

DEAL OF THE WEEK

# In the U.S., It's Back to Nature for Some Resorts

Guy Harvey Outpost Resorts Is Latest Operator Looking to Cash In on Rise in Ecotourism

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By ROBYN A. FRIEDMAN  
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Ecotourism is on the rise. The marina basin at the Islander Resort in Islamorada in the Florida Keys. *Robert Bender*

Ecotourism is often associated with travel to exotic destinations such as a rain forest in South America or a game reserve in Africa.

But Guy Harvey Outpost Resorts is aiming to prove that ecotourism also has a home in the U.S., especially Florida.

On Wednesday, the company is opening its second ecotourism resort in the U.S. carrying the Guy Harvey Outpost brand name, the Islander Resort in Islamorada in the Florida Keys. A Guy Harvey Outpost-branded resort opened in St. Pete Beach, Fla., in 2012. A third resort is planned for St. Augustine Beach, Fla., and plans are under way for the construction of a 30-unit ecolodge in the Galápagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean about 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador.

Guy Harvey Outpost, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is the latest hotel operator rushing to cash in on the global rise in ecotourism, which is especially popular with affluent baby boomers looking for a back-to-nature travel experience.

"Baby boomers were an idealistic generation in their youth, and then they turned into capitalists during their middle years, and now that they're retiring and have cash and free time they're willing and interested to sort of go back to their ideals," said David Krantz, program director of the Center for Responsible Travel in Washington, D.C., an industry group.

Guy Harvey Outpost resorts are oceanfront hotels and lodges that showcase the work and scientific research of Guy Harvey, the company's chairman and a marine artist and conservationist. The company said its property in Islamorada, often referred to as the "sport fishing capital of the world," will offer adventure travelers recreational fishing and diving. The resort also will offer the opportunity for guests to get involved in a research project.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the local people." Its goals are to minimize impact, build environmental and cultural awareness and provide positive experiences for visitors, as well as financial benefits for both conservation and local denizens.

Whether U.S. properties fit this mold is debatable. The high cost of construction in the U.S., with land being more expensive than in other locales, makes it difficult to build in a way that minimizes impact.

"The term 'ecotourism' varies all the way from nature tourism...to tourism in a place where there is no electricity or running water and people live off the land," said Abraham Pizam, dean of Rosen College of Hospitality Management at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

Other ecotourism resorts already operate in the U.S. Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows on the island of Hawaii offers a sea turtle program, which has released more than 200 turtles back into the wild since its inception. Passports Resorts operates two ecotourism resorts in California: the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur and Cavallo Point in Sausalito.

Popular ecotourism hot spots include Costa Rica, South Africa and Belize, but Mr. Krantz said Guy Harvey Outpost's focus on Florida also makes sense. "I think they're right on the money," he said. "Yes, there's the Miami Beach scene, but the Everglades, the Keys—there are palm trees and coconut trees and plants and birds and animals that are exotic to somebody like me."

Guy Harvey Outpost was founded in 2007 by Mr. Harvey and three partners. The company doesn't own any hotels, but licenses the Guy Harvey Outpost brand name to independently owned hotels that use its reservation system. The company also provides reservation services to other independently owned ecotourism hotels in the Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Mexico and Dominica. "We founded Guy Harvey Outpost as a way to offer a wonderful experience in a remote, desirable location," said Mr. Harvey.

In evaluating potential sites, Mr. Harvey said he considers the number and type of guest rooms, the infrastructure of the property, whether it has a marina and sport fishing capabilities, and whether research can take place there. Florida offers many advantages, Mr. Harvey said. "It's on the mainland, has easy access, and there are some very good properties to pursue," he said.

Still, the market for ecotourism in the U.S. is limited. Optimal locations are in short supply, and development costs can be high. Many U.S. ecotourism operators are setting up locations outside of the U.S.

Benjamin Loomis, founder of Chicago-based Amble Resorts, is the developer and owner of Isla Palenque in Panama, where guest rooms average \$400 to \$500 a night. The 10-unit resort in Panama, which opened in February 2013, is located on a 400-acre island, with a tropical forest, 5 miles of beach and caves to explore. Wildlife, including iguanas, tropical birds and howler monkeys, abounds. An on-site organic farm provides fresh produce. Guests can hike along miles of trails in the 220-acre nature preserve.

Mr. Loomis said the market for ecotourism will keep expanding, largely due to the Internet and sites like TripAdvisor that take some of the risk out of traveling to remote locations. But he is bullish on ecotourism in the U.S. as well.

"The large number of visitors each year to America's national and state parks pretty much proves the market," he said. "Amble's initial focus has been Central America more because of investment objectives and asset and land pricing, not because there isn't a market for it in our home country."

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