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Making Waves

For Banyan Tree Group heiress Ho Renyung, the world is quite literally her kingdom—and she is reigning over it with heart, humanity and a renewed sense of purpose *By Coco Marett*



Ho Renyung is leading Banyan Tree Group with empathy and a love for the environment

In 2016, Ho Renyung took on the role of senior vice-president of her family's business, Banyan Tree Group. Taking the reins of a globally renowned luxury hotels and resorts brand might sound like something glamorous out of *Gossip Girl* or *Succession*. But the soulful scion prefers to fly under the radar and has been quietly working to bring the Banyan Tree brand into the future with an acute sense of purpose, specifically in the areas of sustainability and humanity.

"Through the years, luxury has evolved to become more personalised," says Ho, who is based in Singapore. "Customers today want experiences they have a personal connection with, and brands that drive emotional responses will be the ones that

last through seasons and trends. True luxury is feeling rejuvenated through the healing power of nature, or having a renewed sense of purpose after experiencing local culture."

And nothing exemplifies Ho's vision for the brand quite like Buahian: A Banyan Tree Escape in Bali, which opened in June this year. One of the most anticipated and talked about resort openings for 2022, the property has made headline after headline for pioneering a bold "no doors, no walls" concept.

Located in a secluded pocket of Ubud, Buahian sits next to the Ayung River and waterfall, with sweeping views over the valley. The resort's 16 balés (villas) are open spaces that blend living and



Buahan: A Banyan Tree Escape, with its bold "no doors, no walls" concept, exemplifies Ho's vision for the future of the luxury hospitality group



sleeping areas with the surrounding landscape, a concept Ho hopes will "allow guests to fully immerse in the sounds and sights of nature".

She also hopes that Buahian's thoughtful use of local materials and produce will encourage a sense of connection between guests and the Balinese community. For example, its menu concept uses ingredients sourced from local suppliers and Banyan Tree's own farm—all within an hour's drive from the resort. Upcycled Ulin wood—also known as ironwood from Indonesia's Kalimantan region—previously used on boat piers and fishing boat decks, hand-smithed copper, and naturally dyed fabric can also be found throughout the property.

"At the same time, we're ramping up our efforts in biodiversity

conservation and protection," Ho shares. As a pioneer of resort-based conservationism, Banyan Tree has over the years established an impressive network of world-leading research facilities, including the Banyan Tree Marine Lab in the Maldives, to study environmental health and use those findings to help the most vulnerable havens of biodiversity thrive. Closer to home, Banyan Tree has focused its efforts on protecting natural habitats in Thailand and Indonesia, where some of its earliest science-based conservation initiatives have taken root.

According to Ho, sustainability in business practice is no longer an option, but imperative. "Practising sustainable actions sustains business. It's a mindset of understanding

the ecosystem of how something is created and the impact of one on another. When we know the consequences of our actions, we can think differently about how we consume," she says.

"In terms of shifting conversations," Ho posits, "we can ask these questions: what are we wanting to protect? Why do we want to change? If someone doesn't quite believe in caring for the oceans, then perhaps talk about how microplastics are broken down and consumed by marine life—which eventually ends up in our gut. It's about finding an angle that resonates with what people care about and that will start the paradigm shift."

She adds: "I've always believed that we belong to this earth; it does not belong to us. The pandemic is an opportunity to recentre our core purpose of well-being and sustainability, positioning us to benefit from the growing interest in how self, others and nature interconnect."

The pandemic has also shifted Ho's vision for Banyan Tree behind the scenes. In 2020, in an effort to boost team morale and improve mental health in difficult times, the group rolled out I Am With You, an empathy-centred programme to promote mindful practice in service culture and mindset development for its associates around the globe. With the aim to inspire renewed purpose and a "better me, better you" mentality, Ho says the programme has not only improved the well-being of Banyan Tree's associates, but also created team cohesion, passion and conviction in the value of what they offer guests.

"We began enquiring what made us special as a brand and why our guests always feel 'home' with us," says Ho. "We realised it's a quality of empathy that endowed a sense of sanctuary, no matter the location. Having empathy cultivates a space for diversity, adaptability, and creating connections within the self and to others."

IMAGES: BANYAN TREE HOTELS & RESORTS