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Real estate in emerging markets

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SUSTAINABLE SPAS: MARKETING MYTH OR GREEN LIGHT?

Wellness equals wealth for spa operators but, in the quest for quality, can spas be eco-friendly too? **Charlotte Butterfield** investigates



The term 'eco-luxury' has a certain cachet, but is it simply the latest trend for high net worth individuals with a green conscience, or an ambitious oxymoron impossible to achieve? Just as the term 'luxury' has been weakened through over-use, many spa operators claim to deserve the coveted 'eco' label just by using refillable containers for massage oil.

The tourism sector is undoubtedly one of the principal industries that stimulates economic progress, but at what cost? The push to complete projects to the highest specification on time and on budget can drain natural resources, often causing irreversible damage to the environment. To build a sustainable property, the speed at which materials are used should equal the length of time it takes for the resources to be regenerated; the amount of waste products generated through construction and operation of the facility should be in line with the natural capacity of the surrounding ecosystems; and the development should ultimately have no negative impact on the health of the environment in which it operates.

In established markets the need for environmental sensitivity and a strong corporate social responsibility ethic is an accepted part of most business practices. In the Middle East and other emerging key markets, the awareness of eco concerns is only just becoming an issue for developers, architects and designers, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the hospitality industry.

"Today's consumers seek luxury holiday experiences to exercise their spending power as well as to reflect their personal values. Increasingly, consumers are attuned to environmental values and community responsibilities, thus sustainable and eco-friendly products and services attract informed consumers who seek luxurious yet sustainable experiences," says Ravi Chandran, managing director, spa operations, Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts.

"Spa indulgence and green values can go hand in hand with increased efforts," he adds. The successful launch of Banyan Tree Al Areen, Bahrain, and the planned urban retreat in Ras Al Khaimah as part of the Saraya Islands project, scheduled for comple-

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tion in late 2011, is proof that eco-luxury may well be the workable theme of the future. The architecture and interior design for the project's 'villas in the sky' concept will be undertaken by the in-house architectural division, Architrave Design and Planning, which is also responsible for a US\$110 million eco-spa resort for Angsana, covering 140,000 square metres in Abu Dhabi's Eastern Mangroves district.

"In conceptualising the design and architecture of our spas, we try to source locally for design materials, to reflect a sense of place and to allow our guests to connect with the local environment. Local design materials are also more appropriate for the local climatic conditions, thereby reducing the energy required for cooling," explains Chandran.

"With developments in emerging economies like India, China and Eastern Europe, we need to include greater environmental consideration during the planning stages," he says. For example, in Banyan Tree Ringha, China, the construction of the resort and spa incorporates both ecological and cultural conservation into the design through the restoration of authentic Tibetan farmhouses.

Likewise, CGH Earth is an independent hotel and spa chain, operating sustainable resorts across Kerala, whose dedication to using indigenous materials and building practices and promoting sustainable tourism is at the forefront of its business practice.

ECO RESPONSIBILITY

Using locally accessible materials is not only beneficial to the local economy, it also reduces a project's carbon footprint and fuel costs while reinforcing an 'eco' approach. Susan Harmsworth, founder and CEO of ESPA International explains: "It is becoming ever more important to create luxury whilst retaining eco-friendly ethics. ESPA strives at all times to source local and indigenous materials within its spa development, such as stone from a local quarry. If we are building a spa in Asia, we would never think about importing Italian marble, for instance."

Six Senses has gone a step further with its Six Senses Hideaway Hua Hin, in Thailand, which brings a new paradigm to holistic wellness in a natural environment. The spa is built entirely from a mixture of clay-like mud, which has excellent insulation properties, thus reducing the need for air-conditioning, or the importation and transportation of materials.

In the process of developing spa treatments and food menus, operators are also looking at following the theme through to indigenous ingredients and supporting local farming communities. "Local sourcing helps to minimise carbon emissions from the delivery and packaging processes, and ensures quality freshness with minimal energy consumed through refrigerating and preserving products," explains Chandran.

In addition to sourcing locally, Harmsworth makes a valid point about ensuring that construction techniques and management practices measure up to the same green scrutiny. "While we already proactively choose to use local materials, there is still a gap in ensuring that engineering is truly eco-friendly. Many spas are marketing themselves as eco-friendly destinations, which is sometimes dubious," she says.

Other areas where operators can go green is by implementing the waste minimisation approach (reduce, reuse, and recycle) and creating composting programs and installing in-house incinerators. By favouring renewable energy sources and eliminating carbon emitting activities, operators can reduce the impact on the environment. Nick Laidlaw, marketing communications manager, Six Senses Resorts & Spas explains: "Our 20/20 vision is not to become carbon neutral





or zero carbon, but to de-carbonise. This vision will be achieved by making all Six Senses-branded resorts carbon-positive based on renewable energy." Six Senses has a Carbon Offset Programme designed to offset the carbon emissions by replacing coal-fired power plants with Suzlon wind turbines in South India. During its 20-year lifespan, one Six Senses turbine generates approximately 80,000 megawatt hours of clean, renewable electricity, averting the production of 70,000 tons of carbon dioxide.

Ensuring that the resort only impacts its surroundings in a positive way, in line with true eco-spa positioning, community projects or conservation schemes are also an integral part of the overall planning process. Banyan Tree has launched Coral Regeneration and Turtle Conservation plans in The Maldives, in addition to Hawksbill Turtle Conservation schemes in The Seychelles. In 2001, it also established the Green Imperative Fund to expand and formalise environmental conservation and community development efforts. Guests make an optional US\$1 to US\$2 donation for each night they stay at the hotel, and Banyan Tree matches the guests' contributions to develop the fund.

WATER SAVING

The hospitality industry consumes a massive amount of water and depleted aquifers and pollution are making fresh water a rare commodity. In hot climates particularly, reducing water consumption is a key priority, and more operators are exploring the use of recycled and treated grey water. Banyan Tree has installed a biologic waste water treatment system at Banyan Tree Bintan to recycle waste water for irrigation purposes. Six Senses suggests operators install waste water treatment plants which utilise communities of micro-organisms known as biofilms. This natural bacteria culture breaks down the pollutants with the help of oxygen that is diffused inside the reactors. The water then passes through layers of sand and gravel – a natural filtering process which removes suspended particles – and can be used for irrigation.

Clodagh, CEO of Clodagh Design in New York, adds: "It is essential that what we take out of the environment goes back into it without pollution. The use of water in laundries is enormous; a huge amount of potions and lotions and oils are used in the treatments and we are starting to use grease traps to catch the pollutants before they leave the spas."

REGULATIONS

The inception of LEED certification in 1998 has given designers a formal set of guidelines to adhere to in the quest to design an eco building, as well as setting a benchmark for developers around the world. "Clients actually come to us with projects that they want certified LEED gold, silver or platinum, as they realise that this is a positive marketing message to their spa-goers. Intelligent clients realise that green is green – the colour of dollars. It is a marketing and branding must," Clodagh adds.

At the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 182 heads of state endorsed a global benchmarking, certification and improvement system for sustainable travel and tourism. Green Globe is based on Agenda 21 and the principles of Sustainable Development. It focuses on energy efficiency; conservation and management; management of freshwater resources; ecosystem conservation and management; management of social and cultural issues; land-use planning and management; air quality protection and noise control; waste water management; waste minimisation, reuse and recycling impact areas.

Developed with the assistance of Six Senses Resorts and Spas and the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre (STCRC), it is a starting point for the operators



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who are unsure of the best way to direct their efforts to reduce their operation's environmental impact.

Stewart Moore, CEO of EC3 Global, the management company of Green Globe, commends the spa industry for taking a leadership position on sustainability. "The push for this new sector came from the spa industry itself. They were the first to recognise that industries could no longer continue to be as resource consumptive as they had been in the past. Spa managers were keen to take responsibility for their own businesses."

POSITIVE ENERGY

To create a true eco-spa, everything from the land parcel selection to the oils used in the treatments needs to be carefully sourced and selected. For most architects and designers the primary stage is the determination of the 'emotional theming' of the spa space, through definition of the energy levels.

More and more designers are realising the importance of principles such as Feng Shui, chromatherapy, aromatherapy, sound light and biophilia, particularly when the spa's sole purpose is to aid relaxation and rejuvenation.

Andrea ter Mors is an architect who specialises in Vastu, the ancient Vedic science of layout and planning of buildings dating back 5,000 years. She explains: "Design is rational and emotional; Vastu aims to make sure the energy of a building is in harmony with both physical and metaphysical forces. It applies a philosophy of wellness and health to our environment." Mors elaborates that Vastu has various energy grids that cross the planet, and calculations are based on location, materi-

als, colours and the energy manifests itself in all these forms. These readings can be manipulated to achieve a particular emotional state. If a spa is built on an area of high energy, this would need to be diffused in order to achieve the sense of calm and rejuvenation the spa operator would be aiming for.

"Many planners and engineers don't realise the consequences of their designs," she adds.

Clodagh continues: "What is stopping more spa operators from asking designers to go down this route is a lack of information and fear of the upfront costs that some of this leadership might entail." Markus Stebich, director of Spas and Interiors, Jumeirah Group, agrees: "It is very short-sighted to think that going green is more expensive to implement. Operators and developers should never just think of the short-term outlay for the materials; they need to look at the costs involved over time. Producing less waste equals less money spent on disposing of it.

"Also, with the rising costs of energy and fuel, alternative energy solutions such as turbine and solar will work out much cheaper over a 10 to 20 year period in the life cycle of the spa. With an ambitious expansion plan that sees 60 hospitality projects open across the world by 2012, Jumeirah Group is in the process of developing a sustainability report and wants to be completely transparent on eco issues."

A new genre of clientele is emerging, one for whom the term 'eco-luxury' is nothing short of an absolute requirement in their spa experience. Laidlaw, from Six Senses agrees: "Eventually, the eco-friendly focus will become a qualifier, not a differentiator." ●