

# PARADISE GAINED

There is a new breed of entrepreneur-hotelier on the rise in Asia. And, as it turns out, combining the positive effects of social enterprise with unique cultural experiences and luxurious amenities in a fantastically beautiful location is proving to be a winning combination.

STORY **PAUL KAY**

Once viewed as the preserve of tree-hugging environmentalists and New Age hipsters, ecotourism has blossomed into the mainstream in recent years, with luxury hoteliers the world over taking pains to style their properties as ‘environmentally friendly’ or ‘sustainable’. But much like the act of travel itself, the definition – and nomenclature – of ecotourism has evolved significantly in the past few decades.

Twenty years ago, it was sufficient merely to minimise a development’s negative environmental impact for it to be considered ‘eco’, for example through water and energy-saving measures. Then, ‘sustainability’ became the buzzword, prompting a drive to be carbon-neutral and zero-energy. But a new generation of hoteliers is spearheading a burgeoning movement that takes the concept to its logical conclusion.

Sometimes referred to as ‘regenerative tourism’ or ‘tourism with a purpose’, this kind of tourism seeks to have a net positive effect on the places it touches by combining sustainable principles and environmental awareness with community-focused social programmes, often through the implementation of a charitable foundation. In an era in which so-called greenwashing (deceptive assertions of environmental friendliness) is increasingly common, what separates the genuine article from those who merely pay lip service is a fundamental commitment to make only ethical choices and to improve the lives of the local people.

**CAPTION**  
Jean-Michel  
Cousteau Resort  
in Fiji

COURTESY, JEAN-MICHEL COUSTEAU RESORT



## AN ISLAND OF ONE'S OWN

Thanks largely to the fact that many of the region's most exclusive resorts are situated in or close to areas of severe poverty, Asia is arguably leading the way in this field, and one of the standard bearers is the private island resort of Song Saa. Situated some 30 kilometres off the coast of southern Cambodia, the multi-award-winning luxury resort exemplifies all the principles of regenerative tourism, from its eco-aware design and energy and water conservation measures to its environmental activism and needs-led social programmes. It embodies the concept to such an extent that one could suppose it had been drafted from some master blueprint (or perhaps greenprint) for contemporary responsible tourism – except that it wasn't supposed to happen at all.

When they first arrived in Cambodia in 2005, Song Saa founders Rory and Melita Hunter had no plans to settle there, let alone establish a pioneering luxury resort and a charitable foundation. It didn't take long, however, for the Australian couple to fall for the country's laidback charm, and to see business opportunities amid its rapid development. Drawing on Melita's background in design, and with Rory turning his back on a promising career in advertising with Saatchi & Saatchi, the pair began to buy and renovate old colonial-style apartments in Phnom Penh before selling them on to expats and foreign investors.

In their downtime, the Hunters explored Cambodia, and after hearing glowing reports about the little-visited islands close to Sihanoukville, they rented a fishing boat and set off to explore the Koh Rong Archipelago for two weeks. On the final day of their trip, the couple stopped for lunch at the two tiny islands that they would eventually christen Song



COURTESY THE PAVILIONS HIMALAYAS

Saa – Khmer for The Sweethearts. Although flush with potential, the islands were some way short of paradise at that point. Occupied by a small fishing community since the end of the Khmer Rouge's brutal reign, the islands had fallen into a state of shabby disrepair, with 30 years of rubbish piled up, chunks of rainforest chopped down for firewood, and the coastal waters polluted by the abundance of fishing boats that used the island as an overnight haven.

Worse still, as the Hunters discovered while talking to the villagers, the surrounding waters had been over-fished to such an

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The Pavilions Himalayas offers both luxury relaxation and the chance for guests to get up close and personal with locals



COURTESY THE PAVILIONS HIMALAYAS



**“THE VILLAGERS HAD LAND BACK ON THE MAINLAND AND THEY WANTED TO GO BACK TO RICE FARMING, SO THEY ASKED, ‘DO YOU WANT TO BUY OUR ISLAND?’”**

– Melita Hunter,  
Song Saa Private Island

extent that it was becoming very difficult to eke a livelihood from the sea. “They had land back on the mainland and they wanted to go back to rice farming,” recalls Melita, “so they asked, ‘do you want to buy our island?’”

Instantly smitten by the idea, the Hunters returned to Phnom Penh and had their lawyers look into the legalities of such a deal. Rather than buying the land, the couple would be purchasing something akin to squatters' rights to the islands, a potentially risky endeavour. Undeterred, they had a contract drawn up and returned to the islands the following weekend

with a naval escort and a paper bag stuffed with cash to conclude the transaction.

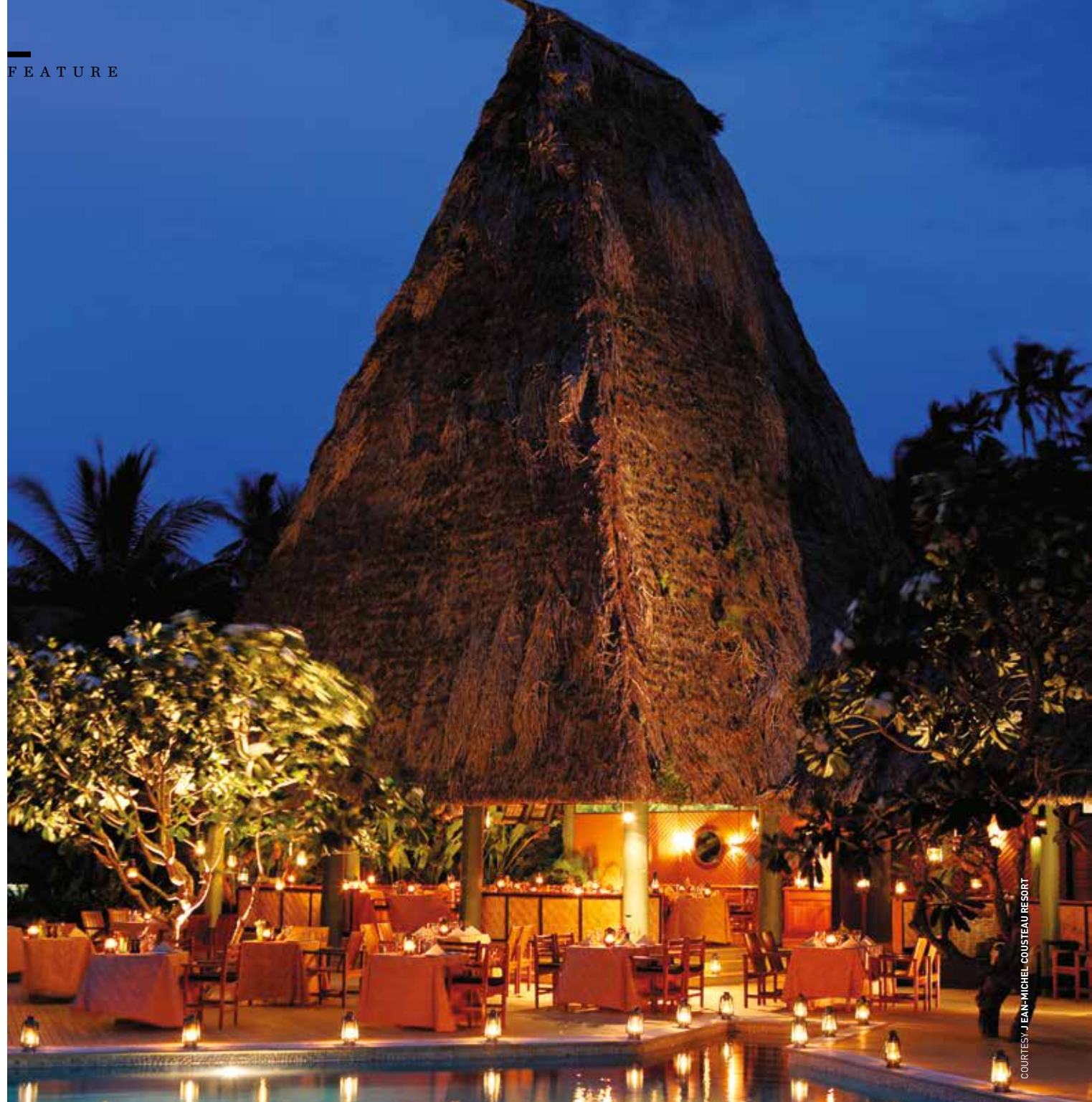
Further legal manoeuvres over the next three years saw the Hunters secure a more tangible 99-year lease over the islands, while they also took the first steps to securing the area's environmental future by setting up Cambodia's first marine reserve and creating the country's first island-based solid-waste-management centre on nearby Koh Rong.

The couple also spearheaded a variety of conservation and social projects in local villages, including clearing around 16,000 bags of

rubbish – some 80 tonnes – in just a few months. “It was while doing the conservation work, working with the local communities and understanding some of the challenges they faced, for example lack of access to healthcare and education, that we started to see how important a role we could play,” says Rory.

Construction began on Song Saa in 2008, and the resort opened in 2011, by which time the Hunters' conservation and community work had grown to the point that they began planning the launch of the Song Saa Foundation, which came to fruition in 2013. “We did that





COURTESY JEAN-MICHEL COUSTEAU RESORT

for a couple of reasons,” explains Rory. “One, we wanted to make sure that [the conservation and needs-led social work] wasn’t secondary to the business. When you run something as CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility], then it’s always going to be secondary to the business, and by separating it out we could really focus on independent governance and separate organisation, still working symbiotically with the resort and leveraging on the infrastructure. But it also allowed us to open up other funding streams.”

Those streams have included

donations from guests and the involvement of heavyweight benefactors such as Prince Albert II of Monaco, who recently partnered with the Song Saa Foundation to expand the Koh Rong Marine Reserve. Community programmes, meanwhile, include workshops on health, hygiene and nutrition, educational programmes, vocational training and medical relief.

“The hotel is like a pebble you throw in a pond, and the foundation is the ripples,” says Rory. So far those ripples have been powerful enough to replenish fish stocks in the archipelago, alter the lives of local

villagers for the better and convince the World Economic Forum to name Rory as one of their Young Global Leaders in 2015.

Crucially for the success of both the resort and the foundation, Song Saa has been conceived as the type of high-end resort that attracts the global jet set like bees to a honeypot, offering pampered seclusion in spectacular and exclusive surroundings. Designed by Melita, the resort endeavours to balance man-made luxury and natural beauty in perfect harmony. This is particularly evident in each of Song Saa’s 27 villas, which combine

**THIS PAGE**  
The chance to engage the outdoors and locals at Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort means there is never a dull moment

**OPPOSITE**  
Song Saa is built on the philosophy of respecting the local community; the Song Saa Foundation seeks to improve the lives of the local people



COURTESY SONG SAA



modern and traditional design touches with salvaged materials to create contemporary private sanctuaries imbued with just the right amount of rugged charm.

When guests aren’t lolling by their private pools or dining in a choice of picturesque locations around the island, they can take part in morning yoga sessions or melt into one of the indulgent treatments at the spa. For those with a mind for more active recreation, there are sea kayaks and sailing dinghies as well as snorkelling and scuba gear, while the smaller of Song Saa’s two islands, Koh Bong, which has been

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– Alex Malcolm, Jacada Travel

left to grow wild and is connected to the main island of Koh Ouen by a footbridge, makes for a pleasant nature walk.

Reflecting Song Saa’s altruistic side, the resort also offers free tours of a local Khmer fishing village to see firsthand the positive impact of the foundation’s work, as well as opportunities to learn more about the archipelago’s ecology.

### A SOLID FOUNDATION

Notable as the Hunters’ achievements may be, they are not alone in using high-end tourism as a vehicle for positive social change. Built by maverick surfer-turned-developer Claude Graves and his wife, Petra, on the Indonesian island of Sumba in the 1980s and ’90s, Nihiwatu has evolved into one of Asia’s most sought-after destinations following a takeover by American billionaire investor Christopher Burch and South African-born hotelier James McBride in 2013.

In addition to creating the resort, Claude Graves also joined with Sean Downs, who volunteered to help set up The

Sumba Foundation in 2001 to fund initiatives intended to improve the lives of the local tribes on what is one of Indonesia’s poorest islands. The foundation proudly states that since its inception it has established 16 primary schools and five medical clinics, reduced malaria infections by 85 percent and dug more than 60 water wells to supply 172 villages with clean water. While ramping up the luxury factor to the tune of US\$30 million, the new owners have also vowed to continue supporting the foundation with what McBride calls “a large portion of our assets”, and encourage guests to visit the community projects to see for themselves where their money is going.

“The Sumba Foundation is very important, let’s say it is the spirit of the resort,” says McBride. “The long-term benefit is that we are working on educating the Sumbanese people and helping to eliminate malnutrition at schools in West Sumba. From minimising water shortages, [to preventing] malaria and malnutrition, you can see how we are making a difference already.”



## THIS KIND OF TOURISM SEEKS TO HAVE A NET POSITIVE EFFECT ON THE PLACES IT TOUCHES BY COMBINING SUSTAINABLE PRINCIPLES AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS WITH COMMUNITY-FOCUSED SOCIAL PROGRAMMES, OFTEN THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A CHARITABLE FOUNDATION.

### GIVING BACK

It's not just pristine beach settings that attract such social ventures. There is Douglas Maclagan, who is the driving force behind The Pavilions Himalayas, a luxurious resort tucked into a valley near the Nepalese city of Pokhara. The founder of the Child Welfare Scheme, a Hong Kong-registered charity that provides education, healthcare and social opportunities for disadvantaged children in Nepal, Maclagan opened the hotel late last year as a way to fund community projects. As well as being self-sufficient in terms of water, energy and – to a large extent – food, The Pavilions donates 70 percent of its net profits to support social initiatives that benefit the local people and offers guests the opportunity to participate in its work if they wish to.

This philosophy is also reflected by luxury tour operators like Jacada Travel, which donates part of the profits from every trip it sells to handpicked conservation and social projects, while offering opportunities for travellers to connect with local communities. According to founder Alex Malcolm, credentials and experiences such as these are rarely top of mind for most of his customers – at least not until they experience them.

“It isn’t necessarily the first thing that people talk about, I think it’s something that we have the responsibility to bring to people’s attention,” says Malcolm. “But the people that do end up going to see these kind of things end up with it being one of the more powerful experiences of their travel. The feedback we get is that people then

**FROM TOP**  
The Song Saa Foundation creates educational opportunities for local children; Nihiwatu caters to a balance of the holiday experience while allowing guests to give back to the local community



feel a more genuine connection with people and places.”

This sentiment is echoed by McBride. “It becomes a very nice balance between having a holiday and giving back,” he says of Nihiwatu’s charitable initiatives. “It makes the experience warmer and more fulfilling for the guests.” He stresses, however, that there is “no emotional obligation” to participate, and, like Song Saa and The Pavilions Himalayas, it’s entirely up to the guests whether they want to learn more, get involved – or simply drink cocktails by the pool.

“People are realising the impact of their consumption decisions, and not just in travel,” says Rory Hunter. “And weaving a social mission into your business model helps motivate you, because you’re doing it for reasons that are powerful. It’s not just about money; it’s about having a positive impact. And that helps you get out of bed in the morning.” Hunter also points out that, rather than this being a new idea, it’s actually a return to the principles of an earlier era, when business were an integral part of the community.

Significantly, despite common misconceptions about the ethical route and the profitable path being at opposite ends of the spectrum, Hunter insists that doing the right thing and good business sense are often inseparable. “More often than not, the right decision for the environment or for the community is also the right business decision,” he says. “As long as you’re taking anything other than a short-term view, they’re generally one and the same.”

Given the success of Song Saa, which has plans to expand its brand in Cambodia and beyond, and Nihiwatu, which is looking at potential locations in Sri Lanka and Central America, it appears that Hunter might well be right. ☺