Playgrounds for the tourists of the future

From the Filipino jungle to the beaches of St Kitts, these places are beacons for sustainable travel, says Greg Dickinson

Suspened above the canopy of the Sierra Madre range in the Philippines, a giant cobweb connects the treetops. Up here you can practically taste the water evaporating from the jungle, while macaque monkeys cackle at the sight of helmeted humans tiptoeing along the web.

But this network of ropes, the prime attraction of the Masungi Georeserve, is more than a grown-up playground. It is the product of a collective of single-minded Filipinos who stood in the way of illegal loggers and other environmental offenders to protect one of their most precious geological regions. These are the stewards of destination conservation. And those people, grinning as they navigate the cobweb like two-legged spiders? They are the tourists for tomorrow.

The way we travel has changed a lot in a short space of time. Rewind just five years: you wouldn’t have had a KeepCup in your backpack; you might have rented a diesel car on holiday without a whiff of guilt; and vegans were still mythical creatures, yet to infiltrate our in-flight menus.

The privilege of travelling the world is something we at Telegraph Travel have always cherished and endorsed, but we now have a growing awareness that the decisions we make on our holidays can have an immeasurably positive impact. We’ve long known that our “tourist dollar” is more valuable in developing countries than it is on our own high streets, but the tricky bit has been identifying where it is best spent. Do we go for chain hotels, or private accommodation? Take a chance on a local tour guide we met on the street, or book through an agent? Buy souvenirs from a shop, or haggle with a street vendor?

Today it is easier than ever to identify the accredited schemes – biosphere reserves, eco-retreats, community co-operatives – that are genuinely doing some sort of good while bringing unique experiences to the visitor. A golden era for conscientious travel is upon us, and in its brand new Destination Stewardship award category, the World Travel &
Tourism Council (WTTC) has highlighted three places that are leading the way when it comes to sustainable travel.

We start on the volcanic island of St Kitts in the West Indies. Colonised after an expedition led by Christopher Columbus in 1493, St Kitts was cultivated for tobacco before shifting to sugar cane production in 1640, an industry that fuelled the large-scale importation of African slaves. For 365 years, sugar production was at the heart of everything in St Kitts; it was even nicknamed Sugar City. However, towards the end of the 20th century the sugar industry slowed down and in 2005 the government closed the last of the country’s plantations. From this moment, St Kitts would become a tourism economy.

Visitor numbers quickly boomed on the idyllic Caribbean island, from 350,000 a year in 2005 to more than a million by 2015. But the ministry of tourism realised it needed to develop a sustainable strategy that would be both “pro-planet” and “pro-people”, to ensure tourism was a benefit, not a burden, to the island.

So what does this mean for us, the visitor? The Rails to Trails project, for example, has transformed a 100-year-old plantation railway into a new 13.5-mile (22km) hiking and biking trail. What was once a relic of a bygone industry has been transformed, acknowledging the past while also looking to the future. There are also beach clean-ups and waste management projects to ensure that not a soul on St Kitts, whether a human or a leatherback turtle, is negatively affected by its burgeoning popularity. Today, 80 per cent of St Kitts’ residents believe tourism is more positive than negative – an incredible statistic for an island whose popularity trebled in a decade.

If you’re looking for a more active holiday, Grupo Rio da Prata, a few thousand miles south of St Kitts, is a ranch-based tourism experience in Brazil’s midwest, offering snorkelling, hiking and horse riding.

Founded in 1995, this was the first organised tourism experience in the country’s midwest. From its humble origins as a simple ranch experience, the complex now combines three eco-ranches and two private natural heritage reserves – areas with a focus on preserving the environment and maintaining biodiversity – and welcomes more than 67,000 tourists a year. Preserving nature is at the heart of everything at Rio da Prata, where more than 50,000 trees have been planted since it was founded, and it is a good case study of how an ambitious ecotourism initiative can influence government policy. By working with state representatives, new laws have been introduced to protect the Prata and Formoso rivers, ensuring the long-term impact of the initiative.

Back in the Masungi Georeserve in the Philippines, the land that lies beneath the cobweb is just as bountiful as St Kitts or Rio da Prata. This is a habitat occupied by other-worldly beasts, such as glow-in-the-dark snails that make sounds when they retreat into their shells, and the cloud rat (sometimes called the “cloudrunner”), which resembles a hybrid of a guinea pig and a capybara. Archaeologists have also recently discovered rare fossils of single-cell organisms in the karst rock that is abundant in this area – a reminder of the scientific importance of protecting delicate landscapes.

There is a human development side to the story, too; many of the park rangers who work here today were once logging workers who threatened the same land.

“The area was becoming devoid of trees in the Nineties,” says Billie Dumaliang, a park officer. “The locals would say that you could only hear chainsaws in the area.” Now, it’s the bird song that’s deafening. In 1996, the government realised the damage that was being done and began working with private developers to find sustainable ways to manage the land. The Masungi Georeserve Foundation was created in 2015. Thanks to its success, the government has now expanded the legally protected area from 400 hectares to 3,000.

Alongside the conservation and
scientific benefits, and the pleasure of the visitors who enjoy coming here to take in the stunning views of limestone outcrops and the soft glow of Manila in the distance, Masungi has created jobs and generates more than $1million (£750,000) for the local economy each year.

Tourism is not all quite so rose-tinted in the Philippines. Last year, the world-famous beaches of Boracay closed due to the negative impacts of “overtourism”; a six-month period of repair and restoration was announced after the country’s president described it as a “cesspool”. So how can Masungi, a place that has become increasingly popular due to its “Instagrammability”, ensure it does not fall victim to the same problems?

Capacity is something the patrons of the georeserve keep a close eye on. In the first year after opening, visitors had to request a booking months in advance. The growth of the reserve area means that there is now scope for more foreign tourists, but still in moderation. Every visitor must acknowledge the georeserve’s environmental policies when they book (no littering, smoking, or noise pollution) and breaking a rule results in a fine of 3,000 Filipino pesos (around £45).

What Masungi, St Kitts and Rio da Prata show is that when tourism initiatives are managed thoughtfully, and with a creative spark, they can be a tangible force for good for everyone – locals, tourists, governments, tortoises, cloud rats. And while a localised progressive tourism initiative may seem like a drop in the ocean compared with the wider societal and environmental challenges that humanity faces today, the collective impact they can have on the travel and tourism industry (worth $88billion a year, no less) is truly exciting. Like a cobweb threading itself to every corner of the planet, the movement for sustainable tourism is a deceptively powerful force.

**FIVE WAYS TO BE A BETTER TRAVELLER**

**EAT LOCAL**
Ditch the fast food chain and head to the nearest market for some local street food instead.

**GO PLASTIC-FREE**
Bring your own reusable vessel for hot drinks, and a water bottle – and never go anywhere without a backpack, so you can say no to plastic bags.

**RESPECT THE CUSTOMS**
Learning your “hellos” and “thank yous” will go a long way. Likewise, read up on the local customs to ensure you don’t accidentally cause offence.

**FLY LESS, STAY LONGER**
Take fewer flights per year and stay longer – it will help to keep your carbon footprint down. Local businesses benefit from longer stays, too.

**BE A ‘LOW IMPACT’ TRAVELLER**
Consider cycling or using public transport, rather than a polluting car; use eco sun creams if you’re going in the sea; and avoid having your hotel towels washed daily.
WTTC’S 2019 TOURISM FOR TOMORROW AWARDS SHORTLIST

The Tourism for Tomorrow Awards have shortlisted 15 organisations in five categories. Winners will be announced at the WTTC Global Summit in Seville, Spain (April 2-4 2019).

Climate Action Award, for organisations undertaking significant and measurable work to reduce the scale and impact of climate change:
- Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, Aruba (bucuti.com)
- The Brando, Tetiaroa Private Island, Tahiti (thebrando.com, pictured)
- Tourism Holdings Limited, New Zealand (thlonline.com)
- Investing in People Award, for organisations demonstrating leadership in becoming an exciting, attractive, and equitable employer in the sector:
- Lemon Tree Hotels Limited, India (lemontreehotels.com)
- Reserva do Ibitipoca, Brazil (ibitt.com)
- Shanga by Elewana Collection, Tanzania (elewana-collection.com)
- Destination Stewardship Award, for organisations helping a place to thrive and bring forward its unique identity for the benefit of its residents and tourists:
- Grupo Rio da Prata, Brazil (riodaprataeco.br)
- Masungi Georeserve, Philippines (masungigeoreserve.com)
- St Kitts Sustainable Destination

Investing in People Award, for organisations demonstrating leadership in:
- Council, St Kitts and Nevis
- Social Impact Award, for organisations working to improve the people and places where they operate:
- Awamaki, Peru (awamaki.org)
- Intrepid Group, Australia (intrepidtravel.com)
- Nikoi Island, Indonesia (nikoi.com)
- Changemakers Award, this year focused on organisations fighting the illegal wildlife trade through sustainable tourism:
- Kelompok Peduli Lingkungan Belitung (KPLB), Indonesia
- See Turtles, US (seeturtles.org)
- The Cardamom Tented Camp, Cambodia (cardamomtentedcamp.com)
RAILS TO TRAILS
An old plantation railway on St Kitts is now a biking and hiking trail.
WORLD WIDE WEB
Hiking in the Masungi Georeserve, main; an Amihan floating hut, above