

## **From green to regenerative: How India's hospitality sector is reimagining sustainability**

As World Environment Day 2025 draws global attention to the theme of Ending Global Plastic Pollution, India's travel and hospitality sectors find themselves in a moment of reckoning. After years of progress in reducing single-use plastics, installing solar panels and optimising water consumption, the time has come to look beyond conventional sustainability practices. The next frontier is regenerative tourism where the focus shifts from harm reduction to ecosystem restoration, community empowerment and long-term resilience.

World Travel & Tourism Council's Environmental & Social Impact Report: India (2023) noted that the tourism sector accounted for 4.9 per cent of India's total greenhouse gas emissions, highlighting the urgency of structural shifts in operations and strategy. Meanwhile, the Deloitte report, A Roadmap for Sustainable Hospitality, urged the sector to move beyond low impact measures to bold systemic change. It recommended integrating ESG metrics into business decision-making, developing regenerative business models and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure. These changes are not merely aspirational – they are becoming non-negotiable as global travellers increasingly demand transparency and accountability.

This trend was echoed in the Booking.com Travel & Sustainability Report 2025, which found that 87 per cent of Indian travellers intended to make more sustainable choices over the next year. Of those surveyed, 52 per cent planned to use greener transport, 51 per cent aimed to reduce waste and 50 per cent decided on prioritising energy savings. Furthermore, 72 per cent of respondents said they would feel better about flying if the flight had lower emissions, and 75 per cent preferred to filter tour and activity options based on sustainability credentials. More importantly, 49 per cent shared that they were willing to make more mindful food choices and nearly half intended to avoid wildlife-harming activities.

“Indian travellers are demonstrating a clear and growing commitment to sustainable travel, not just in their intentions but in their actions,” says Santosh

Kumar, Country Manager, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia at Booking.com. He adds, “From opting for greener transport and reducing waste to actively seeking accommodations with credible sustainability credentials, Indians today are looking to make a meaningful difference.”

This growing consumer pressure is already shaping industry action. The ITC Sustainability Report 2024 outlines a comprehensive sustainability framework that blends circular economy principles, water stewardship and biodiversity conservation. The report details ITC Hotels' efforts to become net positive in water and carbon, with 58 per cent of energy needs met through renewable sources and 99 per cent of solid waste reused or recycled. Smart technologies like IoT and automation are being increasingly deployed to optimise energy and water use in real time, making sustainability not just a compliance requirement but a source of operational efficiency.

Meanwhile, the EHL Hospitality Business School's insights into global sustainability trends in hospitality stress the need for a transition from 'green-washing' to verifiable, data-backed outcomes. The report underlines that the next generation of hospitality leaders must understand life-cycle analyses, carbon accounting, and stakeholder-based sustainability reporting. According to EHL, hotel brands that align ESG performance with guest experience and employee satisfaction are likely to see higher resilience and long-term profitability.

Among India's hospitality giants, the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) is making notable strides with its ESG+ framework, Paathya. Fifty-one of its hotels now operate on renewable energy. The Taj Mahal, New Delhi, has introduced Innergise Green Meetings, which follow low-impact guidelines. In Goa, IHCL joined hands with Bisleri to install Benches of Dreams made from recycled plastic bottle caps, turning waste into purpose. The company has also conducted beach clean-ups and waste education programmes in partnership with United Way Mumbai. The cumulative effect of these actions points to a hospitality brand attempting to close the loop on waste and energy.

Heritage hotel chain, WelcomHeritage Hotels champions responsible tourism, seamlessly blending sustainability with cultural preservation. “Each of our properties is committed to environmentally conscious practices, reflecting our

profound respect for India's heritage and natural ecosystems. We don't just advocate for sustainable living—we embody it. Many of our hotels have eliminated single-use plastics, adopted eco-friendly alternatives, and actively reduce food waste through mindful consumption,” says Ashutosh Chhibba, Chief Executive Officer, WelcomHeritage Hotels. He adds their commitment to clean energy and resource conservation is evident through features like electric vehicle (EV) charging stations at properties such as WelcomHeritage Santa Roza, Kasauli and WelcomHeritage Parv Vilas Resort & Spa, Solan. “This World Environment Day, we reaffirm our pledge to not only protect our environment but also to celebrate and safeguard the cultural and natural legacy of India for generations to come,” he shares.

Likewise, The Fern Hotels & Resorts offer a premium standard of amenities and services with a deep commitment to the environment. In a world where guests seek proactive, personalised experiences, it goes beyond expectations – delivering elegance, contemporary comforts and warm hospitality with minimal environmental impact. “Sustainability is woven into the fabric of everything we do. We believe that putting an end to plastic pollution is not just an environmental concern – it's a shared responsibility. Through steps such as phasing out single-use plastics, adopting biodegradable alternatives and engaging both guests and staff through awareness campaigns, we are committed to measurable change. Every small action, from refillable dispensers to eco-packaging, adds up,” says Managing Director Suhail Kannampilly.

For Westlife Foodworld which operates McDonald's restaurants in India's West and South markets environmental consciousness stands as a cornerstone of its business philosophy. “Our sustainability journey began with purpose and conviction, embedding eco-friendly practices such as eliminating single-use plastic from all customer touchpoints throughout our operations as part of our fundamental values. Businesses today have both the opportunity and obligation to reimagine traditional models, creating frameworks where economic growth and ecological harmony coexist,” says Vice Chairperson Smita Jatia.

World Environment Day reminds us that environmental protection isn't a once-a-year commitment, it is our daily responsibility. Every small action contributes to the larger goal of conserving the environment. We hope to inspire both guests

and the wider community to make more conscious and environmentally responsible choices.” adds Gopalakrishnan, General Manager at Gateway Bekal.

From a policy standpoint, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is pivoting in response. The Swadesh Darshan 2.0 scheme, a revamp of the Government’s flagship tourism programme, now focusses on destination-led development that prioritises sustainability and community engagement. It emphasises on infrastructure that supports local economies such as nature interpretation centres, eco-lodges, decentralised waste management and clean mobility infrastructure. The goal is to distribute the economic benefits of tourism more equitably while ensuring minimal ecological disruption.

The broader transformation towards regenerative tourism also requires measurable impacts on local communities. As highlighted by Deloitte and the WTTC, empowering communities with training, employment, and ownership within the tourism value chain can deliver social capital alongside environmental gains. In India, this is visible in ecotourism initiatives that engage tribal populations in states such as Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Sikkim. Many of these projects are now being studied as scalable models for combining conservation, culture and commerce. However, progress is not without obstacles. Fragmented regulations, limited access to green financing and a shortage of trained personnel continue to hinder widespread adoption of advanced sustainability practices. Additionally, data collection and reporting remain inconsistent across much of the industry, undermining efforts to benchmark and improve ESG performance. Still, the sector’s intent appears strong.

Tejus Jose, Director of Operations at ibis & ibis Styles India, reinforces this momentum. “At ibis, our sustainability journey is deeply woven into every aspect of our operations, from the way we build our hotels to how we serve our guests and engage with our communities. We have implemented solar-powered water heating systems that reduce our daily energy consumption by over 6,000 units, and water-saving aerators that help conserve more than 340,000 litres of water each day.”

Across India, ibis properties are gradually shifting to LED lighting, with over 50,000 installations already in place. Beyond infrastructure, they actively collaborate with local communities, schools and NGOs to drive on-ground impact – organising beach clean-up drives in coastal cities, launching tree plantation initiatives in partnership with government schools and encouraging guests to participate in sustainability experiences. “This World Environment Day, we reaffirm our vision of creating accessible, enjoyable stays that are mindful of our planet’s future,” he adds.

“At JW Marriott Hotel Bengaluru, our commitment to environmental management is deeply ingrained into our operations, defining us as a model in sustainable luxury. By taking a genuinely comprehensive and distinctive approach to reducing our environmental impact, we have established a standard for conscientious hospitality in the city core,” comments Gaurav Sinha, Hotel Manager, JW Marriott Hotel Bengaluru.

“Sustainability is not just a policy for us. It is a mindset we carry into every aspect of how we run the hotel,” exclaims Surajit Chatterjee, General Manager of Novotel Goa Panjim.

“For us, it goes beyond simply following rules or ticking boxes; it is about embedding eco-consciousness into the very fabric of our daily operations, from energy management and waste reduction to sourcing local, ethical products and fostering a culture of environmental responsibility among our staff and guests. Being awarded the Green Key is an honour, but more importantly, it serves as a constant reminder and motivation to improve. It keeps us focused on doing better every day, pushing us to innovate and adopt practices that reduce our ecological footprint while enhancing the guest experience. This recognition is not the end goal but a milestone on our ongoing journey toward true sustainability”, he adds further.

Echoing this shift in consciousness among newer hospitality players is ELIVAAS. Founder-CEO Ritwik Khare says, “Our commitment to sustainability goes beyond intention. It’s reflected in the details of every guest experience. Recognising the environmental benefits of jute as a natural, biodegradable and eco-friendly material, we have transitioned to using it across

our properties in the form of jute slippers and jute bags which are durable, reusable essentials that reduce our ecological footprint. Moreover, understanding the long-term harm caused by single-use plastic, we have replaced plastic water bottles with glass alternatives, promoting safer and more sustainable hydration. Complementing these efforts are thoughtfully curated eco-friendly kits and organic toiletries, ensuring that every touchpoint reflects our vision of responsible luxury. On World Environment Day, we reaffirm our dedication to creating experiences that are both enriching and environmentally conscious.”

“At The Ritz-Carlton, Bangalore, we have reimagined luxury to place environmental responsibility at the core of our service philosophy,” said Reuben Kataria, General Manager. “World Environment Day is a timely reminder that our industry holds both the opportunity and the obligation to lead meaningful change. Through our sustainability efforts from energy optimization and sustainable amenities to plant-forward dining we prove that environmental consciousness and exceptional hospitality are complementary forces,” concludes Reuben Kataria, General Manager, The Ritz-Carlton, Bangalore.

As India charts a future in which tourism restores more than it depletes, the hospitality sector must serve not just as host, but as steward. This World Environment Day is not just a celebration of past achievements – it is a call to lead the way forward.