

TRAVEL WITH A CONSCIENCE

by **Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle**



Image courtesy of Banyan Tree

1

The idea of travelling light is given new meaning as Green advocates choose to tread lightly on nature-based travel holidays. Instead of taking more than they can give, they've adopted a new mantra of taking nothing but photographs, memories and knowledge, and leaving nothing but footprints.



Having lived on three different continents, **Y-Jean** is no stranger to change. A peripatetic lifestyle such as hers allows her to move easily among cultures, and she quickly adapts and adjusts to new environments, rising to meet the challenges and opportunities that necessarily emerge from the school of life. She finds joy and solace in writing and has been contributing to various regional and international titles, shining a spotlight in particular on art, design and horology. When she's not writing, you'll find her dancing, practising yoga or dreaming up scenarios for a murder-mystery novel she hopes to write in the future.

1 & 2 Laguna Bintan's first hawksbill sea turtle release last year saw 12 of the endangered species successfully released into the sea, which involved Banyan Tree and Angsana Bintan guests.
3 Waste management is an interactive way for guests to assist a local village in Southern Thailand.

When you plan for your next holiday, forget chaotic city tours in the polluted urban jungle; opt instead for eco-tours in the wild outdoors. Whether you're an eco-junkie or a novice, nature-based, ecologically-sustainable tourism that cultivates environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation is 'in', judging by its pace of growth in the tourism industry. Just look around the region to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, which offer near-untouched locales that are often overlooked, but are perfect for 'green' travellers looking to get in touch with nature.

Then consider the current global financial crisis, which is causing us to relook the way in which we travel. Increasingly, people are choosing destinations that are closer to home and offer value-for-money experiences while giving back to society. Eco-tourism maximises the environmental, social and economic benefits of tourism as visitors have the opportunity to directly experience nature while providing a major source of income for local populations, which in turn helps ensure the survival of natural attractions for future generations. People are making travel choices with their conscience.

Since antiquity, humankind has learnt from nature but as the world's population grows, we are creating pressures on the environment that are difficult to counter. Eco-tourism seeks to redress the impact of human interventions and present a new environmental approach. This is an environmentally-correct form of travel, where visitors indulge in numerous activities without disturbing the ecosystem's integrity. So you can have your cake

and eat it too; you'll have done the right thing while having enjoyed yourself and gained valuable knowledge about environmental conservation.

Dr Reza Azmi, Founder and Director of Wild Asia, which supports nature conservation and promotes green businesses in Southeast Asia, says, "There will be no travel business in Asia without sustainable destinations. Preserving our natural areas and the local communities not only protects the very things that tourists come to Asia for, but also ultimately increases revenues from the tourist trade."

CONNECTING THE "ECO" WITH TOURISM

Andaman Discoveries helps local communities link tourism with the environment and culture by providing short-term volunteer placements and one- to seven-day responsible tours that promote environmental awareness and low-consumption lifestyles, while providing cultural exchange opportunities. Visitors discover homestays to experience daily life in the village which includes cooking traditional Thai dishes, learning to speak Thai or fishing in the ocean; eco-tours which include diving and snorkelling around remote islands, cycling through fruit orchards and plantations, jungle hikes to view wildlife and learn about traditional usage of local plants, long-tailed boat rides through mangrove forests, tours around a wild animal sanctuary, sunset beach barbecues to appreciate nature; and activities such as interactive handicraft workshops, beach cleanups, recyclables collection and sorting,



2

Image courtesy of Banyan Tree



3

Image courtesy of Andaman Discoveries

Our hope is that we can prevent the destructive consequences of mass tourism from happening by bringing environmentally- and socially-conscious people to the communities that we work closely with. We provide a model for other companies to show there are options for tourism that can sustain, not harm, places

mangrove restoration and orchid conservation and replanting.

All activities are hands-on: during a mangrove replanting project, guests ride a boat through the mangrove forest, work with villagers to replant trees, learn about the mangroves' role in protecting tsunami-hit areas and listen to villagers sharing their environmental protection efforts and rules. Director Thamrong Chomphusri "Tui" says, "Our focus is to provide an alternative vacation option for responsible travellers. Our hope is that we can prevent the destructive consequences of mass tourism from happening by bringing environmentally- and socially-conscious people to the communities that we work closely with. We provide a model for other companies to show there are options for tourism that can sustain, not harm, places."

The Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation manages eco-tours to key birding sites in Cambodia, which ensures the conservation of local biodiversity in general and critically-endangered bird species specifically. In response to demand to visit the site, the Tmatboey Ibis Project was initiated, which includes a community homestay programme in the remote Tmatboey Village situated within the Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary in the Northern Plains of Cambodia. This is a small-community tourism model for long-term environmental, sociocultural and economic sustainability that encourages local residents to preserve wildlife and its habitat by making them partners in an eco-tourism project.

The almost 200 families living here are earning an alternative livelihood from showing bird enthusiasts around the sanctuary, where they may glimpse endangered bird species like the giant ibis and white-shouldered ibis in a near-unique environment. Coordinator Nick Butler states, "Tmatboey faces the same environmental problems of many developing countries: loss of habitat and illegal hunting of wildlife for food and sale locally and internationally. The alternative livelihoods from eco-tourism linked to no hunting and land conversion agreements provide an alternative that will help to conserve the environment."

At Sarinbuana Eco Lodge, on Mount Batukaru in a traditional farming village of central Bali surrounded by protected rainforest, guests take advantage of healthy dishes made from its organic garden, a freshwater pond to catch fish for their meals, rice field, rainforest and mountain treks with local guides, swims in natural waterholes,

traditional Balinese workshops led by villagers, local ceremonies, plant long-living native trees, and learn about the critically-endangered Sumatran orangutan. They also find out about permaculture-inspired sustainable practices and environmental education through books, posters, maps, photographs, in-room information booklets, workshops and orientation talks and, in response to demand, the lodge now offers guests full-day training sessions. Ten per cent of guests even participate in the lodge's tree planting carbon-offset programme to compensate for the carbon footprint left by their holiday.

Owner Norm vant Hoff divulges, "Genuine eco-tourism is a powerful force for nature conservation. An eco-traveller might prepare by embracing the idea that it's not all about 'me' being satisfied or entertained. It is about the relationship between the traveller, the locals and their environment. In eco-tourism, benefits must flow both ways, and this makes the experience positive and satisfying for everybody."

Eco Lodges Indonesia focuses on sustainable ecological development. Its four eco lodges—Udayana in Bali's Jimbaran Hills; Rimba Orangutan in Borneo; Bajo Komodo in Flores; and Satwa Sumatra Elephant near Way Kambas National Park in Sumatra—offer guests the opportunity to walk with Komodo dragons, ride on Sumatran elephants, see Sumatran rhinos and tigers, observe orangutans, gibbons, deer, butterflies and birds, cycle through wildlife parks, trek through tropical rainforests, take a riverboat trip to the sea, snorkel and dive to protected coral reefs, experience traditional dances and relax in eco-friendly surroundings. Workshops are held for guests to learn about topics ranging from butterfly identification to sewage recycling. Chairman of the board Alan Wilson relates, "Guests receive unique wildlife experiences which could not be obtained easily from other companies. Also, we try to convince them their funds are showing a greater value to the environment than other uses like palm oil."

For a luxury resort alternative, Le Méridien Khao Lak invites its guests on a nature discovery tour. They start with a bicycle ride to a nearby village to visit a rubber plantation, where guests witness latex production, from rubber tapping to processing liquid latex into rubber sheets. This is followed by the exploration of tropical fruit orchards and local spices gardens where they encounter mangosteen, durian, longan and lemongrass, before riding across hills

4 Jungles, rivers and waterfalls set against mountainous backgrounds in southern Thailand. **5** Birding enthusiasts have the opportunity to see two critically-endangered ibis species in the dry dipterocarp forest of Cambodia's Northern Plains, which encourages local residents to preserve wild habitat by making them partners in an eco-tourism project. **6 & 8** Andaman Discoveries visitors try their hand at making soaps with the expert guidance of the soap cooperative women. **7** Guests on a tour to see the Tmatboey birding site will stay in the Tmatboey Village Ecolodge in the Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary in the Northern Plains of Cambodia. **9** Guests are encouraged to go on an edible garden tour of Sarinbuana Eco Lodge's grounds. **10** Guests of Sarinbuana Eco Lodge help to plant trees in the rainforest.



4 Image courtesy of Andaman Discoveries



5 Image courtesy of Sam Veasna Center



6 Image courtesy of Craig Lovell



8 Image courtesy of Craig Lovell



7



9 Image courtesy of Sarinbuana Eco Lodge



10 Image courtesy of Sarinbuana Eco Lodge



Image courtesy of Banyan Tree

11



Image courtesy of Eco Lodges Indonesia

12

Genuine eco-tourism is a powerful force for nature conservation. An eco-traveller might prepare by embracing the idea that it's not all about 'me' being satisfied or entertained. It is about the relationship between the traveller, the locals and their environment.

and plantations to a rainforest, and thereafter proceeding on foot to a waterfall. Guests are immersed in an unspoilt environment, and their participation boosts the local economy by providing jobs to locals.

Banyan Tree advocates the principle of "embracing the environment, empowering the people". It encourages guests to introduce environmental preservation initiatives into their lives for a more symbiotic relationship with their surroundings. Michael Kwee, Group Director CSR – Strategy & Communication, says, "Discerning consumers today aspire more towards brands that share the values they embrace." Thus, guests feel safe in the knowledge that they are not having a negative impact on the environment, while being able to learn about a place's beauty. They contribute a per-night donation via the Green Imperative Fund mechanism (an opt-out US\$2 charge is added to the bill of each Banyan Tree villa), which is matched dollar for dollar by the resort. Funds go towards sea turtle conservation, beach clean-ups and tree planting trips to raise awareness of climate change.

Banyan Tree Phuket encourages guests to

assist in its Greening Communities programme of planting over 2,000 trees to offset carbon emissions and engage in birding with resident bird specialists as part of a bird monitoring programme that functions as a gauge of environmental health, while Banyan Tree Bintan offers nature walks, guided birdwatching excursions, tree planting activities and coral safaris. During the nature walk, guests observe the resort's wildlife, trek in the forest, visit a nearby village, view a butterfly breeding facility and visit the Banyan Tree Bintan Conservation Lab, its first research facility catering to terrestrial conservation, at which guests may also attend classes to learn about Bintan's indigenous wildlife.

Six Senses Resorts & Spas takes pride in providing innovative and enriching experiences sustainably so that guests not only have fun, but increase their environmental knowledge and realise that luxury and responsible business are not contradictory. Therefore, guests are regularly informed of its environmental initiatives so that they may embrace the philosophy in their own lives. Arnfinn Oines of the Area Environment Conscience – Thailand & Vietnam department relates, "We have always believed that giving back to the local

community and taking care of the environment are sound responsible business practices."

For guests of its Soneva properties, a carbon offset tax is automatically included on their bill to counteract flight-related emissions, with the money flowing into the Six Senses Carbon Offset Fund, which finances a wind turbine. At the Evason Phuket and Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi resorts, guests learn to appreciate the benefits of a healthy ecosystem through activities like elephant trekking, bicycling, kayaking, sailing, sea canoeing, Thai cooking and Thai boxing.

Guests of the Evason Phuket are encouraged to donate to the Gibbons Rehabilitation Project (which they may visit) and Elephant Sanctuary. Activities in which they may participate include beach cleaning, mangrove planting and the Eco Trail to learn about the resort's environmental practices. A 15-minute boat ride away from Evason Phuket lies Bon Island whose beach is exclusively for the use of its guests, who participate in the clean-up of the resort's own reef to preserve the marine environment.

At the Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi, guests

Eco-tourism maximises the environmental, social and economic benefits of tourism as visitors have the opportunity to directly experience nature while providing a major source of income for local populations, which in turn helps ensure the survival of natural attractions for future generations.

experience the Nature Trail situated in a mangrove forest connected to the resort where they spot crabs, mudskippers, monitor lizards and hornbills, and may harvest herbs and vegetables from the resort's garden for Thai cooking classes. In-room guides like the Little Green Book (highlighting environmental practices) and Nature Compendium (describing the flora and fauna in the area), signage, notice boards and general reminders from hosts educate guests on social and environmental issues.

THE EMANCIPATED TRAVELLER

What do eco-travellers get out of the experience? Environmental education and the feel-good factor of having reduced their impact on the environment and supported enlightened tourism operators. For urbanites who make up the majority of eco-tourists, it's a chance to reconnect with nature and address the ill-effects of climate change. Even if they weren't previously eco-conscious, they may return home with renewed commitment to do more for the environment.

Thamrong relates, "For many guests, our programmes are their first experience in a

homestay. They arrive with the goal to support a positive mission and see a piece of Thailand removed from tourist touts. Guests leave with a deeper appreciation, understanding and respect of other cultures." For Andaman Discoveries, guest response to its eco-tours was so positive that it has since expanded from offering programmes in one village to four villages.

However, adverse effects sometimes result from eco-tourism in that competition for tourist dollars between various communities may lead to social disharmony. Kwee discloses, "Tourism can be a double-edged sword. It develops and brings prosperity, but it can also destroy the environment and lead to disharmony within communities." Ways to improve benefit sharing must be addressed from the outset, otherwise in fighting may result due to tourism growth and cause the eventual closure of the tourist attraction.

The above examples have shown that eco-values are being infused into the travel industry. More people would rather not enjoy a holiday at the expense of the environment

or another's livelihood, and the popularity of eco-tours persuades local communities to protect their unique flora and fauna, essentially restoring man's balance with nature. Therefore, when you embark on your next eco-adventure, seek out a holiday that proposes strong commitment to local cultures and the environment so that the attraction you have come to visit remains pristine for future generations to enjoy. Don't "tune in, drop out"; instead "tune in, get switched on".

11 As part of its Greening Communities effort, Banyan Tree engages community members, guests and its associates when carrying out tree plantings. **12** Get a chance to see orangutans in the wild when you stay at Rimba Orangutan Eco Lodge in Borneo. **13** Like homes on a plantation estate, the villas of Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi are hidden away amidst dense jungle on an island midway between Phuket and Krabi. **14** Rubber trees provide a significant source of income in southern Thailand—visitors see how locals process this natural latex into the finished product. **15** The herb and vegetable garden at Evason Phuket is used to educate guests while they take part in Thai cooking classes.



13

Image courtesy of Six Senses Resorts & Spas



14

Image courtesy of Craig Lovell



15

Image courtesy of Six Senses Resorts & Spas

My Permaculture Experience at Panya Project

by **Andy Tay**



Andy is just an ordinary Singaporean living a not-so-conditioned life. He is a global citizen and a believer that the planet, people and prosperity can co-exist, and sustainable growth and excellence is a possibility. Andy is currently working on a social and business initiative to bring sustainable development into the heart of Singapore for all to win. Please feel free to contact him at andy@solutionhub.com if you have any ideas on collaboration and partnership.

Permaculture Design Course? Honestly, I had no idea what I was in for; I only read about it on a website—it mentioned sustainability, organic farming, and learning how to integrate it altogether. What did I sign up for that took up two weeks of my life in a not-so-far-away part of the world at Chiang Mai, Thailand? But little did I know that it would become the most life-changing two weeks of my life.

So what is Permaculture? That is perhaps the most common question I get when I mention about the course. Permaculture is a design science that seeks to create agriculturally productive systems with the diversity and sustainability of natural systems, in order to provide food, water, shelter and all other needs in a sustainable (or even regenerative) way. In short, it serves to meet human needs and increase ecosystem health.

BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE

Two fellow Singaporean friends (Linda and Paul) and I gathered at the meeting point at Thae Pae gate at Chiang Mai City. People from all over the world streamed in and it was amazing just to see a group of like-minded individuals from US, Europe and Asia congregate at one place. Soon, we set off in trucks, enjoying the serene and peaceful ride as the Thai countryside beckoned.

We checked into our accommodation, which was really just a thin mattress on an wooden structure (completely open air but with a roof) with mosquito nets separating each of us in two rows. It was cold season in Chiang Mai then and we were prepared for minus 10 degrees Celsius temperatures. Each of us could take as many thick blankets as we wanted to, but we were still quite conservative, averaging three blankets each. There were even some participants who chose to camp out in tents.

The first night was relaxed. We gathered for dinner, formed a circle and shared a bit about ourselves. The two instructors, Christian Shearer and Ethan Roland (both Americans) shared their intentions for the course, and their background. It was very interesting to see that out of the 29 participants, about a third were Asians—three from Taiwan; one from Malaysia; one from Thailand and four from Singapore. The rest were mainly Americans, Canadians, a couple from Australia and one from Belgium. Some of the participants have occupations related to farming, gardening and NGOs, but a portion of them were really just there because they wanted to learn how to integrate their lives together with Mother Earth and make a difference in the world we live in. I guess that was one of the reasons why I was there too, besides learning how to design my own sustainable land and home in the future!

HANDS-ON PROCESS

The two-week course was a combination of theory and practical lessons as well as design project proposals where we had to work in teams and present our ideas to a pseudo client (who engaged us as designers to design their land) in front of the whole group.

First, we learned what Permaculture really is and the key principles behind it. Initially, it was quite hard to grasp the concept as I had never been exposed to this sort of topics before. But I gradually warmed up to it and started to understand its concepts, and enjoyed the course.

It was really quite profound to realise that all the various aspects of permaculture, like organic farming, natural building, alternative energy, animals, water, etc., are all interconnected, supporting one another on many different levels. I also discovered how modern agriculture has been destroying the planet by stripping off the precious topsoil and contaminating the earth with pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, etc. How silly we are to destroy the very land we live off for the sake of higher yields (which do not even go to the people who need them the most). And on top of that, the crops are less nutritious and less tasty.

During the course, we had the chance to go for a couple of field trips, visiting a very big worm bin which the local agriculture university had on campus; an eco-community; and a lovely holistic resort where there were lots of mini streams around (like a mini Venice among the houses). We also chopped loads of coconuts for their juice—a mega highlight for me! The satisfaction from chopping my own coconut with a machete and drinking from it was immense. The coconuts were utilised for their meat (for cooking) and husks (as pots for saplings).

Every morning, we had chores to do. We could choose from dish-washing, cleaning up the study area, collecting straw, collecting and chopping wood, watering the plants, etc. My favourite things to do were watering the plants, chopping wood and collecting straw. It was so fun to just get out and connect with nature while doing chores which the community, a living, breathing ecosystem by itself, needs done every day to keep things moving.

Another highlight for me was that I never had to flush a toilet for two weeks! In fact, there was no wet toilet at all. I did my 'big business' using a dry composting toilet and 'small business' freely 'in the wild', i.e., at the numerous banana trees all around. I even had a favourite banana tree that I could help fertilise every day. Did you know that our urine is extremely rich in nitrogen and carbon (a 1:1 ratio)—

what the plants truly need for growth—other than potassium and phosphorous?

In the evenings, we watched highly enlightening DVDs. The first one was titled Earthlings which served as a very good wake up call for us. It talks about how human beings have been exploiting all kinds of animals to serve us in five main areas—as pets, food, clothing, entertainment and for scientific research. It evoked emotions aplenty and most of us were in tears by the end of the show. Another great movie we watched was The Coconut Revolution where I witnessed how a big mining company had devastated and polluted a small island and how the natives fought back against the Australian and Papua New Guinea armed forces to reclaim their land. Coconuts were the focus as it can be used for numerous uses including fuel.

Over two evenings, Christian shared about the concepts of "integral theory" and "possibility alliance" (out of the course context actually) but they were issues that he was truly passionate about. In brief, they refer to the integral connectivity of the world and how to live a life of simplicity, community living, social action, joy, peace, harmony and love. It was amazing just listening to some of Christian's stories.

Some of the fun practical stuff we did include making adobe bricks. We had to squeeze into a sand pit and mix up the sand, clay and rice husks using our feet. Other than making bricks, we also used the mixture to smoothen garage walls.

There was a huge compost pile where we mixed greens (weeds), dried stuff (straw), manure, pee, food scraps and a whole lot more to create a smoking pile within two days. It was absolutely cool to pee into the compost and contribute to its decomposition.

Urban permaculture was one of the topics which I felt was closest to my heart, since I currently live in a city. I learned how we can start moving closer to nature, even within our own apartments. So I am dedicated to build my own balcony garden, garbage enzyme production and worm farm one day. Financial permaculture got us to think holistically about our finances and where we invest or spend our money. Are we thinking local, supporting our local community and consuming products which are green, organic and make us healthier? Or are we patronising larger organisations which dish out unhealthy mass produced synthetic stuff? Genetically modified food was also discussed, and it was quite scary to know that by playing God, we could possibly be creating even more harm to ourselves and the planet.

As the days went by, we picked up more knowledge (albeit very general information) and how to integrate them together. We were broken up into a few small project groups to test our knowledge and presentation skills to the class. Eventually we had to do a project where we were allocated a 2-hectare piece of land, and were required to walk the land, observe the contours and climate, and then design for our 'client' according to what he desired.

There were three main themes for the seven groups: a retirement home, eco-village and farm. Our group (comprising my friends and I) was allocated the farm scheme. Honestly, I have not been in any form of academic or group project since almost nine years back and given the fact it was such a non-academic subject, I had my worries if I could grasp the concept and come out with something that made sense. Later, our group presented our farm project for which we received overwhelming positive response, much to our surprise.

FIESTA FAREWELL AND FINAL THOUGHTS

All too soon, it was the end of the course, and we commemorated it with a fiesta night. Every participant was expected to put on a show, whether as an individual or with a group, in order to receive our certificates. It was quite stressful because I probably have almost no creative talent to speak of. Luckily, team Singapore got together again and came up with an a cappella rendition of the song "In Still of the Night".

As it was our last night there, we formed a circle again to share about what we learned from the course. I shared with the group about how I really enjoyed the power of possibilities which I don't think the education system in Singapore encourages. Maybe it was because the instructors are from America, I felt and saw that there was no wrong answers, just different perspectives, and as long as we can substantiate it, there is always a possibility. I saw the possibility of living in harmony with our planet, in peace and joy with our community and creating a win-win-win situation for all around the world. I saw that I was not alone; there are people around the world who are true to their hearts, and want to do their part to make the world a better place for all to co-exist. At the same time, I also know that I have to accumulate more practical experience to effect active change, or else it will just be all talk.

On reflection, the course also made me think that although we depend on our planet for so many resources to make our lives comfortable, do we really show gratitude and take care of the places where these resources come from? Rather, we take it for granted that these natural resources will be in continuous supply, and we do so without care of repercussions, even as we crave for more and more. It is a time for a mindset change. I'm not saying that everyone should live a life of absolute asceticism; I'm saying that we can choose to live in moderation and have the best of both worlds.

Thank you Panya Project; thank you Christian and Ethan, and thank you to all 29 participants and everyone who supported the course in some shape, way or form. Thank you for changing my life forever. I know we are all going to do wonderful things together.

For those interested to sign up or find out more about the course, please visit www.panyaproject.org.



16 The instructors Ethan and Christian
17 Worm bin **18** Mixing the compost
19 Smoothing the garage walls