



Responsible getaways



From Aruba to the Arctic, these destinations are making environmental practices part of their appeal

1. THE IDYLIC ISLAND ESCAPE

Aruba's Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort sits on 14 acres of beautiful white sand beach. The 104-room resort is stunning and it's also a pioneer in sustainable tourism.

Named the world's most sustainable hotel by Green Globe, a Los Angeles-based sustainability certification agency, Bucuti & Tara became the Caribbean's first carbon-neutral resort last year. Thanks to the largest solar panel installation the government of Aruba will allow, plus smaller measures, such as energy-efficient appliances and purchasing carbon offsets from a local wind farm, the resort has been able to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to net zero.

"Global warming, climate change is a major threat to the islands," owner and CEO Ewald Biemans says. "Everybody needs to make an effort, especially those of us who are in the travel business."

Guests are provided with a reusable water canteen upon check-in, a program launched six years ago that has kept nearly 300,000 single-use plastic water bottles from Aruba's landfills each year (the country currently does not recycle plastic). To further reduce the use of plastics, rooms feature dispensers for shampoo, conditioner and lotion instead of individual containers.

Sustainability initiatives such as these make good business sense – tourism accounts for the majority of Aruba's economy – and appeal to guests, Biemans says.

The resort also organizes monthly beach cleanups, which guests are invited to participate in. Many guests choose instead to lounge by the pool or swim in the Caribbean Sea, but some guests always volunteer, and Biemans is happy to reward them. "In return they get a bottle of Champagne for contributing to the environmental conservation of the island," Biemans says.

For more information, visit bucuti.com.

– DAVE MCGINN

2. SETTING SAIL

Cruising has never been more popular – 30 million people around the world are expected to go on cruises this year, up from 17.8 million in 2009.

But with demand surging, the cruising industry has come under fire for its environmental impact. "All travel companies are part of the problem with climate change, and we've got to be part of the solution," says Leigh Barnes, the chief purpose officer at Intrepid Group, a Melbourne, Australia-based company that operates several brands, including Peregrine Adventures, which operates 10 charter itineraries across Asia and Europe.

Their nine-day sustainable cruise to Thailand, for example, takes passengers to small islands off the country's west coast, including Ko Phayam, Surin Tai and Khoa Lak, where you can swim in the Andaman Sea and then dine with locals in villages.

To promote sustainable cruising, Peregrine uses smaller boats that each accommodate a maximum of 50 passengers, generating less waste than larger boats. The company has been carbon neutral since 2010 thanks to carbon offset projects including fighting deforestation in Kenya and purchasing carbon credits from a wind farm in Turkey. Last year, Peregrine banned all single-use plastics from its cruises, which means no plastic water bottles or straws. Instead, passengers are provided with refillable water bottles. To further reduce the carbon footprint of the company's cruises, Peregrine sources 90 per cent of each trip's food locally.

Through the Intrepid Foundation, a not-for-profit entity set up in 2002, the Intrepid Group is also raising money for a seaweed farm off the coast of Tasmania. By matching donations dollar for dollar, the foundation has so far raised more than \$400,000 for the project. "Seaweed is the fastest growing plant in the world and it's really good at sequestering, drawing carbon out of the atmosphere," Barnes says.

For more information, visit peregrineadventures.com.

– D.M.

3. A NURTURING RETREAT TO NATURE

There are few things more quintessentially Canadian than paddling in local waters, and family-owned Owl Rafting teaches guests the intricacies of whitewater rafting, the finesse of canoeing and the importance – both historical and modern-day – of this country's waterways.

The company has two locations: one in Ottawa, which offers day trips and overnight excursions down the 12-kilometre Rocher Fondu rapids of the Ottawa River. The other, Madawaska Kanu Centre, teaches whitewater kayaking and canoeing in the Madawaska River, just east of Algonquin Park.

Both locations are committed to green practices, including how they prepare and buy food, as well as in the day-to-day operation of their ecolodges. They both use reusable plates and cutlery, have solar-assisted showers and composting toilets (which reduce 90 per cent of sewage waste), grow their own produce, maintain their own livestock and only buy local when they need something they don't have on hand.

In Ottawa, a busier water thoroughfare, the company also organizes an annual shoreline cleanup, with volunteers picking up garbage left behind. "Our business revolves around healthy waterways so we do our utmost to respect them," says Vincent Boyer, a manager with the company.

Visit owlrafting.com for more information.

– GAYLE MACDONALD

4. THE EPIC ARCTIC TRIP

It has been called the polar bear capital of the world and there is no question that Churchill, Man., is one of the best places to indulge in a passion for these cuddly-looking predators in the Arctic tundra, their natural habitat, on Hudson's Bay's rugged coast.

Seal River Heritage Lodge is the flagship ecolodge of tour operator Churchill Wild, which prides itself on a minimalist, sustainable and responsible approach to luxury Arctic safaris that allow travellers to get up close and personal with bears, belugas, caribou, Arctic foxes, birds and countless other Arctic species. Most of the daily excursions, for instance, are conducted by foot to minimize impact on the environment and interference with the wildlife.

The lodge runs primarily on solar power, operates greywater recycling systems, maintains a strict waste, water and compost program and offers locally foraged foods as well as organic produce grown in a recently built greenhouse in southern part of the province. Smaller changes include using biodegradable cleaning products and energy-saving lights and appliances. Each trip is capped at 16 guests to lessen the footprint and resources used.

Churchill Wild's founders and owners, Mike and Jeanne Reimer, have been hosting Arctic safari trips since 1993. In 2015, two of Churchill Wild's three lodges, Seal River Heritage Lodge and Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, became members of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, a collection of hotels dedicated to protecting the surrounding habitats and cultures.

Visit churchillwild.com for more information.

– G.M.

5. A PLACE IN PARADISE

Taking a "green tour" may not seem like a priority after making the long journey to Tetiaroa, an atoll not far from Tahiti, in the South Pacific, but at premium luxury resort the Brando, getting a view of the back of the house is something the staff are exceptionally proud to show off and something they suggest every visitor see.

It's easy to be impressed by the spacious villas, five-star service and unmatched blues of the ocean – this is a place where Leonardo DiCaprio and Barack Obama have each vacationed – but Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design platinum-certified Brando wants guests to have equal admiration for the sustainability efforts of the property.

In French Polynesia, air conditioning accounts for 60 per cent of resort electricity bills; in response the Brando uses sea water air conditioning, chilled water from the ocean's depths, as the cooling source for its 35 villas. The Brando has the largest solar field in the country, which produces two-thirds of the island's energy. Currently a generator, fuelled by coconut oil and other biofuels, is used from midnight to 8 a.m., but the goal is to be on natural power round the clock. Rainwater is collected and used for laundry, glass is ground and used in paving projects and the compost program is so successful the resort sells its extra to a company in Tahiti.

All staff must sign a commitment to the company's environmental charter and if guests want to get around they must do so by bicycle or on foot. Make no mistake, Tetiaroa is paradise and The Brando a once-in-a-lifetime tropical escape. But those who manage the property know without the island there would be no draw and so they make protecting it part of the appeal.

For more information, visit thebrando.com.

– MARYAM SIDDIQI