

In search of true eco-lodges

There seems to be more disagreement than agreement on whether eco-lodges even exist in Egypt.

This confusion is normal, according to Amir Gohar, a tourism and land use planning expert. There is no straight forward definition of the term eco-lodge worldwide, he says. In other words, the term should instead be viewed as a continuum.

"The more environmental a lodge is the more you lean towards the 'eco' side of the gradient," says Gohar.

The problem in Egypt is that these lodges often neglect the environmentally sound practices that would put them closer towards the 'eco' end of the continuum, but yet they continue to label themselves as such, mostly for marketing purposes.

Egypt's Ministry of Tourism does not use the label eco-lodge when granting permits. Instead, lodges label themselves. "The governments' criteria and regulations are well refined and defined for ordinary tourism resorts, but not for activities related to eco-tourism," says Gohar.

Some of the environmental practices in running an eco-lodge include separating organic and non-organic waste, using organic waste to create compost, and using solar energy for heating and electricity.

But there's more to an eco-lodge than just compost and solar energy. "It should be about the experience, the setting, the accommodation, the whole thing," says Gohar. "It should provide people with something exclusive."

This also seems to be lacking to some degree in Egypt's eco-lodges.

"On the one hand there is the tendency to just copy designs rather than fit them to the necessities of the area where you want to build," says Gohar. "And on the other, visitors to an eco-lodge often miss out on being exposed to a new setting by being introduced to the culture of the locals and their language."

This does not mean that an eco-lodge must provide low-end accommodation. On the contrary, an eco-lodge can be high-end and expensive. In fact, the notion that an eco-lodge should be cheaper than a normal/high end hotel is a misunderstanding. This is because the costs for running the place are higher, while the number of guests are fewer than those staying at a normal hotel.

In order to standardize the labeling of eco-lodges a set of criteria is necessary. According to this criteria, eco-lodges would be granted permits and would receive a rating. A system would be created whereby these lodges are given 'green stars' as opposed to the normal stars ranking for hotels.

Yet at this point, Egypt lacks this system and although there have been generic proposals presented to the Ministry of Tourism, according to Gohar, none of them has been institutionalized.

So for now the few places in Egypt that label themselves as eco-lodges have been built through individual initiatives. One example is Anakato, located in Gharb Soheil, a village south of Aswan in Upper Egypt.

Anakato means 'our home' in the Nubian language Kenzi. The name is truly descriptive of the setting.

Anakato consists of two Nubian houses, one located by the water shore of the Nile and the other nearby on a hilltop. Both houses contain a maximum of six rooms, and staying there truly feels like being at home. The comfortable, peaceful and colorful houses are designed as Nubian homes and aim to provide visitors with a true regional experience.

The owner of the eco-lodge is Yahia Taher, a local businessman who originally built the house by the water shore for use as a private residence, before he was encouraged by friends visiting from Cairo to turn it into a lodge. Taher then built the second house and plans to build two more houses in the village.

"The aim of the project has always been to help the village prosper, either by providing residents with jobs or, by attracting tourists, which would bring further income to the village through activities, such as renting camels or buying handicrafts from the local bazaar area," Taher says.

Staff members at Anakato say that this is more than just job. They are just living their lives, they say, while hosting and welcoming tourists who are interested in Nubian culture. They all say that they want to put Nubian heritage on the map, but they are not seeking to commercialize it. With this in mind, they do not want to expand their project to the point where too many tourists are lured to the area. The two new houses will also be small.

In its environmental practices Anakato cannot be considered the truest of eco-lodges. Electricity is sourced from the main grid and electric heaters are used for hot water. Waste is not separated or recycled and is instead collected by a private contractor three times a week.

There are, however, plans to introduce more environmentally sound practices for the two new houses. One will have a piece of land attached to it, where fruits and vegetables will be organically grown and fed to guests. The owner is also considering using solar energy.

However, according to Gohar's second criterion of what an eco-lodge is about, Anakato definitely fulfills this by providing visitors with exclusivity and the experience of being there. Guests also can learn about the area's culture.

Despite its questionable eco-lodge status, Anakato is worth a visit. Guests can truly bond with the breathtaking nature of the area and be mesmerized by the majestic Nile. Aswan is only a ten minute boat ride away and on your way you see countless protectorate islands. We can only hope it becomes more of an authentic eco-lodge in the future with management's plans for the place.