

WAY TO GO

How to Pick Green (Not Greenwashed) Hotels

On the eve of Earth Day, we're looking at ways the travel industry recognizes and promotes sustainable hotel practices and connects travelers with conscientious hotels around the world.

We'll help you make sense of:

- *Criteria you should pay attention to*
- *The best resources for discovering cool sustainable spots*
- *Our recs for unique boutique stays*
- *What the big chains are doing (for those who want to put their points to good use)*

You're doing your bit to be a better citizen of Planet Earth. Maybe you switched to reef-safe SPF, or bring your own cup to the coffee shop, or, after a day of driving, you plug your electric car into an outlet.

And because you don't want to turn off your conscience on vacation, you like the idea of staying in a hotel that makes an effort to mitigate its impact, too.

The good news is that many hotels and hotel companies share your sensibility and embrace sustainable practices in ways both big (building materials, water and energy consumption) and small (plants in the lobby, refillable bottles in rooms).

The thing is, there's green, and then there's greenwashing — and it's not always easy for travelers (and, ahem, even the experts) to tell the difference. There's no real equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval or a Consumer Reports for the travel industry as a whole, and because there is no one authoritative, third-party global body that rates, ranks, and evaluates a hotel's ecological claims, **travelers have to do a little more research to differentiate between slick hype and noble fact.**



Photo courtesy of Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, California.

The Criteria

Before we get into the insanely gorgeous hotels that will have you booking flights tonight, let's review the standards, credentials, and seals of approval that can help you choose a truly *good* hotel.

- The [Global Sustainable Tourism Council](#) (GSTC) creates sustainability standards for hotels, tour operators, destinations, and travelers. They don't do the certifying; they just provide accreditation to other companies (like the hotel affiliations listed below) that use GSTC standards to make their judgments.
- The seventeen [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) include gender equality, no poverty, clean water and sanitation, climate action, and responsible consumption and production.
- [Green Key](#), created by the nonprofit Foundation for Environmental Education, certifies travel companies (hotels, parks, restaurants, attractions) that comply with 100+ criteria around two main themes: environmental and sustainable

management and environmental and sustainable education. Hotels apply and submit to an audit; certifications last for one year. There are more than 5,000 certified sites around the world, but, according to their interactive map, none are in the United States or Canada, so this certification is hardly globally comprehensive.

- **LEED** certification — in platinum, gold, or silver — is another accreditation that hotels like to tout. This rating system for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design was created by the U.S. Green Building Council and includes some 197,000 projects around the world, of which hotels are only one part. It's important to note that LEED certification only applies to how a structure was built, and not how green it is (or isn't) once it's up and running.

It's also worth remembering that while ecological stewardship is critical, it's only one of the ways a hotel can have a positive impact on its environment. Another: being culturally sensitive and working with and employing the local community. As we learned from [an interview we did with Dr. Gregory Miller](#), executive director of the Center for Responsible Tourism, sustainable tourism goes beyond the physical environment: "It is equally important to protect the cultural heritage and economic well-being of local communities and to provide an equitable, fair, and respectful tourism ecosystem at any destination."



The Collections

The hotel associations listed below provide marketing, promotional, booking, and strategic support to small, independent, and boutique hotels — in other words, the hotels who can't rely on a larger corporate parent for those benefits. In recent years, these associations have launched sub-collections designed primarily to **shine a spotlight on hotels that adhere to certain environmental and community-minded standards — and also (presumably) to appeal to increasingly conscious consumers**. Additionally, the associations often provide standards, guidelines, and measurement tools that hotels can leverage to design and evaluate their work. Hotels pay to be part of these associations, both through membership fees and commissions paid on bookings generated through association websites. It's not altogether bad

that hotels pay in some way for participation, but it's good to understand that the process is not entirely independent.

Beyond Green

The 38 hotels and lodges in this collection are evaluated every two years based on more than 50 sustainability standards designed to align with the UN's SDGs. Ninety percent of the hotels in the collection have **a dedicated sustainability manager on staff**, and Beyond Green's hotel pages do an excellent job of showcasing their work around three themes: nature, culture, and community. For example, [The Ranch at Laguna Beach](#) crushes glass bottles and turns them into sand used in their nine-hole, geo-certified golf course, and saves 21 million gallons of water per year through a water reclamation project. [The Leela Palace Udaipur](#) recycles decorative flowers into incense hand-made by 300 women in marginalized communities, and clears some 900 pounds of waste from Lake Udaipur with every cleanup it organizes. Beyond Green is a division of Preferred Travel Group, as is [Beyond Green Travel](#), the consultancy created in 2005 by ecotourism pioneer Costas Christ, who also consulted on the development of GSTC standards.

Fathom Favorites:

- [Inn by the Sea](#), Cape Elizabeth, Maine
- [Casa di Langa](#), Cerretto Langhe, Italy
- [Post Ranch Inn](#), Big Sur, California
- [Three Camel Lodge](#), South Gobi, Mongolia

Which love-to-compost friends also love to travel? Bet they'd also love to see this.

Considerate Collection

These hotels, a division of Small Luxury Hotels, also adhere to the UN's SDGs as well as GSTC standards. The 59 hotels (none more than 50 rooms, hence the "small") commit to and document how they are **environmentally conscious, cultural custodians, and community minded** — yes, the same three pillars Beyond Green uses. [Arctic Bath](#) in Sweden ticks the boxes by running on 100% renewable energy, cooking traditional meals in an ancient Scandinavian firepit, and employing indigenous Sámi guides and a resident moose whisperer. [137 Pillars](#) in Bangkok sources its house tea from sustainable forests, in partnership with local farmers, and supports charities like Autistic Thai Foundation and the Good Shepherd Foundation, which empowers women, children, and vulnerable communities.

Fathom Favorites:

- [Gangtey Lodge](#), Phobjikha Valley, Bhutan
- [Ca' di Dio](#), Venice, Italy
- [Dar Ahlam](#), Ouarzazate, Morocco
- [Forestis](#), Brixen, Italy



Photo courtesy of Tschuggen Grand Hotel in Switzerland.

Sustainability Leaders

Leading Hotels of the World is a collection of more than 400 independent luxury hotels around the world. Sustainability Leaders are a subset of 81 hotels that meet GSTC standards for cultural, social, and environmental sustainability, including [Ritz Paris](#) and [De L'Europe Amsterdam](#). What isn't clear if you click through those hotel web pages is what exactly the hotels have done to earn the Sustainability Leader badges at the top of the pages.

Fathom Favorites:

- [Tschuggen Grand Hotel](#), Arosa, Switzerland
- [São Lourenço do Barrocal](#), Monsaraz, Portugal
- [Hotel Adlon Kempinski](#), Berlin, Germany
- [Capella Ubud](#), Ubud, Indonesia

Regenerative Hotels

Unlike the three aforementioned associations, Regenerative Travel was created to **consult and**

advocate around social and environmental issues in the travel industry. The 34 independent hotels in the program detail how they're making a "regenerative impact." [Andronis Concept Wellness Resort](#) in Santorini planted 1,000 native plants around the property, pays equal wages to all staff, and equipped a local school with laptops and air conditioning. [Wythe Hotel](#) repurposed materials to adapt an old industrial building in Brooklyn, composts all food waste and donates discarded seafood shells to the Billion Oyster Project, which works to restore New York waterways. [Playa Viva](#) in Mexico, a co-founder of Regenerative, is powered by an off-grid solar system and replenishes the local aquifer through smart water management. Regenerative offers a \$99 membership program which entitles people who book through the platform to receive credits and perks at member hotels.

Fathom Favorites:

- [Song Saa Private Island](#), Koh Rong Archipelago, Cambodia
- [Rockhouse](#), Negril, Jamaica
- [Kasbah du Toukbal](#), Imlil, Morocco
- [Within The Wild – Tutka Bay Lodge](#), Kachemak Bay, Alaska



Photo courtesy of Rockhouse in Negril, Jamaica.

The Editorial Shout-Out

[Bouteco Loves](#)

Sustainability journalist and podcaster [Juliet Kinsman](#) has been talking about green hotels long

before it was fashionable. Boutecco is the consulting company that grew out of her passion; Boutecco Loves is a list of 117 sustainable hotels around the world selected purely for their strong ecological and design cred. There's no pay for play and no profit to her for bookings. It's just **pure independent judgment**.

Fathom Favorites:

- [Fogo Island Inn](#), Newfoundland, Canada
- [Heckfield Place](#), Hampshire, UK
- [Longitude 131](#), Uluru, Australia
- [Kisawa](#), Benguerra Island, Mozambique

The Big Guys

We've focused here on independent and boutique hotels because, well, we never hide the fact that we're partial to them. But we are happy to see that the multinational hotel chains — who control the lion's share of the hotel market — have also made commitments around sustainability, community, and good governance. You can see what they're doing on dedicated sections of their website: [Marriott](#), [Hyatt](#), [Hilton](#), and [Accor](#).

[IHG](#) is worth spotlighting because two of its brands are especially dedicated to positive work: At [Six Senses](#), sustainability (along with wellness) is the North Star guiding all decisions. The independent hotels within IHG's [Vignette Collection](#) — nine so far, eighteen in the pipeline — have community as a central theme, through initiatives like partnerships with local charities. The website could do a better job of explaining what the positive impacts are, but they're off to a good start.