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THE NEW GENERATION OF GREEN HOTELS

CARBON OFFSETTING, STAYING LOCAL, CONSUMING LESS: BEING GREEN USED TO BE DOWN TO THE INDIVIDUAL, BUT THINGS ARE SCALING UP. INCREASINGLY, IT'S THE INTERNATIONAL CHAIN HOTELS AND LUXE FRANCHISES THAT ARE MAKING ENVIRONMENTALLY SAVVY DECISIONS THAT HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO CREATE A BLUEPRINT FOR WIDER CHANGE. WORDS: JULIA BUCKLEY

When the hotel behemoth Intercontinental Hotel Group (IHG) declared in July it would be phasing out mini toiletry bottles in all its rooms over the next two years, it made headlines around the world. What may sound like a small thing is actually no mean feat. IHG owns brands including Holiday Inn, InterContinental and Crowne Plaza. There are 856,000 of those rooms around the world that will see the bottles replaced with bulk dispensers.

"Any decision like that is a big one," says Catherine Dolton, VP of global corporate responsibility — not least because IHG, like most chains, works on a franchise model, so the brand needed to convince owners to make the change. Then there are the practicalities to consider — how do you implement this system across 5,700 individually owned hotels? That's one of the reasons it's a two-year pledge.

As it starts the process, IHG is putting the final touches to last year's headline pledge — that by the end of 2019, its hotels will ban plastic straws. The move should save 50 million straws going into landfill each year. According to CEO Keith Barr, large brands have a responsibility to protect the environment and an opportunity to make a real difference: "There's always more we can do to minimise waste, but the work we're doing to reduce single-use plastic is a powerful example of how we can come together with guests, owners and colleagues to drive positive change," he said at the time. Indeed, a month after IHG's 2019

announcement, Marriott declared that it, too, would ditch mini bottles.

So how did we get here? Past perceptions might have been that to keep things green while travelling, we should stay in smaller, locally owned hotels. But leaving aside the issue of ownership, and looking purely at ecologically friendly initiatives, recently the big brands have really raised their game. Last year, Hilton pledged to cut its carbon emissions by 61% and halve water usage by 2030, in line with the Paris Agreement. In the past decade, it's already reduced emissions by 30%, water use by 20%, waste by a third and energy consumption by 21%.

Hilton also recycles 400 tons (362 tonnes) of soap per year and is removing plastic straws and cocktail stirrers from its hotels. Hyatt is doing the same, recycling soap and shampoo and donating it to communities in need — during the Caribbean hurricanes of 2017, 250,000 bars were donated to people in need by Clean the World, which works with both chains. Hyatt also has a Responsible Seafood Sourcing initiative: 50% of its seafood served globally must be sustainable.

Although this might be the first time some of us are hearing about these initiatives, brands have been taking steps for years. The International Tourism Partnership (ITP) was founded in 1993 to encourage environmental responsibility in the hotel industry. It's here that representatives of big brands can come together to share their initiatives. "There's definitely a bit of healthy competition," says director Madhu Rajesh, who says

the ITP is a safe space for rival brands to brainstorm together. "As much as they want to collaborate, they want to be as good as each other. So it's good to see that spark, as well as a spirit of sharing." The group's 16 members represent nearly 25% of the industry.

The path to sustainability was marked out a long time ago, says Rajesh. A decade ago the ITP developed tools to measure hotels' carbon and water consumption and provide a management plan; today, 20,000 properties use them. Hilton implemented a similar monitoring system in 2008.

Although environmental issues have been in the background for many years, Rajesh says: "The topic is in the spotlight now, so that's accelerated the pace. But brands are all very large and the industry has a franchise structure, so new initiatives take a long time."

Not so IHG's miniature toiletries decision. Dolton says she first raised the idea with Keith Barr in spring 2019. By mid-summer, it was implemented, such was the urgency they felt.

"Our executive committee has been very aware of how [environmental issues] are really rising up the agenda over the past couple of years," says Dolton.

The pressure's on

At first glance, it looks like the pressure is coming from an increasingly urgent public mood. In a survey of 73,000 Hilton guests last year, 60% said hotels' green policies affect their booking decisions. Crucially though, IHG's recent decision wasn't only based on pressure from the general public. "More and





more the issue of sustainability has been rising up from shareholders and colleagues as well as guests," says Dolton. And it's not just an ethical agenda; it's a business one, too. The mini bottles initiative will require cost upfront for owners as they invest in bulk dispensers, but over the long-term, the return on investment is significant. The same goes for moves that dial down air conditioning and introduce keycard-activated lights and LED bulbs — for an upfront investment, hotels are going to save long-term. "There aren't only moral and ethical considerations, but considerable financial ones too," says Rajesh.

"Being sustainable is smart business these days," agrees Daniella Foster, senior director of corporate responsibility at Hilton. "Times are changing. We're in an environment now where this is what our guests and employees want, and investors are looking at it as well. Companies that perform well environmentally do 20% better than those that don't."

With a long future ahead of them, more than half of Hilton's employees are millennials or younger. The brand was named number one in its industry in 2018's Dow Jones Sustainability Index. "There's a groundswell building up," she says. "Hilton shares are now being bought because of our [green] performance." In a follow-up this year to its 2018 survey, a third of 72,000 guests said that they actively seek

out information on a hotel's environmental credentials before booking.

And green doesn't have to be lean. We tend to think of hotel luxury in terms of fluffy robes, piles of daily changed towels and those mini bottles of upmarket toiletries. But it's been the luxury market that's led the way with sustainability. Take, for example, Six Senses — the luxe brand acquired by IHG in February. Each property bottles water onsite and plans to be completely plastic-free by 2022. Even the toothbrushes in the amenity kits are made of biodegradable cornstarch. Then there's Soneva, which banned plastic straws in 1998 and bottles 10 years later and also has recycling facilities at all of its Indian Ocean resorts. Meanwhile, Soneva Fushi, in the Maldives, turns polystyrene packaging into construction blocks.

Luxury Peruvian brand Inkaterre also has a sustainable focus, aiming to be entirely single-use plastic-free by the end of 2019. In April, its Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel donated an organic waste treatment plant to the city in which it sits — the gateway to the famous ruined citadel. Everything organic — from food scraps to human waste — is turned into fertiliser, which is used to aid reforesting the Andean Cloud Forest and Machu Picchu itself. The hotel has also previously donated a plastic compactor and a biodiesel plant.

FIVE GREEN HOTELS

HOSHINOYA KARUIZAWA, JAPAN

In the forest an hour from Tokyo, this eco-hotel by Japanese chain Hoshinoya is powered by hydroelectricity, generated by the river that runs through the property, and geothermal energy from onsite hot springs. It's 70% self-sufficient and uses no fossil fuels. Doubles from £750. hoshinoya.com

MORUKURU BEACH LODGE, SOUTH AFRICA

In the De Hoop Nature Reserve, 150 miles east of Cape Town, this lodge is entirely off-grid. Electricity is generated by solar panels, while hot water and underfloor heating comes from pellet burner boilers. Wastewater is purified via an innovative take on a septic tank, linen is washed with biodegradable soap and toiletries are made sustainably from indigenous plants by local women. From £478. morukuru.com

AQUATUM, GERMANY

This quintuple-glazed former water tower on Lake Constance generates all its energy from solar panels, hydrothermal and wind power and donates the leftovers to the National Grid. From £104. aquatum.de

ZURIZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

On the Kendwa beachfront, this hotel uses 52% less energy than the baseline for green certifiers EarthCheck. Water comes from wells and the sea via onsite desalination, rainwater is harvested for irrigation, and the grounds are grass-free. The innovative air conditioning system uses a quarter of the power that normal AC does. From £331. zurizanzibar.com

STOKEBY NAYLAND, SUFFOLK

This hotel in the Dedham Vale AONB produces so much energy via biomass boilers, solar panels and air source heat pumps that it supplies the excess to the National Grid. Air is heated by the pool and everything down to cooking oil is recycled. From £175. stokebynayland.com

PREVIOUS PAGE: Jetty, Joali Maldives

OPPOSITE: Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, Peru

The latest move makes Machu Picchu Pueblo the first hotel in Latin America to recycle 100% of its solid waste.

These days, even air conditioning isn't a given at the higher end of the market. Jade Mountain, one of St Lucia's poshest hotels, swaps air conditioning for a missing fourth wall, with open-to-the-elements rooms designed to draw in trade winds. Manager Carl Hunter leads popular sustainability tours around the property. "Visitors not only pay attention to our sustainability efforts, but wish to learn more," he says.

"[Being green] is a given at the luxury end," says IHG's Catherine Dolton. Hilton's Danielle Foster, meanwhile, reckons it's down to location. "Luxury hotels often have a tie to nature. You're going there to see or experience something, and you want to preserve that for future generations."

Owners and CEOs of smaller brands tend to be vocal proponents of environmental issues themselves, according to Rajesh. In the ITP, she says, these brands can be more innovative, but it's when big brands get involved that a difference can be made on a global scale. She cites the leaders of Soneva and ITC Hotels — India's third-largest chain, which goes as far as using jute (vegetable fibre) name tags for conference guests rather than plastic clip-ons and urges guests to ditch suits and ties to help reduce the need for air con.

Making individual changes

Of course, a one-size-fits-all approach to environmental issues can lead to 'greenwashing' — banning straws isn't so laudable if you serve poolside drinks in plastic cups, and there's no point bragging about recycling prowess when there's little recycling in your destination. Carbon offsetting, which many hotels do, is no substitute for using sustainably generated energy in the first place, and although there are numerous certifications schemes for 'green' buildings, there's little clarity around what each means on a property-specific level. It's on the individual level, however, that hotels can make a huge difference, working within their specific circumstances.

Take Blue Apple Beach House on the island of Tierra Bomba, off Cartagena in Colombia. In 2017, owner Portia Hart launched the Green Apple Foundation, which sorts waste, composts organic matter, converts cooking oil to biodiesel fuel and uses a glass pulveriser to turn bottles into sand, which locals use to make cement. "Our logistics have been developed around our location — this is an island with little to no municipal services," says Hart, who hopes to create a replicable model for places where recycling is scarce. "If we end up with glass-recycling centres on the coast of Colombia, vermiculture [worm-aided composting] in the coffee region and plastic recycling in Bogota, that will be a win."

Other properties are working with their direct environments. In April, Mashpi Lodge in the Ecuadorian rainforest doubled the size of the private reserve in which it sits to 6,200 acres, with plans to reach 35,000 acres by 2040. The move means everyone who stays there, or travels through Ecuador with its sister company Metropolitan Touring, will be carbon-neutral — the growth of the rainforest offsets their emissions in a place that needs protection (rather than other carbon offsetting projects planting trees in unsuitable places).

Main shareholder Roque Sevilla's reasoning is stark: Metropolitan Touring's 14,000 annual visitors generate around 25,000 tonnes of CO2. "It's not enough to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from our operations," he says. "It's essential to offset their carbon footprint and absorb the difference by expanding the Mashpi Reserve."

In Cambodia, designer-turned-hotelier Bill Bensley went so far as to buy 1,000 acres of national park-adjacent land in Cambodia after hearing that miners and loggers were after it.

"Having spared the land from the prospect of clear-cut logging, the question was what to do with it," says Bensley, who worked with business partner Sokoun Chanpreda. "Our dream was to educate Cambodians that conservation is smarter than extraction. We spent years coming up with a low impact model that would not only conserve and protect the land, but also create sustainable opportunities for locals." The result is Shinta Mani Wild, which, as well as being green, is 70% staffed by locals. "They now have an alternative livelihood to extracting from the forest," says Bensley.

So, what's the future, sustainability-wise? Strawless hotels look like a given, as do properties trumpeting their carbon-cutting initiatives. And you can expect to see many more as standard, such as cork recycling (The Savoy currently does this), beekeeping (Fairmont St Andrews restored three acres of lawn to natural grasses for its 20,000-strong bee population), and less water-greedy gardens. For example, Blue Horizons Garden Resort in Grenada replanted more than six acres of its grounds with drought-resistant plants and trees in 2014, while Atmantan, near Mumbai, uses only climate-appropriate plants such as mango trees and chillis.

Crucially, green initiatives will be factored in at the planning stage, so hotels are built to be sustainable, rather than adapted retrospectively — something Madhu Rajesh thinks is crucial for real change.

The other thing that can make a difference? Us. It's time to alter our holiday mentality: turn lights off, employ the air con sparingly and use the same towel for a few days. IHG already offers extra loyalty points for guests who forgo housekeeping — as with the toiletries, expect others to follow. As Madhu Rajesh says: "We all have the ability to influence." ■