

AT LEISURE

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

Soneva's Sonu Shivadasani shares how protecting the planet's precious resources is possible even while crafting highly bespoke stays.

BY GRACE MA

When Sonu Shivadasani and his wife Eva opened Soneva Fushi in the Maldives in 1995, they had more than a “barefoot luxury” experience in mind.

At that time, the term “sustainability” was hardly on any hospitality brand’s radar, much less the idea that luxury travel could be described that way. The couple’s vision for Soneva was ultra-personalized stays operating with a healthy bottom line, yet nurtured the body and soul, benefitted surrounding communities, and were gentle on the environment.

Shivadasani said: “Our core purpose is to bring the slow life to our guests, offering luxuries while minimizing our impact on the planet and enhancing their health.

“Wellness, sustainability, and luxury are not opposites. People would say that if it’s sustainable, it can’t be luxurious, or if it’s luxurious, it can’t be good for you. Our point is to prove people wrong.”

Soneva now has four resorts and residences including Soneva Jani and Soneva Fushi in the Maldives and Soneva Kiri in Koh Kood, Thailand.

Their latest concept, Soneva Secret, opened in April this year – an ultra-luxe retreat on Makunudhoo Atoll with only 14 beach and overwater villas, and the only floating villa in the Maldives. Each two-story villa measures at least 461 square meters and is served by two butlers (or “barefoot guardians” in Soneva’s vocabulary) and

comes with two ensuite king bedrooms, a water slide, a surprisingly well-equipped mini gym, and a spa treatment room on the upper deck. You can zipline into the standalone Out of This World dining tower for a tasting menu or have one of the 14 chefs available prepare anything from Asian to Middle Eastern and European cuisine for in-villa private dining.

Shivadasani plans to open more Secrets, “which is about remote locations of incredible beauty”, in places like Japan, the Middle East, and Europe. The focus is on leisure travelers who have plenty of time, enjoy engaging with the hotel staff, and want unique wellness and dining programs.





Such levels of bespoke beg the question of how resources are used, but Shivdasani already had it all thought out. Instead of relying on lithium-ion batteries, which deplete quickly and lose performance over time, Soneva Secret is relying on solar panels to achieve almost 100 per cent dependence on renewable energy for its electricity needs by 2025. There will also be two generators for backup. He explained: “Most of our energy demand will be met when the sun’s up, such as having the central chiller system and desalination unit running between 10am and 5pm. In that aspect, it’s pushing the boundaries of sustainability to newer levels.”

There is always more to be done for the environment

Shivdasani likened Soneva’s environmental impact journey to one of peeling onions, saying: “Every time you peel a layer you think you’ve cracked it, but there’re more things to discover and do.”

In the ‘90s, the focus was on marine conservation, such as protecting turtles, sharks, and reefs. Villas were built around existing trees with materials like bamboo, cedar, and pine instead of heavy tropical hardwood like teak, which had a higher carbon footprint. Jetties were set back at least 20 meters from reefs to protect the corals.

Energy consumption and resource conservation then came to the fore. Soneva Fushi became the first resort to install a solar power facility in the Maldives in 2008. Together with Soneva Jani, both resorts have been carbon neutral since 2012 and are now generating about 40 per cent of their electricity with solar energy. The 2 per cent environmental levy from every guest stay is channeled through the Soneva Foundation into projects with environmental, social, and economic impact, such as planting half a million trees in Thailand and distributing energy-efficient cookstoves to rural communities in Myanmar and Darfur, Sudan.



Coral regeneration is the current urgent need, said Shivdasani. “Scientists are saying that 90 per cent of the world’s coral reefs may disappear by 2030. Our goal is to reverse that trend by supplanting two hectares of coral reefs a year.”

The Aquaterra Centre was launched in Soneva Fushi last May. It has one of the world’s largest coral nurseries employing mineral accretion technology, a relatively new method of restoring coral reefs by using electricity to create “biorocks” where naturally dissolved minerals in seawater would precipitate and attach themselves to a metal structure. Corals growing on these electrified artificial reefs have been found to grow three to four times faster and with a higher survival rate. The center also houses Maldives’ first coral spawning and rearing lab, where coral fragments are nurtured in micro-fragmenting tanks and sea conditions are replicated on land to increase the corals’ fertilization rate. The aim is to produce up to 150,000 coral fragments annually.

Assessing impact

Shivdasani, who received the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) last year for his contribution to tourism, sustainability, and charity, shared that Soneva has developed its own Total Impact Assessment report since 2016, as he finds most



external standards to be “weak on clear benchmarks”. The annual report precisely measures direct impact from business operations and indirect impact via their supply chain and air travel by guests. The data collected is used to refine operational processes right down to the amount of biodegradable cling film used in the kitchens.

Soneva is also a member of the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, which includes hotel groups like Marriott, Hilton, IHG and Hyatt. “The reason we’re there is that we’re a benchmark on how others can and should perform,” Shivdasani said, referring to how they have already banned plastic drinking straws and water bottles as early as 1998 and 2008 respectively, way before other hospitality brands followed suit. Besides Maldivian government and non-governmental partnerships, Sonu has also initiated global exchanges among scientists and sustainability thought leaders through the Slow Life Symposium, which gathers scientists and sustainability thought leaders in a strategic exchange.

He said: “We have evolved in the last 30 years, adding new things but still sticking to our core purpose – having a positive impact on society, a carbon-neutral operation and delivering exceptional guest experiences while operating profitably. That is what a business should be: To find a greater purpose for its existence beyond shareholder returns.” ^P