

Tahoe Ritz-Carlton part of hotel initiative to save water

By Deidre Wenge, Hotel Magazine

The facts are staggering. According to water.org, 780 million people around the world do not have access to clean and safe water; every 20 seconds a child dies from a water-related illness; and water, sanitation, and hygiene-related problems kill more than 3.4 million people each year.

But Karena Albers and Jennifer Willig, founders of Whole World Water, believe the hospitality and tourism industry can play a big role in solving the worldwide crisis.

Whole World Water is a campaign that asks hotels, resorts, spas, and restaurants to begin filtering, bottling, and selling their own water and donating 10 percent of the proceeds to the Whole World Water fund. The funds will be invested in approved clean and safe water projects around the world.



The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe is part of a project to conserve water. Photo/LTN file

Willig, who previously helmed RED, the organization founded by Bono and Bobby Shriver to fight AIDS in Africa, believes that the hospitality industry can come together to make a serious change.

“Hospitality and tourism is a multi-trillion dollar industry,” she says. “And if we can align, we could actually see this issue eradicated in our lifetime. It is the first time that a single industry has the potential to be united on a non-competitive platform and take action against this major global issue.”

Albers, a documentary filmmaker, explains that the idea was inspired when Sonu Shivdasani, chairman of Soneva Resorts, invited her to a symposium at Soneva Fushi in the Maldives. The focus of the symposium was to discuss how the hospitality and tourism industry could develop more sustainable business practices.

Soneva Resorts decided to ban imported bottled water from its properties a few years ago, and began to donate the proceeds from its own filtered, bottled water program to charities in 2009. Since then, Soneva Resorts has helped more than 600,000 people in 52 countries get access to either clean drinking water or basic sanitation services.

Albers explains that Whole World Water is based off of Shivdasani’s success and hopes to attract the industry at large to be a part of the campaign.

So far, Whole World Water has several hotel and resort partners including Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts, Six Senses Resorts and Spas, and Virgin Hotels. The Ritz-Carlton is also piloting the program at its Charlotte, N.C. and Lake Tahoe locations.

Willig says that the campaign is also designed to offer participating partners financial benefits and a sustainable business plan. If hotels choose to partner with Whole World

Water, they can reduce carbon emissions from shipping costs associated with commercially bottled water and can cut down on waste through reusable glass bottles instead of plastic bottles. And the sale of filtered, bottled water can offer hotels a new source of revenue.

“First and foremost, this is a business-building initiative,” says Willig. “We’re estimating that serving filtered, bottled water instead of commercially bottled water can potentially build bottom lines by up to 25 percent.”

Participating hotels will need to pay a yearly licensing fee of \$1,000 per property in order to help fund a multi-media marketing campaign that includes a social media platform, celebrity endorsements, global events and symposiums, and a feature-length documentary film. The fee will also allow members to access all campaign branding and materials for their own marketing and public relations efforts.

To make the implementation and transition to the campaign seamless and efficient, Whole World Water has partnered with Vivreau, a manufacturer of purified drinking water systems, to give hoteliers access to an easy turn-key filtration solution. Willig does stress that Whole World Water is not requiring hotels to use the Vivreau system, especially if they already have a filtration system in place.

The campaign will officially kick off March 22, World Water Day, and Albers says she expects it to be a big hit with not only with their hospitality partners, but with guests and consumers as well.

“The program has been very well received so far,” she says. “When a consumer understands that a percentage of the proceeds are going to address a global issue, they want to be part of that engagement.”