

The Caring Web

Analysis by Thin Lei Win/IFC - Mekong Private Sector Development Facility

Wish you could contribute in some way to the destinations you visit? You're not alone: more and more travellers are becoming conscious about the impact of their travel. A new company, Worldhotel-link.com is now setting a (grassroots) trend for travellers who care for their destinations.



a new model of booking service for local accommodation providers in the developing world. It was piloted in the Mekong region from 2002, and was eventually spun off as a private company in March '06.

The team behind WHL weren't content with simply getting accommodation providers online; they were also set on finding a way to help local destinations protect their environment and culture, and improve social outcomes. This interest in building a sustainable tourism industry led to an innovative traveller-driven program called *Caring for the Destination*.

Len Cordiner, CEO of WHL says, "During the course of collecting information from the accommodation providers we stumbled

According to recent studies in the USA, UK and Australia, around 60% of all international travellers would prefer to stay with accommodation providers, or tour with operators, doing something to protect the local culture and environment. We have all been confronted by scenes of poverty and environmental degradation in the developing world, but in most cases are uncertain how to respond. We'd like to contribute in some way, but giving money to street children and beggars is both uncomfortable and often discouraged. So what options do we have?

WHL (worldhotel-link.com), an accommodation and tour booking site with a difference, thinks it has found the answer. For a start, bookings in every destination it covers are processed by local operators, ensuring that commissions and jobs stay in the community. Secondly, the organisation is making a big effort to bring many small, locally owned accommodation providers online, ensuring that more tourist dollars reach local travel businesses.


WHL began as a project within the IFC (International Finance Corporation), the private sector arm of the World Bank, as

across fantastic things some were doing for their local community. I met guesthouse owners who were taking in street children and giving them a home and the training they never had before. Others were involved in things like setting up turtle hatcheries, or supporting local dance schools, or restoring traditional old farm houses. Nobody knew about any of this unless you asked the owner."

Cordiner thought this should be included as part of WHL's online content. *Caring...* relies on travellers' feedback: once they have stayed with a provider carrying the rating, they receive an email requesting feedback on the level of commitment of the provider etc. This is published online for others to read. The model is free for accommodation providers.

Cordiner adds, "Our ultimate aim is to demonstrate to local accommodation and tour companies that doing good is good business, thereby encouraging more in the community to get involved."

The current challenge for WHL is to spread the word and get the industry excited. Although they expect to have around 250 destinations launched in over 60 countries this year, the brand isn't widely known. A partnership with Lonely Planet, who liked what WHL is doing and has a strong commitment themselves to engaging travellers in sustainable tourism, should help raise awareness considerably.

If you are planning a trip and would like to see how you can contribute to the local destination, staying with one of WHL's caring providers could turn out to be the highlight of your holiday. 

Current WHL destinations range from Laos, India and the Philippines, to the Czech Republic, Kenya and Panama. Visit them at worldhotel-link.com.



WHL partner Boomerang Beach Bungalows, Upola, Samoa