



SPECIAL REPORT
FUTURE OF TRAVEL

LOFTY AMBITIONS Below, from left: On the approach to Soneva Fushi resort, host of the 2011 Slow Life Symposium; Sir Richard Branson at the resort's jetty.



READY FOR TAKEOFF

Though he will soon be rocketing wealthy tourists into space, Sir Richard Branson's more immediate concern is making the way the rest of us travel more sustainable. The time for talk is over, he says, and the time for action is now
BY RON GLUCKMAN

The travel industry, one of the world's largest, faces extreme challenges and uncertainty in the future, but it's a safe bet that billionaire Sir Richard Branson and his multifaceted Virgin empire will play a huge role in shaping its direction and sustainability.

Branson was among dozens of speakers at October's Slow Life Symposium, a celebrity-studded ecotourism conference hosted by Six Senses Resorts & Spas at its Soneva Fushi property in the Maldives' Baa Atoll. He was joined by some of world's most prominent green planners, thinkers, and alternative-energy advocates to discuss climate change and progress toward sustainable business

practices within the travel industry.

While politicians continue to debate carbon-reduction schemes, Branson told delegates that the price, in environmental terms, grows steeper every day. "On global warming and climate change, we have already reached a critical point. The time for talk has passed," he said. "We need action, and we must take action now." And the cost of inaction, he maintains, is moving the world ever closer to "the mother of all recessions."

"We're not going back to the Stone Age," concurred the Maldives' environment minister, Mohamed Aslam. "Travel is a fast-growing industry, and the Maldives itself is dependent on tourism. But we must have the kind of travel that helps the world instead of destroying it."

Despite the concerns, the mood at the



conference was upbeat. "I think businesses are moving in the right direction," Branson told *DestinAsian*. "On global warming, politicians have failed. But if every company in the world takes on this issue, a lot will get done."

He offered examples from his own initiatives. "We have created the Carbon War Room to do things that not only help to green cities, green islands, and green shipping, but that also create jobs," he said, referring to the website he recently launched with the aim of drastically reducing the use of traditional jet fuels. Toward this end, Branson's team began by tracking the routes and efficiencies of cargo ships worldwide. Providing data on 100,000 vessels online allows customers to choose the most energy-efficient among them, saving carbon and money in the process.

They then launched the Green Capital Global Challenge, a program designed to improve energy savings in cities. "It's such a simple scheme, just looking at all the ways to make buildings better, to save energy and money," said the 61-year-old founder of the Virgin Group. Launched last fall in two U.S. cities, the initiative funds makeovers of buildings that, according to Branson, should not only repay investment costs in energy savings, but also generate billions of dollars in increased economic activity through the creation of 17,000 jobs. In the future, he hopes to get more funding partners onboard and roll out the program in cities across the world.

If Branson seems all over the map these days, that's because he is constantly on the go, involved in scores of campaigns. A few days before our meeting in the Maldives, he was in Shanghai, speaking against the harvesting of shark fins alongside basketball star Yao Ming, one of China's most famous athletes. A week later, he was scheduled to travel to New Mexico to open his Virgin Galactic Spaceport. He said that Virgin Galactic was on track to begin taking tourists to the edge of space in 2013, with 500 space tourists having already paid US\$200,000 for advance bookings.

And there is more, much more. Even though space tourism is getting most of the publicity, Branson said his Virgin Oceanic venture would be even more amazing. The endeavor will see a single pilot take the world's most advanced submarine 11 kilometers into the deep blue, with the first dive slated to explore the Mariana Trench later this year. "In some ways, it's more risky than going into

space, and the pressure in the ocean will be greater," he said. "Eighty percent of the species in the sea are yet to be discovered. It could be a whole new area of exploration for us."

With his long blond hair and irresistible charisma, Branson might seem more suited to rock stardom than saving the planet. The entertainment and aviation mogul built Virgin from the ground up, selling records from the trunk of a car, eventually forming his first enterprise, Virgin Records. He launched British carrier Virgin Atlantic in 1984, Virgin Mobile in 1999, and Virgin Blue (now Virgin Australia) a year later, along the way making news for such death-defying escapades as record-breaking hot-air balloon flights and dogsledding to the North Pole.

Branson said that it was Al Gore who inspired him to take a stand against global warming. "He just showed up at my door one day," Branson chuckled. This was six years ago, before the former American vice president's Oscar-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* propelled climate change into the spot-

light. "He practiced his presentation on me," Branson recalled. "I was an attentive guinea pig, and it made me realize that we had to do something to change the way we did business or we would ruin our world for our grandchildren and their children."

Last year, Branson joined forces with Gore to offer a US\$25 million prize to inspire young minds to come up with creative ways to combat climate change. Since then, thousands have submitted proposals to the Virgin Earth Challenge for the development of means of removing carbon from the atmosphere.

In recent years, Branson has pledged all profits from his aviation and train business to finance the invention of an alternative, ecological airline fuel. He spoke passionately about various biofuels, and hinted at a huge breakthrough. Sure enough, weeks later came the announcement that his team developed the first low-carbon aviation fuel with half the carbon footprint of normal fuel. "This is just a start," Branson said, adding that the goal is

IT AIN'T ROCKET SCIENCE

Since NASA announced plans to abandon its space shuttle program, a new generation of businesses have stepped up to commercialize space. Next year should see the launch of Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic odysseys, which will take tourists (up to six at a time) into suborbital space for a suitably out-of-this-world price: US\$200,000 a ticket.

Several other companies are developing rockets of their own, but among all the pioneering visions, none is as radically retro as that of José Mariano López-Urdiales. The Spanish founder of Zero2Infinity (*inbloon.com*) plans to take people into space by balloon—or, as he



calls it, "bloon."

An aeronautical engineer whose résumé includes stints at the European Space Agency and Boeing, López-Urdiales concedes that balloons have been on a backburner for decades, but believes they offer unique appeal in the era of global warming. "They are zero emission, with zero impact," he says.

He envisions a small, ellipsoid-shaped pod soaring

into the stratosphere, some 36 kilometers above the planet. Inside will be room for four passengers, who will enjoy about two hours of space viewing. The pod would then detach from its balloon, and parachute back to earth.

Just a lot of hot air? Perhaps not. López-Urdiales is already offering advance bookings, and says the first balloon flights could commence by 2013. —RG

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carbon-neutrality within five years.

That would be welcome news to a tourism industry increasingly walking a line between the energy expectations of climate-conscious consumers and fuel-hungry comforts like the air-conditioning they demand while on holiday. The very act of traveling demands the expenditure of enormous energy and carbon for flights.

"We have seen some wonderful ideas and initiatives at this symposium," said Slow Life host Sonu Shivdasani, chairman of the Six Senses group. "Global warming and climate change present challenges to all resorts, and there is a huge effort to be more energy conscious." An eco-pioneer among the world's luxury hotel chains, Six Senses is at the forefront of such efforts. Its properties purify and bottle their own water in recyclable glass bottles, and a portion of the business's proceeds are channeled into various green and wildlife conservation funds.

Holding the symposium in the Maldives contributed an extra sense of urgency. The

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low-lying archipelagic nation, whose highest point is no more than two meters above sea level, is more vulnerable than most to the rise in sea levels attributed to climate change. Its president, Mohamed Nasheed, has become a poster boy for the battle against global warming, challenging world leaders to do more to rein in carbon emissions. He has also steered his tiny, newly democratic state on its own green path, announcing the goal of carbon neutrality by 2020.

"Unlike all the countries that talk about what other countries need to do, the Maldives is taking action," said Mark Lynas, Nasheed's

climate-change adviser and author of *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans*. "These islands have been important in changing the dialogue," he added, noting that several other nations have matched the carbon-neutrality pledge. "Think of the Maldives as a laboratory for the world."

Nasheed, the first democratically elected president of Asia's smallest nation, said: "It's very clear, regardless of whether you are big or small, rich or poor, too much carbon will kill you." He commended the sense of optimism at the conference, noting that the world had been stymied by the economic costs of climate action for too long. "There is a sense of lethargy, of losing hope, but I am confident we can win this. I believe in human ingenuity. I think there will be a huge change, a massive shift, a renaissance. This is the time to step up. We really have to take action. It's time to stop thinking in the old economic terms, and come up with something new."

Branson agreed. "Some see this as a huge challenge. I see opportunity." ☺

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