

Beyond Green aims to spur sustainability action

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Founding members of Beyond Green, a new collection of environmentally conscious hotels, discuss how sharing best practices can help change the industry for the better.



Three Camel Lodge, which accommodates guests in felt-covered gers against the backdrop of the Gobi Altai mountains in Mongolia, is a founding member of Beyond Green. (Photo: Beyond Green)

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GLOBAL REPORT—Sustainability in the hotel industry requires more thought, not necessarily more cost, and a global pandemic is no excuse for inaction, according to hoteliers who recently joined Beyond Green, which seeks to set aside the buzzwords and spur progress on environmental initiatives.

Beyond Green launched in November as a brand within Preferred Hotel Group, the family-owned parent company of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, which supports independent hotels, hospitality companies, destinations and tourism bureaus with sales, marketing, revenue management and distribution. The concept of the Beyond Green brand derives from a collaboration with sustainable tourism consultancy Beyond Green Travel, which Preferred acquired in February.

"Sometimes I chuckle to myself because I see a parade of names out there ... for example, let's have conscious travel and meaningful travel, or let's launch geotourism, ethical tourism and so on. And I adore the latest spin on this regenerative travel, of course," said Costas Christ, brand leader of Beyond Green and founder of Beyond Green Travel.

"I wish that folks would give as much attention to actual impact and action as they would in trying to think of new names that they think are going to be the answer. Beyond Green is about sustainable tourism leadership. I would almost reverse the perpetual phrase of walking your talk and I would literally just say that we walk before we talk, and that is at the core and heart of this brand."

Beyond Green's 24 founding member properties each were vetted and passed key criteria, which Christ described as "the reduce, reuse, recycle aspects of having a friendly environmental footprint ... support for the cultural and natural heritage ... (and) the social and economic wellbeing of local people."

However, the idea isn't to turn away properties that don't meet the same standards, but rather to help bring them along, he said.

"We will work with them, help them identify their weaknesses and then help them get strengths in that area," he said. "I don't know a GM in the world who would say, 'Hey, you know what, we have good service here for our guests, we think we have great service, so relax a little, we don't have to think about it too much.' The GMs I'm familiar with, no matter how good they are, wake up every day thinking, 'What else can we do for our guests?'"

Lindsey Ueberroth, CEO of Preferred Hotel Group, said the goal is to grow the brand thoughtfully and globally.

"Initially we said we'd love to get to 100 properties in the first 24 months. When I look at the pipeline and interest, I think we could do that sooner," she said.

"(However), we're still sensitive to making sure that we don't put too many properties in one location. We want to balance that. I could see us having 100 hotels in 18 months, but the goal is finding the right properties that are committed to it. We would love to have dots on the map so that regardless of where anybody wants to travel, we have a hotel that they can stay at that's committed to this vision."

Christ also has a more altruistic goal for the brand.

"My own personal viewpoint ... I work toward a day when a portfolio of properties like Beyond Green doesn't need to exist because the very definition of hospitality and tourism will mean sustainability in its actual fabric and core values," he said. "It will be far from an add-on."

While Ueberroth acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic delayed an announcement of the Beyond Green brand, originally timed for June, Christ said the health crisis isn't cause for hoteliers to cut back on their commitment to sustainability.

"There have been many lessons in this pandemic, and one of the most significant lessons is the realization and the understanding that there cannot be personal health and wellbeing without planetary health and well-being," he said.

"Frankly, any hotelier out there who thinks that the pandemic is an excuse for not engaging in sustainability is misguided."



Clockwise from top left: Red Carnation Hotels' Brett Tollman, Preferred Hotel Group CEO Lindsey Ueberroth; Beyond Green brand leader Costas Christ; Michael Moritz of Borgo Pignano; and Three Camel Lodge's Undraa Buyannemekh. (Screen capture: Robert McCune)

During a virtual roundtable with Hotel News Now, three owners of Beyond Green founding member hotels shared their vision of sustainability and how they are achieving it during the pandemic.

What does sustainability, and Beyond Green, mean to you?

"This is not about pure profit; it's not about just doing things for our own good. It's about sharing and learning. ... It's a wonderful opportunity for us as an industry, and a collection of properties, to say you can run a commercial enterprise sustainably and do good for the planet based on your footprint. You can do well by supporting local communities and local cultures. ... We also recognize the threat of Airbnb experiences. For example, what we've done to compete with that is to ensure we're offering local experiences. You can stay at Ashford Castle, and we will take you ... to spend a day with a farmer or a sheepdog breeder or someone who makes peat moss that they use to make fires ... really local, immersive experiences. ... In doing so, we're obviously providing them (locals) with an additional livelihood, and the opportunity to tell their stories. ... That, I think, is a very beneficial and holistic or a virtuous circle."

- Brett Tollman, CEO, The Travel Corporation and Red Carnation Hotels, which has three founding member properties

"I don't think sustainability actually creates extra costs. I think what it requires is extra thought and extra planning. We had the good fortune of buying what was a derelict property about 20 years ago, which afforded us a fresh beginning so that we could approach the restoration of the property, and also it's surrounded by about 750 acres of farmland and forest. We can approach the buildings and the land with an eye to making sure we nurture both. ... When we set about restoring the buildings, it requires a little bit more thought. For example, the idea of being about to generate as much of our own power as possible, being able to capture every drop of rainwater, which is very precious in Tuscany, being able to install recycling systems, solar panels and wood-fired boilers—all using what was available to us for

nothing. ... This isn't some subsidized effort. Our goal is to attain the best sort of profit margins that you can get in the luxury hospitality segment, and I think you can do that, cheek by jowl, with the best common sensical and sustainable practices."

- Michael Moritz, owner, Borgo Pignano (Tuscany, Italy)

"Sustainability to us has always been enriching lives and protecting places. Because of the travel industry (existing) only about since 1990 in Mongolia ... we see ourselves as representing an entire destination. Part of our mission has always been about how do we contribute to the development of tourism in the right way in Mongolia as a destination ... for future travelers, but then also how do we help to train and grow and nurture and prepare the travel professionals in Mongolia. ... (The best part of being a part of Beyond Green) is really that spirit of working together with like-minded people and inspiring our staff to dream about what's possible and what's done in other destinations."

- Undraa Buyannemekh, president, Three Camel Lodge (Gobi, Mongolia)

How has the pandemic changed your approach to sustainability, or the attention given to sustainability by others in the industry?

"The beauty of being a privately held family business is that we've only had two options in this pandemic: hunker-down and contract, or invest in something that we saw as, not just an opportunity, but something that was really needed. We decided to lean in ... and we were lucky to find a group of founding members that agreed with us and were doing the same thing. They're investing during a time when others are contracting. I tell our team, 'Get ready to hold on to a rocket ship, because when we come out of this thing ... it's just going to take off like this. ... This has been my bright light during these past 10 months, honestly, working on this project."

- Moritz

"Every situation is different, obviously ... so it's very hard to give anyone advice at this time, other than notice this will pass and take it one day at a time. Try not to take shortcuts either with the people, or if you do, have sustainability at the heart of it."

- Tollman

"We have one of the shortest seasons for travel, and Mongolia just doesn't have the infrastructure to support the large numbers of tourists, so our planning has always been around ... how do we attract the right traveler? ... We believe that through this collection, we will see and form a community of the right travelers that we actually do want to see in Mongolia ... travelers who care about what the (locals) are doing in their communities and what kind of impact they have to protect the natural beauty of the places. ... This pandemic of course did allow all of us time to pause and reflect and think about what we want to focus on in the next year, three years, five years; and I think that same kind of reflection is happening on the part of travelers. They are thinking about where they want to go ... how they want to use that precious time in a way that's going to be most beneficial, whether it be building stronger connections or having truly memorable vacations. I am hoping we did move the needle in the direction that more people are going to be more mindful about the travel choices they make."

- Buyannemekh