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ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Have you ever felt slightly guilty about leaving that half-used bar of soap for the housekeeper to throw away when you check out? Especially those nice big ones?! I sometimes take mine with me, to use up at home!

As consumers of hotel services, we travellers must contribute a whole lot to the degradation of our planet in one way or another. Whoever uses a new bar of soap every single day at home? Mulling over this whole “tragedy” of wasted soap, I just love Carlson Rezidor’s Soap for Hope Initiative, which the CEO, Wolfgang Neumann, personally launched at the African Hotel Investors Forum in Kigali last year. What this involves is recycling used guestroom soap and distributing the newly-minted bars to local communities who have little access to soap or sanitation. According to a director of Sealed Air, who are running the programme, “A typical 400-room hotel generates 3.5 metric tons of solid soap waste each year”. Good grief! 3.5 tons? That’s kind of a lot, and that’s just one hotel!

Recycling soap for use in the community has to be one of the easiest, most common sense solutions for sustainable environmental responsibility! Imagine this, recycling tons and tons of used hotel soap and funnelling it back to those who need it most! Not only are jobs created for the local recycling companies, but also a cleaner and safer environment for all, cutting down on disease.

With a growing appreciation of the need for more responsible business initiatives (and as someone somewhat cynical about the reality of those mealy-mouthed words on the tent cards in the bathroom about not changing towels every day – they always do change them, even if you obediently hang them on the rail), I decided to take a look at what is happening in West Africa.

Here in Lagos, the management of the Radisson Blu hotel have looked at their power generators that every hotel (and home, and business...) requires, they are an essential part of life, despite the fumes, noise and heat they produce, the space they take up, and the need for constant maintenance – they’re a flipping nuisance, to say the least! Turning a negative – the wasted heat produced – into a positive, and fitting a heat exchanger to the generator, means that water used in the hotel can be heated for free. The reduction of the carbon footprint facilitated by using more fuel-efficient generators coupled with this heat recycling programme...priceless!



In addition to the heat recycling, the hotel has also adopted the Blu Planet towel re-use programme, where hotel guests are given the option of re-using their towels on the basis of a pledge of a donation to Just a Drop, an international water aid charity. That, for me, is a more compelling proposition than those words on the tent card about how many “billions of gallons of water the hotel industry” uses – well, I say to myself, washing (or not) my towel won’t make any difference in the scheme of things, so change it when you make up the room! Now, a donation to a good cause, that’s something real I am contributing to. (I still remain cynical about whether they will actually not replace my towel, even though I “signed up” for that charity donation – I must go and test their system, and hope to be proved wrong!).

Round and about West Africa, the Soap for Hope initiative is up and running in Freetown and Abidjan. And what about other regions in Africa? I decided to check this out on a recent visit to the Radisson Blu hotel in Lusaka. There, the hotel is not only due to participate in the Soap for Hope initiative, but also has other projects on the environmental sustainability agenda.

One is the installation of a solar water heating system in the hotel, bit exactly a new idea, but you would be surprised at how few hotels have it. Solar energy is used to heat water for the hotel, and in a way that is free, clean and reusable. It is estimated that savings on energy consumption can reach anywhere between 50 to 85 per cent. Looking at several mounted solar panels on the hotel’s roof, I can’t help but think how important it is to generate clean energy, not only for the environment, but let’s face it, for an immediate impact on the bottom line as well!

Another project, the LED Lights fit-out, saw the replacement of over 32,000 watts of traditional and energy-saving bulbs with LED lighting. From the restaurant to the parking and swimming pool areas, bulbs were replaced – fluorescents, flood lights, spotlights and down lights – the entire spectrum of light types. An assessment by the engineering team at the hotel estimated a 75 per cent saving in the total wattage at the hotel. This represents a huge amount of saved dollars, again impacting significantly on the profit margin, whilst saving on energy.

According to Green Globe, who provide sustainability performance assessments for hotels, there is a growing appreciation among hotel owners of the so-called green consumer and their power to influence earnings. With identified benefits such as cost savings, competitive advantage and international recognition as a green hotel, there is a growing trend towards the development of greener hotels, with increasing green elements. There are several examples with all of the main chains moving into this space, and many independents, but Starwood Capital’s 1 Hotels chain was actually developed from ground up with environmental consciousness embodied throughout. 1 Hotels are not (yet) in Africa, but where better than to “be one with nature”?

Providing green elements of the stay is down to hotel owners and management, but what about are we, the travellers in Africa, doing about it? Research in Impact, a publication of the Green



Hotel Association, found that “people are making decisions on where to stay based on a company’s environmental position”. Whilst there is no certification for the ‘greenest’ consumer, perhaps we could take that up as a personal challenge to demand better deals for the environment from the brands we patronise? Is it part of our purchasing decision, the fact that our stay will be less damaging to the planet? Does it matter to you, or is loyalty all about points, rather than what they do with that hardly-used bar of soap?!

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