

# Ecotourism and green building define the 21st-century

By Scott H. Lawson

Consumers of all kinds are increasingly viewing their purchases in a new way — through green-colored glasses. Ecotourism, sustainable travel and green buildings have entered the thoughts and lexicons of travelers worldwide. And a recent survey by the audit firm **KPMG** found that a majority of consumers were willing to pay more in order to go green.

The survey, released at the end of 2007's holiday shopping season, found that 88 percent of consumers described themselves as very concerned about the environment. The survey further found that 74 percent indicated that they purchase environmentally friendly products, while a majority reported that they're willing to spend more for environmentally friendly items and that they make a concerted effort to support retailers with a green reputation.

One example of this is the explosive growth of ecotourism. Ecotourism, as defined by the **International Ecotourism Association**, is "responsible

travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." According to *New Scientist* magazine, "this sector of the travel and tourism industry is growing at a stunning 10 percent to 30 percent per year and now accounts for around one in five tourists worldwide."

As these numbers indicate, travelers are willing to put their money where their environmental conscience is, and the hospitality industry should take note. Going green can mean making green in the form of increased profits.

For example, a growing percentage of hotels, B&Bs, inns, motels, city and state parks, elegant hotels, resorts and business hotels are taking steps toward greener operations. These include modest efforts like including towel rack hangers and sheet-changing cards, which encourage guests to consider using their linens more than once. According to the **Green Hotels Association** such efforts can "save 5 percent on utilities alone. At least 70 percent of guests can be expected to participate." The effects of these utility savings are immediate, and the programs are easily put in place at little cost.

While small efforts to go green can yield benefits, more ambitious green decisions will reap even greater results. Use of green building methods when developing new hotels, B&Bs, resorts, motels and business hotels can have a considerable impact on both the long-term utility costs associated with managing a facility and the appeal to green consumers.

Going green presents opportunities for businesses in the hospitality sector to cut costs, work more efficiently and ultimately improve their bottom-line results. For example, energy costs, a large factor in any hospitality operation budget, can be reduced through environmentally beneficial, low-energy consumption

methods. Green building can have a significant impact on these costs. According to a study authored by **Gregory H. Kats**, the director of financing for energy efficiency and renewable energy at the **U.S. Department of Energy**, green buildings reduce energy consumption by 25-30 percent on average.

Businesses in the United States spend \$107,897,000,000 annually on energy for their facilities, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. A 30 percent cut in this cost would represent \$32,369,100,000 annually in bottom-line savings for businesses in every region and sector of the country.

In order to measure the value of green hotel facilities, however, it is also necessary to consider the cost of building green, as compared to traditional building practices. There is a widespread misconception that green building is significantly more expensive than conventional building methods. While building green may come at a higher initial cost than traditional building methods, green investments are easily regained over time. In *Sustainable Building Technical Manual: Green Building Design, Construction, and Operation*, estimates that the initial construction of green buildings typically accounts for only 2 percent of the total cost, with operations and maintenance accounting for 6 percent. The long-term cost savings, however, can lead to an ROI in between 10-20 percent

through reduced operating costs according to **Steve Blossom Consulting's Kit Cassingham**. Cassingham goes on to point out that one estimate shows up to "\$50-75 per square foot savings over the average 20-year life of a building — more than 10 times the 2 percent extra cost for green buildings."

Further, according to the **US Green Building Council**, the construction industry's leading green building rating organization, the costs of green building to a recognized compliance level are also relatively modest. The USGBC's LEED

Green Building Rating System is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-performance green buildings. LEED recognizes four different levels of the application of green building practices to new and renovated buildings. The highest level of compliance earns a platinum certification for the building, while the lowest threshold of compliance earns a certified recognition. A Level 1 (certified) certification adds only about .45 percent to the cost of a building, while silver and gold certifications (Levels II & III) add only about 2 percent. To earn platinum recognition, a building will likely increase in price approximately 6.5 percent. The average premium paid for green buildings is slightly less than 2 percent, or between \$3-5 per square foot, according to Kats. The US Green Building Council currently recognizes more than 30 hotel/resort facilities certified at various LEED levels in the United States, with project size varying between a modest 10,714 square feet to facilities as large as 523,743 square feet.

The future of hospitality looks bright — and green. Hotels, B&Bs, resorts, motels and business hotels of all sorts and locations are taking advantage of green practices, from asking guests to reuse towels to building new LEED-certified facilities. The savings available make it clear that the more you invest in green practices and building, the richer the rewards. Your customers will thank you, your accounting department will thank you, and, ultimately, the planet will thank you for going green. ■

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