

## PIONEERS AT HEART

SETTING UP THE FOUNDATIONS FOR ECO LUXURY WASN'T SMOOTH SAILING FOR THESE FIVE INDIVIDUALS, WRITES **BRADLEY COCKS**.

**T**he definition of “eco-warrior” can be applied to any person who makes significant gains towards protecting the environment. It was coined in 1962 by the late Canadian environmentalist Robert Hunter after a Cree (Native Canadian) prophecy called the Warriors of the Rainbow.

The notion of ecotourism and sustainability has shifted since then, however today's focal points remain food, water, energy, education, health, commerce and conservation, both of wildlife and culture.

During the explosion of luxury hotels in underdeveloped countries in the 1990s, five individuals have invested their passion, energy and livelihoods into setting up the framework around reducing our environmental footprints by making reasonable (and sometimes unreasonable) approaches towards hotels with a presence or impact on their surrounding communities.



### SONU SHIVDASANI

**Passion: Water, energy and waste**

Sonu Shivdasani, founder of the Soneva Group and former chief executive and founder of Six Senses Resorts & Spas, is largely regarded as one of the hospitality industry's pioneer of sustainable practices. Founded in 1995, today, Six Senses is owned by US private equity group Pegasus Capital but is still setting benchmarks miles ahead of its competition.

The British-Indian Oxford graduate and his wife Eva were enraptured by the Maldives while holidaying there. “We fell in love with the geography of the destination, but felt more could be done in terms of quality and sustainability,” he tells *Luxury*. His vision was to create experiences combining both luxury and sustainability, thus creating and educating a new generation of eco-conscious travellers. His ethos was to “have a purpose beyond profit ... to find opportunities to make small positive changes that do not impact negatively on either profitability or the guests' perception of the product”.

In 2008, Sonu created the SLOW LIFE, or “Sustainable Local Organic Wellness Learning Inspiring Fun Experiences”, program. Initiatives included bonuses for staff using “waste-to-wealth calculators”, which are aimed at ensuring there is no more than 30 kilograms of waste per 100 kilograms of product brought onto an island. In the same year, imported water was banned from the resorts as replacement filtered mineral water was produced on site.

Continuous improvement was focused over the years across recycling, strict use of local and sustainable building materials, purchasing policies (eco-friendly chemicals), environmental impact (buying and growing local), preservation, reusable packaging wherever possible and eventually a 2 per cent climate levy on room revenue, to offset guests' carbon footprints. [soneva.com](http://soneva.com)

After falling in love with the Maldives, Sonu Shivdasani, left, founded Six Senses. Richard Branson was among the many guests at his 2014 SLOW LIFE Symposium, below left.



### CLAUDE GRAVES

**Passion: Health and education**

Graves founded Nihiwatu resort on the remote and poverty-stricken Indonesian island of Sumba and mastered the model of running a for-profit boutique hotel alongside a non-profit foundation. Graves and his wife Petra found the site for their hotel after backpacking the perimeter of Sumba in the late 1980s.

The Sumba Foundation was established in 2001 with a focus on creating community development programs for clean water, malaria clinics, education, malnutrition and farming. “The foundation allowed me to no longer rely on profits from the hotel to support community development,” he says. His big-vision projects, funded by guest donations, started generating interest internationally. By 2005, this profit-non-profit model was inspiring new developments across Africa, Asia and the Americas.

“Once a guest donated to a project, they were kept up to date with monthly reports, through to completion,” he says. “This kept our donor guests linked to the

Sumbanese community and many of them have been returning for the past 10 to 15 years.”

Before the resort was purchased by American entrepreneur Christopher Burch in 2013, it received more than \$6 million in donations from guests; 23,000 people in hundreds of villages within a 285 square kilometre radius of Nihiwatu benefited.

Graves doesn't like to be linked to the “eco” category, however: “It's far too vague to be impressive any more; it's much more than light bulbs and water-saving devices,” he says. “To be truly a sustainable and responsible hotel requires a lot of effort and commitment on the hotelier's behalf.

“It needs financial and human resources many find too much to commit to – however I feel confident sophisticated travellers will continue to be ahead of the curve and seek out properties where they feel their travel dollars are not only helping the environment but also local communities.” [sumbafoundation.org](http://sumbafoundation.org)

