

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL REPORT: BALI

Interview with founders Karolien Verschelden & Frederik Wittesaele of the Suarga Padang Padang by Peppers

Words: Vanessa Cappelli

Sustainable tourism is surely one of the most talked about issues of recent years but what exactly does it mean to the communities that are effected? As defined by the World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is “the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems”. With the aim of adhering to this concept and reducing their carbon footprint, a number of properties across the globe have taken matters into their own hands. Vanessa Cappelli visits the Suarga Padang Padang by Peppers in Bali to understand how it is possible to combine modern luxuries with minimal cost to the surrounding environment.

Let's start from the beginning, where did you come from and how did you end up in Uluwatu, Bali? *FW:* We are originally from Belgium. My work in the textile industry brought us to Jakarta and we lived there for many years. Our family used to travel to Bali regularly so it became a second home for us. As with many, we were enchanted by the charming culture, nature and local people.

When did you decide that building Suarga was your vocation and tell us about the initial vision? *KV:* In 2006 we were still living as an expat family in Jakarta. We purchased a parcel of land in Padang Padang. This was intended to be our home, with a few cottages to rent out and a small organic restaurant, providing yoga classes and eventually related practises.

FW: The 2008 financial crisis happened and made us clear that we were ready for change. I am very business minded and the answer was obvious: we had a sizeable piece of land in one of the most desirable surf locations in Bali. The mini version of Suarga was already created in our minds and we decided overnight to take it seriously and projected it to another level in size and concept.

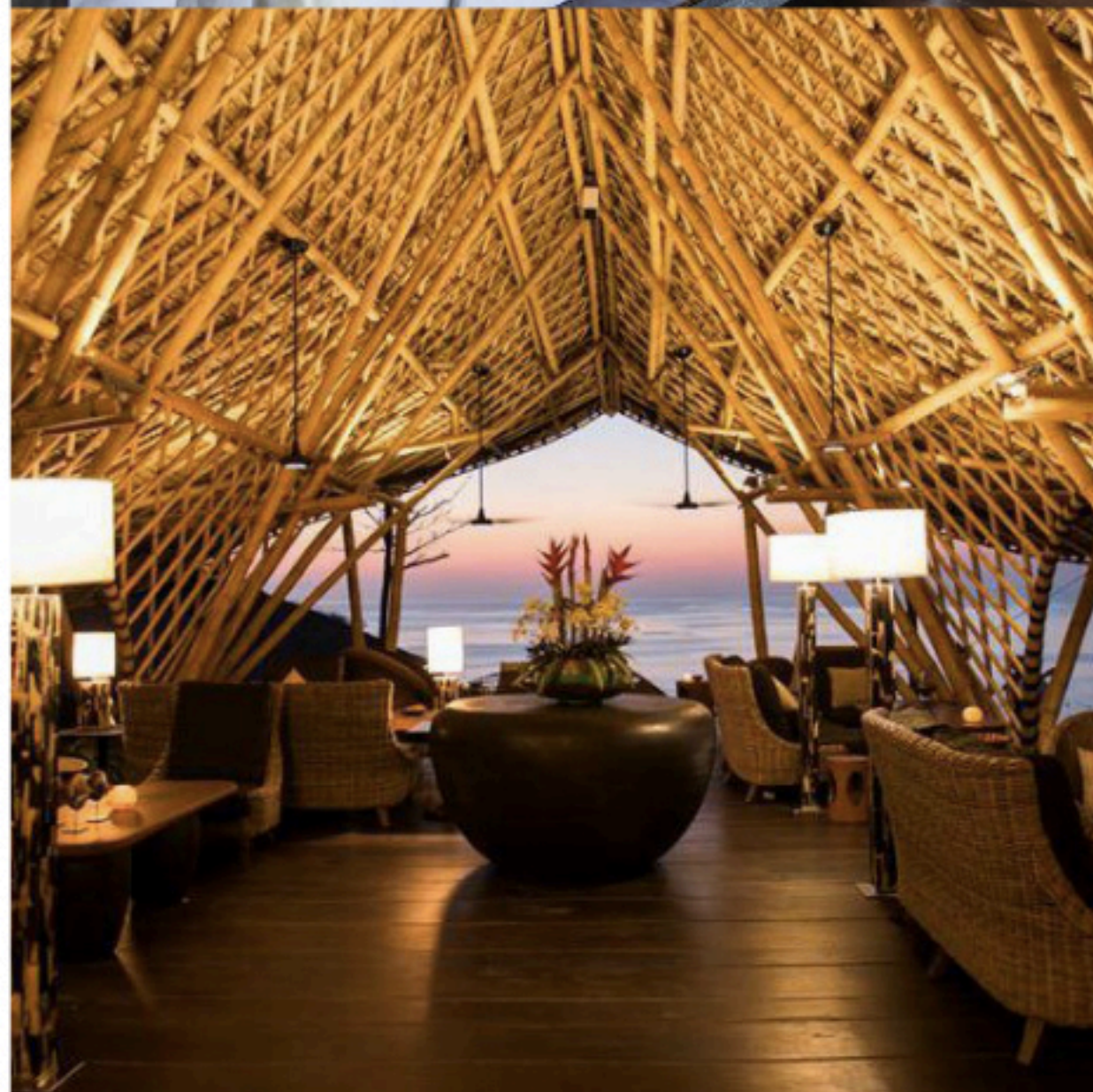
KV: Our mental notes were based on our family travel experi-

ences, our likes and dislikes, personal priorities, interests and a long wish list of idealistic ideas striving towards the creation of a responsible business model. Our research on bamboo connected us with inspiring people and opened new doors, for instance international organizations such as FSC and Rain Forest Alliance. We are all aware of the ongoing destruction of our planet, but actively realizing that one can contribute to the solution gives a tremendous motivating power to become part of that solution. What started as a simple idea grew into a passion, a way of thinking and a philosophy embraced by the whole family.

In your eyes what does it mean to be sustainable? *KV & FW:* acting and thinking sustainable is an expression of thinking beyond one's own (life) time. Today's actions affect everybody's future. In pure business context, a business needs to be economically sustainable at all times, but there is the understanding that a business model principally based on numbers will have difficulty to withstand the fast changing currents of today's economics. The three pillars of sustainability are unmistakably related to create a durable (long term) income for the owners and their staff whilst paying attention to the use of natural resources and environment.

When you were project planning were your priorities design and aesthetics before sustainability or the other way around? **How did you go about setting your priorities?** *KV:* Suarga is built in the Bukit, an old coral formation which probably took hundreds of thousands of years to become what it is today and from the very start we decided to maintain the hilly landscape instead of making it flat in order to facilitate construction. It was an organic process that went hand in hand. The aesthetics play an important part and have been realised in a sustainable way. Our desire to use sustainable materials encouraged us to be creative and resourceful.

FW: You will see that within the resort, we use very few types of materials, which are assembled in various textures and motifs



Clockwise from facing page: The main building and vista at Suarga, made from Bamboo; Ulin Pavilion Bedroom; Pool and views of Suarga Padang Padang; Ulin Pavilion Terrace and Exterior; Dugong Restaurant and Lounge Bar

to achieve the aesthetics. The materials used are entirely local to Indonesia and the natural tones and textures blend harmoniously with the location.

I've personally seen to what extent you've gone out to find, research and integrate modern sustainable techniques, recycled materials, local practices in your project but for those who haven't yet could you give us an overview what they should expect to find? KV: The name "Suarga" (Sanskrit), means heavenly world or paradise. It is our hope that our guests feel "at home" at Suarga Padang Padang. It is a place where they can enjoy modern comforts at a minimal impact to the environment. Suarga targets the "Rough Luxury Travellers", the well-seasoned travellers sensitive to the luxury of nature's presence. Looking up from the edge of the cliff towards the resort, Suarga looks like a village, it might even evoke some nostalgic feelings and longing for an authentic and simple lifestyle. Back to the basics, the essence.

Why is it important for future hoteliers to understand eco and sustainable practices in this industry? FW: For hoteliers established in holiday destinations it is no debate that the location is the reason of their existence. So if no responsibility is taken for the environment, the economic success will degrade. Tourists have options to choose other destinations. It is important to

“

SUARGA IS BUILT IN THE BUKIT, AN OLD CORAL FORMATION WHICH PROBABLY TOOK HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS TO BECOME WHAT IT IS TODAY AND FROM THE VERY START WE DECIDED TO MAINTAIN THE HILLY LANDSCAPE INSTEAD OF MAKING IT FLAT IN ORDER TO FACILITATE CONSTRUCTION. IT WAS AN ORGANIC PROCESS THAT WENT HAND IN HAND. THE AESTHETICS PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART AND HAVE BEEN REALISED IN A SUSTAINABLE WAY.



weigh the challenges and efforts towards success.

KV: To invest in renewable energy sources may absorb big budgets but at the end will reward with an ROI for considerable time. As a guest we take it for granted to receive bathroom amenities, but do we question the pollution it creates, the traffic it causes to transport it and the price we pay for it? Are hoteliers willing to take the time to explain this to the guest, offer the choice and make the effort to prepare it on personal request instead of making it an easy polluting costly standard? There are thoughts and choices to make.

What message would you like to leave to the ones that may want to follow your footsteps? KV: Do research, listen, talk and ask. It is surprising how little is done and how much is possible. There are so many inspiring people driven by idealism and readiness to play a role in an active process of change, who dedicate their life to progress and wish to share their knowledge. Big or small actions, taking part is being part of the solution.