



Clockwise from left, voluntourism in the Northern Territory; solar panels at sunset; caravan parks are getting in on the eco-friendly act (2); tent luxury and going green can go hand in hand.



The GREEN issue

If the word 'ecotourism' conjures up images of rustic cabins, composting toilets and making do without comforts, it might be time to take another look. What began as a niche market has broadened to include all aspects and levels of travel, from wilderness lodges to prestigious hotels.

"Ecotourism has tended to be associated with backpacking and the grassroots end of travel, but it is now a focus at the very top end of the market as well," says sustainable tourism expert Kerry Lorimer.

"It is becoming recognised that the principles apply to all types and styles of travel – all budgets, all destinations, cities and wilderness."

Ecotourism operator Martin Darcy says while international visitors to Australia have long been seeking out "behind the scenes" experiences of Australia, Aussies are only just starting to embrace the idea.

"For a large section of the domestic population, ecotouring has a had a bit of a bad reputation, conjuring up thoughts of hot, hard, uncomfortable touring, listening to boring guides drone on about this plant and so on," says Mr Darcy, of Discovery Ecotours Australia.

Responsible tourism spans all budgets and has spread to all types of travel

"Ecotouring has come a long way and is so much more than this."

Ms Lorimer, who was the coordinating author of the Lonely Planet book *Code Green: Experiences of a Lifetime* and is a respected consultant in the sustainable tourism sector, prefers the term "responsible tourism" to ecotourism, as it allows for a broader definition.

She says sustainable tourism works on three levels: it minimises the physical impact on the landscape, maximises cultural interaction and respect for the local culture, and creates a financial benefit for the local community.

Ms Lorimer believes the push for

The ecological tourist

Ecotouring is booming. Jane E. Fraser looks at how can you can enjoy your travel adventure with a clean conscience.

sustainable tourism has been somewhat hijacked by carbon offsetting, which she says is "commendable" but only part of the picture. If the focus on carbon emissions causes people to stop travelling, many tourism-reliant communities will struggle to cope with the impact.

"We've got to get back to more of a balance in our thinking... When sustainable tourism is done well, the positives outweigh the negatives," she says.

Responsible tourism is not only spanning all budget levels, it has spread to all types of travel, including guided tours, big city hotels, exclusive retreats and even caravan parks.

Trial Bay Eco Tourist Park, in South West Rocks on NSW's Mid North Coast, made a decision to embrace ecotourism several years ago and has enjoyed an average 20% growth in annual turnover since that time, although it says it is not possible to attribute the growth specifically to its eco status.

Initiatives adopted by the caravan park include a worm farm, native planting, weed control in the adjacent national park, the installation of water-efficient plumbing, education programs and chemical-free cleaning.

The park certainly has the right location to attract nature-oriented visitors, being entirely surrounded by national park and a short walk from the beautiful beach of Trial Bay, which is about

midway between Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie.

PAYING DIVIDENDS

While the Trial Bay park says it is difficult to quantify the financial benefits of eco initiatives, Hidden Valley Cabins near Townsville, Queensland, says a sustainability push has produced clear returns.

The property, which lays claim to being Australia's first carbon-neutral resort, says it has been achieving record occupancy levels – as well as massively reduced power bills – since making the switch to solar power late last year.

"We've had huge publicity and our numbers have swelled dramatically," operations manager Ross McLennan says.

Hidden Valley previously relied on a diesel-powered generator for power, such is its remote location in the mountains about 90 minutes northwest of Townsville. The natural environment is the focus of the property, with regular wildlife sightings including platypuses, wallabies, lace monitors and gliders.

As Hidden Valley trades on being Australia's first carbon-neutral resort, the Novotel Forest Resort Creswick in Victoria is branding itself Australia's first 'drought proof' resort.

Situated on the northern slopes of the Great Dividing Range and surrounded by the Creswick State Forest, the new resort

promises to stay green year-round, thanks to initiatives including Australia's first privately owned water treatment plant.

The system treats water for re-use indoors, along with treating raw sewerage for use on the golf course and in the gardens. The resort has also created a number of wildlife lagoons to provide a haven for birds and other wildlife during extended periods of drought.

The Novotel hotel group is a good example of eco initiatives reaching the corporate end of the tourism sector, a demonstration of how far we have come since ecotourism was limited to a handful of wilderness resorts.

Novotel has about 400 hotels worldwide and is working towards Green Globe environmental accreditation for every

property.

Novotel's sister company, Mercure Hotels, is laying claim to having the first 'carbon-neutral conferencing', with emissions from conferences calculated and offset through emission reduction projects and carbon trading schemes.

With energy costs rising and consumer demand for environmentally friendly accommodation growing, it is not surprising that such momentum is gathering.

VOLUNTOURISM TAKING OFF

If you want to do more than stay in environmentally friendly accommodation, a growing trend is to incorporate volunteer work into travelling. 'Voluntourism' has been popular among travellers to overseas destinations for many years but has been slower to take off in Australia.

Conservation Volunteers Australia undertakes projects from tree planting to mammal trapping in parks and natural areas around Australia and offers numerous nature-based and volunteer trips. Overnight stays cost just \$40, including meals and accommodation, while extended trips start at \$208.

Another example of voluntourism is the Cape York Turtle Rescue Project, where you can help secure turtle habitats from predators and remove fishing nets that threaten the turtles' survival. A five-night program, including accommodation and meals, costs \$2125 per person.

Other nature-based volunteer programs are run by organisations such as state parks and wildlife bodies and the



Earthwatch Institute, which has a range of expeditions to choose from.

You could be studying koalas, counting marsupials, looking after orphaned animals or even diving a shipwreck. It might not be a luxurious holiday, but it will certainly be a memorable one.

If you prefer some luxury to go with your memories, there are some spectacular new developments emerging at the top end of the market. About to open at the world famous Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia is Sal Salis, a 'wild bush luxury' camp modelled on the luxury safari camps of Africa.

The property has five individual safari tents sheltered behind the sand dunes of the Cape Range National Park, where the incredible corals of the Ningaloo Reef are just metres from the shore. Ningaloo is regarded by many to offer better snorkelling and diving than the Great Barrier Reef and is known for its yearly visitation of massive (yet harmless) whale sharks.

Activities on offer including swimming with whale sharks and manta rays and guided kayak trips, while the Sal Salis



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Mark of quality

WITH the word 'eco' being worked to death in the tourism industry, it can be hard to separate the wheat from the chaff. Thankfully, Australia has a well-regarded ecotourism accreditation program, run by Ecotourism Australia and now being exported to the rest of the world as an international standard.

While no accreditation program is ever perfect, if you look for the distinctive "Eco Certified Tourism"

logo, you will know you are dealing with a company that has made a commitment to sustainable practices and been assessed by an independent organisation.

There are now more than 600 Australian companies accredited under the program, and those that meet very high standards are awarded advanced accreditation.

