



Sustainable tourism

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*Eco-tourism and eco-resorts are slowly becoming popular with a weary, fed-on-excess urban population. **G. Venkatesh** profiles an eco-resort in Bhopal which is trying its best to adhere to the ideal way of living, which must soon become the norm, rather than the exception.*

Retreats are a special segment of the hospitality sector. At once, their socio-economic contributions become evident. They offer a distinct social service – albeit for those who have a little more money to expend – in the form of providing the opportunity to get away from the hubbub of the workaday city life with its noise and air pollution, and inordinate levels of stress. Economically, they would make the beneficiaries loosen their purse strings and redistribute their affluence to those working at the resorts (the support staff for whom this is a wonderful employment generator), who in turn are able to support their families and send their children to school. The government would be at the receiving end of taxes from the resorts, a good part of which in a well-functioning, non-corrupt, efficient democracy (are we one such?), is pumped back into social welfare.

While the aforesaid is quite obvious, and all retreats would characterise themselves as fulfilling this double bottom line, discerning the third bottom line – environment-friendliness – often adds this extra dimension and creates a ‘new normal’, so to say. Of course, readers may have experienced sojourns at different resorts in India, and this article focuses on just one of them – the Jehan Numa Retreat, which is located in Bhopal (www.jehannuma.com).

Retreat, forests, biofuels et al

My wife happened to spend two days with her parents at this retreat early on this year. This drove me to get in touch with the General Manager Murugan Thevar through e-mail. The gist of the e-interview was the environmental profile of the retreat. The resort organises tree-plantation programmes in which guests are invited to participate. Each sapling is marked with the name of the planter and the date on which it was planted, and photographs of the development/growth of the saplings are sent to the guests on e-mail to keep them updated about how their ‘botanical children’ are faring.



It is only fitting that plantain leaves sourced from the retreat serve as plates, at this ecological haven

Thevar says that the property (12 acres of land in all) was earlier used to grow alfa alfa (horse feed), as the family which owns the resort was in the equestrian business. The periphery is dotted with 30-year-old eucalyptus trees. The tree-planting programme referred to, is now three years old, and over this period of time, about 2000 fruit and forest trees have been added on to the property, on the expert advice of the resort’s landscape architect. At the time of writing, only about seven acres are under cultivation. When quizzed about the possible need in the future to cut down some of the trees to keep the programme going, Thevar responded, “Our concept is based on forests and so we believe that trees must be allowed to grow wild and adapt to their surroundings. We avoid planting them in straight lines and equidistant from each other.” The late Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam’s belief in afforestation being a very useful tool to combat global warming comes to mind at once.

I was curious to find out if some of the acres could be devoted to growing biofuel crops like jatropha...another one of Dr Kalam’s pet projects. Thevar says that alfa alfa is beneficial to the soil as it adds useful nitrogen to it and keeps it fertilised. While some patches are being used for organic farming of vegetables which are also used in the resort’s kitchens, he thinks that jatropha could be put on the anvil and perhaps it may take off in the future.

Growing plants which soak up some of the carbon dioxide and then harvesting them to replace diesel or petrol (a good deal of which is imported into the country), is a great contribution to the economy and the environment at the same time. The farming team at the resort, he says, is from the local village close to Bhopal, and they have been associated with the pedosphere and the biosphere all their lives. They have a wonderful connect with Mother Nature. Thevar finds it a great and rewarding experience to be working with peaceful, nature-loving people at the resort. Terms like global warming and climate change may be foreign to them, but they know for sure the value of trees to human existence.

Trees get their energy from sunlight and soak up carbon dioxide. The Sun can be used in many other ways too. Like for instance, solar heating. This is operational at Jehan Numa Retreat. Solar water heaters handle up to 85% of the heat demand (for water heating) at the resort!

Bhopal, as many readers would know has been plagued by water scarcity from time to time. Borewells and overhead water tanks are common sights in the city. The resort has a captive sewage treatment plant and 70% of the water used for irrigation is sourced from this plant. It is also equipped with an extensive drip irrigation and pop-up-sprinkler system to optimise water use. Rainwater harvesting is also in vogue at the resort; canals dug around the resort reduce runoff and trap the rainwater, some of which seeps into the soil and sustain the ground water levels in and around the resort.

What about biogas? Food waste, horse dung and other organic waste from the village around could be anaerobically degraded to produce biogas to plug the remaining 15% of the heat demand (85% coming from solar energy as mentioned above). Excess biogas could be looked upon as a source of revenue – sold to an external market in Bhopal as a source of heat for cooking or industrial purposes. It can also be blended with the natural gas supply by constructing feeder pipes to the main gas pipeline network. Well, electricity generation is also possible if the resort intends to reduce its dependence on the electricity grid of the city. This is a good idea, according to Thevar...not to be dismissed but kept at the back of the mind for possible incorporation in the future.

Currently, in the absence of a biogas-generating facility, the food waste is composted for use as fertiliser on the property itself. The staff have been trained to identify and segregate the compostable food waste. Still on food, the GM tells me that instead of paper or metal or plastics (the latter requiring wash water later), banana leaves are used as plates at the resort, compostable thereafter, or for that matter, even feed for cattle in the city! When it comes to frills – decorations and festoons etc., especially on festive occasions like New Year, Diwali or Christmas or Id – the resort thinks ‘organic’. Flowers, fruits and leaves from within the property are used as much as possible to reduce the demand for paper, plastic or metal. Whatever non-organics are used, if they are recyclable, they are duly sorted, and a local waste handler collects the same from the resort. However, the author is not aware of the effectiveness and efficiency of the recycling system in Bhopal. So, it would be difficult to say what happens to these recyclables after they are collected and taken away. One hopes that they are recycled – close to 100%.

There are retreats aplenty in India. The potential to unearth more and more possibilities of coexisting harmoniously with Mother Nature and contributing to the control/mitigation of the climate change concerns which have now been globally accepted as real and to-be-tackled, is immense. A little here, a little there, cumulatively will result in something conspicuous, as India marches on in the 21st century with a pot-pourri of challenges to surmount.



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