes on holiday to feel worthy.” In other words, we travel to have a good time, not to change the world. But isn’t it important to know your travels could have a positive impact?

What makes an eco-hotel?

Energy

If the TV and AC are on full blast when you arrive, tell the front desk. And look out for initiatives like renewable energy usage and thermal heat pumps.

Water wastage

Ask if your accommodation reuses its grey water, and check to see if shower heads are low-flow. Turn down rooms with private plunge pools in dry climates.

Food waste

The second biggest contributor to a trip’s carbon footprint. Say no to wasteful buffets and ask what happens to leftovers.

Plastics

Single-use plastics might be being outlawed in many European countries, but they continue to appear in hotels. Bring along your own bathroom goodies. If a hotel boasts that it’s plastic-free, ask if that includes in the kitchen, too.

Think local

Does the hotel employ local staff, fund local philanthropic initiatives or focus on local procurement?