

# On the Cutting Edge



## Hidden Valley opens up on going carbon neutral:

Far away from the Garnaut Report, the Department of Climate Change in Canberra and the environmental consultants in our capital cities, one small ecotourism business north-west of Townsville has quietly achieved what many have thought to be impossible – carbon neutral status.



According to Hidden Valley Cabins, owner and proprietor Ian McLennan the company is the first carbon neutral accommodation and tour company in Australia.

“Being carbon neutral probably wasn’t our goal at the start,” Ian admits. “We don’t have access to town power at Hidden Valley and that means constantly looking at alternative ways of powering our company. In the beginning we used a diesel-run generator and solar power. But even then, the idea was to get rid of the generator and we’ve done it.”

Watching a documentary while holidaying in fuel-hungry North America got Ian and his wife Bonnie thinking about reducing their reliance on fossil fuels. “The program warned that by 2040 we would be out of oil and that all major oil wells were on the downside of peak production,” he said. “That planted a seed.

“In the beginning, buying the solar panels was expensive, certainly more than the diesel to run the generator, but solar power saves money in the long term and with fuel prices going up, it has saved us enormously.

“Now we run our business entirely on solar power and we purchase carbon credits to offset the rest of the operational activities.”

## Welcome to the Hidden Valley solar system:

Hidden Valley Cabins and Tours is 100 per cent solar powered, saving 78 tonnes of CO2 emissions per year. This is Australia's first instance of a tourism resort operating with no support from grid power and remaining carbon neutral.

The company successfully applied for funding through the federal government’s Renewable Remote Power Generation Scheme and has installed a stand alone solar system to run the resort 24 hours per day.

The system consists of 12 KVA inverters, 90 x 130 watt solar panels delivering 120 volts DC into 60 x 2 volt 1660 amp batteries.

To communicate this to visitors, Hidden Valley Cabins has an interpretive centre to explore the operational aspect of renewable energy, timelines on the development of the project and suggested ideas on how individuals can help with the fight against climate change.

There is interpretive signage installed throughout the resort so guests can walk through at their leisure learning about the system.

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## About Hidden Valley

The Advanced ECO Certified Hidden Valley Cabins are 103 kilometres north-west of Townsville and have been operating for 22 years. Hidden Valley is 640 metres above sea level and the local climate is cooler and less humid than the coast, making air conditioning unnecessary, again saving on energy costs.

Guests to the valley can explore picturesque Running River, which is home to a lively platypus population. Ian and Bonnie also offer their guests night walks where rock wallabies, rufus bettong or kangaroo rats, greater gliders, squirrel gliders, feather-tailed gliders and sugar gliders can be spotted. Many visitors enjoy the hiking that is readily available, but Hidden Valley offers its visitors a sense of tranquility rarely found in more populous areas.

Ian constructed the cabins from locally grown timbers, milled on-site, reducing transport costs and associated emissions. The windows were recycled from older homes in Townsville.

Hidden Valley Cabins caters for up to 15 people for conferences and up to 45 people for functions and Ian said that even at capacity, solar power adequately meets the needs of all guests.

"The secret of doing it is to have plenty of capacity left over and then solar is very efficient. Our batteries can last up to five days without input, so overcast days and winter make no difference to the running of the place."

Ian, Bonnie, son Ross and his partner Chelsea run and manage the Hidden Valley cabins. "Ross was a big driving force for us to expand our solar," he said. "He is passionate about green energy and is currently giving a talk on sustainability for the Australian Regional Tourism Convention in the Barossa Valley on behalf of Tourism Queensland. Chelsea is our marketing guru.

"Now that we have Ross and Chelsea on board, Bonnie and I can really focus on our guests and cater for their every need. If they want a tour to the Wallaman Falls, which is the longest sheer drop waterfall in the southern hemisphere, we take them there. If they want to explore our local gorges, we take them there too."

"We are always thinking about improving things."

## ECO Certification:

Hidden Valley Cabins and Tours are an outstanding example of a genuine nature-based tourism operator and have been certified as an Advanced Ecotourism operation - the highest level of certification - by Ecotourism Australia.

Hidden Valley Cabins were awarded Advanced ECO Certification on April 4, this year at the launch of its solar energy system. The resort also received a special award from Premier Anna Bligh for leadership in environmental sustainability in the tourism industry.

In addition, each guest is given a "Certificate of Sustainability" as a reminder of their stay and of their carbon-neutral experience.



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## Best Practice education

Ian discusses how he and the Hidden Valley team have become part of a green community since becoming carbon neutral.

“The best thing about implementing the solar power is the people we have been able to meet. People from all over the country, in tourism and other industries come and see what we’re doing and that is very gratifying. We learn from them and they learn from us.”

Part of this ongoing learning process is the solar workshops that Hidden Valley Cabins offers to local business people, interested parties and home owners.

“Once a month Frank Dallmeyer from Tropical Energy Solutions in Townsville comes up and we run a two-day workshop showing people how to go solar. “Electricians, electrical engineers, resort owners and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority have all come and learned about solar power from us.

“We had a guy who owns an accommodation place in Tropical North Queensland come and see us. He currently spends \$200,000 on diesel per year and we can help him save around \$80,000 annually. We are very proud of our solar workshops. We can really help a lot of people.”

## Ten hints to achieving energy efficiency

Ian and Bonnie also encourage their guests to be energy wise and have included ten hints in each guest’s room on how to be energy efficient.

1. Install solar power. Hidden Valley Cabins is Australia’s first solar powered resort.
2. Turn off your lights when not required. You can save 150kg of CO2 a year just by turning things off.
3. Turns off electrical appliances at the switch. Did you know leaving a TV set on at the power point draws 20 watts per hour, which could result in 1.2 tonnes of CO2 emissions?
4. Use gas kettles to save power and reduce carbon emissions.
5. Replace conventional light bulbs with energy-saving compact fluorescent. It has reduced our power consumption from 2220 watts to an amazingly low 430 watts.
6. Watch your washing. Try not to wash your clothes on a setting above 40C. A wash at 60C uses 30 per cent more energy as 90 per cent of the energy used by a washing machine is used in heating the water.
7. Look for energy efficient appliances and make sure you read the label to see how much it draws.
8. Perform an energy audit on your house to see how much power you use and determine where you can save energy and money.
9. Only boil the right amount of water. This saves on average 33 per cent energy, which can mean conserving the energy of around 50 light bulbs. On average, consumers boil twice the volume of water that is required.
10. Use rechargeable batteries. People throw away over 650 million batteries every year, polluting the soil and filling landfill sites. Rechargeable batteries save energy and the slightly higher cost is recovered in the first five charges.

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## All operators can become carbon neutral!

Ian's advice to other nature-based tourism operators who want to go carbon neutral is blunt.

"Do it now, the time is here. You can become carbon neutral, you just need to commit to it. If everyone does their little bit, we can have a big impact."

The spirit of continuous improvement thrives in Hidden Valley Cabins and Ian and Bonnie have even more plans to expand their solar power usage. "Advanced eco-tourism, really makes us open our eyes and look at ways to constantly improve ourselves. "Our next step will be to look at solar hot water, which is a hard one in this game as guests need hot showers and solar powering our water pump."

It seems certain this next challenge will be easily overcome by the innovative, visionary and versatile McLennans.

For more information on Hidden Valley Cabins please visit: [www.hiddenvalleycabins.com.au](http://www.hiddenvalleycabins.com.au)