



COMMUNITY CHAMPION

Elysian Retreat

We were lucky enough to visit Laureth and Charlton, owners and operators of the incredible Elysian Retreat. This family-run business is leading the way in sustainable tourism as one of the first 100% solar powered island resorts on the Great Barrier Reef. We sat down with the pair to find out how important being carbon neutral is for them and what steps they have put in place to get there!

What inspired Elysian Retreat to go above beyond carbon neutrality?

Our love for the ocean, the reef, and all things beautiful inspired the overall style of the retreat. Our combined passion for the environment and renewable energy set the tone for the ethos and operational structures of all the properties.

We have always felt the importance of taking every necessary step to not only protect and preserve our natural assets, but to minimise the impact we may have on them. As a business that relies on the beauty of our surroundings and the visitors who come to enjoy it, it's even more critical for us to take action. Without it, we would not only see a negative impact on our bottom line but become complicit in the degradation of nature in the longer term.

The staff and management of Sojourn Retreats are fully committed to operate as sustainable an operation as possible by reducing waste, saving and improving usage of water, power, fuel and emissions and thus minimising our environmental footprint.

The retreat switched over from diesel to solar and battery power in 2019 to help lower the retreat's carbon footprint. How long did this transition take and what difficulties did you face?

We took over the lease in 2018 and we spent just over a year renovating the cyclone damaged Paradise Bay Eco resort into Elysian Retreat.

It was always a dream of ours to be totally independent of diesel or fossil fuel power, so we started building the solar farm right away. The most challenging stage was the installation of the farm's footings. The island is harsh, and the rock and sand made it very difficult to drive in the foundations.

Elysian Retreat then switched over to 100% solar power on the 16th of April 2019, two weeks after opening – becoming the first 100% solar powered island resort on the Great Barrier Reef. We operate a full commercial kitchen, spa, restaurant, bar, plus 10 air-conditioned guest villas and hot water systems off solar power and batteries alone. The switch to solar power saves an estimated 39,420



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litres of diesel from being burnt per year, plus the additional fuel it would have used to transport the 39,420 litres of diesel to the island via barge.

Considering the burning of fossil fuels is arguably the largest contributor to climate change, we felt that it was one of the biggest impacts we could make in terms of innovation in climate change action. This translates to 112 tonnes of carbon emissions for the fuel alone, excluding the transport of the fuel, which could easily require four 14 tonne barges per year. The roll-on effect of transporting this amount of fuel to an island is incredibly hard to determine, but quite substantial in terms of the logistics.

Waste is one of the most challenging barriers island resorts face. How does Elysian Retreat handle waste and what are some of the more successful initiatives that have been implemented?

Waste management can be very challenging on an island with no access to the services that regular businesses have on the mainland. For Elysian, our access point is Shute Harbour and we are responsible for all waste removal from the island and have to use private waste management contractors and barge services. It's incredibly high costs such as these, that can break the camel's back for island operators.

To keep our waste to a minimum, staff and even guests are encouraged to recycle on island. Recyclable 10c container recycling is in place as well as cans, paper/cardboard and co-mingled bins. Proceeds from the 10c containers go towards the Reef Restoration Organisation.

Compost bins are used for food scraps and are composted in larger bins for use in the herb garden. Remaining general waste is separated and placed in general skips that is transported back to the mainland with JJ Richards. We use refillable cleaning products and guest amenities to prevent any single use plastic containers. Garden waste is collected and used for mulch and composting or used as fuel for the beach bonfires held for guests.

We actively advise guests via booking information emails and our website that it is unnecessary to bring bottled water along, as the rainwater on the island is perfect to drink. We find that this simple step prohibits massive amounts of plastic waste and in turn carbon emissions. We do not supply any plastic water bottles to guests, only refillable stainless steel or glass bottles. We do not use any single use plastic as far as possible, except for vacuum sealing food portions and occasionally food wrap when absolutely necessary.



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We believe there is still work to be done to minimise our waste and we actively seek solutions in our operations.

Elysian Retreat offsets 150% of its carbon emissions each year with carbon credits purchased through selected verified Gold Standard projects. Which projects have you selected and why were they chosen?

The team have selected to invest in the Yarra Yarra Biodiversity project, Australia's first Gold Standard project and the largest revegetation project based on carbon capture and biodiversity. We selected this specific one as it was the only option available in Australia and we believe that offsetting in the country we are emitting makes the most sense to us. Every project certified by The Gold Standard must monitor, report, and verify carbon savings and sustainable development benefits for local communities. For more info, visit <https://carbonneutral.com.au/australiannative-reforestation-gold-standard/>

1. Would you purchase local offsets if they were available?

Most definitely. We try to support local as much as we can. Products we use in the kitchen and the resort are all as local as we can find. We use local suppliers for our fish and vegetables, and if there is a local project that we can support, we always try to jump onboard!

2. How many credits has the resort purchased?

Elysian Retreat's 2019 Total Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions were 49.4tonnes. A total of 74.1tonnes of GHG credits were purchased (this equates to the 49.4tonnes emitted + an additional 50% -24.7tonnes). As a result, Elysian Retreat became a Beyond Carbon Neutral Destination. We are currently calculating our 2020 carbon emissions.

Water is a precious resource on the islands. How do you encourage staff and guests to minimize water consumption and what kinds of modifications have you made to the retreat's plumbing infrastructure?

We keep a close eye on rainfall by monitoring our rainwater tanks. We have a daily water pumping system and we check the tank levels every morning. We also record and compare water usage with the previous day and share this with the guests so they can be involved in the process. We have also sourced low water usage toilets, tapware & shower heads to ensure maximum water efficiency and savings.



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Currently, we're not able to split the water usage between the villas and the kitchen. We have a plan to put a meter on each area so that we can identify which section of the business is using how much water. For now, we have a consolidated figure and on average we use about 80 litres of water per person, per day.

During our welcome talk on guest arrival day, we chat about the island's initiatives and kindly ask guests to be aware that we only have rainwater and to be conservative with water usage. Overall, we find that our clientele is a more environmentally conscious traveller, so the message is received well. 80 litres of water per person, per day is way below the average hotel use, so we are very happy with that.

You refer to the retreat as "Intelligent Luxury". What does this mean exactly? Have decarbonisation efforts forced the retreat to compromise the guest experience? If not, why?

Traditionally, we believe "luxury accommodation or experiences" have not necessarily acknowledged or factored in their own environmental impact. For both Pumpkin Island and Elysian Retreat, our goal is to exceed guest expectations and provide an exceptional guest experience along the coast of the beautiful Great Barrier Reef, with a firm commitment to environmental sustainability and best practice.

We strive to promote meaningful and responsible travel, and we enjoy seeing how being immersed in pristine nature improves our guest's wellbeing. Both properties have a strong emphasis on giving people the opportunity to disconnect from their busy lives and reconnect with the natural environment.

As such, we believe being sustainability does not mean sacrificing luxury...

We still have air conditioning in all guest villas, completely powered by the sun – coffee machines, 5-star service and comfort – all with minimal waste and impact. No single use plastics (we use refillable guest amenities), no plastic slippers, low water usage, energy efficient appliances and last by not least, we offset any carbon emissions from our operations. This is how we define "Intelligent Luxury". It is still a luxurious experience, but with careful consideration of the impacts of that luxury.

Your website includes a great explanation on the retreat's "Sustainability Initiatives". Why has it been important to communicate these values to your guests?

We love sharing our passion and philosophy with our guests and staff. We strongly believe that the world doesn't need a handful of people doing sustainability perfectly. It needs millions of people doing it



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imperfectly. If by sharing our ideas and initiatives we can influence only a few other people, it will make a huge difference.

What attracted you to the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project and what benefits are you hoping the project will provide for Elysian Retreat?

We were very excited to hear about the project as we had just completed our Advanced Ecotourism and Climate Action certifications. It's great to see that other local partners are jumping on board an initiative that should be a whole community effort. This way, we won't just have single entities trying to make a difference – it becomes the norm between various local operators. Essentially this is how to change the culture and become a more sustainable region. We want to be part of this movement to help bring positive change. The Whitsundays is such a beautiful region, and this is a great project in keeping it that way for future generations too.

What is your biggest barrier to decarbonisation that you would like the project to assist you to overcome?

Our largest emission source is still the fuel we use for the resort vessel. We are yet to find an alternative fuel source that can supply the same power and performance. We do schedule supply runs twice a week to reduce unnecessary boat runs.

Food waste and waste removal is probably our biggest challenge. Currently, there is no way around removal but to get a barge to mainland. And it's not just the waste but the environment we operate in. We would also benefit from more support on how we can minimise waste.

What will a sustainable destination accreditation mean for Elysian Resort and our region?

A sustainable destination accreditation will benefit the whole region in terms of the reputational value for associated operators, as well as the obvious positive environmental impact this will have down the line. The accreditation would be of enormous benefit in marketing the destination and will provide a unique selling point for travellers who are conscious of their environmental impact.

We have seen first-hand how many people are interested in sustainability and the importance it plays in guest's decision-making process when choosing where to stay or play. There's been a huge shift in people's mindsets and if we can target people that are passionate about the environment, I think the opportunities are infinite.



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The WHH project is a step in the right direction and enables us to proudly stand up and be identified as a community that has earned the right to be called a sustainable destination. It's an aspiration to be proud of as long as it is authentic.

For more information or to register interest in joining the Whitsunday Healthy Heart Project, please visit our website <https://www.innovationhub.whitsundayrc.qld.gov.au/whitsunday-healthy-heart-project>

The Whitsunday Islands is one of three key locations with projects currently underway as part of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation's Reef Islands Initiative, which is working to restore critical island habitats to protect ecosystems and save vulnerable species. The 10-year program is supported by funding from Lendlease, the Australian Government's Reef Trust, the Queensland Government, and the Fitzgerald Family Foundation.