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# 10 best luxury eco-resorts

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© EcoCamp Patagonia

Geodesic domes reminiscent of the local Kawesqar people's huts were constructed for guests visiting EcoCamp Patagonia, which is in Torres del Paine National Park. Trekking into the Patagonian wonderland of mountains, fjords, volcanoes, pampas and ice fields is a top activity.

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By Stephen Regenold

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Put your ethos aside for a moment. Forget about saving the earth. Now imagine laying on white sand with waves splashing nearby. Think of turquoise waters, a warm and kissing breeze, green palms on the beach.

You're at CESiaK, a beach resort and retreat south of Tulum, [Mexico](#), on the [Yucatan Peninsula's](#) Caribbean coast. The wilds of Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a 1.3-million-acre park, is to the west, complete with climbing monkeys, mangroves and Mayan ruins. Sea turtles nest nearby. CESiaK is paradise unfettered. Indeed, the resort is an archetype for self-indulgent tropical travel.

But here's the kicker: CESiaK is also an ecologically responsible place to stay.

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To start with the resort is completely off the grid: wind and sun power its buildings. Rainwater is collected, filtered and stored in cisterns for use. Local labor was used in the construction of the resort, and its current employees are natives to the area. CESiaK leads ecology education tours for visitors; its staff reaches out to more than 800 area kids via the public schools in Tulum and Punta Allen, where CESiaK leads environmental lessons.

**ALSO ON THIS STORY****In Pictures: 10 Best Luxury Eco-Resorts**

A veritable picture of a well-oiled eco-machine, CESiaK is one of hundreds of similar small resorts around the planet with a mission based on sustainability. Since the late 1970's, when the term "ecotourism" first entered the travel industry's taxonomy, resorts with environmental and educational intents have become increasingly

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"People became disenchanted with traditional tourism," said Martha Honey, executive director of The International Ecotourism Society in [Washington D.C.](#) Interest in ecotourism

dovetailed with the environmental movement and society's increasing interest in sustainability. By the early 1990's, Honey said, ecotourism was the fastest growing sector of the travel industry.

Specifically, The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people." At no point in history has a traveler had so many eco-options. From British Columbia to Bali, resort owners are embracing its tenets, which revolve around environmental conservation, education and community involvement.

But as a buzzword, the term "ecotourism" can spurn marketing hype. "Because of its open-ended definition, 'ecotourism' is interpreted differently by everyone," said Cameron Boyd, owner and founder of CESiaK, which stands for Centro Ecológico Sian Ka'an. "You have to watch out for places that promote ecotourism on no real basis."

As examples, Boyd offers up beach resorts that perpetually run diesel generators for air-conditioning. Martha Honey said non-resident employees are shipped in to work at some resorts, displacing locals who could do the job. In fact, some resorts and tour operators use "eco-" terms and prefixes simply because they market well.



© Jungle Bay Resort & Spa

This Dominican resort, found midway down the chain of Caribbean islands near Guadeloupe and Martinique, includes 35 cottages elevated on wooden posts and perched like bird's nests under a jungle canopy. The visitor center sits on a seaside cliff. A yoga center, a volcanic stone swimming pool, live entertainment and dancing are popular diversions.

Honey calls this hype "greenwashing," and she says small resorts as well as big hotel chains have been culprit as of late. Part of the problem is that there's no universally accepted international certification for ecotourism. "It still might take some investigation on the traveler's behalf to make sure the resort is the real deal," she said.

But things are changing. The International Ecotourism Society, in collaboration with the Rainforest Alliance, has plans to introduce a

global accreditation system — the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council — to certify individual programs within the next two years.

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Despite some subversiveness (or confused semantics in some cases), Honey said the overall future for ecotourism is

bright. "There is a broad desire of the general public to travel in a social and environmentally responsible manner," she said. Resort companies large and small are taking notice.

The endgame of the ecotourism movement, said Honey, will be the total reform of the worldwide travel industry as we know it. Here are 11 resorts doing "eco" the right way.

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