



At one with nature

As more high-end hotel groups listen to their guests and embrace increasingly sustainable ways of doing things, to what extent is the five-star experience changing? Elly Earls speaks to **Vishnee Payen** of LUX* Hotels and Resorts, **Amber Marie Beard** of Six Senses, and **Jane Mackie** of Fairmont to find out about the challenges and opportunities of fusing luxury and responsible behaviour.

Foie gras and imported San Pellegrino might once have been the hallmarks of a luxury hotel stay, but as guest expectations evolve to embrace more sustainable ways of holidaying, it's no longer certain that they will always be so. Indeed, many high-end hotel groups are already demonstrating that luxury doesn't have to equal opulence and, further, that their definition of luxury, 'a pleasure obtained only rarely', actually goes hand in hand with the sustainability ethos, bringing benefits to guests, local communities, the environment and hotels' bottom lines. The only challenge now is to convince the rest of the industry.

It's a well-known phenomenon that travellers increasingly expect hotels across the spectrum to operate

responsibly. Not only does this encompass managing resources like electricity, food and water, it also extends to looking after employees and contributing to local communities whether that's through donations, beach cleans or education programmes.

"Guests expect operators to behave responsibly at all levels," says Vishnee Payen, sustainability and CSR manager at LUX* Hotels and Resorts, which prides itself on offering a 'lighter, brighter' sort of luxury, encapsulated in its 'Tread Lightly' initiative, through which the group aims to offset 100% of the carbon emissions created during guests' stays.

"They expect to see that environmental impacts are mitigated or avoided; they expect to see how

businesses value their human capital and the local community; they expect to see responsible purchasing policies and, above all, ethical ways of doing business."

And responsible behaviour is not just about keeping guests happy; luxury groups like Fairmont and Six Senses have followed sustainable practices for a quarter century largely because it makes good business sense to do so.

"When the group began 25 years ago, sustainability wasn't a major point of concern in the industry – especially in the luxury sector. However, Six Senses continued to support these practices because we knew it made sense – environmentally, socially and financially," explains Amber Marie Beard, vice-president of sustainability at Six Senses Hotel Resorts Spas, which is regarded

as a pioneer in sustainable practices industry-wide with its resource conservation programmes, responsible purchasing philosophy and focus on giving back to its properties' local communities, among many other sustainability initiatives.

Environment at the core

At Fairmont, where sustainability has also been a core value for more than 25 years and which recently became the first hospitality company to reduce its CO₂ emissions by 20% below 2006 levels through its partnership with WWF's Climate Savers Programme, it's a similar story.

"Sustainable operations add tremendous value from a colleague, guest and local perspective," says Jane Mackie, vice-president, Fairmont brand. "By creating efficient practices and providing alternative uses for resources such as waste, water and energy, we definitely see a positive ROI impact. Additionally, the support of local communities adds tremendous benefit to our hotel operations. By engaging with local residents, we can work together on achieving important environmental goals and creating efficiencies that result in an all-around gain for everyone."

Plus, responsible businesses attract like-minded investors as well as impacting positively on staff retention. "Sustainability is just good business," Beard summarises.

But does operating sustainably truly equal good business for groups that pride themselves on offering uncompromised luxury? For Beard, a resounding yes, although she's the first to admit that not all of her industry colleagues agree.

"Six Senses delivers unique, once-in-a-lifetime experiences to our guests in everything from our beautiful locations, comfortable accommodations, bespoke service, delicious food, wellness activities and spa, and crafted adventures for guests – all without compromise to sustainability," she stresses.

"However, unfortunately, there is still this confused perception [looking at the industry more widely] that 'sustainability' is equal to 'sacrifice', meaning that you can't have a truly luxurious experience if you have to be



LUX* Belle Mare operates under the company's 'Tread Lightly' initiative.

responsible. The irony is that sustainability is often sacrificed in luxury because it is seen as costing too much."

For Payen, this argument simply doesn't stand up. "Luxury groups have an even greater responsibility [than economy hotels], as all activities of the business should be at the same level as the products and services provided," she notes. "Moreover, luxury groups are the ones who can afford to take initiatives towards sustainable development. We cannot create services at the cost of the people and the planet. It must go hand in hand."

Of course, that's not to say that responsibility can be successfully

wedded to uncompromised high-end facilities, as Six Senses put it on its website, without challenges – cost being one.

"Like all businesses, the key challenge is the cost implications," Payen acknowledges. "Even if the motivation is present, there is a great need for financial support to make it happen."

Managing expectations

Another challenge is how to meet guests' expectations of a luxury operation, according to Beard. "This is most noticeable in food and beverage," she says. "The expectation for imported bottled water and products like foie gras



Honey harvest time at the Fairmont Waterfront.

will not be fulfilled on our properties and for some these are hallmarks of luxury.”

At Six Senses, instead, water is treated, purified and bottled on each property with 50% of the proceeds donated directly to local water charity projects, avoiding the necessity of importing it, and in turn reducing transport emissions and packaging waste.

For Beard, this doesn't compromise the luxuriousness of the Six Senses experience in the slightest. “Food items that are either unsustainable or unethical are just not our idea of luxury,” she explains. “Six Senses luxury lies in our guests experiencing something rare and different, memorable experiences, and we deliver without compromise to our values.

“Sustainability does not necessitate sacrifice. What it does require is a different frame of mind. There are a few definitions of 'luxury' and it is most typically includes opulence. However, luxury also means 'a pleasure obtained only rarely'.”

At Fairmont, Mackie describes this as 'a truly personalised and meaningful experience', but it comes down ultimately to the same concept and goes down incredibly well with guests.

“Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly for our 'Bee Sustainable' programme [through which bee apiaries are installed at Fairmont properties, providing bees with a home to pollinate gardens and parks, as well as giving chefs the opportunity to harvest the honey and use it in on-site bars and restaurants] and our focus on regionally inspired and sourced menu items,” Mackie remarks.

The group's focus on giving back to the local communities around its properties also ties in with this different definition of luxury. “We place great emphasis on ensuring that we encapsulate each destination and create a memorable guest experience by offering many activities and services within the local environment,” Mackie explains, adding that examples include partnering with local children's hospitals and participating in beach clean-up days.

At Six Senses, this local focus is equally important. “One of our core values is 'responsible and caring'. We believe it is important to care for our hosts and the



Responsible and caring: hotels are partnering with local communities to take care of the environment.

local communities where we are based, and we walk the talk by working closely with local farmers, fishermen and artisans as well as schools and community groups,” says Beard.

Each property also has its own Sustainability Fund, comprised of 0.5% of revenues, 50.0% of water bottle sales and the sales of in-villa soft toys, which is used for social and environmental projects at a very local level, including constructing community buildings, providing water purification systems in schools and hospitals, and providing funding for teachers in local schools.

Operating beyond the now

“In addition to the 'Sustainability Fund' our Six Senses property teams also spend a lot of time in the local communities providing 'sweat equity' on projects; for example, teaching English or yoga, or participating in local charity events,” Beard adds.

The equivalent at LUX* is the group's Ray of Light platform through which team members participate in CSR initiatives.

Looking to the future, the next challenges for all three luxury brands will revolve around not only improving their own already impressive sustainable practices (while Fairmont are looking to focus on waste diversion and water management, LUX*'s future plans plan include improvements in energy management, water optimisation and community well-being, and Six Senses want to increase its focus on community

engagement and self-sufficiency), but also encouraging the rest of the industry to follow suit.

“Our focus is really about pushing the agenda of sustainability in the industry further through transparency,” Beard says. “The hotel industry is slowly starting to benchmark and report on sustainable performance; however, not necessarily in the tier of hotels that we operate. More data sharing needs to happen, and we are targeting increased levels of performance and sophistication in reporting to share.”

Again, one of the key challenges she anticipates is the associated initial costs. “The industry at large still doesn't have a good repository of case studies that demonstrate the value of sustainability and that can make it a challenge at times. However, it's all evolving, and the industry is starting to see a slow shift to most luxury hotel groups starting to implement green-building certification, some simple sustainable operations practices and/or social responsibility initiatives. So with any luck it should get easier as time goes by,” she predicts, concluding that at Six Senses itself, the group's key priorities will remain the same, regardless.

“Our goals for enhancing sustainability at Six Senses will not impact our ability to provide our guests with the uncompromised luxury that we are known for; rather, it will just be a continual improvement as well as positive response to the expectations of our guests.” ■