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Caribbean

An Ecotourism Report Card

'Green' travel is booming. So our reporter spent the night at one of the newest resorts (agreeing, along the way, to taste an assortment of foliage) to see how far the industry has come

By **JEFFREY ZASLOW**
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Christopher Columbus passed by the ruggedly beautiful island of Dominica on a Sunday, Nov. 3, 1493, and named it after the Latin word for that day -- "Domingo." When I arrived last Sunday, I found a pristine natural beauty little changed in the 512 years since.

And that's exactly how Dominica is trying to sell itself. The small Caribbean island has created a master plan to become a major ecotourism destination. It has plans to build more environmentally friendly attractions, and now has ecotourism classes in its high schools.



Todd Anderson/Black Star
 One of the cottages designed and built from residents using hardwood from the area.

Ecotourism, where resorts pledge to protect the local environment and boost the livelihoods of residents, can be an adjustment. During my visit to Dominica, guides were eager for me to taste an assortment of foliage -- and to rub plants on my body as a natural deodorant. After hiking to the volcanic Boiling Lake, guests were given eggs to boil in nearby springs.

But ecotourism is a fast expanding slice of the travel industry -- revenue is rising at about 30% a year world-wide, according to the International Ecotourism Society, a trade group. And clearly the industry is in some ways maturing. There are now efforts to police rampant "green-washing," the term used to characterize resorts that make superficial changes -- such as recycling -- and then falsely pronounce themselves ecofriendly.

At the same time, ecotourism, a phrase coined more than two decades ago, remains a source of confusion for both practitioners and vacationers. The heart of the problem: The term itself means different things to different people. About 75 certification programs now award seals of approval ([see related article](#)¹) to ecoresorts, though many just put the resorts on the honor system. Eco-operators sign pledges that they'll conserve the environment, empower local people, and teach tourists about cultures, but many fall far short of those goals, according to the Ecotourism Society.

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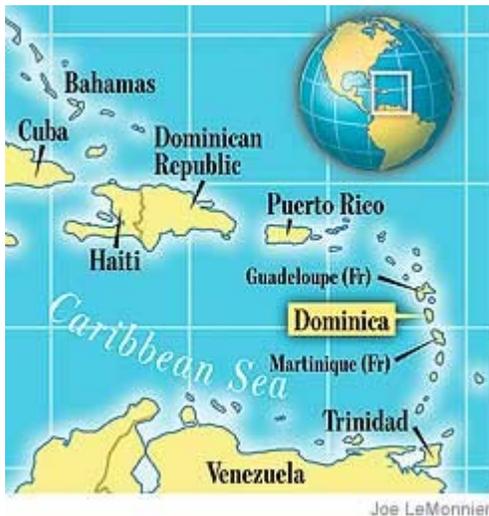
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 **3 ECO GUIDE**
 Learn more⁴ about researching ecotourism seals of approval.

Some critics contend that the very notion of ecotourism is an oxymoron in the resource-intensive travel industry. They have a point: To get to Dominica, I flew more than 2,700 miles from my home in Detroit. Studies suggest it takes about 65 gallons of jet fuel per airline passenger to travel that distance.

I'm a total eco-novice -- our standard family trip is to Disney World, where trees are fake and the audioanimatronic bears dress better than the tourists. I wondered: Would an eco-trip cause me to rethink my annual cruise on the "It's a Small World" boat? To test the premise, I visited Dominica, which sits in the eastern Caribbean between Guadeloupe and Martinique and is one of the few islands in the region without a big-name brand hotel. I stayed at Jungle Bay, a rainforest retreat that opened last year as Dominica's ecotourism showplace. As part of my stay, a barefoot guide led me through waist-deep rivers in a prehistoric jungle to a waterfall few Westerners have seen -- and I even showered with "Ecoessential" shampoo.



Jungle Bay is the creation of 45-year-old Sam Raphael, a real-estate developer from the U.S. Virgin Islands who was born in Dominica. He bought the 55-acre site for \$45,000. To build the resort, he went to nearby villages and hired dozens of underemployed farmers, who've been hit hard by the decline of the island's banana trade. Over the course of the five-year, \$6 million building project -- financed in part by European investors and built mostly without machinery -- many employees have changed roles. Earning about \$2.50 an hour to start, they graduated from construction workers to furniture builders to waiters to tour guides.

Some of the resort's 42 employees are among the Caribbean's last remaining indigenous Carib Indians. The resort is paying \$8,000 to cover tuition for 200 high-school kids in the Carib Territory. It also sponsors a \$40,000 loan project that encourages young adults to develop business activities that support Jungle Bay, from greenhouses that can provide vegetables for its restaurant, to waste-management ideas.

Because Jungle Bay is new and not yet well known, just a handful of its 35 cottages were occupied when I was there this week. (The rate is about \$200 per person per night, with meals, yoga, massages, airport transfers, and tours included.)

Most guests at ecotourism resorts aren't hard-core environmentalists -- several people at Jungle Bay emphasized that they weren't "greenies," but they were impressed by the nature: the density of the rainforest and the views of Dominica's coastline, with its few swimmable beaches, ferocious surf and massive cliffs.

One guest was Sherman Bull of New Canaan, Conn., a surgeon who holds the record as the oldest American to reach the top of Mt. Everest. He reached the summit in 2001 when he was almost 65. Dr. Bull is an ecotourism veteran. He was part of an expedition to clean up "the world's highest garbage dump," when he and other climbers carried down waste and empty oxygen canisters from Everest.

Dr. Bull, who visited Jungle Bay with his wife, says he thinks his visit helped in a small way to

convince locals that there is money to be made in paying attention to the environment.

Though there are certainly many natural wonders in Dominica, some claims made in the name of ecotourism are exaggerations. The nation's tourism office boasts that the island has more than 20 centenarians, a tribute to the healthy eating on the island. One celebrated woman in Dominica was allegedly 128 years old when she died in 2003. Gerontology researchers say that claim is untrue.



Todd Anderson/Black Star

A bridge to the Emerald Pool.

The nation, a former British colony of 70,000 people, also has made compromises regarding its heritage. Movie makers arrived last year to film the sequel to Johnny Depp's "Pirates of the Caribbean," and local leaders saw it as an opportunity to show off their ecotourism. Then, because a scene of cannibalism was planned, the Carib chief tried to organize a boycott. He was overruled by other Carib leaders, and by the hundreds of people in the territory who appreciated the money they'd make as drivers, caterers and movie extras. Rather than be true to history -- there is no proof that Caribs were ever cannibals -- locals took the money and danced around as directed.

Residents are straightforward when they talk about ecotourism. "We can't accommodate mass tourism," says Vincent Younis, a cabdriver. "The entire island knows ecotourism is the way to go to replace the banana economy." Workers like Mr. Younis who interact with tourists attend seminars to learn about the local environment.

Vegetation grows swiftly in Dominica. Last year, at Jungle Bay's outdoor restaurant, a guest threw a cayenne pepper over the balcony to the ground below. Now, there's a giant pepper tree, with hundreds of peppers available for use in the restaurant. It's as if someone tossed a soft-drink can to the sidewalk of a U.S. city, and a Coke machine quickly rose up to dispense a never-ending supply of refreshments.



Todd Anderson/Black Star

Tourists at the resort can swim in the Emerald Pool.

All food not consumed by guests is given to local farmers to feed pigs and use as compost, Mr. Raphael, the developer, explained during a group tour offered to all guests. The cottages are built on stilts to minimize impact on the soil. And the showers are heated by pilot-less propane gas to reduce energy consumption. (Solar heaters would require too many trees to be cut down.) By 2008, Jungle Bay hopes to use wind to generate its electricity.

Mr. Raphael conceded that he is offering "luxury eco" -- hot water, fluffy towels, fine cuisine. "But pure ecotourism is a very small market," he explained, "and we feel we can make a broader impact with a broader product."

Taking three different jets back to Detroit, eating packaged snacks for nine hours and handing plastic cups to flight attendants, I reviewed my eco adventure. I'm not sure how much "energy," if any, I actually saved the planet. The natural beauty was spectacular, but so is Niagara Falls, where

the tourism is less-ecofriendly.

Contrary to some of my preconceptions, there were plenty of creature comforts at Jungle Bay -- it was eco-easy. The highlight for me was seeing nature through different eyes. "We see every tree as food or medicine," said my guide, Irvin Eusebe, as he rubbed wet leaves on my arm. "Every tree."

I'd like to bring my wife and kids back next time -- and they say they'd like to go, as long as it doesn't mean giving up the Disney World trips.

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