

green tourism



Green Matters

Hotels are stepping up their eco-initiatives -- proving that big or small -- everything matters in efforts to make this world a greener, better place to live

BY PERCY ROXAS

At Hansar Samui, the general manager rents an unattractive wasteland beside the hotel, and convert it into an organic veggie and aquaponic fish farm. In Khao Yai, Kirimaya Resort develops a five-acre farm of organic produce that will eventually supply 100 percent of the resort's vegetable and herbs requirements. In Bangkok, hotels such as Four Seasons Bangkok and Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square set up mini "farms" on their rooftops. Elsewhere, similar efforts are happening. In the last few months alone, Thai hotel operators appear to be stepping up their green activities just as they should be. As Tanu Pumprakobsri, senior director of engineering at the Four Seasons Bangkok, puts it, "Any effort on going green -- big or small -- matters. Even if they are little things, we are at least doing our bit to save the world." *Lookeast Magazine* takes a look at some current examples of green initiatives making news in the kingdom:

Island Ideals

Many people are commenting about how the rush of tourism developments on Koh Samui seem to be ongoing with utter disregard for the environment and hurting the island. But in fact, there is no absence of counter efforts by others to minimize the impact of their projects. Policies are in place to make Samui a "Green Island," and many tourism stakeholders -- in particular, hotels and resorts -- are paying more than just lip service to the idea of going green.

Among these hotels is Hansar Samui, headed by general manager (GM), Indra Budiman. The resort has rented an unattractive wasteland near the hotel and converted it into an organic veggie and aquaponic fish and farm.

"This half hectare of land adjacent to the hotel was previously used as a dumping ground," says the innovative and creative GM. "In addition to making this land more attractive, we have put it to excellent use by growing organic veggies. In fact, we are now in the second season of planting." By using intercropping, and recycling of dried leaves and refuse, they make sure the farm is operating in a very environmentally friendly manner.

The organic farm grows herbs (ginger, galangal, turmeric, lemongrass, rosemary, holy basil, thyme, tarragon, and Italian basil); vegetables (morning glory, Chinese kale, several varieties of lettuce, green cabbage, bunching onions, and green pai tsai); fruits and root crops (sweet potatoes, sweet corn, baby corn, pea eggplant, cucumber, round egg plant, seedless yellow water melon, seedless red watermelon); as well as tomatoes, bell peppers, chilies, and papaya. Indra says they plan to add other varieties later, as the hotel plans to sell the organic veggies to other hotels on the island, and donate the revenues to local temples and schools.

The produce from these farms is now being used to create fresh chemical-free food for guests and staff. The hotel's cooking classes also benefit from the farm, as participants make use of the fresh produce in their cooking lessons. Meanwhile, the fish farm -- two large ponds previously used as water tanks -- is currently breeding 3,500 tilapia fish. The fish, harvested every three months, are used in the staff restaurant, providing nutritious protein for the the hotel staff.

What makes the project even more significant is that it involves the entire hotel team in the green effort. Each hotel department has their own plot within the farm. Each department is provided with seeds to plant, and they engage in a friendly competition for the best farming results. The winning team receive a sustainable certificate award.

Hansar Samui is not alone in "going green" programs like these, of course. Many other hotels and resorts are already implementing -- or at least planning -- similar organic farm programs. In some, pro-active green efforts already encompass entire operations, from back-of-the-house systems to front-of-the-house procedures.



Mountain Fresh

In Khao Yai, the Kirimaya Mountain Resort takes advantage of its natural sanctuary and year-round temperate weather to further its green initiatives. The first stage of its organic project involved developing a five-acre farm and planting it with organic produce that will eventually supply 100% of the resorts' vegetable and herbs requirements.

Overseeing the project is Executive Chef David Bedinghaus, who recently joined the Kirimaya team. With over 30 years of experience (15 of them in Thailand), David's wealth of knowledge in both Thai and international cuisine requirements make him a perfect choice for this project. He has been changing his chef's hat for gumboots because his hands-on approach literally has him working and planting crops alongside the team.

"I am thrilled to have such a unique, exciting project to develop," says David. "Organic produce is such a huge trend in the industry right now and to grow the produce in the resort, it doesn't get any fresher than that. This is just the first of the many levels and layers of green initiatives we are planning for the resort -- more is coming."

Khao Yai's rich fertile soil and temperate climate make it ideal for an organic farm. "Already, 10 staff work full time on the farm, where the 'seed-to-harvest' period can be from 45-60 days depending on the crop," says David.

The farm will use a "drip irrigation" system close to the surface of the soil, which will control both the moisture content of the soil as well as limit weed growth without using chemicals. Organic fertilizer will be used on the plants. The plant blocks are 1.2m-wide and 18m-long with varied crop spacing depending on which plants are used. Each plant will be grown in four blocks, which are harvested one week apart to give continuous supply until the end of the season.

Green Certified

Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square's unique take on green farming is the 130sqm-Spirulina farm that the hotel started on its rooftop recently. This project, says Asita Vimolchaichit, the hotel's resident manager, will not only absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and help save energy by reducing heat absorption through the roof, but also will produce more than two tons of highly nutritious vegetarian protein per year that the hotel can use as raw ingredients and dietary supplements.

The effort is consistent with the hotels track record as a "green hotel." Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square has been an active partner of 'Green Globe' (2006-2007), and 'Earth Check' (2008-to present) -- two leading international environmental certification programs adapted to the tourism industry.

Unlike many resorts in Samui, Phuket, or Chiang Mai, the hotel has limited land and therefore widescale organic farming is out of the question. Thus, the hotel also puts a lot of focus on other areas besides running a totally green day-to-day operation. These include organizing fund-raising charities in support of tree planting -- in conjunction with group umbrella Accor's Planet 21 global environmental campaign -- and other related activities.

Likewise, it is active -- as are many other hotel operators -- in trying to involve both hotel guests and the outside community in all its "going green" efforts.

Rooftop Concerns

The Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok is another hotel is constantly trying to make the environment a top priority.

Being a city property, the hotel also doesn't have much of a land to start a big organic vegetables or fish farm. It has a small rooftop garden -- not so much as to supply all of the hotel's vegetables and herbs requirement -- but just to do their "small" share in helping save the planet. The rooftop garden grows chilies, papaya, aubergine, lime, lemon balm, sweet basil and other herbs. At the same time, it keeps the hotel cool, and cut down its energy consumption.

In fact, on closer scrutiny, even without the rooftop garden, the hotel has already reduces its water and energy bills because of its environmentally conscious programs. Its water-saving schemes save the hotel up to Bt2,250 every day in water bills and its energy bill by Bt17,500 per day.

To cite examples, the five-star hotel is using a special valves in all hotel taps to reduce the volume of water while maintaining the pressure. It recycles water used by guests to irrigate the garden, and it is finding alternative uses for things that others just throw away. But that's not all. In various areas of operations, green practices, big and small, are being implemented.

In the same vein, the hotel is also active in educating both the hotel staff and their families on the importance of caring for the environment.

"Since the hotel industry consumes a lot of energy, it is essential for us to give back to society," Tanu Pumprakobsri, its director of engineering, puts it succinctly.





'Plan Bee' for the City

Proving that there are many other areas where hotel operators can carve a unique "green" niche and make a difference, the Onyx Hospitality Group recently launched "Plan Bee," a program for conserving the Asian Honeybee (*Apis cerana*) from extinction. Pesticides threaten these insects, widely used in farms around Thailand.

"Onyx aligns its values and business practices with a sense of connection to the environment," says Lisa Thomas, Onyx's CSR director, explaining the company's interest in biodiversity. "This CSR-project works as a means of giving back to local communities."

The plan is to first introduce urban beekeeping in Onyx properties (such as the Amari hotels and residences) and then extend the program into rural beekeeping, teamed with education provided for local farms. The program was launched at the Oriental Residence Bangkok, selected as the first location for Onyx's urban beekeeping, which makes it the "first beekeeping serviced residence or hotel" in Bangkok.

So far 60,000 bees have moved to the rooftop of Oriental Residence Bangkok and started their work. Bryan Hugill, Hacknologist from Raitong Organics has set up the hive and explains the process of making honey. The hive is emptied from the wax yearly (the next time in May 2014), and then honey is squeezed out from the wax combs. He said beehives are easy to maintain and the insects do not sting unless not provoked. Guests in the Oriental Residence can join "the buzz" by arranging a visit to see the hive and soon by enjoying delicacies made from their own homemade honey in Café Claire and Mandopop, as well as at hotel breakfast.

BEYOND these examples there are other green pursuits that most hotel operators are already involved in. There are currently 100 properties designated as "green hotels" in Thailand. But even those that are not designated yet are obviously aware that it is essential to manage their own actions as well to be independently evaluated via a certification program.

Let's take it from Thirayuth Chirathivat, chief executive officer of the Centara Hotels & Resorts, one of Thailand biggest hotel company: "Each of our hotels and resorts operates according to strict environmental standards," he says. "With the company rapidly expanding both in Thailand and overseas, this deeply embedded philosophy has become more important than ever."

Thirayuth says the environmental performance of each Centara property is monitored against the policy, benchmarking the indicators against baseline and best practices. The group's environmental and social impact is also measured through the EarthCheck Online Self Assessment.

"All results are assessed and verified by third party auditors on an annual basis," Thirayuth says, "and the program means involving staff, and whenever possible guests, with the result that there is a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and that everyone feels they have a personal contribution to make.."

For sure, much remains to be done – and by everyone. These green examples prove that each of us can help in creating a truly sustainable tourism industry in Thailand, and contribute to the effort of saving the planet in each our own way. We can start in our own backyards.



Green Meetings

A recently launched initiative by Hilton Worldwide sees Millennium Hilton Bangkok, along with the group's other 3,900 hotels around the world, introduce an innovative meeting and seminar program. The objective: to offset carbon emissions. The initiative, which started Oct. 30 at the Millennium Hilton Bangkok, will make Hilton Worldwide the first and only major multi-brand hospitality company to make sustainability a brand standard at each of its hotels worldwide.

"Sustainability is a priority to Hilton Worldwide and a central part of how we do business," says Dirk De Cuyper, regional general manager for Thailand and general manager of Millennium Hilton Bangkok. "For us, it's not just about saying we are committed to sustainability, it's about taking action. This program gives organizations and individuals a sustainable choice for their conferences, meetings or social events. By offsetting carbon emissions at no cost to our customers, together we're able to give back to the environment and benefit important renewable energy projects in the region."

The program covers all events such as meetings, conferences, weddings, and other social occasions. (*Ed's Note: More on this in our next issue, which will focus on "Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Conferences."*)

Green for Guests

In line with green initiatives, many policies are already in place throughout hotels around Thailand. For example, Kee Resort & Spa Phuket uses SelecTV technology, which dramatically reduces the need for paper. Guests can get most of the information they need during their stay at the resort via the TV, including the latest promotions, and they can even check their bill in real time, without the hotel having to print a single piece of paper.

Other energy-saving technology includes highly efficient LED lighting, which can be controlled by a switchboard in guest rooms – using up to 90% less power and lasting much longer than conventional lighting. Even the hotel's kinetic elevators store the energy they produce when going down, then use that stored energy to power the elevator when going back up. Behind the scenes, batteries and other items are recycled, and heat-exchange technology saves energy by using the heat exhaust from the air conditioning system to heat water.

All these green ingredients are great examples of how green technology can reduce energy use while actually enhancing the guest experience, and also keeping costs low



Biking for Change

Ramada Plaza Menam Riverside recently launched "Bike for a Greener World" and offered 30 bikes to selected staff as an alternative ecological means of transport. Additionally five bikes were allocated to hotel messengers and office errands. The plan is to offer more bikes for staff and introduce biking as a recreational activity for the hotel guests. The initiative supports the "Green Transportation Year", declared by The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Their shared goal is to "stimulate this market segment and the ideas of creating dedicated bicycle routes."