



Throw-away plastics have become the bane of the green-minded consumer.

Most of the world's nations have struggled to control the use of these cheap plastic items, and Cambodia is no exception. An average day in the kingdom might put a visitor in contact with a heap of straws, bags, bottles and to-go containers -- none of it biodegradable, all of it harmful to the environment.

The good news is that most single-use plastics are avoidable. And now, a group of Siem Reap hoteliers is proving that plastic-free travel is not only possible, but also a smart, sustainable practice for businesses in Cambodia's maturing hospitality sector.

Joni Aker, manager of the Treeline Urban Resort in downtown Siem Reap, has been active for years in the local environmental scene, working on community clean-ups and other projects. In a place like Siem Reap,

the friendly gateway city to the Angkor temples where everyone knows everyone, it didn't take long to find others with the same interest in improving the environment. Besides herself, those three include fellow Siem Reap hotel managers Karl Diederich and Christian de Boer. Diederich runs the Mulberry Boutique Hotel, and de Boer is the managing director of Jaya House.

Though their businesses may sometimes be in competition, this crew is now working toward the

same goals of beautifying the city while creating a plastic-free blueprint for hospitality managers across the country.

"The best way to achieve a more sustainable tourism is to work together on it; within the Hotel by making our Team fully integrated to the process but also working towards it with like-minded partners such as Treeline or Jaya House," said Diederich. "All of that creates a whole new type of Hotel offer for guests looking to stay in Siem Reap."

As such, there are no disposable bottles of water in the mini-fridges in the room of these businesses, nor any styrofoam to-go boxes in their kitchens. Even the tiny plastic containers of shampoo so common to hotel bathrooms are banished here.

Instead, all three hotels are now stocking their showers with hygiene products made locally with all-natural ingredients. Upon arrival, guests find in their room a glass bottle of water that can be refilled at any time. Guests might also receive their own reusable metal canteen with the price of their room as a kind of useful souvenir. And the amenity kits, available upon request, are also locally created using biodegradable bamboo and other environmentally friendly components.

Guests can even pack up a picnic for the Angkorian temples without leaving a negative impact on these ancient places. That's because the hotels provide their own to-go boxes woven from leaves, all produced in Siem Reap province favoring the local suppliers.

But the green movement isn't just happening where guests can see it.

All three managers said their eco-friendly measures go much further back, stretching into areas like food sourcing, composting organic waste and even using solar power to make hot water. Aker said staff buy-in has been essential to this growth, and credited the help of training and resources provided by partner organizations like Plastic Free Southeast Asia, Naga Earth, and Clean Green Cambodia.

De Boer -- who is also a co-founder of Refill not Landfill, an international campaign to eliminate single-use plastic bottle waste -- said many of the necessary steps have been simple, and required only minimal investment.

For example, three years ago, his team gave linen bags and a request for plastic-free produce to the business that stocks the Jaya House kitchen with fresh bananas. It was a



10-minute conversation that swiftly eliminated a previous source of throw-away packaging.

"There are so many little things like that, that you can multiply by 365," de Boer said. "That's mountains of plastics we've eliminated and made sure won't end up in a landfill or a river."

The trio of hotel managers have also gone beyond plastic-free by throwing their unified support behind community clean-ups and tree plantings throughout the city, nearly 1,500 of which were supported by the Jaya House team alone. Their latest tree-planting effort with other Hotel partners added approximately 70 native trees to the green coverage of Siem Reap, in just one day. "A simple social responsibility action, beneficial to locals, tourists and wildlife for years to come" they said.

Though visible local impacts have been crucial, the long-term goal is to

shift the culture in a greener direction. There are signs that's working -- the managers have found an outpouring of support from guests both domestic and international, and what's more, the usual faces at the community clean-ups have become increasingly representative of Cambodian society.

"When I first started this kind of work a long time ago, it was always foreigners and businesses pushing for environmental education and commitment," Aker said. But at a recent major garbage clean-up before the Water Festival, one of Cambodia's biggest holidays, that dynamic was totally flipped.

"It was literally just a handful of foreigners and businesses," she said. "I couldn't even count how many schools and local organisations there were, it was super exciting to see all the young people -- they're the future, and things are changing."