

# The Land of Eco

How Australia helped set the standard for sustainable tourism.

BY COSTAS CHRIST

**W**ITH ALL THE green media coverage these days, it's tempting to think that sustainable tourism is just the latest fad. But the truth is that it is more evolution than overnight sensation, and one country has been at the forefront of that process for the last two decades: Australia.

Back in 1991, I sat at a table with a dozen tour operators, scientists, and conservationists from around the world, gath-

ered in a farmhouse outside Washington, D.C., to discuss a new vision for tourism. It was the inaugural meeting of The International Ecotourism Society, and it took us two days to agree on the definition of ecotourism that is still in use today: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." The challenge at the time was coming up with an example to fit our definition; none of us knew of a real

working model anywhere.

While the tenets of ecotourism were slow to take root in most of the world (including the United States), the Aussies grabbed the idea and ran with it in their own country. Less than six months after we officially defined the term, Australia held the first World Congress on Ecotourism in Brisbane and formed Ecotourism Australia, a private-sector-driven organization that launched one of the first and most successful

**Rooms that rock:  
Longitude 131°.**



## GO GREEN

green-certification programs for tourism in the world. That it was developed by travel businesses for travel businesses led to a highly credible effort and wide support. By 1993, the state of Victoria had produced the country's first ecotourism plan, and a year later, the Australian government became the first in the world to commit sizable funding – \$10 million – to developing a national ecotourism strategy. This led to a series of travel-industry training and education programs throughout Australia, aimed at educating businesses and travelers about what needed to be done: better energy conservation, waste reduction, recycling, and “leave no trace” operations. The result was widespread awareness of how tourism could be an opportunity for protecting Australia's fragile natural environment, rather than a threat to it. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, one of the most popular tourist attractions in the country, became a focus of attention, introducing new innovations such as giving green incentives (operating permits for 15 years instead of 6, for example) to tour companies that actively adopted ecotourism practices in the park. The return on this investment has been increased conservation and improved protection of the largest coral reef on Earth.

As ecotourism gave birth to sustainable tourism – taking the principles of going green out of the jungle and bringing them into the mainstream – Australia has continued to set standards in best practices. In

the last three years, the country has twice been a winner of the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards – the sustainable tourism “Oscars,” hosted by the World Travel & Tourism Council (“Go Green,” March/April 2009) – and is again a finalist in 2009.

All of this means that when you are planning a trip to Australia, there is no reason why you cannot have your green cake and eat it too: Many of the country's top resorts, hotels, and tour operators deliver the goods, and not at the expense of the environment.

**ABERCROMBIE & KENT IS ONE OF THE LEADERS.** The company may have pioneered luxury travel on the savannas of East Africa, but it has now brought its ethic of helping protect nature all the way to northern Queensland, where the roughly 463-square-mile Daintree Rainforest houses one of the greatest concentrations of primitive flowering plants in the world, along with endangered species such as the nearly six-foot-tall, flightless cassowary bird. By teaming up with Rainforest Rescue, **A&K's Australia** division is working to help secure conservation for more of the coastal lowland tropical forest, which stretches from the Daintree River to Cape Tribulation, representing one of the most significant ecosystems on the planet.

The most important question for **Big Five Tours & Expeditions** is not where to go – Australia is one of its top destinations – but rather where to stay once you get there. In

2008 the company launched the Spirit of Big Five Foundation (I serve as its green ambassador) to support sustainable tourism and the local hotels and resorts that take it to heart. One itinerary brings guests into the red center of the country at **Voyages Hotels and Resorts' Longitude 131°**, an Advanced Ecotourism Certification, 15-tent luxury camp that overlooks Uluru (the Aboriginal name for Ayers Rock). Longitude 131° is further proof that high-thread-count sheets, chef-prepared dinners under the stars, and top vintages can be part of safeguarding nature and supporting traditional culture. In addition to minimal-impact tents designed to maximize natural air flow for cooling and heating, water-use reduction in an arid climate, and recycling throughout the property, Voyages launched the Mutitjulu Foundation, in partnership with the local Anangu Aboriginal community, providing nearly \$1 million to date in funding for improved health care, education, and poverty alleviation.

Since its founding in 1963, **Horizon & Co.** has run trips to almost every part of the globe, including down under. The Australia by Mercedes itinerary weaves through the Blue Mountains outside Sydney and dips into the famed Hunter Valley, where you'll stop off at wine estates and stretch your legs on hiking trails that meander along dramatic escarpments. It is all wrapped within a company policy of Sustainable Tour Operator Principles, which include environmental management practices (think reduce, reuse, and recycle), carbon reduction on the road (that Mercedes already gets great mileage, but by offsetting all emissions through Horizon's partnership with Climate Friendly, your entire trip can be carbon neutral), and supply chain management (sourcing local products such as farm-to-table organic foods, local handicrafts, and art), all aimed at delivering direct economic and social benefits to local communities.

Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck said, “People do not take trips ... trips take people.” Through sustainable tourism, innovative companies are taking people on trips that deliver on the promise of protecting our planet, so that current and future generations can continue to enjoy the wonders of travel. And we have Australia to thank for a lot of that. VI

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

What to know about your vacation's green side before you go.

No matter where you go, the tour operator or hotel can and should be an active part of the sustainable tourism transformation that is rewriting the rules for how we travel: giving back to destinations, supporting local communities, and protecting natural and cultural heritage, all while delivering top amenities and authentic experiences. Before you book, here are three questions to ask your travel

advisor that will help you know if your trip is really green:

- **How does this company help protect nature?**
- **How does it provide direct benefits to local people?**
- **What are the company's environmentally friendly practices?**

Even just five years ago, it would have seemed odd to pose these kinds of questions to a travel

advisor or tour company. Not any more. Many hotels and tour operators list this information on their websites (for example, whether they contribute directly to conservation projects, hire native guides, provide reusable water bottles, and the like). Today, they should be able to answer these questions easily or find someone who can. If not, seek another company that gets it.