



Experiencing the Andaman's Green Escapes

By Barry Daniel

We are facing a time of environmental and economic crisis and it may not be overly dramatic to ask ourselves if tourism really has a future.

Baz Daniel investigates a range of initiatives being introduced by some of the Andaman region's most exclusive resorts to provide their guests with a unique lifestyle experience which is also environmentally friendly.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that a global crossroads has been reached for the future of tourism as we have known it. We are facing a global environmental and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions which is changing our interlinked world forever.

The airline and tourism industries are coming under enormous pressure to reduce the damaging environmental impact they have on our planet. Their very survival is a matter of debate and conjecture. Yet, some forward-thinking leaders in this industry are taking bold steps to show that indeed they can operate in a much more environmentally friendly way, while still providing superb standards and experiences that their guests have come to expect.

Around the Andaman there are a number of the leading high end resorts who are embracing environmental responsibility as a way of ensuring a sustainable future for their businesses, while enhancing their guests' experiences and their own bottom line. Their successful business models prove that implementing "best practice" environmental initiatives does not necessarily mean increased costs for the operator and their guests. In fact many of the resorts that are leading the way in eco-friendly tourism are finding that their bottom lines are actually enhanced by the initiatives they're taking.



The Six Senses Hideaway on Koh Yao Noi

Sonu and Eva Shivdasani the owners of the Evason, Six Senses, Hideaway and Soneva brands represent the leading edge of environmental innovation world wide. Since the launch of their iconic Soneva Fushi high end eco-friendly resort in the Maldives, they have pioneered a number of superb resorts that also feature state of the art environmental practices, two of them in the Andaman region.

Sonu states the company's vision as "creating innovative and enriching experiences in a sustainable environment" and it could be argued that this vision should be adopted by Thailand's tourism industry as a whole.

Koh Yao Noi, an hour east of Phuket by boat, is a mainly Muslim island of simple fishermen and rubber tapping folk. It is blessed with stunning rain forest, undulating terrain and dramatic seascapes, all commanding fabulous views of the limestone karst topography of Phang Nga Bay.

Around the Andaman there are a number of the leading high end resorts who are embracing environmental responsibility as a way of ensuring a sustainable future for their businesses, while enhancing their guests' experiences and their own bottom line.



The Six Senses Hideaway is set on 24 acres of hillside overlooking a beautiful bay on the southeast coast of the island. The pool villa accommodation has been built right into the verdant landscape with as little disruption as possible of the natural harmony of the location. Each villa is built with natural materials, with abundant wood, sago palm leaf thatched roofs, huge glass windows and a feeling of space and privacy, enhanced by the proximity of the rain forest within which each villa is cocooned.

The company's commitment to exacting eco-friendly management is found in all their business practices.



For example all soaps and detergents are bio-degradable and in refillable containers and all waste materials are separated and re-cycled wherever possible. As the island itself is designated as a Nation Park, many of these practices were mandated by law.

All falling rain is collected and added to re-cycled water used in the resort to produce “grey water” which can be used for watering the prodigious herb and vegetable gardens that provide much of the resort’s organic foods.

Despite its double monsoon rain patterns, the Andaman region suffers a water shortage and many resorts buy in water delivered by road tankers, often in the dead

of night, to meet their needs. This is of course costly for their bottom line and for the environment.

At Six Senses all “grey water” needs are covered by re-cycling and only primary shower and tap water, plus water for cooking, is drawn from the mains supply.

Water also plays a role in naturally cooling both the environment and the guests while they are staying at the resort. The pools around the reception area for example are in fact on the roof of an underground conference room, thereby helping to keep both guests and the room itself cool.

The Six Senses sister property in Phuket is the Evason on Chalong Bay in the island's southeast corner. Here they have taken environmental initiatives to the ultimate degree and estimate that their water re-cycling efforts saves up to \$350,000 US a year.

The Phuket Evason property is also the home to the company's "Environmental and Social Conscience" Arnfin Oines, a highly qualified executive who oversees the green practices of the group.

He points out that leaves are not swept up on their properties, but allowed to rot and provide natural organic fertiliser for the resort's vegetation. All organic waste materials are also "mulched" and used as fertiliser in the herb and vegetable gardens.

Tree branches and wood waste are chipped and then burned in a furnace to generate electricity to help run the Evason's air conditioning units. These are all "win-win" initiatives, helping the environment, while saving the company money.

Sonu and Eva believe that they have a role in spreading environmental awareness, as well as pampering their customers and so there is a "green book" placed in every room and

villa spelling out all the initiatives they are taking. On each bed a little teddy bear or elephant sits, which visitors can buy, the proceeds going entirely to support local social initiatives like the "Care for Children" programme which looks after orphans in the locality of the properties. Guests are encouraged to indulge in environmentally friendly soft adventure experiences like cycling to the Mangrove Rehabilitation Centre which Six Sense supports, or learning Thai cooking in the local village with the local fisher folk.

The group also donates 0.5% of total revenues to socially responsible activities and carbon offsetting projects such as tree planting and spreading green technology.

Sonu and Eva's vision of sustainability amongst luxury is being thoroughly implemented within their group and their company is seen as representing the "leading edge" of best environmental practice. They are using the Green Globe 21 benchmarking programme for all Six Senses properties and will continue to innovate better and more efficient environmentalism as time goes on.

This is truly a "win-win" situation for their customers and the environment.



The Trisara Resort and Spa

The opulent end of the green market is represented on Phuket's fashionable northwest coast by the Trisara Resort, where the management has worked tirelessly to bring both environmental and socially responsible initiatives to bear.

This ultra-luxurious resort and villa development is spread across a huge 150 rai tract of private land comprising two stunning headlands and a central bay and beach.

Anthony Lark, who is the CEO and one of the partners, points out that the exclusivity of the resort's location has enabled them to create a microcosm of socially and environmentally responsible practice, which is often ignored in much of Phuket's tourist sector.

Trisara is just twelve limo-purring minutes from the airport where up to a quarter of their guests arrive by private jet. As soon as you arrive at Trisara you realise that this is one of the ultimate lifestyle resort and villa developments in the entire Asia Pacific region, yet it boasts a strong environmental ethos.

The Sanskrit name "Trisara" alludes the garden of delight in which the Lord Buddha found himself during his third level of enlightenment. In tune with this Buddhist ethos, the resort removed thousands of the original indigenous trees and plants during development, then cultured and re-planted them, so that every facet of the natural environment is authentic with no imported species. They have their own gardens, arboretum and nurseries so that they are continually able to upgrade the land with additional indigenous vegetation.

There are only forty guest suites in the entire resort, meaning that each visitor has a huge area in which to enjoy their privacy amidst the luscious rain forest that surrounds. Although set upon three separate levels spreading up the central hillside above the beach, every single guest room has the same uninterrupted ocean views.

Anthony Lark worked in close collaboration with Thailand's most famous architect and designer, Mom Tri Devakul to create every aspect of the development of Trisara. His vision was to produce an oasis of elegance and relaxed intimacy that represent the perfect escape from the rigours and



compromises of the outside world beyond the gates of Trisara.

Most of Trisara's customers are very environmentally conscious, says Lark, as are Trisara's management.

In order to save valuable water, every drop of rain is caught, treated and used in showers, toilets and on the gardens. All storm water is caught and treated before being released into the ocean. The resort uses no

The airline and tourism industries are coming under enormous pressure to reduce the damaging environmental impact they have on our planet. Their very survival is a matter of debate and conjecture.

plastic and all the fruit and vegetables served are organically grown in their own gardens or in the King of Thailand's projects.

Soft adventure options that bring the guests into close contact with unspoiled nature are the order of the day. The beautiful hand built wooden traditional phinisi sailing boat is often available for sailing the Andaman or Phang Nga Bay with its crew of Kanjo natives. Kayaking, snorkeling and scuba diving adventures take guests to nearby islands where nature abounds and Trisara's instructors are

all well versed in environmentalism which they readily impart to their guests.

Trisara also believes in social responsibility and have instigated some of the best working conditions in Thailand's booming tourist sector, thereby ensuring that their staff enjoy working for them and tend to be very loyal and long serving. Of course a happy member of staff smiles all the more readily and is all the more eager to do whatever they can to make a guest's stay perfect.

Trisara's staff work only a standard five day week, with regular holidays. They are all environmentally trained and enjoy regular staff outings and events. These benefits are almost unheard of in Thailand's high-pressure tourist sector.

Says Lark, "we were able to start with the cream of the crop when we recruited our original staff and then keep training and developing them. Even within our first year, a high percentage of our guests were repeaters and it reinforces what we are all about when customers see the same staff from one visit to the next and are remembered and greeted as friends."

There's no doubt that Trisara has invested in smart "win-win" environmental and social policies settings a positive example for other resorts in Thailand to follow.



Pimalai Resort and Spa on Koh Lanta

Koh Lanta is situated off the coast of Krabi, some eighty kilometres southeast of Phuket and remains relatively undeveloped as yet and is a perfect location for experiencing an unspoiled natural environment and partaking in engine-free soft adventure sports like cycling, snorkeling and hiking in the island's national parks.

Pimalai is one of the best resort spa and residential developments in the entire Andaman region. It sits on a perfect sweep of beach in the south west corner of the island, close to the extensive and untouched national park. There are many types of

accommodation, from lavish suites, through to super-luxury residential pool villas. All these are spread across 100 acres of a divine natural amphitheatre on the hillside above the resort, which also commands nine hundred metres of pristine sandy beach.

The villas blend seamlessly into the natural rainforest environment, which General Manager Franck de Lestapis says necessitates warnings about marauding monkeys and snakes being posted beside each infinity pool.

Ninety per cent of the natural deep southern rainforest trees were retained when the resort was built and electric vehicles are used exclusively in the steep, winding grounds of the resort.

Pimalai features a beautiful full-length outdoor pool, gymnasium, library with Internet connections, plus several stunning restaurants and a full range of tours and trips including

We are facing a global environmental and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions which is changing our interlinked world forever.



scuba diving and island hopping by private boat though the surrounding islands of the marine national park.

Pimalai's social contributions are equally impressive, being the co-founders of the annual Koh Lanta folk and craft festival in Old Town each December. They funded and built a ward at the local hospital and also support local schools, running an annual seabed clean up and clown fish re-seeding programme with the school children.

The resort won the Green Resort Gold Class Award from Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and the Green Planet Award for its extensive environmental policies. They've even solved the island's access problem, at least in the high season, when a speedboat service will take you from the mainland to the resort in about forty minutes.





The Sarojin in Khao Lak

Since opening in October 2005, the Sarojin has won Asia's Premier Boutique Hotel Award at the World Travel Awards for three consecutive years. Situated in an exclusive ten acre tropical garden, leading onto an eleven kilometre white sandy beach at Kao Lak, an hour north of Phuket's airport, this unique resort has pushed forward all the boundaries of luxury, relaxation and individualising the travel experience, while innovating strong green practices.

The Sarojin's grounds are full of the original indigenous plants and tree species of the area, while lotus pools abound with thriving fish and pond life attesting to the cleanliness of the water.

In the immediate vicinity there are five of Thailand's largest, most pristine national parks in which even wild tiger and elephant still roam.

Each guest is assigned to a personal "imagineer" – the ultimate personal concierge who will tailor personalised experiences for romantic couples.

Every type of sport and leisure activity can be arranged such as trips to Khao Sok national park, ninety minutes away, for genuine jungle adventures such as trekking, river kayaking and bird watching, with a sumptuous meal, champagne and guide.

The world class diving of the Similan and Surin marine national parks is less than an hour away by the resort's 38-foot *Lady Sarojin* cruiser, which can be privately chartered.

There are just 54 guest residences blended discreetly into the verdant natural surroundings. Each has a private garden and sala sundeck, plus a couples' bath, outdoor rainfall shower and there are even plunge



pools that blend into the surrounding fecundity. Each residence is entered by crossing a little stream through a private garden terrace. Water is an important environmental feature at Sarojin, being used for natural cooling and keeping the surroundings extremely lush.

The dining outlets are all of a world-class gourmet standard, while the wine cellar won the coveted 2008 Wine Spectator Award of Excellence. Alternatively, you can ask a chef to cook and serve whatever you desire on your own terrace, or on the beach, or at a nearby candlelit waterfall and you can even order gourmet hampers to accompany you on your daily adventures.

The Sarojin also believes strongly in social responsibility and set up the “Sarojin Fund” after the 2004 tsunami to help fund the recovery efforts. They raise money and organise initiatives such as local health care, education, road building, animal welfare, landscape replanting and regeneration, and are involved in the local turtle rehabilitation and breeding programme. They have also been awarded the Green Planet Award for their ongoing commitment to environmentalism.

Last word



The last word on the initiatives being instigated by the Andaman’s leading resort goes to Steve Galster, Director of the Wild Aid environmental NGO in Bangkok. He says that while the energy and pollution saving efforts by the resorts are an excellent start, the real impact of tourism on the environment is the carbon emissions of long haul air travel.

However, with economic constraints mandating more holidays being taken closer to home, long haul flights may well decline. We should be grateful therefore, that here in the Andaman we have so many fabulous and “green” resorts right on our doorstep.

Six Senses Hideaway, Koh Yao Noi

Tel: +66(0) 76 418 518

www.sixsenses.com

Evason Resort and Spa, Phuket

Tel: +66 (0) 76 381 010 – 7

www.evason-phuket.com

Pimalai Resort and Spa, Koh Lanta

Tel: +66 2 320 5500

www.pimalai.com

The Sarojin, Khao Lak, Phang Nga Bay

Tel: + 66 (0) 76 427 900

www.sarojin.com