

WORDS GEMMA GREENWOOD

Hotel brands are raising a green flag, offering a growing number of responsible hospitality options to travellers

Staying Green

Sustainable travel is no longer a niche. It has rocket-launched up the list of top criteria that consumers consider when making booking decisions. Increasingly aware of the environmental and social impact of their travel plans, travellers now consider how destinations and brands are giving back to the planet and its communities.

Many are seeking regenerative travel, with the onus, for instance, on accommodation options that not only preserve, but also improve the locations they inhabit. Hotels are under the microscope as travellers start to scrutinise their values, ethics and sustainability commitments. Recent research by Online Travel Agency (OTA) Booking.com saw 81 per cent of global travellers confirming that sustainable travel was important to them, while 57 per cent said they would “feel better” staying in accommodation with a certification related to sustainable practices.

When it comes to buying business travel, a survey of travel management and procurement leaders across Europe and North America conducted by corporate travel and payment technology platform HRS and the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), found nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) prioritised hotels that have earned a validated sustainability certification, such as LEED. More than half (59 per cent) indicated they elevated the visibility of these hotels in their corporate online booking solutions used by employees to book hotels.

The hotel industry is responding, and even though it has a long way to go, it is making strong headway in 2023. The Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (SHA), which brings together leading hospitality companies from across the globe to tackle key challenges impacting the planet, endeavours to enable the industry to collectively operate responsibly and grow sustainably. Its members include major hospitality



OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: ENVI The Islita is an ecotourism project which is being built in Costa Rica's secluded Nicoya Peninsula

companies such as Accor, Four Seasons, Hilton, Hyatt, IHG, Jumeirah Group, Marriott and Radisson, among others, which comprise 35 per cent of the global industry by rooms which totals 6.2 million across 45,000 properties.

These groups are all pursuing Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategies to varying degrees. However, with many of them operating large portfolios, and often with properties housed in old buildings in urban locations, progress will be gradual.

The trailblazers of sustainable accommodation, therefore, are the smaller, more agile hospitality companies, including startups, who have the luxury of working from a blank sheet of paper. For those operating in markets like the GCC, where many tourism destinations are still considered ‘emerging’, or ripe for development, it’s a dream come true for developers and operators who want to build in sustainable practices from day one.

ENVI Lodges

One startup tapping into the accelerated demand for transformational and regenerative tourism experiences that positively impact destinations and communities is the GCC’s first experiential eco lodge brand, ENVI Lodges.

Its eco lodges, built in remote locations, are cocooned in nature and anchored around experiences such as adventure, wellness, agritourism, cultural immersion, and environmental discoveries.

With projects opening this year in Saudi Arabia, more are planned for the UAE, and another recently signed in Costa Rica – a destination considered a pioneer of responsible tourism. ENVI Lodges is one to watch as it quickly grows its footprint. Keep a close eye as savvy investors, keen to align to government goals that prioritise the development of regenerative and nature-centric tourism projects, are snapping up ENVI’s three accommodation concepts – tents, prefabricated



DID YOU KNOW?

Members of the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance include major hospitality companies such as Accor, Four Seasons, Hilton, Hyatt, IHG, Jumeirah Group, Marriott and Radisson, among others, which comprise 35 per cent of the global industry by rooms.



ABOVE: ENVI's three accommodation concepts include tents, prefabricated villas and pods

villas and alternative pods. They are also acutely aware of consumer appetite for genuine 'eco-friendly' stays and experiences, with the global experiential lodging (glamping) market predicted to be worth US\$3.9 billion by 2027, with a 17.5 per cent CAGR, according to *Businesswire*.

The three upcoming ENVI properties in Saudi Arabia are as diverse as the kingdom. First to launch and due to open by mid-2023 is a waterfront eco lodge on the pristine Red Sea coast featuring 40 pods, a restaurant, a beach club, private pools, an experience hub, a wellness sanctuary, and a kid's club. In Al Ahsa, the largest governorate of Saudi Arabia and one of the top focus destinations of the National Tourism Strategy of the kingdom, travellers will be able to choose from a circuit of three distinct eco lodges. The first lodge, set to open in Q1 2024, is located on a privately owned date farm and will offer 25 biophilic pods with private plunge pools, nestled between palm trees. Al Ahsa is considered one of the largest producers of dates in the world, and the lodge will offer guests the opportunity to discover and experience this very special fruit in various foods, spa and bath amenities, agricultural and wellness activities.

The second and third lodges planned for the next phase will have 40 units each. One will focus on adventure and the other on family beach activities.

ENVI has also signed a master agreement with the Mansour Alsanooni Group to operate multiple eco lodges across the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Mansour Alsanooni Group is owned by Mansour Al Sanooni, a successful entrepreneur and prominent figure in the country's entertainment industry. The lodges will comprise innovative modular pods conceived by Al Sanooni himself, providing a "memorable escape nestled in nature, with an innovative culinary offering, and five-star amenities."

Travellers will also be able to travel outside of the region to experience ENVI's experiential eco lodge offering, with the company recently announcing plans to develop its first property on Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula. ENVI The Islita will comprise 31 guest units made of canvas and wood, as well as 26 low-impact villas that will be sold to individual owners and put back in a rental pool to be managed by ENVI Lodges as part of the eco lodge inventory. Facilities will include jungle lounges immersed in nature where guests will gather to unwind, connect, and enjoy the pool and a communal dining experience. Local chefs and farmers will connect with guests and celebrate food, culture and the natural surroundings of the peninsula.

ENVI Lodges is also a member of Beyond Green, an alliance of eco-hotels established in 2020 by the Preferred Hotel Group.

Kerten Hospitality

With multiple brands under its belt, its properties in the Middle East can be found in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Türkiye and Kuwait, and further afield, in Georgia too.

Kerten Hospitality says that it is carving a niche as a "mixed-use, ESG and lifestyle operator". In layman's terms, this means it is committed to creating destinations and concepts with a purpose – to make a positive impact on communities.

The company, part of the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (SHA), collaborates with like-minded partners and brands across food, retail, entertainment and art to create lifestyle hubs with a focus on "community empowerment and entrepreneurship" and, of course, sustainability.

Brands include The House Hotel, The House Residence, Cloud7 Hotels and Cloud7 Residence, each with its distinct proposition. In Saudi Arabia, the Cloud7 Residence AIUla, now open in the kingdom, is an affordable eco lodge offering bungalow accommodations, locally sourced farm-to-fork dishes, and live music nights with local guests and handicraft artisans.

In Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province of Aseer, The Wellness Hotel Abha by Cloud7, currently under development, is being pitched as "the ultimate

destination for wellness, detox and regeneration". Guests staying in the 89 villas or rooms at this wellness retreat destination will be able to enjoy organic food options, two pools, a gym, a spa and a fully-equipped wellness centre, with mountain views and rich nature as the backdrop.

Also in Aseer, the Cloud7 Rooh Resort in the city of Abha is envisaged as a lifestyle destination with 70 eco villas that aim to "build a community of long-stay guests, digital nomads, and ecotourism travellers". Abha's first eco-resort will offer personalised experiences and connect international travellers to the local community through curated events and exploration of the local neighbourhood and nature. As an ESG-driven destination, Cloud7 Rooh Resort will help create opportunities for local employment and training in hospitality.

Over in Kuwait, The House Hotel Al Khiran immerses guests in the new community of Sabah Al Ahmad Sea City, offering locally relevant curated events designed to connect Kuwaitis and international visitors. Other properties already open include Stayso by Cloud7 hotels in Istanbul and Bomonti, as well as The House Residence Helis Bodrum, all in Türkiye, and the well-established Cloud7 Residence Ayla Aqaba in Jordan.



ABOVE AND LEFT: In Saudi Arabia, the Cloud7 Residence AIUla, now open in the kingdom, is an affordable eco lodge offering bungalow accommodations

BOTTOM ROW: The House Hotel Al Khiran in Kuwait immerses guests in the new community of Sabah Al Ahmad Sea City

Upcoming hotels with a distinct eco lodge offering includes the Cloud7 Camp Jebel Jais glamping resort in Ras Al Khaimah, which will mark Kerten's UAE debut. This

mountain property with 30 units all built from local stone, will offer guests the chance to explore ecotourism tracks and authentic Emirati hospitality and Bedouin culture.

The first ENVI lodge for Saudi Arabia is set to open in Q1 2024 on the Red Sea coast and is located on a privately owned date farm. It will offer 25 biophilic pods with private plunge pools. The second and third lodges planned for the next phase in the kingdom will have 40 units in each property.



LOOK OUT FOR



MANTIS

A pioneer of curated hotels, eco lodges and waterways since 2000 when founder Adrian Gardiner, a global entrepreneur and conservationist, opened the first sustainable conservation tourism project in South Africa, Mantis is now spreading its wings in the Middle East. Look out for two new properties, one in the UAE and the other in Bahrain.

Opening this year, Saij Mountain Lodge in Ras Al Khaimah is a "protected and sustainably managed mountain resort" with 35 eco lodges built from natural materials. Guests staying at the Mantis Collection mountain lodge will be able to take part in guided treks in the emirate's mountain ranges as part of an activity programme that helps them reconnect with nature, reassured that water conservation, energy efficiency and minimal waste generation programmes dictate how this retreat is operated.

Hot off its heels and slated to debut in 2024, Mantis will open a property on Bahrain's Hawar Island, which is a 45-minute boat ride from the mainland and recognised by UNESCO for its natural history. Guests will stay in one of 75 overwater villas with direct access to the sea and surrounded by a wildlife sanctuary, enjoying the island's biodiversity, which includes sand gazelles, Arabian Oryx, multi-coloured coral reefs, and endangered dugongs. The island is also a birdwatchers' paradise, attracting various migratory birds,

particularly Socotra Cormorants. Facilities will include five dining concepts, an adventure park, a bike track, a waterpark, meditation spaces, and other social areas for adventure and sports enthusiasts.

EARTH HOTELS

From urban resorts to remote retreats, Earth Hotels, opening soon in UAE locations including Ras Al Khaimah, are described as the place to "wake up" and get a "fresh perspective". These design-conscious hotels for the "earthly traveller" will be boutique but easygoing, built with minimal environmental and social impact while creating spaces to 'just be'.

The founders describe themselves as ecowarriors, but without the judgement, with Earth Hotels built with a "sustainable state of mind", using technology to minimise waste and repurpose existing spaces, all with a creative twist and a sense of play. Recycled materials, low-energy lighting and solar power are standard. Earth Hotels will offer a range of experiences for travellers in pursuit of "authentic culture, mind-boggling nature and boundary-pushing adventures", carrying the slogan, "let your time on Earth be as wild or chilled as you want it to be".

At Earth Hotels, guests will be able to "Reboot. Relax. Recharge (or party all night long)." The operators are keeping details on the concepts under wraps, but look out for Earth Hotels on the coast, in the mountains, and other locations in between.



The Mysk Moon Retreat glamping destination in the Mleiha desert is set in the shadow of Fossil Rock and is a first-of-its-kind luxury glamping destination comprising 10 single-bed domes, eight of which have private pools, four family tents with private pools, and two single-bed tents.



Shurooq

The Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq) is a driving force behind the transformation of Sharjah's tourism offering, with a focus on eco-hospitality and environment-led projects. Its Sharjah Collection, operated by Mysk, has played a key role in putting the emirate on the map as a promoter of sustainable and responsible tourism, with properties revealing the essence of Sharjah by delicately balancing luxurious accommodation with the protection and conservation of culture, heritage and the environment.

The most recent addition was the Mysk Moon Retreat glamping destination in the Mleiha desert. Set

in the shadow of Fossil Rock amid the dunes of Mleiha, this is a first-of-its-kind luxury glamping destination comprising 10 single-bed domes, eight of which have private pools, four family tents with private pools, and two single-bed tents.

Each unit is self-sufficient and fitted with essential amenities, including a private barbeque area, in addition to a lobby and a common area. It is part of the Travel Sustainable Programme, which means Shurooq has taken significant steps to ensure stays are eco-friendly and sustainable. It uses 100 per cent renewable electricity throughout the property to offset some of its carbon footprint, while guest accommodations feature water-efficient toilets and showers, and

waste recycling bins. Also, most food served is locally sourced and organic.

Other Sharjah Collection properties include The Kingfisher Retreat, inviting guests to discover a unique world of conservation in one of the UAE's most diverse ecosystems, Kalba. It is set on an island off the east coast of Sharjah, where birds, gazelles, turtles, and crabs can be found abundantly amidst mangroves. Guests arrive by a private boat, stay in one of the 20 luxury tents with private pools, and enjoy bespoke dining and curated onsite and offsite experiences including visits to the island's conservation centre. The tents are set up around 30m from the shoreline and raised from the ground by almost one metre to preserve the flora and fauna.

The third property in the collection is Al Badayer Retreat, a picturesque desert resort in the sweeping dunes of central Sharjah, comprising private tents and traditional accommodation that is evocative of an Emirati home. It offers handcrafted dining options, private spa rooms, a large family pool and an amphitheatre.

And there is more to come. The Lux Collective, a luxury hospitality management company, is set to operate two upscale eco resorts in Sharjah's scenic central and east coast regions this year. The nature-inspired LUX*

Al Jabal Resort in Khorfakkan, located on a spectacular terrain hill overlooking a beach, will feature 45 eco-friendly units and suites that open out to expansive views of aquamarine waters and a jagged mountain range. Shurooq's commitment to sustainability is evident in the eco-friendly cube-shaped accommodation imported from Finland. Made from a special variety of Finnish pine wood, it is validated by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, a global sustainable forestry initiative.

LUX* Al Bridi Resort in Al Dhaid meanwhile will be located next to the newly-opened Sharjah Safari, the largest conservation park in the region and the largest wildlife safari in the world outside of Africa. A partnership with Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA) ensures the care and conservation of the wild species inhabiting the reserve. Also scheduled to open this year, the property will feature 35 luxurious private tents, as well as a LUX* Me Spa, a gym, a pool, a restaurant and a kid's club.

Shurooq has also unveiled plans for a first-of-its-kind tourism project in the region known as Nomad – fully-equipped travel trailers that aim to offer close-to-nature travel experiences for families and adventure enthusiasts. **BT**

ABOVE: The Kingfisher Retreat in Sharjah's Kalba region

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Mysk Moon Retreat glamping destination in the Mleiha desert



US\$3.9 BILLION

The global experiential lodging (glamping) market by 2027

17.5%

The CAGR of the experiential lodging (glamping) market worldwide by 2027

*According to Businesswire