

Sustainability

Hotels stay focused on sustainability despite pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many changes for hotels, but in terms of eco-friendly initiatives, sources said they remain committed to sustainability while meeting social-distancing and cleaning standards.





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GLOBAL REPORT—The COVID-19 pandemic has led to new social-distancing measures and disinfecting tactics that have changed how food and other hotel amenities are served, but for the most part, the pandemic hasn't led hotels to bring back less sustainable items, such as single-use plastics.

In fact, it's led to more sustainable initiatives for some companies. Properties at Costa Rica-based Cayuga Collection no longer print menus, guest books or any other in-room printed materials and are now using QR codes, said Hans Pfister, co-owner and president of [Cayuga Collection](#), via email.

"We got rid of everything that is not really needed," he said. "But most importantly, everything has become even more local in terms of purchasing, and that is a good thing. We make more of our things from scratch. Sauces, ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, hot sauces in the kitchen. Furniture and décor in our woodshops. Having to live on a zero-income budget made us more creative and innovative. We use all our resources more carefully, from paint to office supplies."

Staying sustainable

Cayuga had to close some properties at the onset of the pandemic and has reopened some. Pfister said reopening those hotels without thinking about sustainability in the current environment was "never negotiable."

"Sustainability is not a trend or a marketing tool for us. It is part of our DNA. We walk the talk," he said. "I implemented the first sustainability program in Costa Rica in 1995 and once you really buy into this, there is no going back. When we prepared for reopening and worked on the new protocols, we decided that they had to be 100% safe, not 'kill' the guest experience and not compromise our sustainability efforts. I think we did a pretty good job. And when we think sustainability, we think people. When we closed, we closed and reopened, we always took care of our staff and the communities where we operate."

Pfister said his hotels have been able to stay away from single-use plastics throughout the pandemic aside from having to increase the use of plastic gloves, which he hopes is temporary.

"Social distancing does not require plastic. We wear reusable masks that do not require plastic. We use the same EcoLab cleaning products and locally sourced organic biodegradable bathroom amenities in dispensers as before. No additional plastic used there," he said. "(There's) no need for plastic bottles nor plastic straws. That does not make things safer. Washing glasses and plates and using our compostable bamboo straws works just fine."

Kate Mikesell, VP of global corporate responsibility at Hilton, said via email that the company remains committed to cutting its environmental footprint in half and doubling its social impact by 2030 through an initiative called Travel with Purpose 2030 Goals.

"We have continued to prioritize our sustainability initiatives throughout the pandemic, including incorporating sustainability and corporate responsibility considerations into our new standard operating procedures," she said. "For example, our new meetings and event standard, EventReady with CleanStay, specifically focuses on ensuring that meetings are safe, flexible and socially responsible. EventReady establishes responsible meetings as the new standard for all Hilton meetings and events, including locally and sustainably sourced food-and-beverage options, low-waste meetings, community impact activations and donation of all excess edible food, where legal."

Last year, [Hilton](#) implemented several initiatives to reduce the use of plastics, which included eliminating plastic straws, Mikesell said. The company remains committed to these initiatives and reducing other disposable items. For example, when guests request single-use cutlery, Hilton recommends that its hotels provide biodegradable options*.

"We are all trying to navigate the new realities of our operations, but we're proud of the steps that Hilton has taken to look at our operations with a

sustainability lens,” she said. “Where possible we’ve sought to avoid using unnecessary single-use items unless where truly necessary from a health and safety perspective.”

At the online Designscape conference in August, hoteliers and designers said the COVID-19 pandemic has actually “[catapulted sustainability and environmental consciousness](#) even farther up the hotel industry’s agenda,” HNN’s Terence Baker writes.

Blanche van Berckel, founder and CEO of Vous Hotels & Retreats, said everyone needs to be on the same page at a hotel to create it, open it and operate it in a sustainable way.

“(Sustainability) is a circular thing,” she said. “It has to start from an investor point of view. If they do not care, it will not filter down to management. I think most people could see the demand from customers, but hoteliers still have a role to create awareness in the culture.”

Sustainability is about people

Pfister said sustainability has always been about people, and that includes investing in his employees. He added that tenet was strengthened when the pandemic hit.

“Today (our hotel employees) are performing at their best, motivated and committed 100%,” he said. “This is because they were on career paths before, continued to grow during and are now excelling after the pandemic-related closures. We had to let go of some staff but paid them their severance pay. Many of those we are currently hiring back. We had to cut work time and compensation for our staff by up to 50%, but salaries are going back up now.”

Cayuga’s properties are up and running again in Costa Rica and getting back on track because of the local market, Pfister said.

“I did not expect this market to respond so well here in Costa Rica, but they did. They love our hotels. And I guess this also makes this all much more sustainable,” Pfister said. “Local market means less travel emissions. But of course, we are also excited to see international tourists again and happy to help them offset their carbon emissions by planting trees.”

Clarification, 17 September 2020: This story has been updated to better reflect Hilton’s policy on single-use plastics.