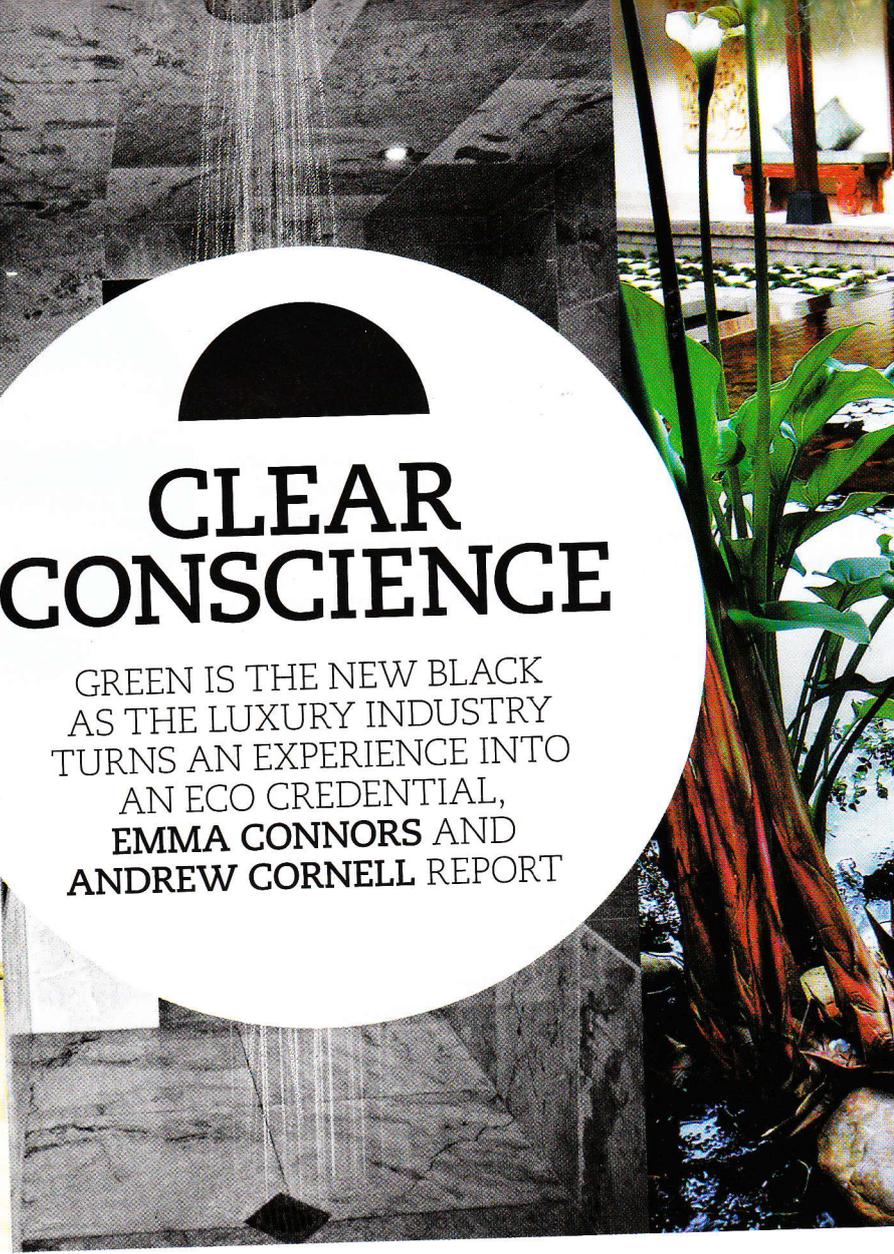




CLEAR CONSCIENCE

GREEN IS THE NEW BLACK AS THE LUXURY INDUSTRY TURNS AN EXPERIENCE INTO AN ECO CREDENTIAL, EMMA CONNORS AND ANDREW CORNELL REPORT



TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

THE TALLEBUDGERA VALLEY in the Gold Coast Hinterland is as near a picture of bucolic bliss as you can get on this dry continent. A single-lane road winds between lush green hills and small-acre farms that back onto ridges of pristine bushland. Of late, however, the local tree changers, horse trainers and farmers have noticed a variation in the road's desultory traffic.

Since the beginning of the year, the utes, four-wheel drives and horse floats have been interrupted by occasional tinted-windowed limos, floating up the track like stealth bombers. Their destination is Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat; aboard some purdah-screened celebrity whose name may later emerge in the press. Nicole and hubby rested there this year after the rigours of filming. Kidman's *Australia* co-star Hugh Jackman liked the place so much he bought a share of it.

What draws them to this little pocket of paradise is the latest must have: green luxury – consumption with a clear conscience. Environmentally friendly goods have come a long way from scratchy toilet paper. Now green is the new black, and everyone wants to save the planet. Purveyors of fine goods and lifestyle experiences have joined the rush. They

At Gwinganna, the all-c better because most of the fossil-fuelled, cross-conti hormone-injected food h of a detox body wrap or K truly stupendous 33-room knowing the water used The early morning walks glades benefit from the g site botanist and ecologi helps guests rest easy as

When it's time to leave a helicopter or grab a lim paradox of the resort's c with food-waste consum energy-guzzling lives, b ruminations on recycling impact. Green has to be converted luxury trends

A few hours drive aw Michael Robison is sho Villa, in the hills above



"We want to attract movers and shakers," says Robison, who originally intended the villa to be his private residence. Business demands overseas prompted a rethink, and Robison opted to create a property that would hopefully infect others with the passion for the environment that has fuelled the last 15 years of his professional life (see Emerald green below).

"It is becoming fashionable to be sustainable, and we need that drive," Robison says. "The world doesn't do much before it becomes fashionable to do it."

Clearly it has become good business to appeal to ethical consumers and that's not been lost on the luxury brands. Last year, LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault told a conference in Moscow that the company's younger customers were receptive to products that define their owners or wearers as ecologically conscientious. The global company has an environment forum that meets each quarter.

A report commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund and published late last year called on the luxury industry to embody a new definition of luxury by which "deeper values" would be expressed through social and environmental engagement. Report co-author, Jem Bendell, believes luxury goods should – and can – be the "most socially and environmentally beneficial brands around". He points out these brands have the margins and mandate to innovate processes and designs, and could channel this power toward social and environmental responsibility. Unlike throwaway consumables, time is on their side. "They can create designs and use materials that can last longer than average, and thus provide a function over a longer time horizon," he says.

Bendell adds that there are some sound business reasons to pursue a green path. "Prestige brands have become so ubiquitous that this has undermined a traditional means of generating prestige through a sense of being rare," he says. "Thus, they are increasingly seen by fashion journalists and luxury consumers as having lost their cachet. This could be restored through social and environmental innovation." If they don't take this path, they could lose their audiences.

"Affluent consumers' tastes are maturing around the world in ways that are 'dematerialising'; fulfilling experiences are becoming more important for discretionary spending than filling a house or wardrobe with more stuff," Bendell says. "This means luxury brands face the threat of their products being substituted by experiences. The story behind a product or service's creation is one way of generating an experience for the consumer, if that story is meaningful. This deeper sense of excellence is the future of luxury."

In the luxury travel industry, Sonu Shivdasani is leading the way, as chairman and chief executive of the Six Senses group, which includes more than 20 resorts and 40 spas in Asia and Europe. "Sustainability is in our DNA," he says.

The group emphasises energy efficiency, natural-resource conservation and waste reduction. Not content with carbon offsets that help fund wind farms in India, Shivdasani wants Six Senses to achieve, then better, carbon neutrality by becoming carbon free, and even carbon absorbing.

One change that will be obvious to guests will be the disappearance of packaged water across the group. Plastic bottles will be replaced by water filtered on site and served in refillable glass equivalents. This will save on landfill, and transport, but Shivdasani knows when to draw the line. He's ecstatic the group is doing away with its water menu, which listed 20 brands. The wine list, however, will stay untouched. "It's vital not to compromise on luxury," Shivdasani says.

He firmly believes most consumers have a conscience, and increasingly will decide they have to "buy wisely" as the realities of climate change and global warming start to hit home.

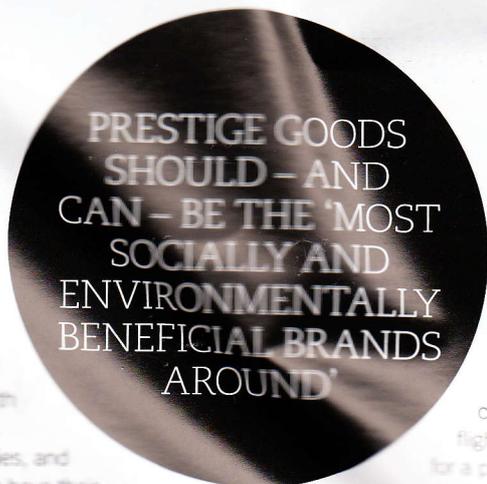
"However, they won't be content with a tent and a candle," Shivdasani says. "Consumers are used to certain luxuries, and they won't give those up. They want to have their cake and eat it too."

Persuading people that it is a good idea to buy goods and services produced with regard to the planet's future is not hard. Getting them to pay a bit more can be difficult. Carbon taxes have not proved popular – even among those you might expect would have concern for natural surroundings.

Adventure travel agent World Expeditions has focused on sustainability since starting in 1975, chief executive Sue Badyari says. It custom-designed kerosene stoves for its guides to use in the mountains of Nepal, for example, where a burgeoning adventure-travel industry has made severe inroads into the precious wood supply. Using stoves rather than fires costs a bit more, but so do most measures aimed at preserving the status quo of ecosystems and the native human population they support, Badyari says. "The market needs to understand that if it wants to buy a product that is green, it will have to part with a bit more money," she argues.

In keeping with its commitment to low-impact, responsible travel, World Expeditions introduced carbon offsets for the flight component of its trips about a year ago. It is an optional charge but is presented on all invoices so customers must consciously opt out of the payment. So far, 92 per cent have done this, refusing to pay the offset fee which, on a \$1300 return fare from Sydney to Kathmandu, would be about \$146.

So much for the fashionable leading the green charge. Badyari attributes the low take-up to confusion and cynicism about "greenwashing". "Many people don't really understand



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"One I wonder about is co-founder of Climate Friendly businesses and individual emissions. "I've seen adv carbon neutral and that's

Fleming says there is a claims. "Carbon neutral h what we need to focus on are genuine, they are focu using renewable energy a the fundamental causes o

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But in this image-conso everything, a change is u be seen as a leader if you EMMA CONNORS



EMERALD GREEN

A BOOK BY Al Gore prompted a major rethink for Michael Robison back in 1992. Now he is hoping to ease others into a similar mind shift with a luxurious short-term rental property near Byron Bay.

"Humanity is, in the

majority, selfish," says Robison, who preaches a green but comfortable lifestyle. The entrepreneur, who co-founded Climate Friendly and is working on a project to put Indonesian forests into perpetual trust, clearly has a passion for the planet. But that doesn't mean he lives like a monk.

"Frankly I don't want to suffer," he says. "I enjoy simple food and camping, but I also like fine restaurants and staying in luxury hotels."

Robison is on a mission to convert influential people from the arts, the business world or the social pages to the

environmental cause. The key, he says, is to destroy the myth that sustainability equals poverty. A few days at Robison's Emerald Villa should be enough to aid that destruction.

The guesthouse can be rented by just one group a time and guest numbers are limited to eight. An on-site concierge manages service, leaving visitors free to enjoy slightly more than 32 hectares of rainforest surrounding the property. Or they can lounge around the 17 by 4-metre pool filled with spring water pumped through basalt and free of chlorine or salt. For those inclined to swim



Clockwise from above:
Soneva Fushi resort, Maldives; Emerald Valley Villa in the Byron Bay hills; Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat horizon pool (remaining pictures are of Gwinganna); eco chic treatment area; sunset; bathing; relaxing with a good book and green mindset.

