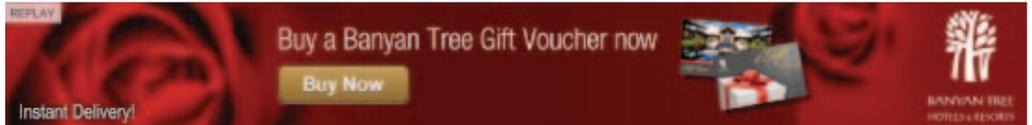


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OK the resort's green, but is it good?

Eco holiday resorts are great, so long as they don't lose sight of what a vacation is all about -- fun and relaxation

By [Justin Calderon](#) (author/justin-calderon) 12 December, 2011

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Looks lovely on the outside, but what's it like to stay there?

Open up a tourism brochure and chances are they'll be there. "Eco," "green," "sustainable," "environmentally friendly": the growing litany of buzzwords that punctuate the path of righteous holidaymakers.

"Tips for green traveling" are offered by lodges now deemed Mother Nature-compliant enough to carry the prefix "eco."

Other establishments speak about organic this and that.

But with all this emphasis on sustainability, aren't resorts and hotels in danger of neglecting what most of us go on holiday for -- good old-fashioned fun?

Any resort that declares itself to be "employing grassroots practices" certainly sounds like you're opting into more of a muddy field-based, Woodstock experience than one of pampered R&R.

And stick a dedicated eco-resort or lodge next to a non-eco, traditional counterpart and the differences can be stark.

One comes with solar panels clad to the exterior, beeswax coating the furniture and chemical-free soap; the other with eight different types of pillow and an [iPhone as a room key](http://travel.usatoday.com/hotels/post/2010/06/iphone-as-hotel-room-key-technology-offers-high-level-of-security-tech-chief-says/94658/1) (<http://travel.usatoday.com/hotels/post/2010/06/iphone-as-hotel-room-key-technology-offers-high-level-of-security-tech-chief-says/94658/1>).

Yet, this is just on the surface. As I have found, this is a type of tourism that not only offers all the leisure facilities of similar non-eco properties, but also educates.



JUSTIN CALDERON

Solar panels greet you at the pier at Pulau Macan.

Eco educated

Palau Macan, a 90-minute boat ride north of Jakarta, is a one-hectare eco resort island near the tip of the Thousand Islands archipelago, so small that it employs a self-imposed population cap of 40 people.

It is at odds with everything the raucous Indonesian capital represents. Leaving the murky soup of the Ancol Marina, you can even spot the line where the water quality goes from filthy to flawless, as if a giant strainer was set in place.

"Palau Macan," now 80 percent self-sufficient, "is a pilot project for an evolutionary eco-resort/village that is designed to be replicated across 800 eco-resort/villages worldwide," says founder and general manager Roderick Des Tombe.

Yes, Pulau Macan has a long strip of shimmering solar panels over the pier, you are reminded to save water and electricity and the occasional bug can be seen scampering across your floor.

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But Pulau Macan and other eco-resorts like it are becoming far better defined by the select group of travelers they attract -- open-minded people prepared to face the elements with alacrity, versus the pool-side slugs whose holidays are ruined if a little rain shows up.

Creating awareness of these principles is one of the key takeaways. "I know how to save water now, and [when I returned home] I found that I save electricity more too. I think simply being conscious helps," says Susan Octari Yauwhan, a university student from Jakarta who stayed at Pulau Macan.

Even suffering a rash from red ants in her open-air bungalow didn't put Yauwhan off the green experience.



It's not all work and toil.

Price is right?

Perhaps the biggest peeve one may have against an eco-resort is its pricing.

Outdoor showers and thatched hut bungalows, though tastefully designed, are far from the luxurious facilities found in non-eco five-star chains, yet for such simplicity these hotels can demand a relatively hefty sum.

Why submit yourself to rogue insects when shower stalls, cement ceilings and spas are readily available at the Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort and Spa?

Well, just like any hotel, you are not paying specifically for each and every

item in the room; the cost is not governed by the sum of the parts.

You are paying for the holistic experience, and where some resorts will offer fantastic food and luxury bath tubs, others will find a place for community interaction and eco education. It's the latter that are the remit of the eco tourist trade.

At [Castaway Resort](http://kohlipe.castaway-resorts.com/index.html) (http://kohlipe.castaway-resorts.com/index.html) on Koh Lipe, an "eco-friendly" resort 60 kilometers off the shore of southern Thailand near the Malaysian border, stray dogs are taken into care, for example.

Pulau Macan makes its organic buffet meals out of catches from local fisherman and puts returns directly back into the community. The income of the local team (a family of distant and close relatives that lives on the island) has tripled in the past three years.

And it appears lavish resorts and spas are starting to see the positives in a sustainability model too.

The news is spreading

Pangkor Laut Resort, home to Emerald Bay off the coast of Western Malaysia, is upgrading its equipment to reduce carbon emissions, for example.

And for those that are willing, there are even more impressive eco-technologies to invest in. "Pulau Macan combines many elements that most other eco-resorts don't," says Des Tombe.

This month the installation of a waste-water garden will further the island's goal of achieving 100 percent sustainability.

The eco-technology, fine-tuned by Dr. Mark Nelson of the [Biosphere 2 experiment](http://www.b2science.org/) (http://www.b2science.org/), allows for the effluence of fecal matter without chemicals or electricity, making productive use of sewage.

By "reproducing the conditions of natural wetlands," says Florence Cattin, project director of [Wastewater Gardens International](http://www.wastewatergardens.com/) (http://www.wastewatergardens.com/), the network involved in implementing Pulau Macan's wastewater treatment, the constructed garden acts as the small kidneys of the island's ecosystem, purifying the wastewater cycle.

Such is the draw of eco credentials that some places, such as Costa Rica, are even complementing the traditional star-rating system with a green leaf system denoting sustainability.

Many more of us are now paying attention to that sort of thing, to do at least a little good for our overburdened planet.

Even if it means skipping out on air-conditioning.



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Living in and out of Asia since 2006, Justin spent two years in Shanghai. He also hunkered himself down in Taipei for two years to teach English and study traditional Chinese characters. He is a Mandarin reader and speaker. Read more of Justin's work at [justincalderon.wordpress.com](http://www.justincalderon.wordpress.com/) (http://www.justincalderon.wordpress.com/)

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