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How sustainable are wellness resorts?

By **Matthieu Provino** · Sep 3, 2024 9:00am

Sustainability

Horwath HTL

Wellness Resorts

Six Senses



Six Senses has been a pioneer in merging sustainability practices and discerning experiences. Pictured: Six Senses La Sagesse, Grenada. (IHG Hotels & Resorts)

The hospitality industry contributes to 3 percent of global carbon emissions, with hotel operations responsible for 1 percent and construction of new hotels accounting for the remaining 2 percent. Additionally, the industry generates approximately 289,700 tons of waste annually, which includes around 79,000 tons of food waste. As concerns over environmental impact and corporate responsibility grow, hotels globally are adopting multiple "green" initiatives aimed at reducing their carbon footprint, conserving resources and improving community engagement.

Numerous "green" certifications have emerged over the last decade and this can be noted as a step in the right direction for hotels that desire to add sustainability in their ethos and make commensurate efforts. Nevertheless, such certificates come at a cost and some challenges towards understanding and implementation that hamper these platforms seem to be widely accepted. As a matter of fact, properties can get discouraged not only with costs associated for obtaining these certificates (ranging from annual fees to various audits fee and potential construction expenses) but also with the extensive lists of measures/best practices (staff training, sustainability criteria to follow) necessary to comply with the certification requirements. Some owners may also question the intrinsic value of a certificate and perceive it only as a marketing tool. As a result of the wider disconnect between sustainability experts and hotel operators, majority of the brands are formulating their own unique policies and guidelines for establishing sustainability practices throughout their chain/network.

In order to understand the context, relevance and adaptation of sustainability practices in wellness resorts, we have researched two leading entities in the wellness hospitality segment, differentiated by their size, programming and target clientele. They are:

- **Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas**, a member of the IHG Hotels and Resorts with 26 properties in 21 countries across the world.
- **Fivelements Retreat Bali**, a holistic wellness retreat in Indonesia focused on traditional healing, nutrition and aligning urban lifestyles with nature.

Sustainability at the Six Senses: A Structured Corporate Approach

Six Senses, a known luxury retreat brand, has been a pioneer in merging sustainability practices and discerning experiences by implementing innovative operational measures and demonstrating a strong commitment to environmental conservation. The brand's sustainability standards have been recognized by Global Sustainable Tourism Council with some initiatives even extending beyond this purview. Below are some of the key best practices followed by the brand and across all resorts, extending from the development phase up to day-to-day operations.

- **Sustainability recognized as a core brand pillar:** Messaging is key and the Six Senses brand has put tremendous focus on showcasing its conservational and sustainable achievements both on online and offline platforms. Each resort features a dedicated public space where the sustainable achievements of the property are highlighted and also allows guests to participate in some of these efforts.

- **Resource allocation at all organizational levels:** The brand has created a company-wide structure for sustainable operations with dedicated allocation of human and financial resources towards this focus. Each property employs a dedicated sustainability manager or director, who also forms a part of the property's executive committee, further aligning the operational goals towards sustainable outcomes.
- **Sustainability-linked performance goals and Key Performance Indicators:** General managers at Six Senses properties are assigned sustainable goals, which are reviewed and assessed during performance reviews. By integrating the term in the brand's central messaging and ethos; sustainable operational guidelines are extensively prepared, distributed and tracked with KPIs for all employees across all levels and functions of the company.
- **Rigorous audits and training:** In order to ensure consistency and standardization of sustainable practices, the Six Senses brand conducts its own rigorous audit at the property level, led by the property's sustainability manager/director and supported by corporate resources, for a period of five days. This process also includes general training sessions and meetings with all department heads.
- **Dedicated sustainability-centric fund:** The brand has also constituted a sustainability fund that receives contributions from all its properties for deployment. Owners of each Six Senses properties contribute 0.5 percent of total revenue to this sustainability fund. This money is used towards environmental and social causes unique to the property and the surrounding communities, as well as targeting major environmental concerns such as marine life conservation in the Maldives.

Understanding how sustainability goals fit into the corporate as well as the operational nuances gives an in-depth perspective of how large and organized brands are approaching this topic.

Fivelements Retreat Bali: Holistic Wellness and Sustainability

Fivelements Retreat Bali has been chosen as it uniquely embraces a holistic sustainability approach (i.e., creating activities, experiences and offerings that drive demand from guests as well as sustainable outcomes). In most cases the guests are a key part of the sustainability offerings, making them extremely unique. The operational and wellness focus of the property is rooted in the Balinese philosophy of Tri Hita Karana, which highlights three core principles: respect for God, nature and humanity. These principles shape every aspect of the resort's operations, emphasizing environmental and social responsibility.

- **A circular micro-economy:** The hotel has established a comprehensive water recycling system, where water from guest showers and other public areas is treated and reused for watering the gardens and ponds. The irrigation system sustains a 3,700-square-meter herb and vegetable garden, which further supplies approximately 35 to 40 percent of the kitchen's ingredients for the resort's plant-based restaurant. Additionally, the resort composts 95 percent of its organic waste, turning it into manure for its garden.
- **Uplifting local cottage industries:** Approximately 90 percent of all the amenities and raw materials consumed by the Fivelements Bali are sourced within a 10-kilometer radius, heavily depending on local resources and minimizing the carbon footprint associated with logistics and transportation.
- **Charitable initiatives:** Fivelements Bali donates 0.5 percent of its total revenue to three key charities. These organizations focus on educating young children, supporting orphanages and re-developing a pine forest in the Kintamani region with more varied and enriched flora.
- **Sustainable waste disposal:** The resort's location and the surrounding village suffer from the lack of a sustainable waste disposal services, leading the villagers to resort to burning household waste in large quantities and then polluting the neighboring rivers. As an initiative, the Fivelements Bali has partnered with local agencies for sustainable waste disposal, the resort now undertakes the responsibility of effective waste management for the surrounding village as well as the property.
- **Training and education on sustainability:** The team at Fivelements is dedicated to spread knowledge of sustainability practices and educate locals on the various conservation and environmentally friendly practices. As an example, the team engages the village locals each year to clean up beaches on Earth Day, clearing out tons of plastic.

With a nifty and curated approach to sustainability, the Fivelements Retreat Bali pushes the boundaries of inclusion of guests, local communities and third-party organizations to achieve sustainable outcomes. The resort further enhances these touchpoints by communicating to each guest their carbon footprint and consumption during their stay making a conscious effort towards awareness of these modern-day challenges.

Key Highlights

Our interviews with industry professionals and sustainable organizations shed light on an apparent gap within the industry when it comes to implementing and measuring best practices at a property level. Both organizations (Six Senses and Fivelements) have opted for a more curated approach to tackling various aspects of operational sustainability. There is a lack of clear and standardized metrics (sustainable KPIs) for hotels and resorts, which discourages them from participating. The tourism industry does provide high-level targets such as reducing carbon emissions to nearly zero, but the measures and steps undertaken are still being debated.

In essence, green certifications may provide a guiding path for hotels and wellness resorts, however, there are still challenges in developing widely accepted best practices or measured outcomes of success, which would make them more tangible and attractive. Positive outcomes in operations can be achieved by ensuring synergy between various hospitality and wellness operators, common sharing platforms for operational best practices, corporate strategies, and measured financial outcomes. These will be key in defining the future of sustainability in wellness hospitality.

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