

Eco-Tourism's New Itinerary

As urban eco-tourism brings the idea of sustainable travel to the city, the ultimate perk to business is that drawing in new customers and building a green reputation are mutually beneficial

BY SUCHI RUDRA

TOURISTS ARE SOMETIMES GUILTY OF carrying habits from home when they travel. But as the green lifestyle becomes more deeply integrated into daily routines, many global citizens are packing up their good habits—those that are eco-friendly and community oriented—along with their bags. And hotels, restaurants, wineries, land developers, and other businesses in the tourism industry are responding—to the benefit of their bottom line.

Seeking out new ground is the increasingly popular niche of urban eco-tourism, a city-oriented sub-genre of the more widely known eco-tourism market. Urban eco-tourism, which gained visibility in the early

2000s, is turning out to be a highly profitable segment of the tourism industry, and has been associated with responsible travel, slow travel, and sustainable travel. Regardless of what it's called, the game remains the same: when traveling, leave the place better than when you arrived.

Ayako Ezaki, director of communications at The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the world's first organization of its kind, offers her own thorough definition of urban eco-tourism: "taking the experiences and lessons learned from best-practice examples of eco-tourism and applying them to tourism experiences in urban destinations in a way that allows travelers to gain

valuable insights into the local culture, history, and lifestyle, as well as minimizing the negative footprint, with low-impact travel activities or green hotels, and maximizing the positive footprint, with volunteer vacations or supporting social causes."

It's All About the Local

Travelers don't have to figure all this out on their own: hotels, tour operators, and other businesses have been swiftly jumping on board, identifying hyper-local attractions, green-minded leisure spots, and projects within the community with which tourists can volunteer—sometimes in exchange for a discounted room rate. Even in an unsteady



economic climate, those who have entered the urban eco-tourist zone are finding that adopting an Earth-friendly business model brings only good things.

“Without question, it’s profitable for hotels and tour operators to do this,” says David Krantz, the Washington, DC, coordinator of the Center for Responsible Travel (CRT). He says the Willard InterContinental Hotel in DC is a prime example: At the end of the third quarter of 2009, the hotel found that more than \$750,000 of its revenue came from green initiatives, including a program to support a local school, a park clean-up project, a watershed clean-up project, green business meetings, and green weddings. To collect funds for these initiatives, the hotel built in a \$5 donation into the room bill, with the ability to opt-out.

Other hotels have also hopped on board. Guests of the Fairmont Waterfront Hotel in Vancouver get a chance to contribute to the local environment in a rather unique way. As a response to the declining bee population, the hotel teamed up with the city’s HoneyBee Centre and now boasts four honeybee hives on the hotel terrace. Apiaries now also exist in several other Fairmont locations, including Quebec, Toronto, and New York City.

The Memories That Stick

Tourism experts have noted that some travelers like to get their hands dirty. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has become a good example of “voluntourism,” where tourists often build an extra day or two into their itinerary to participate in local volunteer work. Recently, Marriott revealed a voluntourism package for all nine of its hotels in New Orleans. Luxury hotels like the Ritz Carlton also offer volunteer opportunities, with enticing room discounts, from locations as varied as Austin, Texas, and Costa Rica.

“This is a value-added experience,” Krantz says of voluntourism. “What we’ve seen time and again is that when people travel and include some volunteering, the memory that sticks is that volunteer experience. It’s not a fringe activity in any way—it’s happening all over.”

Voluntourism is also leading to some of the greenest tourism in the convention and meeting side of the business “with corporations that have a green ethos,” Krantz points out. “A lot of hoteliers are bolstering their green credentials because they know that businesses are asking for it. Meetings and conventions often include extracurricular activities, and often that was a golf

Survey Says...

How much demand is there for businesses in the urban eco-tourism market? According to CMIGreen’s first annual Green Traveler Survey Report:

More than **80%** of respondents expected sustainable practices in business events

50% of couples who responded sought out green wedding options

More than **60%** indicated a desire to green their rental-car choice

But will your customers pay more to be an urban eco-tourist?

More than **84%** would be willing to pay something in order to decrease their environmental footprint on their next vacation



» All commercial planes landing in San Francisco are fueled by 100-percent organic kerosene.

TAKE YOUR BUSINESS INTO URBAN ECO-TOURISM TERRITORY

Ayako Ezaki from The International Ecotourism Society offers these eight tips for businesses seeking to establish themselves in the urban eco-tourism niche:

- 1 Minimize energy use by organizing employee car pooling, utilizing alternative-travel options for business trips, and retrofitting lighting and heating systems in your facility
 - 2 Utilize renewable energy sources when possible
 - 3 Find creative ways to engage employees and customers in your greening efforts
 - 4 Effectively communicate (through e-newsletters, signage at your facility, etc.) about your sustainability practices, and encourage others to share feedback and additional ideas
 - 5 Look into sustainable-tourism-certification options available in your region that meet your needs
 - 6 Investigate partnership options to work with local, regional, and national tourism organizations, as well as relevant entities involved in conservation, environmental protection, and sustainable community development
 - 7 Research opportunities to work with carbon-management and -offsetting organizations in your area
 - 8 Identify ways to encourage guests, customers, and employees to travel in a more eco-friendly way (reward those who visit/commute by public transportation and offer discounts to those who participate in eco-activities)
- + **Planeta.com**, a “global journal of practical eco-tourism,” also offers a wealth of resources for businesses looking to boost their green status



tournament or a site-seeing tour, but now these are being replaced by volunteering opportunities.”

A Market for Responsibility

CRT’s research has shown that demand for responsible travel remains strong relative to overall demand, despite the economic climate. “People care about these things in their life, and they are passionate about living in a responsible way in the place they are, and taking that with them when they go on vacation,” Krantz explains.

Increasing concerns about climate change and individual travelers’ carbon footprints from long-haul journeys—especially air travel—may also have helped raise awareness of the need for greener local travel options, as well as new opportunities available in urban areas, Ezaki adds.

By giving tourists an in-depth, local perspective and a chance to meet and interact with locals in urban areas, tour operators like Urban Adventures are at the epicenter of the new travel trend, catering to the idea of “slow travel,” a tributary of the “slow food” movement that began in Italy, which seeks to support and preserve regional and traditional cuisine.

Ezaki says slow travel is very much in line with the principles of eco-tourism. “Traveling slow, seeing a place like a local, is a great way to experience urban eco-tourism—and especially in areas such as culinary tourism and cultural tourism, I think that slow travel represents a key approach to urban eco-tourism,” she says.

Traveling to new places usually means discovering new foods, so it’s no surprise that the slow movement and culinary tourism has a strong appeal to today’s travelers—green-minded or not. This means that organic restaurants and wineries, with sustainable practices already in place, are now throwing themselves into the urban eco-tourism mix. “These places now have a nice accent to add to their brand,” Krantz says, admitting that it would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that for some travelers, sustainable travel is just pleasant and therefore adds value to the leisure experience. As soon as being eco-friendly does cost more—or marginally more—customers may abandon their green preferences.

Payback is Guaranteed

There is plenty that tourism-oriented businesses can do to keep the costs of sustainability at a minimum, thus refraining from asking their customers to pay a higher price for an eco-friendly experience. Reducing water and electricity consumption—as proven by nu-

merous companies and facilities around the globe—is a good place to start, Krantz says.

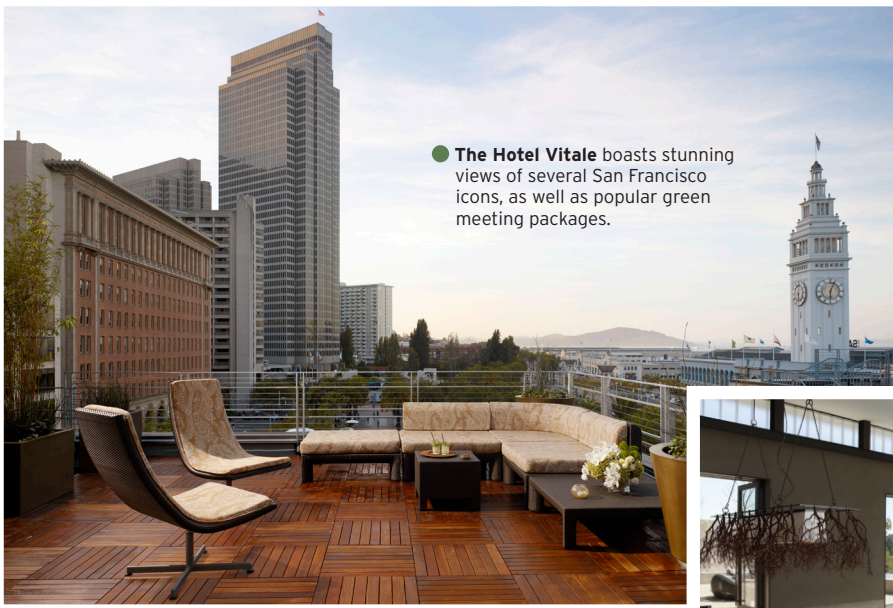
An intriguing model has been around now for a few years from major building-engineering-systems companies like Johnson Controls and Honeywell, and now smaller players like California-based Octus Energy are getting involved. Such firms provide 100 percent financing to hotels and other public or commercial buildings for the installation of energy-saving features, such as light-bulb replacements or energy-efficient windows. They are then paid back over time from the costs savings earned by the retrofitted building. “What’s eye-opening to me is that the bank and engineering company are so certain of the return and the ability to track it and make it back, that they’re moving forward with this in many places,” Krantz says.

Retrofits may be the answer for some who are vying for tourist dollars, while others, like state and city governments, are building sustainability right into their development plans. Within the United States, a number of states, including Wisconsin, Tennessee, and North Carolina, are putting in effort and financing into grassroots campaigns and green certification workshops for all interested businesses connected with the tourism industry. Tennessee and North Carolina have also partnered to “preserve, protect and grow the World Heritage Site of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and its gateway communities through sustainable tourism,” according to the Tennessee Vacation website.

Krantz acknowledges that this forward thinking can help states and cities “identify who they want to be, what kind of visitors they want to attract.” “Some cities are saying, ‘We want travelers who are concerned about protecting the environment.’ [Cities] like San Francisco, Portland, Vancouver, some areas of North Carolina, Blackstone River Valley in Rhode Island, and the city of Oberlin, Ohio.”

Ezaki agrees that implementing aspects of eco-friendly travel in urban destinations can add significant marketing values to a destination or a city’s promotional efforts. “The key, as with any type of ‘doing good’ claims, is to under-promise and over-deliver,” she says. “More and more consumers nowadays are wary of greenwashing, and if one is to promote anything ‘eco,’ it is critical to live up to the claim.”

When businesses stay open-minded and take a look around to see where they stand in the big picture of environmental affairs, it will likely leave them no choice but to take a step forward into greener pastures. Eco-savvy tourists, with their selective spending power, are sure to follow. **GBQ**



● **The Hotel Vitale** boasts stunning views of several San Francisco icons, as well as popular green meeting packages.



● **Napa & Sonoma Valley Bike Tours** offers an eco-friendly excursion into wine country. Photo: © Napa Valley Bike Tours.



● **Cade Winery's** tasting room is the perfect place to learn about urban eco-tourism's positive and profitable impacts.

SAN FRANCISCO'S SHANGRI-LA: The Model for Urban Eco-tourism

San Francisco has been called one of the greenest cities in the world, so it's no surprise that this scenic, waterfront mecca of sustainability has also become a thriving hot spot for urban eco-tourism. You can even trace the green roots of the city back to 1892, when the Sierra Club, the country's first environmental organization, was established. In a city with a 77-percent recycling rate, which was also the first city in the country to ban plastic shopping bags, local businesses catering to tourists can't help but get caught up in San Francisco's green splendor.

To help understand what urban eco-tourism is, what it means for the tourism industry, and how business owners, entrepreneurs, and restaurateurs are responding, a virtual trip to San Francisco would be informative. And that's just what *GBQ* presents: a glimpse into one of North America's hottest eco-destinations.

For a lesson in healthy hospitality, check into the luxury boutique ● **Hotel Vitale** on the city's waterfront, where you can join more than half of the hotel's guests and visit the popular farmer's market on Saturday mornings at the historical Ferry Building across the street. You might even bump into the hotel chefs loading up on fresh, local ingredients from which most of the hotel's menu is prepared. Meet with Jill Plemmons, director of marketing for the hotel, and she'll tell you that despite a tough 2009, the hotel has made an amazing recovery in 2010. Plemmons is proud of the hotel's green-business certification and

says that its green-themed business-meeting package—offering yoga breaks, hiking excursions, paperless meetings, and no prepackaged bottled water—is extremely popular.

Venturing about San Francisco, you'll quickly realize the local transit companies have earned their eco-tourism badge. Matt Stiker, executive vice president and chief marketing officer of the **San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau** points out that many of the city's tour operators incorporate green practices, including **Bauer's Intelligent Transportation**, which uses bio-diesel, exhaust-gas recirculation, and propane vehicles in its fleet of buses and

limousines, and **Hornblower Cruises**, which has a fleet of hybrid-fueled boats that use electricity instead of diesel to ferry visitors to Alcatraz or around the bay. And 57 percent of the city's taxis are now hybrids or compressed-natural-gas vehicles.

Other models of green business are just outside the city. An hour from San Francisco, the world-renowned Napa and Sonoma Valleys are linked by a successful and sustainable venture: ● **Napa & Sonoma Valley Bike Tours**. Nestled in the center of the valley and catering to both winery hot spots, this company offers wine tasting minus the carbon footprint.

Owner Brad Dropping confesses to the necessary use of a few 15-passenger vans (lunch delivery and support for wine purchases and tired legs), but the most-traveled vehicle is a Honda Fit that gets 35 miles per gallon and has been retrofitted to hold up to nine bikes. As with many other businesses, 2009 was a "down year, but 2010 has come back quite nicely," Dropping says. This success was partly due the new self-guided bike tour, at a medium price-point of \$89 (a fully-guided tour is \$139).

Getting into wine country is only half the experience. A tour of ● **CADE Winery** in Napa Valley

will leave you with some delectable tips on appealing to eco-tourists. Having sold its first bottles of wine in April 2010, CADE recently became the first LEED Gold-certified winery in California—featuring sustainably designed buildings and 71 acres of organically grown grapes. The winery attracts not only tourists but also vintners from around the world looking to learn from CADE's innovative, sustainable practices.

As LEED certification also requires a commitment to ongoing education, CADE will even hand you a blueprint of the winery when you visit. John Conover, partner and general manager at CADE, believes without a doubt that urban eco-tourism is a profitable marketing niche for the winery, and going LEED wasn't really an option. "It's the future of winery design and construction," he says, "because if you look at it, the wine industry especially takes a generational approach to the way it runs a business. So it makes you...step back and see how important these decisions today are important for the future. Green won't be a revolution but a series of steps in this country."

One could spend an entire week talking with the businesspeople who have transformed San Francisco tourism into an industry worthy of the city's overall sustainability goals. But if urban eco-tourism is about not only a good time but also about giving back, then taking lessons from here home is a way to keep green business flourishing. **GBQ**