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It ain't easy being green – there quite a few criteria that must be adheared to. So beware the claims of hospitality chains, writes Stephanie Mee.

Idyllic... but for how long?



At the edge of the protected Cardamom Mountain range in Cambodia lies a small lodge surrounded by jungle and flanked by the banks of the Tatai River. The six small cabins at the Rainbow Lodge do not have hot water or air conditioning, there are no toiletries on offer, and guests are offered only a few choices for dinner, which they must decide upon in advance. In addition, water and electricity are in short supply. So why then is the Rainbow Lodge consistently booked out?

The answer is simple: eco-tourism.

Now, more than ever, there is a huge push to go green. Thus, many businesses have adopted the moniker 'eco-friendly', 'green', or 'organic' to entice tourists. From hotels to restaurants to laundry facilities, everyone seems to be jumping on the environmentally-friendly bandwagon these days.

There are, however, many businesses that claim to be eco-friendly, but are simply using the term as a marketing ploy. This practice is called "greenwashing", and it is particularly problematic because it sets out to deliberately deceive consumers, and undermines legitimate ecotourism businesses.

Greenwashing is exactly what Rainbow Lodge owner, Janet Newman — a former criminal barrister from Birmingham, England — wanted to avoid.

Janet went to Cambodia as a volunteer for an environmental preservation group working in the Botum Sakor National Park. Her work with the group inspired her to create a place where tourists could appreciate the unique nature of the area, yet still give back to the local community.

"Before we began building, I researched how to build accommodation that would have the least impact on the environment," she says.

"I borrowed books from the Royal University of Phnom Penh and spoke to other business owners who were doing similar projects."

Janet also considered how her venture could best benefit the local community.

The Rainbow Lodge opened its doors in January of 2008 and now features electricity powered by solar panels, a filtered rainwater system, meals made from fresh local produce sourced from the onsite garden and the local market, and staff made up of local villagers. The building materials were sourced locally and erected with help from locals in the nearby Tatai village and neighboring provinces.

The explosion of eco-friendly businesses can be seen across Southeast Asia, and Bali is no exception. Hundreds of hotels, tour companies, spas, and restaurants claim to be environmentally friendly and socially responsible. However, as of yet, there are no national certification standards for eco-tourism in Indonesia. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether a business is truly adhering to internationally recognised standards for ecotourism.

The International Ecotourism Society defines eco-tourism as, "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". In general, there are two main types of eco-tourism — community based eco-tourism (CBET) and private sector eco-tourism.

"In 1997 CBET was defined as tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account," Janet says.

"It is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the

community and local ways of life.

"Private sector eco-tourism therefore (in my view) should try to emulate this definition, but of course is not owned by the community and profits are not actually given back to the community."

An important component of CBET is that local communities must be aware of how to set up sustainable business practices that address their particular needs.

I Madé Suarnatha, the Executive Director of the Wisnu Foundation — an environmental NGO in Bali — says: "Bali is a small island with limited resources that must be used wisely and with equity."

Madé believes that to create sustainable tourism in Bali, there must be community participation and an integration of culture, economy, and the environment.

"Every place has its own unique culture, so eco-tourism efforts must be sensitive to the area," he says.

"For example, in Bali, the *subak* system of organising water usage already exists. This is a very community-based concept, and very in tune with nature. With eco-tourism it is important that villages realise their potential, and what they already have so they can manage it and create a good relationship between their home and the guests that visit it."

Many tourism ventures in Bali are planned and managed by large corporations and wealthy entrepreneurs from outside Bali. The Balinese people often have little say in this development, instead, becoming tourist attractions rather than the owners and implementers of tourism projects in their own villages.

This issue was the driving force behind the formation of the *Jaringan Ekowisata Desa* (JED), or Village Tourism Network. The JED was designed and is managed by four Balinese villages. Their aim is to raise funds for conservation and promote cross-cultural understanding. The villages have complete control over their eco-tourism projects, and receive administrative support from the Wisnu Foundation.

The villagers in the JED network invite tourists to stay in their homes so that people can see the way that Balinese people live on a day-to-day basis. Tourists can explore the natural areas around the villages with local guides, eat Balinese meals prepared by the villagers with local produce, and take part in ceremonies and daily

tasks. All profits from the trips go towards community development and conservation projects.

"By implementing eco-tourism, the villages develop a way of life in which they can share their identity and their natural surroundings with others. This is also an opportunity for two-way learning, instead of having the tourist and the object, this is a situation where both groups are active subjects," Madé says.

The Wisnu Foundation recently released a free publication — *Bali Desa Wisata Ekologis, or Bali Ecological Tourism Village*. The book was created to be a guide and inspiration for other villages that want to create ecological tourism ventures in their areas. The information in the book functions as a set of standards for responsible eco-tourism in Bali.

"The concept of tourism should not just be about survival," Madé says.

"It is about structure, balance, and harmony. It is not about selling what you have, but rather sharing what you have with others. Then, what you have is still there when you need it. It is also about doing small things to slowly influence bigger things."

As Madé points out, ecotourism strategies differ depending on the culture and situation of the people in an area. In Cambodia, one of the main issues affecting eco-tourism efforts is a lack of education about environmental responsibility. To combat this, the Rainbow Lodge organises clean-up days at local sites, gives demonstrations in schools about cleaning up rubbish, and provides and manages rubbish bins in Tatoi town and local sightseeing spots.

In Bali, one of the main issues is trying to spread the message that local people do not have to sell their land or exploit nature for economic gain. Madé is optimistic that more villages will see the value in creating sustainable ecotourism models.

He believes that by sharing information and communicating with local villages and the global community, the people of Bali can conserve their culture and natural resources so that they will still be there for future generations. He sums up this idea with a short story: "A wise man once said to me, if I have a penny and I give it to you, then you gain but I have nothing, however, if I give you knowledge you gain and I lose nothing." 