

Top Eco-Destinations Around the World

With Independent Traveler's Sarah Schlichter



future. About 460 miles of reefs and lagoon waters are dedicated no-fishing zones, which has allowed many endangered species of fish to repopulate the area. The Palau Conservation Society manages nearly two dozen conservation areas and encourages sustainable development to protect the islands' fragile ecosystems.

Costa Rica – Costa Rica is practically synonymous with the term “ecotourism,” and for good reason. Misty cloud forests, black sand beaches, and rushing river rapids offer outdoor activities for both casual nature enthusiasts and hardcore adventure

travelers. A dazzling array of creatures live in Costa Rica's national parks and wildlife refuges, including monkeys, sloths, crocodiles, manatees, herons, sea turtles, and poison dart frogs. Environmentally conscious travelers have their choice of eco-friendly accommodations; the Costa Rican Tourism Institute and Key to Costa Rica maintain lists of green hotels, resorts, and lodges.

Norwegian Fjords – Their remote location and strict environmental regulations have helped preserve the pristine beauty of Norway's famous fjords, with their snow-capped mountains, tumbling waterfalls, and crystal-clear waters. Visitors can go hiking or biking over the rugged terrain or take a scenic boat ride through the towering fjords. A wide variety of wildlife lives here, including eagles, seals, porpoises, and seabirds. Along with the region's natural attractions, the fjords are also home to many small fishing villages where local cultural traditions have survived for hundreds of years. As an international leader in environmental policy, Norway has taken care to protect its unique coastline by regulating the fishing, whaling, sealing, and petroleum industries. For more information, visit the Norwegian Embassy website at www.norway.usembassy.gov.

Kerala, India – The small state of Kerala is one of India's most unspoiled corners, home to hundreds of unique animal species and nearly a quarter of the country's 10,000 plant species. The nilgiri tahr, an endangered mountain goat, takes shelter in Rajamala National Park, while elephants, bison, and wild boar roam freely within the Lake Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. Many of the state's forests are now protected, and tourist officials are encouraging environmentally responsible travel to the area. Thenmala Ecotourism is the first “planned ecotourism destination” in

India. Nature trails, educational facilities, and adventure activities are offered with the overarching goals of ecological sustainability and economic benefits to the local population.

Kenya – Kenya is best known for its wide savannas teeming with lions and elephants, but most travelers don't know that it's also home to mountains, lakes, rain forests, deserts, and beaches, each with its own unique ecosystem and wildlife. Kenya's incredible natural diversity is protected in some 50 national parks and reserves across the country, from the virgin rain forests of the Kakamega Forest Reserve to the wildebeests who migrate to the Maasai Mara National Reserve every July and August. On the coast, travelers can walk down pristine white beaches or go diving along colorful coral reefs. All tourism occurs under the watchful eye of Ecotourism Kenya, which works to protect the local environment through community outreach and education projects. The organization also rates lodges throughout Kenya based on their environmental policies.

Top 10 Eco-lodges and Green Hotels

These facilities were chosen from thousands around the world for their spectacular locations, outstanding guest amenities, and extraordinary commitment to conservation. Please note that room rates are subject to change.

San Francisco, California: Orchard Garden Hotel – The smoke-free, 86-room Orchard Garden Hotel in downtown San Francisco opened in November 2006 as the only hotel in the city to be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council for environmentally friendly design. Its energy-saving electric key card system automatically stops power to each room when a guest leaves and turns it back on when he or she returns. The hotel also uses energy-efficient light bulbs, and rooms are equipped with low-flow toilets, organic bath products, and recycling bins and are cleaned with chemical-free products. Doubles from \$150 per night. www.theorchardgardenhotel.com.

South Andros Island, Bahamas: Tiamo Resorts – For a tropical getaway that's both luxurious and eco-friendly, head to the private beach bungalows of Tiamo Resorts, tucked away on the pristine Bahamian island of South Andros. The resort's hot water is 100 percent solar powered. The buildings were designed to minimize erosion and maximize airflow and were constructed by locals from wood taken from sustainable forests. Tiamo uses composting toilets and water treatment systems to minimize waste – and even gets guests involved by neatly packaging plastic products to be taken home and recycled (there are no recycling programs in the Ba-

What is Green Travel?

What does “green travel” – ecotourism, sustainable tourism, responsible travel – really mean? At the heart of the matter is the importance of protecting the natural and cultural environment of the places you visit. That means conserving plants, wildlife, and other resources; respecting local cultures and ways of life; and contributing positively to local communities.

Top Five Destinations for Ecotourism

From lush jungles and colorful coral reefs to sprawling savannas and fabulous fjords, these five regions encompass some of the earth's most distinctive ecosystems. Each place wasn't only blessed with extraordinary natural resources; those resources are being cared for. These five destinations were chosen not only for their unique biodiversity but also for a local commitment to maintaining the beauty and integrity of these places through sustainable tourism. And remember – visitors must do their part as well, as the parts of the earth with the greatest ecological diversity are often the most threatened.

Palau – Long before it was featured on the 10th season of *Survivor*, the island nation of Palau was recognized as one of the world's foremost diving destinations. In the crystal-clear sea just off the coast is a colorful underwater wonderland, featuring more than 500 species of coral teeming with some 1,400 kinds of fish. On land, travelers can wander along unspoiled beaches or go trekking through dense jungles. Palau's remote location in the westernmost corner of Micronesia has helped to shield both its natural resources and its cultural traditions from the detrimental effects of mass tourism, and the locals are working to make sure their island paradise stays pristine well into the

hamas). Staff are always eager to educate guests and the wider community about the resort's environmental efforts. Doubles from \$570 per night including meals, activities, and airport transfers. www.tiamoresorts.com.

Chichester, England: Old Chapel Forge Bed and Breakfast – The beautifully restored 17th-century house and chapel of Old Chapel Forge provide an eco-friendly stay in the heart of England's Sussex countryside. Old Chapel Forge has been awarded the highest rating from the Green Tourism Business Scheme for its environmental programs, including the use of solar panels to heat water and partnerships with local farmers and merchants to provide locally grown, organic meals. Other green efforts include composting, grey water recycling, and guest education. Doubles from \$100 per night including breakfast. www.oldchapelforge.co.uk.

Mtito Andei, Kenya: Campi ya Kanzi – Get up close and personal with Africa's "big five" mammals (Cape buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, and rhinoceros), and support the native Maasai community at Campi ya Kanzi, a luxurious safari camp in southern Kenya. The camp and its 400 acres are owned by the Maasai people, who work with the camp's Italian hosts to preserve the local wildlife and provide a personalized and sustainable experience for visitors. Up to 14 guests at a time can be accommodated in six thatched-roof tented cottages, all constructed of local materials without cutting down any trees. Electricity and hot water are solar-generated, and waste is composted or recycled. The menu includes organic eggs, milk, and vegetables, and all meals are cooked with eco-friendly charcoal. Guests pay an extra \$30 fee per day to support local conservation efforts. Doubles from \$860 per night including meals, activities, airstrip transfers, and laundry. www.maasai.com.

Bar Harbor, Maine: Graycote Inn – The Graycote Inn offers all the comfort and charm of a traditional New England B&B with an eco-friendly twist. The inn has streamlined its resource use with energy-efficient lighting, high-efficiency furnaces and air conditioning units, and water conservation fixtures on all toilets, showers, and sinks. The inn has established comprehensive composting and recycling programs. Breakfast options include organic coffee and locally grown produce. And the inn's location – just a five-minute drive from Acadia National Park and within walking distance of Bar Harbor's shops and restaurants – makes for a low-gas getaway. Doubles from \$85 per night including breakfast. www.graycoteinn.com.

Queensland, Australia: Binna Burra Mountain Lodge and Campsite – Deep within the subtropical rain forest of Queensland's Lamington National Park is the Binna Burra Mountain Lodge and Campsite, an ecolodge where guests can enjoy hiking, bird watching, abseiling, and numerous environmental education programs. Accommodation options include safari-style canvas tents or more luxurious log cabins. The lodge has

restored the land to its original rain forest state and encouraged the growth of native plant species. Recycling, composting, low-flow water fixtures, and the use of energy-efficient lighting are just a few of the lodge's environmental initiatives. Binna Burra makes regular contributions to research projects within the national park as well as to other environmental organizations. Doubles from \$46 (tents) or \$92 (cabins) per night. www.binnaburralodge.com.au.

Siena, Italy: Tenuta di Spannocchia – Looking for your own place under the Tuscan sun? Try Tenuta di Spannocchia, a working organic farm that produces its own meat, eggs, grains, vegetables, honey, wine, and olive oil. Guests can rent their own farmhouse for a week or stay for a few nights in one of two bed and breakfast facilities. Visitors are welcome (but not required) to learn about and get involved with the farm's day-to-day operations, which rely on sustainable farming techniques.

Spannocchia is home to one of Tuscany's first natural waste water treatment systems, and guests are strongly encouraged to participate in the farm's composting and recycling programs. Housekeeping and linen changes are done once a week. Doubles from \$97 (farmhouse, based on weekly rental) or \$108 (bed and breakfast) per night. www.spannocchia.com.



Villa at Castello Di Spannocchia

Rurenabaque, Bolivia: Chalalan Ecolodge – Bolivia's Madidi National Park is one of the most biologically diverse areas of the planet, and a stay at the Chalalan Ecolodge puts you right in the heart of it. Guests stay in Tswana-style cabins built from environmentally friendly local materials, with balconies overlooking the jungle. The lodge was founded in the 1990s by members of the indigenous community of San Jose de Uchupiamonas to support themselves and protect the beauty and eco-diversity of their homeland. The lodge is still community owned and operated. Environmental provisions include solar-powered lighting, a liquid waste treatment system, a water purification system, and a composting program. Doubles from \$187 per night (based on three-night stay) including meals, activities, and airport transfers. www.chalalan.com.

Bayfield, Wisconsin: Pinehurst Inn – During your stay in Bayfield, Wisconsin, you may see the owners of the Pinehurst Inn trundling around town in their 1982 Mercedes Diesel, which runs on used vegetable oil from local restaurants. This is just one way the innkeepers show their commitment to sustainable living, a commitment that's also visible in every aspect of life at Pinehurst. The 19th-century inn boasts energy-efficient appliances and lighting, solar panels to heat water in the newly built Garden House, and organic cotton linens and towels in all rooms. Locally grown organic food is served at breakfast. Non-toxic cleaning products are used inside, while outside the innkeepers refrain from using pesticides, herbicides, and commercial fertilizers anywhere on the grounds. Doubles from \$99 per night including breakfast. www.pinehurstinn.com.

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico: Hotelito Desconocido – The 29 thatched palafitos of Hotelito Desconocido are built on stilts overlooking a natural estuary in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The resort runs on solar energy during the day, and at night is lit only by candles. Vegetables come fresh each day from the resort's own organic garden, and biodegradable bathroom amenities are supplied in all accommodations. Guests are welcome to participate in the resort's sea turtle protection program, accompanying the resident biologist onto the beach at night to watch the turtles lay their eggs. Doubles from \$312 per night including breakfast.

Many people hear the terms "green travel" or "ecotourism" and picture someone sleeping in a treehouse in the jungles of Borneo or canoeing down the Amazon. But this type of eco-adventure is just one end of the green travel spectrum. You don't need to sacrifice creature comforts or go off into the middle of nowhere to be a green traveler; you can visit big cities or small villages and stay in small eco-lodges or luxury hotels. All that's required is an effort to preserve and protect the environment of the place you're visiting – and it's easier than you might think.

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