

YAO NOI'S SIX SENSES

SUSTAINABILITY IS PART OF THE DNA AT THIS LUXURY RESORT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

BY: **RON GLUCKMAN**



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An ice cream bar may seem unusual at a five-star resort; likewise popcorn passed around at an outdoor cinema under the stars. And few, if any, luxury resorts boast a chicken farm. Breaking the mold has been business as usual, and a large part of the appeal, for over a decade at the upscale but unconventional Six Senses.

This small, influential luxury chain based in Bangkok has created some of the world's most talked-about and celebrated resorts, including Soneva Fushi in the Maldives – a mainstay on the world's best lists. While comfort and top-notch service typifies Six Senses as much as quirky features, the firm's commitment to social and environmental responsibility has been a major attraction to its loyal following.

That's readily apparent on the island of Yao Noi, a Robinson-Crusoe-style getaway in Southern Thailand. No airports serve the rustic isle; guests arrive by private speedboat from nearby Phuket. The property features an eclectic collection of deceptively rustic-looking villas tucked

amongst lush vegetation, all with private pools and the supreme pampering associated with Six Senses' creed of 'Barefoot Luxury'.

No comfort is compromised, yet Six Senses reaches exemplary levels of sustainability. The resort was carefully built among existing forest, using lots of salvaged wood. Lights are efficient. Water is recycled and purified for drinking. Much of the produce consumed by guests is grown in charming gardens on site. And the chickens not only contribute fresh, healthy eggs, but also munch kitchen waste, producing compost used for the gardens.

These are a few colorful aspects of the company's matrix of environmental measures, standard to all its resorts worldwide. Every property has its own sustainability champion who not only coordinates chain policies, but also suggests new measures that work locally, and just might yield benefit for other resorts.

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"I want things like this to come out of the box," says Amber Beard, Vice President of Sustainability at the Bangkok head office. "I want everyone to be involved, and share ideas. One person cannot do this. It's about everyone buying in."

Yao Noi offers a wonderful showpiece. The tiny island has limited fresh water, so the resort produces all its own. Six Senses was a pioneer in switching from expensive (and highly profitable) imported bottled water to locally produced water. This is stocked in recycled glass bottles, sold in the restaurants, with much of the proceeds going to off-site community initiatives.

Initially wastewater was recycled in ponds, picturesque aeration providing basic treatment. Then, the resort started using EM (Effective Microorganisms) to purify the water, now reused around the grounds. "We save a lot of water, and money," says Pimjai Doungnate, who oversees sustainability and quality assurance at the resort.

Many resorts pay lip service to sustainability but Six Senses has a comprehensive Waste-to-Wealth strategy. The aim is to constantly consider new ways of combatting waste, terming the effort a series of opportunities, rather than compromises. "There is this great misconception about

sustainability," explains Beard. "People think that it's going to be hard, and involve sacrifice. That doesn't have to be the case."

She concedes there are costs, sometimes sizeable, but they can be offset by long-term gains. Six Senses sprouts in some of the world's most pristine locations. Often resources are limited, and environmental impact can be huge, compromising the serene ecology that the resort values so highly, and guests come to savor.

Thinking out of the box becomes essential in such settings. Six Senses Zighy Bay is in a remote part of Oman, lacking virtually all services; access is largely from Dubai. Supplies come at great cost, risk of spoilage and huge carbon footprint. Six Senses responded by renting land nearby to grow produce. They ship organic vegetables fresh to the table, with \$80,000 savings in food costs annually, says Beard.

The benefits accumulate. "We're always looking at new ways to do things better," says Manish Puri, general manager at Yao Noi. "We don't put a green flag up. The guests know about this, and we do it for the guests, but we also do it for ourselves."



Reactions, he says, are overwhelmingly positive. Guests tour the organic gardens with chef Anthony Reynolds, who says the resort produces 15 percent of its food, which is healthier utilising fresh, local ingredients. Everything is visible, and shared, including a mushroom-shaped fairytale hut where guests can see how mushrooms grow.

Tours of the resort water plant are also popular, but the main attraction is often the chicken farm, a Yao Noi innovation that could be adopted at other Six Senses. "Before we spent 50,000 baht (about \$1600) per month for organic eggs," says Puri. "Guests can visit the chickens, pick up an egg still warm, and give it to their butler for breakfast.

"This saves us money," he says, "and it makes us different. We still have glitz and glamour, but a lot of people want nature, and to be in a sustainable setting. This makes business sense – it saves money and waste. But it's also part of our DNA."



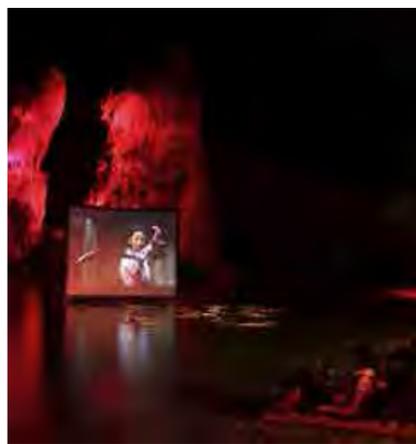




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Phone: + 66 (0) 76 418 500

Web: www.sixsenses.com/yaonoi

General Manager: Mr. Manish Puri

Owner: Sustainable Luxury Hospitality (Thailand) Ltd Company

Room Rates (Double Room): Pool Villas start at 16,875 Thai

Baht (about \$525), low season

Number of rooms: 55 Pool Villas