

CELEBRATING GREEN RESORTS

By DR ZALINA SHARI

TOURISM plays an important role for many local economies in tourist-attracting tropical countries and small island states.

Often, resorts in the tropics are located in highly sensitive environments and it seems unlikely that this trend will fade away. This will most certainly be followed by inevitable effects which these establishments will have on the environment.

In these cases, the conservation of natural resources and more broadly, the sustainable development of host communities, will depend on the way the tourism industry evolves. It is up to resort planners, designers and operators to ensure that the impact on the environment is minimal.

The need for the tourism sector to incorporate the principles of sustainable development has been recognised in Agenda 21, a document adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

Locally, the Government has started to incorporate the sustainability concept in its 8th and 9th Malaysia Plans.

The concept was strengthened in the National Green Technology Policy 2009.

Adhering to these policies, the sustainability concept has now been incorporated in the Malaysian tourism industry.

In recognising the need for a specific means of validation through certified adherence to the sustainable tourism concept, Green Building Index (GBI) has, in collaboration with the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), developed and launched the GBI Hotel and Resort Tools in early 2014.

Both tools are designed specifically for the country's tourism facilities. The GBI Hotel Tool is intended for hotel buildings usually located in urban areas while the GBI Resort Tool will cater to hotel buildings in resort settings.

There are sufficient differences between these two settings and they warrant the need for separate tools. The main difference is that GBI encourages energy-efficient designs for urban hotels while natural ventilation is encouraged in resort hotels.

Both tools use measurable parameters under the following six categories – energy efficiency; indoor environmental quality; sustainable site planning and management; materials and



Green is in at the Arcoris hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

resources; water efficiency as well as innovations.

The tools aim to raise awareness on the environmental-friendly approach for tourism developments, facilities and operations.

There are a number of reasons why resorts should exercise green practices in their developments and operations.

These include gaining competitive commercial advantage by being a green leader in the industry, gaining awards and recognition, enabling employee retention as well as cost savings through reduced energy and water consumption besides facilitating solid waste and waste water disposal, just to name a few.

But, most importantly, it is because it is the right thing to do.

Green resorts, when mindfully developed, are capable of ensuring an acceptable evolution as they regard their influence on natural resources, biodiversity and the capacity for assimilation of any impact other than considering the amount of generated waste, emissions and residues.

Now, how can we go about responding to the environment? The answers must be given in terms of a holistic and integrated design approach which includes location, site planning, construction, building, envelope and interior design, materials, functional programmes and operations management. The performance efficiency of the

green resort design depends on an accurate response to the environment in which it is located.

The environmental response should address concerns that are related to both abiotic (climate and topography) and biotic (flora, fauna and human factors) considerations.

The emphasis on preserving or recreating the natural habitat for native and adaptive vegetation as opposed to importing foreign species is, above all else, critical in the landscape design of the resorts.

Passive design is a viable option for tropical resorts as has been demonstrated in many places.

An efficient passive-climate control concept, providing indoor environmental comfort in the resort could effectively propagate solutions based broadly on non-powered passive techniques such as shading and natural ventilation.

The objectives of passive environmental control in tropical conditions can be expressed by the following broad strategies: To prevent heat gain; maximise heat dissipation; optimise lighting levels; reduce noise levels and vibration as well as influence tourists' perceptions of the environment in such a way that local climatic conditions are readily accepted. These strategies, accompanied by compliance to local building codes and by-laws, are the basis for the certification of buildings under the GBI standard.

Unlike local residents, many tourists would be happy to adjust to the given climate conditions at the holiday destinations they have chosen. It is untrue that the tropical climate is unbearable. It is equally not true that passive architecture cannot cope with the conditions found in the tropics.

Passive climate control will not secure constant low temperature as in the case of powered air conditioners. Therefore, the need for constant temperature which comes from air conditioners is questionable.

Adaptation is apparently much healthier than the desperate efforts to insulate the building and its occupants from climatic impact. This is also a much more sustainable approach.

Another important, if not rather obvious observation, is that tourists travel to a resort to relax. They try to break away from their everyday work, lifestyle and environment.

What is the point of a vacation if the time spent in a resort is similar to what is left behind?

Part of the holiday excitement is derived from experiencing the tropics. The tropics are hot, often humid, and sometimes rainy as well.

Those who provide accommodation should make that experience possible at a somewhat comfortable level. This need could and should be utilised in the resort's planning and design to complement the environment, rather than work against it.

One has to accept that the primary interest of visitors to tropical green resorts is to explore the natural environment.

The economic results of a tourism business, after all, depend on both consumer satisfaction and the facility's operating costs.

It then becomes obvious that architects should apply their skills to making the experience of the environment possible for them to take advantage of what it offers for free as in the sun, the fresh and natural breeze as well as vegetation to enhance the resort's unique microclimate.

It is through the way the building interacts with the environment that architecture of any epoch and locality could normally be perceived, understood and appreciated.

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