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IMAGE

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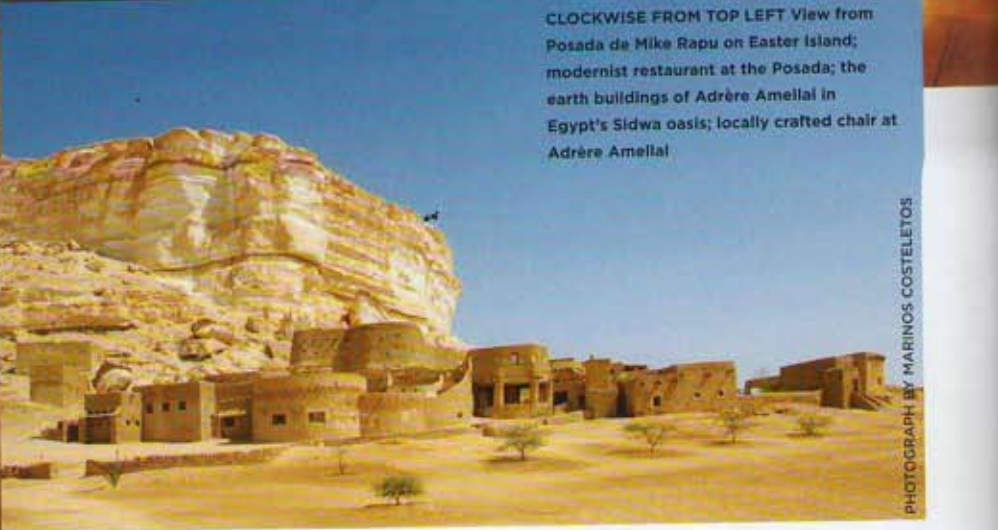
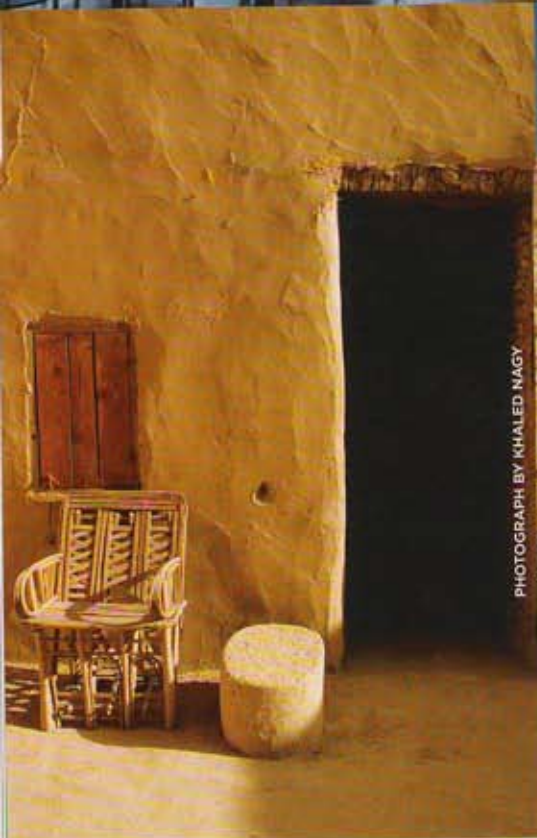


MICHELLE OBAMA: OUR OBSESSION WITH THE NEW FIRST LADY

Way to go

No need to suffer for your principles
- an eco holiday can be just as luxurious
as an energy-guzzling five-star resort.
Just choose your destination carefully.
ELOISE NAPIER reports.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT View from Posada de Mike Rapu on Easter Island; modernist restaurant at the Posada; the earth buildings of Adrère Amellal in Egypt's Sidwa oasis; locally crafted chair at Adrère Amellal

PHOTOGRAPH BY KHALED NAGY

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARINOS COSTELETOS

A few years ago, if you even mentioned the word "eco-holiday" to friends the response was standard – a blank look followed by a joke about travelling somewhere uncomfortable to knit your own muesli. How things have changed.

With ever more dire warnings about global warming and the need to reduce carbon emissions, there is hardly any aspect of our lives that hasn't been touched by eco-awareness. And holidays are no exception. Zara Stassin of Zara's Planet has 21 years in the industry and recently she has seen a marked change: "Eco-tourism has only come to the forefront of everyone's minds in the last two to three years. But now people are genuinely feeling responsible for the environment."

On the surface, pairing "eco" with "holiday" seems a contradiction in terms – the tourism industry has been notoriously un-eco-friendly: low-cost flights mean that air travel now emits over twice the levels of carbon dioxide it did ten years ago. Many five-star resorts and hotels are guilty of being energy gluttons, using copious amounts of air-conditioning/heating, rivers of hot water and food imported from thousands of miles away. So, if you have an eco-conscience, how do you achieve a memorable, guilt-free holiday?

The options are legion. For a start, you don't have to give up your creature comforts – many top-end resorts provide you with every luxury, but at as low an environmental cost as possible. For example, at Tongsai Bay in Thailand waste is carefully managed through recycling and composting; natural extract products are used in place of chemical versions; plastic bags are never used and all packaging is biodegradable.

Although the media gets its knickers in a twist about the damage flying does to the environment, the aviation industry only accounts for five per cent of annual global carbon emissions (contrast this to powering our homes which accounts for 25 per cent). Not that that is a reason to be blasé about your carbon footprint. As Krissy Roe of Responsible Travel says: "If you take a long haul flight make sure you are as green as possible when you get to your destination."

To cut their carbon footprints, many travellers are beginning to change the way they holiday. Zara Stassin reveals that more and more of her clients "are going on one big holiday every two to three years, and are going away for longer – for three or four weeks at a time. This way they just do one long haul flight instead of lots of short trips." Stassin specialises in horse-riding holidays, by their nature green – you do a lot less damage to the environment sitting on a horse than you do travelling in an air-conditioned Jeep.

ECO FAVES

Next hot properties on our eco list? Posada de Mike Rapu on Easter Island, top-notch, super-green and luxurious – a place for romantic adventures, www.explora.com. And, Adrère Amellal in the Sidwa oasis, Egypt – so eco that it's lit only by beeswax candles and hurricane lanterns, the 40 rooms, built from local clay, blend into the landscape www.adrereamellal.net

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The lobby verandah at Tong sai Bay; A Tong sai Bay Grand Villa with pool; Outdoor terrace of a Tong sai Bay Grand Villa.



TONGSAI BAY, KOH SAMUI, THAILAND

ISLAND IN THE SUN Koh Samui is the biggest of a group of more than 60 islands in the Gulf of Thailand, 35km east of the southern mainland. While it's well known on the backpacking trail, there really is an awful lot more (or less) to Koh Samui, making it a beautiful stop on any Thai travels. **HISTORY** The luxury eco resort of Tong sai Bay (the first, and only, independently-owned five-star property on the island) sprawls over the northwest of Koh Samui. The arc-shaped hilly bay was discovered by Thai hotelier Akorn Hoontrakul in 1985, who bought the land with the intention of creating a world-class hotel resort, maximising the natural beauty of the area. For three months, Hoontrakul quite literally slept on the beach at Tong sai, planning the development, so that by the grand opening in 1987, not one tall tree had been felled and no compromise had been made to the surroundings. This philosophy holds true 22 years later, and other than constantly refurbishing and upgrading the property, natural beauty takes precedence, even over some of the resort's construction – there are villas in Tong sai Bay with palm or mango trees growing up through them. In fact, Hoontrakul was instrumental in the island-wide decree that nothing can be built on Koh Samui that's taller than a palm tree.

ACCOMMODATION Dotted all around the bay, 85 luxurious "tree houses" capitalise on the beautiful surroundings. Ultra-luxurious, each cottage or villa has a generous deck – most looking out over the sea – all of which include an outdoor bathtub filled with floating flowers from the grounds upon request – nice touch. Interiors are furnished in dark wood and Thai silk, air-conditioned and spacious with wall-to-ceiling windows. And while all villas are within easy reach of the beach/spa/lobby/restaurants, if you don't fancy the steps up and down, electric golf buggies are on call 24/7. **PARADISE ON EARTH** For an extra-memorable experience, book into a grand villa. Recently refurbished, these come with sun loungers, an outdoor dining table and pantry plus a netted gazebo for sleeping under the stars. Grand Villas with private plunge pools are also available.

EARTHLY LIVING Nice-not-preachy eco touches abound, just as service is warm and attentive. Bathroom amenities come packaged in reusable linen pouches, glass bottles are reused, water is filtered from the sea by reverse osmosis, newspapers and messages are delivered in weather-proof wooden tubes and, while it wasn't confirmed, the occasional flickering of the satellite plasma TV and lighting leads one to believe power is generated naturally. The resort also actively supports and promotes benevolent endeavours on the island, such as the Koh Samui animal rescue centre. **FACILITIES** Tong sai Bay's resort-with-a-conscience makes no compromise to relaxation and luxury. There are three restaurants, bars, a beachside internet café (although Wi-Fi is available in public areas), two swimming pools (one, a crescent infinity pool for over-twelves), free kayaking and sailing, although – wahoo – motorised water sports are banned in the bay. There's also a spa, exercise room and recreation room with an extensive DVD and book library.

CLAIM TO FAME Think this sound familiar? Tong sai Bay's executive chef Piengchom Darbanand – or Chef Chom – originally served the late Thai Princess Vibhavadee Rangsit and was Keith Floyd's advisor and co-presenter on the Thai leg of his *Far Flung Floyd* series in the 1980s. Floyd's beach bar and restaurant at Tong sai Bay has been named in his honour. **MM**

GETTING THERE

Twohigs (www.twohigs.com, 01 648 0800) offers seven nights at The Tong sai Bay, Koh Samui, www.tongsai bay.com from €1,699 per person, or from €2,570 per person in a Grand Villa. Price is based on two sharing a beachfront suite on a B&B basis, including return international flights from Dublin to Bangkok via Abu Dhabi with Etihad Airways; onward domestic flights to Koh Samui with Bangkok Airways; and return airport transfers (excludes flight taxes). Valid for travel until March 31 2009.

Many people are also choosing cycling and walking holidays as an adventurous and eco-friendly alternative to beach destinations. The other benefit of this style of travelling is that you normally stay in B&Bs or small, locally owned hotels where the money you pay goes straight back into the local economy and not into the pockets of an internationally owned hotel group.

For those who are less active, rail travel provides a carbon-soft way of journeying for long distances and seeing parts of the world that are otherwise inaccessible to all but the hardiest of travellers. The Trans-Siberian Express is probably the most famous example, but others include the Ghan, which crosses Australia, and the Hiram Bingham Orient Express, which combines fabulous luxury and style as it negotiates its way through the most scenic parts of Peru. For planning overland, eco-friendly trips across Europe, go straight to the website www.seat61.com which gives details of rail and ferry services across the continent.

One of the most important aspects of environmentally aware travel is the social responsibility side. As Krissy Roe advises: "Do whatever you can to put something positive back into the local community you

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Eucalypt suite at Thala Lodge;
Ospreys Restaurant at Thala;
Thala Beach

TREAD LIGHTLY

To check the carbon emissions produced when you travel log onto www.emissionzero.ie. It also calculates the cost of offsetting – for example, a return flight from Dublin to Paris produces approximately 0.07 tonnes of CO₂, and costs just under €2 to offset. All proceeds from the sale of offsets go to projects reducing CO₂ emissions in Ireland.

are visiting.” There has been a huge upswing in the number of people who are choosing volunteer holidays; these are trips where you combine a socially constructive activity such as teaching, building and repairing houses or caring for children with a beautiful holiday. Christopher Hill, who founded Hands Up Holidays, specialises in 14-day trips where you spend four days helping out in the community, followed by eight-to-ten days relaxing; clients stay in carefully chosen boutique hotels where both comfort and eco-awareness are priorities. Hill explains:

“Our philosophy is to give people a taste of volunteering so that they become inspired to do more volunteer work, either at home or abroad.” Mozambique and Madagascar are particularly popular destinations.

Trying to salve your conscience after a travel splurge by investing in carbon offsetting is definitely a step in the right direction. But, as Krissy Roe warns, it's not a cure: “Offsetting is a last resort. The analogy is simple – if you've eaten three bars of chocolate you can't eat an apple afterwards and hope to make it better.” ■

SLOW TRAVEL

INDIA THE DARJEELING EXPRESS

Travelling up the UNESCO World Heritage Darjeeling Himalayan Railway ticks all the right boxes. Taking you on a cultural journey through the Himalayas, you see incredible landscapes, Buddhist monasteries and vibrant markets. Sixty per cent of the trip's cost is recycled into the local economy. From £2,700 per couple (15 days) excluding flights; www.responsibletravel.com

ARGENTINA SPECIAL ESTANCIA RIDING HOLIDAY (below) If you've ever dreamed of being a cowboy/girl, this is your best chance of turning it into reality. As well as working with the gauchos, you will ride to the base of the Andes past snow-capped volcanoes and crystal clear lakes. The estancia is seriously eco-friendly – all food is grown on the estate, all its power comes from renewable sources and virtually all travelling is done on horseback. Ten-day programme costs from €2,464, including full board and lodging, all activities and transfers, but not flights; www.zarasplanet.ie

THALA BEACH LODGE, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

WHERE Under an hour by bus north of Cairns, not far from picturesque fishing-cum-holiday village Port Douglas, sits Thala Beach Lodge – quite literally, a haven nestled in a tropical paradise. Well, it's just about as close as you'll get. The Daintree rainforest is the world's oldest, spilling down to a largely untouched coastline, which in turn leads to the Great Barrier Reef

BACKGROUND A congregation of luxury Balinese-style “tree houses”, the lodge was built to have as low an environmental impact as possible, in fact, giving precedence to setting right the wrongs done in years past. Its current owners bought the 145-acre peninsula in the early 1970s, when only 45 acres of original forest existed on the site. They replanted the area with thousands of indigenous plants, allowing them to flourish for 20 years before opening the lodge **SETTING** Now, the ancient rainforest that has always fringed the private beach, blends with the rehabilitated eucalyptus woodland, gallery forest and coconut groves, each having attracted its own species of flora and fauna back

CERTIFIED This commitment to rehabilitation and preservation is the main reason that Thala Beach has earned the kudos that only a handful of luxury resorts in Australia hold – Advanced Ecotourism certification from the International Ecotourism Accreditation Program **SLEEPING** Accommodation consists of individual treetop bungalows with views of either the ocean or forestland (and often both), but never the neighbours – except the local birds, flying foxes and lizards. The décor isn't quite cutting edge. But, anything more contemporary than the clean and cosy polished wood, with rattan furniture and neutral textiles might be out of place – and redecorating every year is hardly (eco-) logical

FACILITIES Swimming pools dot the eucalyptus paths and a stroll reveals plenty of secluded lookouts and sun loungers. But, if the great outdoors isn't therapy enough, you could always luxuriate at the Evolve day spa for treatments like the Neroli Rose, Silk and Bamboo massage, using Daintree's own natural products **FOOD**

The restaurant and cocktail lounge are wall-free, allowing views for miles above the forest and along the coast, creating a space where breakfast is enjoyed a metre from parrots playing in cleverly placed treetop springs. The food is innovative, fresh, and locally sourced

ECO EXPERIENCE From the eagerness of a waiter to show off the rare spider he found nesting below the restaurant (shiver), to the resident Indiana Jones-type who'll take you on any number of tours of the resort, the enthusiasm of the staff for the local environment is what makes a stay at Thala. Take up ant licking on a nature walk of the headland; go sea kayaking; star-gazing from the observatory; or do the coconut tour (if your guide's enthusiasm for its health-giving properties doesn't rub off, you're not paying attention) **EXTRAS** Taking advantage of Thala's location is a must and the resort will happily organise snorkeling trips to the reefs at the Low Islands and guided tours of the Daintree Rainforest **GETTING THERE** All-inclusive package including meals and mini-bar from Aus\$850 per night, www.thalabeach.com.au. For more ideas on holidays in Australia, visit www.australia.com

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