

NATURE-POSITIVE TRAVEL



PROVIDED BY SCP HOTELS

The green theme is carried on in a living wall inside the Soul Community Planet hotel in Colorado Springs.

SEEING GREEN

Hotel chain in Colorado attempting to save the planet, one stay at a time

By Helen Thorpe
Special to The Denver Post

On a blustery day in April, I set off to learn more about nature-positive travel.

Hotels around the world are positioning themselves as a benefit to nature, rather than interfering with it, but does the trend represent a real shift or a marketing gimmick?

One of the most ambitious practitioners of the nature-friendly movement is a chain with the fanciful name of Soul Community Planet, which is directed at customers who care about personal wellness, social good and the environment. The company operates throughout the western United States as well as in Costa Rica. Starting in 2021, it formalized its efforts in a program called "Every Stay Does Good."

Here's how it works: Each time a guest stays at one of the chain's hotels, part of the revenue is donated to plant trees in deforested areas, clean debris from polluted beaches, and provide adolescents with mental health skills, among other efforts. To date, the company has planted more than 135,000 trees and helped 126,000 teens.

In Colorado, Soul Community Planet has a property along Interstate 25 in Colorado Springs. On arrival, visitors confront a series of nondescript buildings, and an underwhelming exterior. Then they step inside the lobby.

Rows of flourishing green plants

line one wall, and there are comfy armchairs, board games and a wall of books. Bright murals are splashed across walls, while Mumford & Sons plays over the speakers. The vibe is warm and inviting. And the price is affordable, too: \$88 a night.

At the front desk, a sign proclaims: "Every stay does good." Soul Community Planet has eliminated single-use plastic, cut down on waste, and added energy-efficient systems to many buildings. By the end of last year, the company had produced 369 megawatt hours of energy from solar power and prevented 572,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions. In late 2021, the company committed to achieving net-zero waste, and EarthCheck, a leading certification program in green tourism, has since verified that the goal has been accomplished.

Soul Community Planet co-founder Ken Cruse grew up in Arvada and went to Colorado State University, where he studied natural resources. After working at Marriott, Cruse and his wife bought the Colorado Springs property in 2017. Many of their other hotels are beachfront properties.

"What motivated us was that we have four daughters," Cruse said. "We wanted to model these values for our kids. We wanted to show our kids: 'Look, you can make a difference, even if it's a little difference.'"

Many hotel chains are vying for similar successes. Big entities such



PROVIDED BY SONNENALP

The alpine design influence is apparent at the Bully Ranch patio at the Sonnenalp and other businesses in Vail Village.



Bright murals are splashed across walls at the Soul Community Planet hotel in Colorado Springs. This one is called "The Muse."

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Nature

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as Marriott and Hilton have announced plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: Marriott has said it will cut emissions by 30% as of 2025, and Hilton by 50% as of 2030. Companies want to reduce water usage, stop waste, and source products locally. Soul Community Planet is one of the few hotel chains already doing this and more, by actively contributing to regenerative practices.

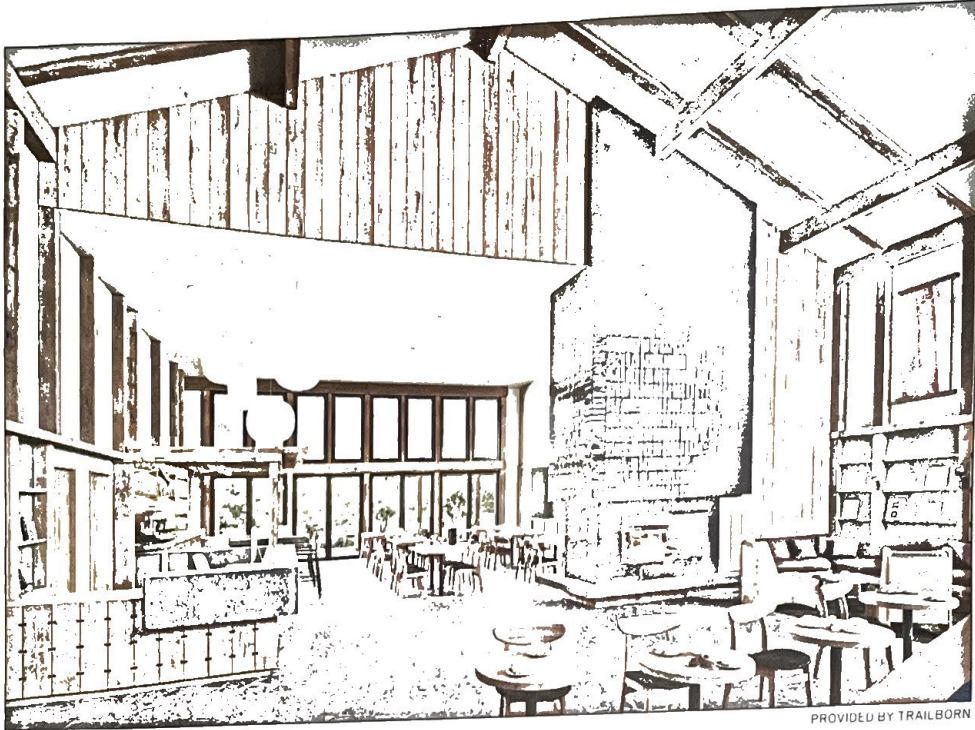
Colorado has other companies that have also made that bigger commitment.

- In the San Juan Mountains, Dunton Hot Springs uses only renewable energy, sources food locally, practices waste reduction and recycling, and also supports local conservation efforts, such as the restoration of the Dolores River.

- Hotel Telluride partners with local conservation organizations, in addition to having implemented a green cleaning program and recycling efforts.

- Near Vail, the Westin Riverfront Resort & Spa has installed solar panels, energy-efficient heating systems, and supports local conservation efforts.

- Sonnenalp in Vail is a more expensive option, but practices green hospitality and gives to a local conservation cause — one with an artistic twist, called Eagle Valley Wild. Founded by photographer Todd Winslow Pierce, Eagle Valley Wild is a non-profit that provides photographs and imagery to conservation-related efforts in Eagle



PROVIDED BY TRAILBORN

A public space at the Trailborn Rocky Mountain Outpost looks out into nature.

County, so as to highlight the beauty and the value of the area's land, water and wildlife.

In July, a new player in the nature-positive travel movement will open two newly renovated properties in Estes Park.

"The majority of our energy is from renewable sources, and we are committed to purchasing a minimum of 30,000 kilowatt-hours a year of renewable energy," said Trailborn Rocky Mountains co-founder and co-CEO Mike Weiss, in an email. "We feel a responsibility

to help preserve these beautiful places. Our properties are designed and operated with sustainability in mind, from environmentally responsible construction practices and green building standards to on-site amenities and a guest experience designed to limit waste, including freshwater wells throughout the properties instead of single-use plastic bottles."

Trailborn also donates \$1 from each booking to the Rocky Mountain Conservancy.

To date, however, few companies have done as

much as Soul Community Planet. It has been recognized by the Green Lodging Program and Sustainable Travel International. The hotel in the Springs has various wings, and some rooms open onto the parking lot, others onto hallways. With a chill in the air, I felt grateful to get an interior room, with an orange and blue abstract painting that brightened up the space.

The communal areas feature various ways to explore well-being, so I checked out the meditation room, a cozy spot with dim lighting. Motivated by the fact such a

room existed, I enjoyed an impromptu deep breathing session while playing meditation bells on my phone.

My only quibble? The food in the market proved pricey and unsatisfying. I paid \$42 for a meal that was little more than a bowl of instant rice and lentils, a bag of pumpkin seeds, and a chocolate bar. Go out to eat instead.

Overnight, the temperature sank to 19 degrees. As the hotel appeared half empty, I had to wonder: Did using energy to heat the hotel's cavernous public spaces actually yield a

positive outcome for the planet? But the following morning, when I asked the clerk at the front desk how my stay would contribute to the company's efforts, he said: "Every stay results in the planting of one tree."

Soul Community Planet seemed to be doing a lot more than any of the other hotels located along this same stretch of highway in terms of leading the way to a better tomorrow. When I return to Colorado Springs, that will be where I stay.

What else should we ask hotels that call themselves "nature positive" do? Perhaps adding pockets of nature in urban environments. According to experts at Rocky Mountain Institute, planting green roofs or small parks in an urban landscape constitutes an important response to climate change. Urban forest carbon credits reward businesses that do so, because adding more nature to cities is one of the most viable ways to reduce the heat-radiating effects of hard-scapes. Green roofs also prevent energy loss.

Adding nature to private property saves money in the long run by reducing energy costs, even as it also improves public health, addresses inequities in the distribution of green spaces, and mitigates the warming of the planet.

Perhaps that's the next step to be undertaken by nature-positive hotels, which appear to be leading the way in environmentally conscious travel.

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