

**A** new hospitality brand called 'Beyond Green' launched last month. It's targeting "experiential travellers looking for a more meaningful way to explore the world". When I write that, what do you think? Eco-cabins and yurts? Cloud forest treks in Costa Rica? Overland adventures in Africa?

In fact, the brand comes from the seriously swanky Preferred Hotel Group. Guests logging onto its website ([stay-beyondgreen.com](http://stay-beyondgreen.com)) will find properties like Cavallo Point Lodge and Spa in San Francisco, The Intercontinental Bora Bora Resort, and Ashford Castle.

Yep, *that* Ashford Castle. Last September, this centuries-old stalwart became Ireland's first five-star to win the Greenmark Plastic Smart Standard Award for responsible tourism, and it plans to remove all single-use plastics by 2022. "This is our defining moment to inspire a kinder and gentler way to explore the planet together," says Lindsey Ueberroth, CEO of Preferred Hotels.

Sustainability has never been a sexy word. But could that finally be changing? Has our pandemic-pause given both travellers and the tourism industry the kick-in-the-pants we needed to go beyond paper straws? In the past, sustainability efforts often felt like add-ons or boxes to tick. Now, a [booking.com](http://booking.com) survey suggests 69pc of us expect the travel industry to offer more sustainable travel options in future. Has Covid ushered in a change mindset? Could travel become a leader in protecting nature and enriching communities, rather than exploiting them?

"We are always in such a rush in the hospitality industry," says Raquel Noboa of Co Clare-based consultancy, Fifty Shades Greener ([fiftyshadesgreener.ie](http://fiftyshadesgreener.ie)). "When I spoke to clients before, they would always tell me, 'We just don't have the time.' The customer was obviously the first priority. But the one thing everybody has had this year is time."

The great slowdown hasn't just alerted us to birds in our gardens, in other words. It has given businesses space to run the rule over their operations, and to see sustainability not just as a philosophy, but as economic sense.

"I really think the industry is waking up to the fact that green business will save them money by reducing utility bills and running costs, and that this is the right time to do it," Noboa says. "I also think the pandemic has opened people's eyes to Mother Nature and what can go on around the world if we're not more careful about biodiversity."

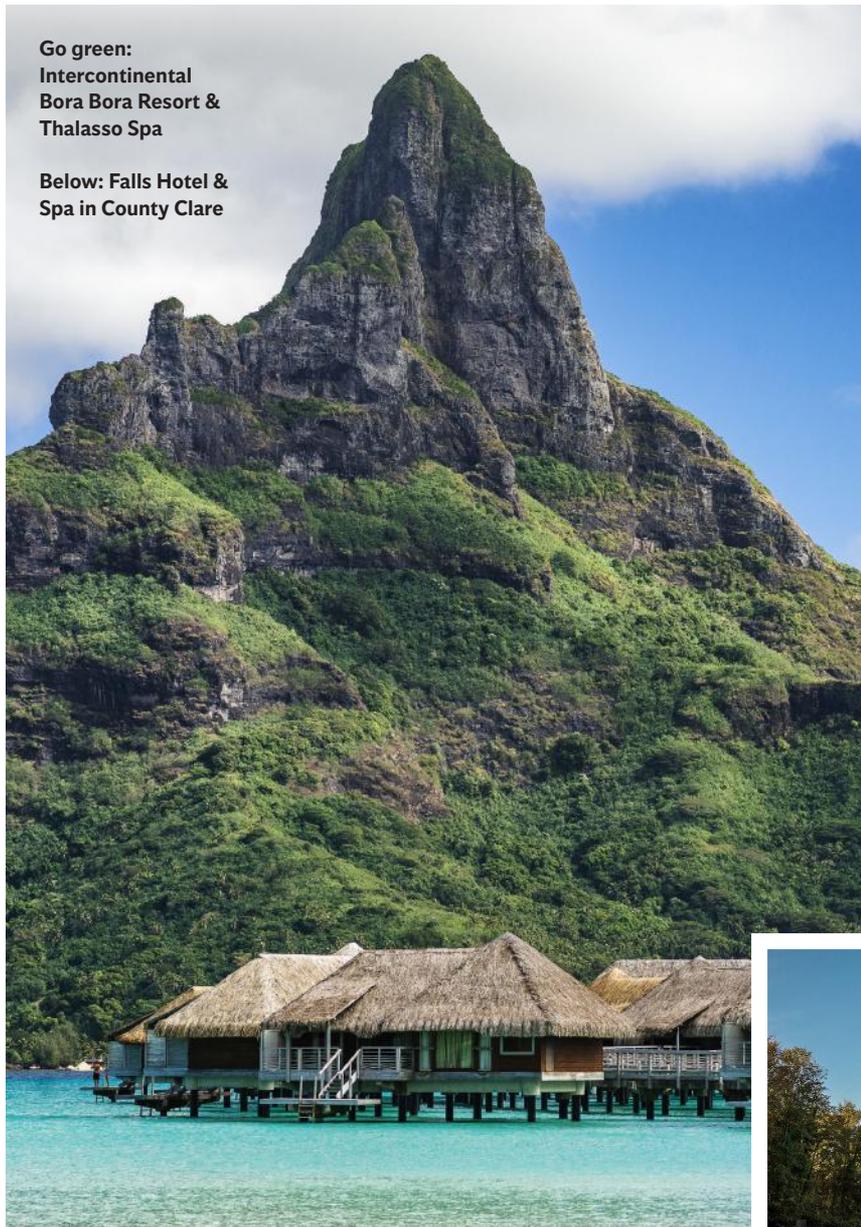
All over the world, headline sustainable-tourism projects are underway. A community-run museum shaped like a whale's tail fin in Norway; Iceland's plans to steer future visitors beyond its Golden Circle; Amsterdam rethinking its Red Light District. Before the pandemic, overtourism threatened pinch points like Venice and Dubrovnik. At the same time, "slow travel" was gaining currency, local ingredients were mushrooming on menus, and niche trends like glamping and organic wines marked a subtle cultural shift. High-end sustainable stays, like Breac.House in Co Donegal and Inis Meáin Restaurant & Suites, which this year won a Michelin Green Star, had become increasingly visible in plush lifestyle magazines. Now Ryanair says it will be carbon-neutral by 2050. Now, Covid may be accelerating the trends, leaving future travellers seeking to have a more positive impact on destinations they visit.

"Being based in an area of such natural beauty as the Burren, we felt compelled to do our best to minimise our impact," says Michael McCarthy, General Manager of the Falls Hotel & Spa in Ennistymon, Co Clare. It built a €1.3m hydroelectric turbine on the Inagh River, which now supplies all of its energy. "With 140 bedrooms, a leisure centre and a spa complex, we went from having a large carbon footprint to being carbon neutral in five short years."

Seeing a four-star like this gain carbon neutral status, as verified by Green Hospitality Ireland, has given others encouragement, Raquel Noboa says. "When you see that others have done it, you realise there is a way to do it."

Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel has replaced its chillers, boilers and lighting and introduced mobile room keys to reduce plastic. On Earth Day last week, staff from the Killarney Park and Ross hotels in Co Kerry undertook a socially distanced litter clean-up around Killarney and its national park. Both family-run hotels are powered by renewables, use chemical-free cleaning products and have Green Teams. In our Fab 50 list of the best places to stay in Ireland, we noted everything from designer cottages with geothermal heating to hotels drilling their own wells.

As we prepare to reopen, now is the time for Irish tourism and hospitality businesses lagging behind to step up, Noboa says — and be surprised by how much money they could save. Companies like hers, Green Hospitality Ire-



Go green:  
Intercontinental  
Bora Bora Resort &  
Thalasso Spa

Below: Falls Hotel &  
Spa in County Clare



## Is sustainability finally getting sexy?

Forget old eco-tourism stereotypes. Covid has prompted a step-change in sustainable travel, and both holidaymakers and brands are jumping on board

### Top tips

**Want to travel more sustainably in future? Look to off-peak times, or less-crowded places. Seek out stays with reliable green credentials, menus with local food, and ask: will the money you spend stay in the local community?**

land ([greenhospitality.ie](http://greenhospitality.ie)) and Sustainable Travel Ireland ([sustainabletravelireland.ie](http://sustainabletravelireland.ie)) are good first ports of call. As hospitality becomes busy again, there's no point appointing a token Green Team, she adds. Owners need to buy in, empower staff and allow them real time to work on actions — "a half-day a week, that's all it would take".

Of course, there's a long way to go. And thoughts of purposeful travel after the pandemic may be wishful thinking. Much as I like the idea of 'Beyond Green', there is also lots of greenwashing in travel, and you could argue that mass tourism will drive us back to the same old problems in the decade ahead. The world may party like it's 2019.

But there's also a changing of guard at the White House. Climate change feels freshly urgent. The nature of Covid has made outdoors living more desirable. Fáilte Ireland says it wants to fast-track sustainable development as we emerge from lockdown, and Ireland has a key advantage — it was the original "green" destination, after all.

### Did you know?

**The Kingsley in Cork** has stopped using plastic bottles, saving the hotel nearly 69,000 bottles a year.

"Popular tourism and sustainability don't have to be mutually exclusive," Lonely Planet said when naming the **Burren Ecotourism Network** one of its Top 30 tourism projects for 2021.

**The Cliff House Hotel** has created its own-brand spa products. 'The Well at Cliff' uses natural Irish ingredients and recyclable packaging.

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