

RESEARCH

Travelers skeptical and unaware of sustainable accommodations: report

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Marine life around Four Seasons Resort Seychelles

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

Sustainability initiatives are on the rise in luxury, but the hospitality sector will need to educate consumers to get them on board.

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According to Booking.com's Sustainable Travel Report, lack of awareness was the primary reason consumers did not plan on staying in eco-friendly accommodations. With an interest in protecting the environment on the rise, hotels must educate consumers on what they are doing on this front in order to win over the new, green consumer.

"Sustainable accommodations are a world away from dim lighting, low water pressure and no air conditioning," said Gillian Tans, chief operating officer at Booking.com. "Guests may not realize that as they sleep on organic cotton sheets, washed with water heated by energy generated from the hotel itself, they are staying sustainably.

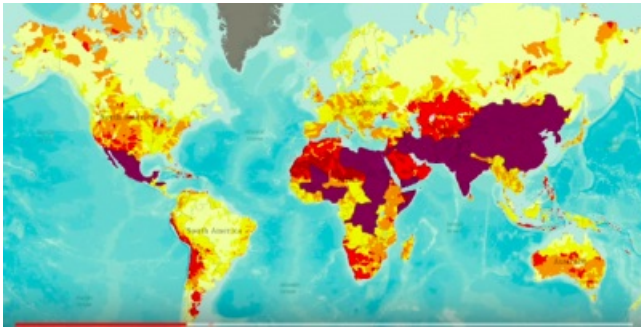
"The more clarity, understanding and visibility around sustainable travel that can be brought to travelers to help them make informed choices around their accommodations and destination, the better," she said. "Our research and ongoing discussions with the accommodations we offer is uncovering a range of sustainability efforts that we'd ultimately love to be able to share with travelers searching and selecting on our site."

Booking.com surveyed 1,000 respondents across each of 10 markets in March 2016. All respondents had to have traveled at least once in 2015 and plan to travel at least once in 2016.

A greener place to stay

Slightly less than half of American survey respondents consider themselves to be sustainable travelers, compared to 72 percent of Chinese respondents and only 25 percent of Japanese surveyed. However, further questioning revealed myriad understandings as to what constitutes sustainable travel and revealed skepticism toward the concept.

As one would expect, staying in eco-friendly accommodations is considered "sustainable travel" by more than half of American respondents. Nearly a third said purchasing locally made products and supporting the local economy qualifies as sustainable travel, almost a quarter identified natural reserves or camping, and 15 percent said it involves interacting with local wildlife.



Water conservation map; image courtesy of Starwood

Volunteer work in the community and staying with an indigenous community were also highlighted as sustainable, by 16 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

While two-thirds say they would be more likely to select accommodations they know are eco-friendly over alternatives, one-third say they do not plan on staying in eco-friendly accommodations.

Among that one-third, 38 percent of American respondents say they would not prioritize sustainable accommodations because they did not know they existed. The number rose to 43 percent among Japanese respondents and 46 percent of Germans.

Worse yet, 11 percent of Americans and 14 percent of Japanese believe that you cannot trust a hotel's claim to sustainability. Many consumers also perceive the hotels as more expensive and less luxurious.



Four Seasons Resort Nevis water view

This data suggests that hotels must take steps to make their accommodations more eco-friendly. Water conservation efforts, sourcing food locally, or organizing local volunteer work are among the steps hotels can take.

However, simply providing this will not be enough; hotels must also assure consumers of the effects and authenticity. CSR initiatives, transparency and of course marketing are among the tools that will help assuage skepticism.

Luxury hotels also are less likely to be affected by the perceptions of price and service that hinder sustainable accommodations. Consumers will already be drawn to the brand for its service and are less likely to need to worry about prices and may even be willing to pay more for green accommodations.



Photo courtesy of Four Seasons

Going green

Strategic sustainability should be focused, starting from a brand's interior before radiating outward toward consumers, according to panelists at The New York Times International Luxury Conference April 5.

Panelists during the "Strategic Sustainability" session agreed that for sustainability practices to work, brand employees must stand behind the company's efforts. Employees are the best brand advocates available and can attest to a brand's charitable initiatives and values as being authentic ([see story](#)).

The growth other related trends already hinted that sustainability should be a major focus of hotels in 2016 and beyond.

Traveling is an increasingly popular way for people to give back, and hotel brands must stay on top of the trend to maintain their status as the best in the business.

A recent study by Tours.com found that an astonishing 55 percent of America-based travelers partook in volunteer work during a vacation within the past two years, with almost three quarters calling their charitable donations or philanthropic endeavors "important," "very important" or "extremely important." As "voluntourism" becomes increasingly common, brands must show that they care equally and assist travelers in partaking in volunteer work or gifting to maintain status and image ([see story](#)).

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