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See the world, save the planet, by traveling green

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For the Journal-Constitution

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From the moment Angela Smock stepped into her room at Sandpearl Resort & Spa last year, she noticed differences compared with a typical hotel room.

Instead of being hit with a blast of cold air, the temperature was set at a comfortable level, and the air conditioning turned off when she left the room. The sheets weren't changed daily. The lamps and other lights had energy-efficient bulbs.

And those were just the visible signs of the green initiative at the Clearwater, Fla., resort, which opened in August.

"I think you definitely walk away saying, 'Wow, they're doing all these things to save energy, to reduce waste consumption, but it's not affecting me negatively,'" said Smock, a corporate meeting planner for FHLBank Atlanta, who stayed at the resort for five days in December. "My travel experience is actually better because I feel like I contributed something. You walk away saying, 'Wow, I can pick up some of these tips at home.'"

The Sandpearl Resort is part of a growing trend: More companies — from airlines to hotels to tour companies — are paying attention to being green, as vacationers place an emphasis on the environment and conservation while making travel plans.

According to Trip Advisor, 26 percent of respondents to an annual trends survey said they will be more environmentally conscious in their travel decisions this year. The concern also contributed to an increase in visits to national parks last year, with more than 275 million visits, up 3 million from 2006.

The trend has accelerated significantly since 2005, said Ray Burger, president of Pineapple Hospitality, a Missouri-based company that holds conferences on the topic and has two Web sites ([www.ecorooms.com](http://www.ecorooms.com) and [www.ecosuites.com](http://www.ecosuites.com)) advertising about 40 hotels and resorts that have met eco-friendly criteria.

From boutiques to major chains such as Hilton Hotels, Hyatt Hotels, Kimpton Hotels, Marriott and Starwood, environmental initiatives are being established or expanded. Walt Disney World, which last year promoted Animal Kingdom executive Beth Stevens to oversee its environmental strategy, is considering building eco-properties.

Thomas Kostigen, co-author with Elizabeth Rogers of "The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time," says Disney is recognizing that people are seeking ways to maintain the same environmental values they have at home while on the road.

The biggest changes are energy-efficient lighting and linen and towel reuse programs, which Burger estimates

have been implemented in about 70 percent of U.S. hotels.

"We're just seeing hotels come out of the woodwork wanting to implement green operating processes, green initiatives," Burger said. "On the scale of one to 10, I would say we're at about a three or four in getting things implemented and executed, industry-wide."

But he admits that it can be difficult for vacationers to determine which properties' efforts are legitimate or just a marketing ploy.

"There's a lot of green-washing going on right now. There's a lot of confusion not only amongst hoteliers but [also] a lot of confusion about what constitutes a green hotel," Burger said.

Several programs recognize green efforts. New and updated properties are seeking certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program. Only seven hotels are certified — Gaia Napa Valley Hotel & Spa was the first LEED Gold certified property — and 161 projects are in that process, according to the U.S. Green Building Council. That includes Sandpearl, which expects this summer to be the first property in Florida to receive LEED certification.

The Green Hotels Association lists its member hotels. The Green Key is an international eco-label for tourism facilities. The nonprofit Green Seal group certifies products used by hotels, government agencies and others. Several states also sponsor efforts.

One way to determine whether a property is focused on the environment is to see if there's a statement about its efforts on its Web site, Burger said.

"It should be pretty obvious that the hotel has implemented some initiatives," he said.

The effort isn't limited to hotels. Some owners of rental homes are updating their units.

In Orlando, Florida Spirit Vacation Homes is installing compact fluorescent light bulbs and solar pool heaters, using e-brochures and offsetting electricity usage with green credit certificates that fund renewable energy sources such as wind power and solar energy. The company's efforts are recommended by Discover Vacation Homes, an association representing nearly 13 percent of all vacation homes in Central Florida.

While companies are trying to do their part, travelers also need to carry some of the values they have daily into vacation mode, Kostigen said.

"Why do we need to change and be bigger pigs while we're on the road?" he said.

Even if the hotel isn't certified as eco-friendly, vacationers can choose to consider the environment by speaking up. Request that toiletry bottles not be thrown away unless empty or your sheets or towels not be washed daily, Kostigen said.

"You don't do it at home; why do you need to do it while you're on the road?" he asked. "Be more firm yourself and not just rely on the hotel to take care of that for you."

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

**Here are 10 tips, from before you leave home through the end of your trip.**

### **1. Unplug away**

Give your appliances a rest. "They're using energy while you're away and not even in the home," Thomas

Kostigen said. That also applies to unplugging adapters on the road when your phone and other technology is done charging.

## **2. Check for leaks**

Put a couple of drops of food coloring in your toilet to determine if it leaks. If the color is still there when you return, there's no problem. If it isn't, you have a leak. Most homes leak 10 percent of water consumption, he said.

## **3. Lose the pounds**

Be mindful of how much you're packing – it not only will cost more money if you exceed the limit set by many airlines, but also adds weight to airplanes. For every additional 10 pounds per traveler, it's 350 million gallons of jet fuel per year, according to "The Green Book."

## **4. Limit the paper**

Use electronic tickets instead of paper tickets, or print yours at home on recycled paper. Visit online travel sites for maps and details about attractions, restaurants and more, and only print pages you need, instead of buying a guidebook. Use the luggage tag that came with your bag instead of paper tags provided by the airlines.

## **5. Rethink getting around**

Rental car companies with hybrids exist, and major chains are offering the vehicles, Kostigen said. For example, Hertz's Green Collection features vehicles that get at least 28 mpg. If that's not possible, select a fuel-efficient compact instead of a sport utility vehicle. Some companies offer free rent-a-bike programs, and some taxi companies are using hybrids. And there's always public transportation.

## **6. Limit the light**

Put your home lights on timers, and turn off the lights when leaving the hotel room. If every home in America used a timer for 12 hours a day instead of letting them stay on during vacation, it could result in energy savings of \$187 million, according to "The Green Book."

## **7. Hydrate responsibly**

Take refillable personal water bottles, instead of buying a plastic bottle every time you need to quench your thirst.

## **8. Avoid the crowds**

Try visiting destinations in the off-season when there isn't as much congestion, and as a result, there's less wastewater and garbage, Kostigen said.

## **9. Give a hoot, don't pollute**

Particularly on campsites and beaches, be mindful of what you leave behind. "Try not to live in excess when you're on vacation," he said. At national parks, visitors receive bags to collect garbage and take it with them out of the park, which National Park Service spokesman David Barna said also could show guests how much trash they're producing daily.

## **10. Purchase carbon offsets**

Airlines such as Virgin Atlantic and Delta are offering the programs, as well as online companies such as Travelocity and Expedia. An extra fee (for Delta, it's \$5.50 for domestic round trips and \$11 for international travel) typically goes to nonprofit funds focusing on the environment. Kostigen said the effort is in embryonic stages, and travelers need to make sure it's clear how the money is being used.

**Sources:** Thomas Kostigen, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

### Information

- Green Hotels Association, [www.greenhotels.com](http://www.greenhotels.com)
- U.S. Green Building Council's LEED Program, [www.usgbc.org/leed](http://www.usgbc.org/leed)
- Eco Rooms/Eco Suites, [www.ecorooms.com](http://www.ecorooms.com), [www.ecosuites.com](http://www.ecosuites.com)
- Green Key, [www.green-key.org](http://www.green-key.org)

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