



Getting Greener

Thailand's fertile jungles, wildlife and rich culture make the ideal landscape for a sustainable vacation. From green hotels with zero-waste policies, to tribal homestays that empower local communities, the variety of experiences are wide and varied

Writer **Judy Chapman**

Thailand is now said to be the most visited country in Asia and among the top worldwide. But as with all popular destinations, the threat of overtourism is real.

Yet out of challenge, innovation thrives. Responsible and sustainable tourism is on the rise, allowing travellers to actually make a positive impact during their visit. Low impact, eco-friendly tourism has the ability to preserve, rather than destroy, a country's natural beauty.

In Thailand, agrotourism is becoming a trend, whereby activities such as rice farming, organic coffee tours, learning farming techniques and touring tribal villages are a part of resort life geared towards education and preservation.

Andrew Jacka, chairman of the Asia Pacific Spa & Wellness Coalition, explains that agrotourism has taken place since as early as 1974. Thanks to the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej,

its teachings of moderation and self-sufficiency continue to be practiced today. He says, "The Kingdom offers sustainable agriculture hospitality, sustainable fashion, farm-stay tourism and increased visibility of micro, small, medium and large-scale service providers."

Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, for example, bonds elephants and humans through educational tours and ethical walks and is led by a resident veterinarian. Meanwhile Anantara Mai Khao Phuket Villas with The Mai Khao Marine Turtle Foundation has guests rescuing turtle eggs from surrounding beaches. These are just two of 15 Anantara resorts in Thailand that support and operate organic farms, and empower local communities.

Since 2008, the Thai hotel chain has been audited annually by Green Growth 2050 with each property expected to

reach Gold level within 18 months of opening, says John Roberts, Anantara's group director of Sustainability & Conservation, adding that they take this further by working with all their suppliers to reduce packaging and maintain ethical production. He says, "Whatever guests donate to their Dollars for Deeds programmes, Anantara will match and this is distributed to elephant, turtle and other foundation charities."

Six Senses Resorts and Spas have long provided a template for creative experiences close to nature. Guests staying at Six Senses Samui can 'live like a local' with activities including market tours, preparing temple offerings and beach and temple cleaning. They also offer a four-night Farm Fun Getaway to experience what it's really like to live and work on a farm. Food is picked and weighed right on the soil, goats are groomed and their pens cleaned, animal feed is made and even the chicken hut

gets scrubbed. The reward? Temple tours and spa therapies. For something quieter, head to Six Senses Yao Noi to take in the mangrove forest which lies adjacent to the resort.

As our awareness of our fragile environment increases, so too does the number of green hotels who incorporate recycling, renewable energy, zero-waste policies and compost kitchens, low-plastic environments and sustainably sourced food into their operations.

Ticking these green boxes is the much-anticipated Six Senses Forestias Bangkok, an urban sanctuary slated to open in 2022. Totalling 199 acres, it will comprise a hotel, branded residences and a members club that will all adhere to strict standards in energy efficiency, water and waste management, social commitments and air quality.

“This innovative wellness-oriented community will offer sought-after access to green space within Bangkok. The entire development will be centered around the concept of a forest within the city,” explains Jeffery Smith, Six Senses’ vice president of sustainability. He adds that sustainability is prevalent throughout the project, including in signature refillable glass bottles, renewable energy, and a brick-and-mortar Earth Lab where guests can learn about the group’s green efforts.

Another impressive example further up north is the Keemala in Phuket. Their key eco-practices include grey water and waste management and zero-waste corporate meetings with no single-use plastic. They have also launched a Sustainability and Authenticity Guest Activities menu to promote a deeper sense of immersion. Guests can take garden cooking or join trips to local markets and fishing communities to source ‘seasonal’ fish that is line-caught within 20km of Phuket’s shoreline.

CAN GREEN TURN TO GOLD?

But will a hotel’s sustainability ethos drive consumer choice in the near future, similar to what we’ve seen with

ethical fashion brands and organic foods producers?

An annual report released in April by Booking.com indicates yes. More than three-quarters of those surveyed believe that travellers need to make sustainable choices to save the planet for future generations and the number of travellers seeking eco-friendly accommodation has grown from 62 per cent in 2016 to 73 per cent last year. Close to 70 per cent say they’d like the money they spend on travel to benefit the local community.

Smith of Six Senses says, “Successfully embedding sustainability into any business often requires strategic thinking versus short-term gains, but there is always a return on investment financially, ecologically and socially in the long term.”

“Investors and owners of the hotels we manage ask us about our sustainable operations—how we will save them money on energy, water and waste issues—while living up to their own business sustainability ethos,” says Anantara’s Roberts, who adds that corporate clients now ask that their company codes around sustainability be honoured during work retreats.

The pioneering stance taken by these hotels is supported by the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s Green Leaf Foundation which has conducted environmental assessments since 1988.

Asia Pacific Spa & Wellness Coalition’s Jacka adds that today the Green Leaf Foundation has more than 200 hotels accredited across the country to help operators improve the use of natural resources and increase their bottom line.

HOW GREEN CAN WE GO?

By September, Six Senses will go a step further by sourcing reef-safe sunscreens, and has hired a permaculturalist to support organic gardening and composting across its properties. “We also have an ambitious plan to be plastic-free by 2022,” says Smith.

Minor Hotels Group, meanwhile, announced a five-year plan that every nature-based resort must support at least one long-term, measurable conservation project. For example, protecting 90km of turtle-nesting beaches in Sri Lanka, or reef protection in their Maldivian resorts.

Roberts says, “The world is becoming ever more aware that we are, as a species, acting unsustainably and that as individuals, we must do something to change this.”

Ultimately, people have the power to create change. Choosing to stay at a resort that preserves wildlife, reduces pollution and use of plastic, and where local people thrive, is the responsible way forward. 🌿



ABOVE: Learn about farm life at Six Senses Samui. OPPOSITE PAGE: Anantara’s famous elephant walks redefine sustainable experiences