
FROM GREEN TO LUXURY HOSPITALITY: THE CASE OF ZORNITZA FAMILY ESTATE RELAIS & CHATEAUX

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Abstract: In the evolving field of luxury hospitality, sustainability has emerged as a key component of brand identity. This paper examines how eco-friendly practices are redefining luxury within the niche segment of Family Estate hotels affiliated with *Relais & Châteaux*. These properties, often rooted in cultural inheritance and located in natural or rural settings, offer an ideal setting for the integration of responsible environmental management with high-end guest experiences. Using a qualitative case study and guest perception analysis, the study explores how green initiatives, ranging from organic gastronomy to energy-efficient operations, strive to enhance brand equity, attract eco-conscious travellers, and reinforce the emotional connection between guests and heritage brands. The findings highlight that strengthening the visibility of sustainability initiatives within its marketing and guest engagement practices would enable Zornitza Family Estate to reinforce the coherence between its environmental commitments and its luxury brand identity, thus enhancing its competitive edge. The guest perception analysis of Zornitza Family Estate demonstrates that the integration of sustainable practices and luxury hospitality significantly enhances the estate’s brand image and market positioning. Guests consistently highlight the high-quality culinary offerings, estate-produced wines, personalized service, comfortable and well-appointed accommodations, and the serene natural surroundings as the key factors contributing to their satisfaction. The estate’s commitment to sustainability, including organic farming, renewable energy use, efficient resource management, food waste reduction, and social engagement, resonates strongly with environmentally conscious and discerning travelers, reinforcing trust, authenticity, and emotional connection with the brand. While minor areas for improvement were identified, such as occasional variations in food quality, spa maintenance, and perceptions of price-value alignment, these do not undermine the overall positive guest experience. The findings indicate that the estate’s eco-luxury positioning not only fulfills guest expectations for comfort and exclusivity but also provides a meaningful and ethically responsible tourism experience.

Keywords: sustainability, luxury hospitality, family estate, heritage brand

1. INTRODUCTION

The convergence of sustainability and luxury in the hospitality industry has attracted increasing attention as consumer preferences shift towards experiences that combine environmental responsibility with high-end service. This trend is particularly pronounced among affluent travelers who seek authentic, immersive and ethically conscious experiences without compromising on comfort and exclusivity (McKinsey, 2024). The concept of eco-luxury hospitality, which integrates sustainable practices into the core of luxury offerings, has emerged as a strategic response to this demand (Fouquet, 2023). Despite the growing interest in sustainable luxury, empirical research examining guest perceptions of eco-luxury hotels remains limited, especially within the context of emerging destinations including Bulgaria. Understanding how guests perceive and evaluate the intersection of sustainability and luxury is crucial for hospitality providers aiming to enhance brand loyalty, differentiate in a competitive market, and contribute positively to environmental and social outcomes (Campos Herrero et al., 2025).

This study focuses on Zornitza Family Estate, a 3,000-hectare eco-luxury destination in Bulgaria, recognized for its commitment to sustainable practices, including organic farming, renewable energy utilization and community engagement. By analyzing guest reviews from the platforms of TripAdvisor and Booking.com, this research aims to explore how visitors perceive the integration of sustainability into the luxury experience and identify the key factors influencing their satisfaction and loyalty. The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism by providing empirical insights into the guest experience of eco-luxury hospitality. Moreover, they offer practical implications for hospitality managers seeking to align their operations with the values of environmentally and socially conscious travelers, thereby fostering sustainable development in the luxury tourism sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of green initiatives into luxury hospitality constitutes a multifaceted topic encompassing aspects of consumer behavior, sustainability, and luxury brand management. The hospitality industry has witnessed a notable

shift as hotels increasingly embrace green practices responding to increased consumer awareness and expectations regarding environmental responsibility. Research has indicated that consumers' willingness to pay for green initiatives significantly influences their hotel selection decisions reflecting a growing concern for corporate social responsibility (CSR) within the hospitality sector. For instance, Kang et al. (2012) illustrate how the increasing importance of environmental issues has encouraged hotels to accelerate their green initiatives to meet consumer demand for sustainability. Similarly, Moise et al. (2020) emphasize that "green" practices are now foundational to enhancing guest satisfaction and loyalty reinforcing the idea that sustainability can serve as a competitive advantage in the luxury hotel market. Furthermore, Iloranta and Komppula (2021) argue that this consumer sensitivity can enhance the perceived value of luxury experiences when integrated with sustainable practices. The concept of sustainable luxury is increasingly gaining recognition, indicating that luxury brands need to align with the evolving expectations of consumers who value both exclusivity and environmental responsibility. Kwon et al. (2021) point out that understanding how luxury hotels can cultivate brand identification through green innovations corresponds to consumer expectations for sustainable development in the luxury sector.

Likewise, Dang et al. (2023) address the role of green practices as a vital business strategy that influences consumer behavior in the luxury hotel sector asserting that effective implementation can substantially enhance brand loyalty and recognition among guests. Moreover, the implications of green initiatives extend beyond consumer preferences to encompass broader market trends. The luxury hospitality sector, which has emerged as a substantial contributor to the global hotel market, is increasingly characterized by a demand for personalization and authentic experiences (Gonçalves et al., 2024). Research by Mele et al. (2024) highlights the necessity for luxury hotels to identify specific benefits sought by guests while incorporating sustainable practices, thus recognizing the need for market segmentation. This acknowledgment is particularly crucial as consumer attitudes shift toward favoring brands that demonstrate both luxury and a commitment to sustainability.

The intersection of luxury and green hospitality also leads to challenges and opportunities in digital marketing. Michael and Fusté-Forné (2023) explore how luxury hotels utilize visual communication campaigns on platforms such as Instagram to showcase their green credentials, thereby creating aspirational narratives that appeal to the target audience. Furthermore, the systematic overview by Kunz et al. (2020) reinforces the critical need for ongoing research into how luxury brands can successfully merge the pillars of sustainability and luxury to foster enduring consumer loyalty and industry growth. Likewise, Wong and Dhanesh (2017) emphasize how luxury brands navigate CSR communications to align their brand identities with ethical principles, which are increasingly valued by consumers. Research indicates that consumers increasingly seek luxury experiences that are exclusive but also environmentally responsible (Athwal et al., 2019). This has led to luxury brands adopting innovative strategies, such as nature-connected design principles that enhance aesthetics while promoting environmental consciousness, as discussed by Lee et al. (2022).

Today's luxury consumers are influenced by their ethical beliefs; as stated by Hang et al. (2021), they expect transparency in sustainability practices. In addition, Yang and Mattila (2016) assert that consumer perceptions of luxury must encompass experiences that align with sustainability trends contradicting the traditional notion of luxury centered purely on grandeur. The paradoxical relationship between luxury and sustainability is illustrated in the findings by Sun et al. (2024) indicating that consumers are willing to pay a premium for luxury offerings that incorporate green practices. Market segmentation plays a fundamental role in determining how luxury hotels can effectively target segments that prioritize sustainability. Mele et al. (2024) emphasize that luxury guests often have different motivation ranging from aesthetic appreciation to environmental considerations. Hence, it is essential that hotels tailor their marketing strategies accordingly.

Despite the growing consumer demand for sustainable luxury, several challenges persist. The reluctance of some luxury establishments to adopt environmentally friendly practices stems from concerns about consumer perceptions regarding service quality and exclusivity (Peng, 2020). This is supported by Sourvinou and Filimonau (2017), who emphasize the necessity of evaluating both corporate strategy and employee engagement when implementing green initiatives to ensure successful transitions without compromising service quality. Conversely, adopting new technologies, such as immersive AI for personalized guest experience, as stated by Gonçalves et al. (2024), can prove beneficial in enhancing perceptions of luxury while addressing sustainability concerns. Furthermore, Dekhili et al. (2019) indicate that sustainability can substantially enhance the marketing and promotion of luxury products suggesting that green initiatives not only advance environmental responsibility but also strengthen the appeal of luxury offerings. Future research is necessary to examine the complex interplay between luxury, sustainability, and consumer perceptions offering insights for the development of effective marketing strategies in this dynamic and evolving sector.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to examine how sustainable practices are reshaping the concept of luxury in the niche segment of Family Estate hotels, the study employed two complementary research approaches: a qualitative case study and an analysis of guest perceptions. The qualitative case study method was selected for its ability to provide an in-depth examination of a single green luxury family-run estate. This approach captures the complexity of how sustainability is embedded into daily operations and brand strategies, revealing the interplay between tradition, authenticity, and luxury service (Yin, 2018). A case study is especially appropriate in this context, as it situates sustainability initiatives within their real-life setting and highlights best practices that may not be fully observable through broader quantitative surveys. This method facilitates rich, contextual insights into how a Family Estate hotel property implements sustainable practices while maintaining luxury experiences. Qualitative insights from case studies can reveal connections between green practices and customer satisfaction providing a basis for improved operational strategies in hospitality. The method flexibility enables researchers to adjust their approach as new themes emerge, which is especially important in developing areas like sustainable luxury.

Guest perception analysis was chosen as the second method in order to complement the managerial and operational perspective with insights from the demand side. By examining guest reviews and feedback, the study reveals how eco-friendly initiatives, such as organic gastronomy, energy-efficient operations, and locally rooted experiences, shape customer perceptions, influence brand equity, and enhance the emotional connection between guests and heritage brands (Sigala, 2018; Jones et al., 2016). By examining both supply and demand perspectives, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability operates as both a branding mechanism and an authentic expression of the values shaping Family Estate luxury hospitality. Guest perception analysis is crucial in understanding how customers evaluate their experiences regarding the sustainability initiatives undertaken by luxury family-run estates. The author adopts a combined coding approach, integrating both deductive and inductive methods, to systematize themes related to sustainability and luxury derived from the Zornitza case study, as well as to identify additional emergent themes present in the guests' reviews. Data from 2017 to 2025 were analyzed using QDA Miner Lite software. The sample size is 126 including domestic and international tourists. Analyzing guest perceptions enables luxury family-run estates to strategically develop their offerings in a manner that balances sustainability with the luxury experience ensuring long-term success and customer loyalty.

Combined, the case study and guest perception analysis provide a robust methodological framework allowing the research to examine both the operational realities and the experiential outcomes of green practices. In this way, the study shows that, within Family Estate hotels, sustainability is not a mere trend but a natural extension of authenticity, craftsmanship, and refined living, which are all key qualities that define this unique segment of the hospitality industry.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Green Practices at Luxury Zornitza Family Estate: Case Study Results

Zornitza Family Estate serves as an example of strategic eco-branding, where sustainability is integrated into all aspects of operations to build a strong, authentic, and emotionally compelling brand image. The estate combines tangible environmental practices with targeted communication enhancing guest perceptions of both luxury and environmental responsibility. Table 1 organizes the indicators characterizing the operations of Zornitza Family Estate and their associated brand values, categorized into two dimensions: sustainability and luxury. A closer examination reveals that several indicators are intertwined and overlapping, making it challenging to assign them definitively to a single dimension. This observation suggests a strong interrelationship between sustainability and luxury. The conducted case study further highlights the primary expressions of both sustainability and luxury within the estate.

On its 3,000-hectare property, Zornitza cultivates organic vegetables, fruits, and herbs, maintains beehives and poultry, and produces estate wines from 18 grape varieties including local Melnik and Mavrud (<https://www.relaischateaux.com>). Hand-harvesting, meticulous production, and on-site use of these products reinforce quality perception and strengthen the estate eco-luxury identity. Over 500 trees producing black Burgundy and Bianchetto truffles further enhance the sense of terroir and exclusivity. Energy efficiency is a strategic priority. Buildings are equipped with modern, energy-efficient climate systems, smart thermostats, and thick stone and wood walls that minimize energy consumption while maintaining guest comfort. Solar panels supply water heating and thermal pools, and staff receive specialized training to implement energy-efficient practices. These measures reduce the carbon footprint, optimize operating costs, and enhance guest satisfaction. Food waste management is also integrated into Zornitza sustainable operations. The estate uses short supply chains, inventory control, and portion management to minimize waste. Biodegradable waste is composted and returned to agricultural fields closing the ecological loop. Surplus food is donated to local communities reinforcing social responsibility and ethical

engagement. Corporate social responsibility is embedded across all operations of Zornitza Family Estate. Ethical sourcing, reduction of plastics, renewable energy use, and active community engagement including educational collaborations, cultural events, and charitable initiatives, demonstrate how sustainability can coexist with luxury. Employee training, fair labor practices, and career development further strengthen organizational culture and service quality.

Table 1. Sustainability and Luxury at Zornitza Family Estate

Dimension	Indicators	Description
Sustainability	Organic products	Cultivation of vegetables, fruits, and herbs; beekeeping and poultry farming; estate wines from 18 grape varieties
	Energy efficiency	Energy-efficient climate control systems, smart thermostats, solar panels, LED lighting, thick stone and wood walls
	Waste management	Short supply chains, inventory control, portion management, composting biodegradable waste, donation of surplus food
	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Ethical sourcing, reduced plastics, renewable energy use, community engagement, educational programs, cultural events, charitable initiatives
	Staff green skills	Training on energy efficiency, green practices, food waste reduction, and operational sustainability standards
Luxury	Exclusive products	Hand-harvested estate wines, truffles, and organic produce used in restaurants and available for guest purchase
	Guest comfort	Luxurious amenities and consistent climate control
	Service quality	Ethical labor practices, employee training, and career development supporting premium service standards
	Experiential luxury	Holistic integration of gastronomy, viticulture, farming, and eco-friendly operations into guest experiences
	Reputation & recognition	Sustainable luxury positioning recognized nationally and internationally; enhanced guest loyalty, intent to recommend and trust

Source: author’s elaboration

The case study of Zornitza Family Estate illustrates that sustainable practices are not peripheral but central to the business model. Eco-luxury enhances brand authenticity, trust, and loyalty translating into sustainable revenue, international recognition, and a competitive advantage in the luxury hospitality sector. Guests increasingly choose Zornitza not only for comfort and luxury, but also for its ethical and environmentally responsible approach making it a leading example of integrated sustainability in high-end tourism.

Guest Perception Analysis of TripAdvisor & Booking.com Reviews on Zornitza Family Estate

Zornitza Family Estate is ranked first among small hotels in the Sandanski and Melnik region, renowned in Bulgaria for their distinctive climate and wine production. The estate maintains a consistently positive reputation, built on an exceptional combination of natural surroundings, luxury accommodations, spa facilities, fine dining, attentive service, and high levels of guest loyalty, with some visitors returning more than five times.

The family estate attracts conscious consumers actively seeking luxury and sustainable tourism products, including eco-tourists and gastronomic enthusiasts, international guests loyal to the Zornitza philosophy, and corporate clients for whom CSR and sustainable events are a choice criterion. Zornitza expands its market without compromising brand identity. In a competitive luxury tourism market, sustainability gives Zornitza a long-term competitive value. While many places offer comfort, few provide a holistic concept combining sustainability, ethics, culture, and taste, which makes Zornitza a mission-driven brand.

Table 2 contains the results of the content analysis of guests’ reviews on Zornitza Family Estate, with codes categorized under Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers and linked to the overarching themes of sustainability and luxury.

The dataset comprises both satisfier and dissatisfier categories reflecting guests’ perceptions of their stay. The most frequently occurring codes are associated with luxury experiences and service excellence, while sustainability-

related aspects appear less prominently but are still present. Guest comfort (luxury) (21.2% of codes; 65.9% of cases) and service quality (20.1%) are the leading satisfiers. These codes highlight that guests primarily associate their positive experiences with the personalized attention, high comfort standards, and quality of service provided by the estate. Experiential luxury (9.6%) further underlines Zornitza’s emphasis on authentic, memorable experiences that go beyond material opulence. The estate’s brand identity as a luxury retreat is well established in the guests’ narratives, with emotional and sensory engagement serving as key value drivers.

Sustainability is implicitly integrated into the luxury experience but not yet a dominant driver of satisfaction in guests’ discourse. Organic and exclusive products (11.4%) and energy efficiency (1.3%) reflect guests’ awareness of Zornitza’s sustainability practices. The emphasis on organic cuisine and local products signals an alignment between sustainability and luxury — guests perceive eco-friendly offerings as an extension of the premium experience. The integration of organic cuisine and local sourcing demonstrates how sustainability can complement luxury, reinforcing authenticity and exclusivity.

However, the low frequency of sustainability-related codes (e.g., energy efficiency) suggests that environmental initiatives may be appreciated but are not central to the guests’ perception of value.

Negative feedback primarily concerns service consistency and operational details, not the estate’s core concept or sustainable-luxury positioning. Food quality (6.6%) and poolside service (1.5%) emerge as the main dissatisfiers, indicating isolated operational issues rather than structural deficiencies. Minor dissatisfaction with guest safety and cleanliness standards suggests that expectations for a luxury property remain extremely high — even small lapses affect perceived value.

Table 2. Codes Distribution by Category

Category	Code	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases	Nb Words	% Words
Satisfier	service quality	92	20,10%	75	59,50%	608	6,20%
Satisfier	organic and exclusive products	52	11,40%	44	34,90%	368	3,80%
Satisfier	experiential luxury	44	9,60%	33	26,20%	553	5,70%
Satisfier	guest comfort (luxury)	97	21,20%	83	65,90%	1352	13,80%
Satisfier	reputation (loyalty and recommendation)	63	13,80%	55	43,70%	422	4,30%
Satisfier	energy efficiency	6	1,30%	5	4,00%	24	0,20%
Satisfier	value for money	3	0,70%	3	2,40%	37	0,40%
Satisfier	management know-how	6	1,30%	6	4,80%	59	0,60%
Satisfier	hospitality concept	33	7,20%	30	23,80%	353	3,60%
Dissatisfier	poolside service	7	1,50%	6	4,80%	88	0,90%
Dissatisfier	food quality	30	6,60%	18	14,30%	406	4,10%
Dissatisfier	staff service	8	1,80%	8	6,30%	151	1,50%
Dissatisfier	wine tasting/pairing	3	0,70%	3	2,40%	49	0,50%
Dissatisfier	guest safety	5	1,10%	5	4,00%	52	0,50%
Dissatisfier	value for money	5	1,10%	5	4,00%	46	0,50%
Dissatisfier	cleanliness	3	0,70%	2	1,60%	46	0,50%

Source: author’s elaboration

The coding results reveal a synergistic relationship between sustainability and luxury, where the estate's commitment to organic products and experiential design reinforces its luxury appeal. Guests perceive authenticity, exclusivity, and comfort as central pillars, while environmental practices enhance but do not dominate the narrative. The content analysis demonstrates that Zornitza Family Estate successfully integrates elements of sustainability within a luxury framework, appealing to guests seeking quality, comfort, and authentic, eco-conscious experiences. Future communication strategies could emphasize the sustainability dimension more explicitly to strengthen brand differentiation within the high-end hospitality segment.

The findings from the Zornitza Family Estate case align with contemporary scholarship emphasizing the convergence of sustainability and luxury in hospitality branding. Studies argue that modern luxury consumers increasingly value ethical responsibility and environmental awareness alongside comfort and exclusivity. The prevalence of themes such as guest comfort, service quality, and experiential luxury reflects the traditional dimensions of luxury consumption, while the presence of sustainability-related codes such as organic and exclusive products suggests a growing appreciation for eco-conscious practices. This dual emphasis illustrates the evolving concept of "sustainable luxury," where environmental stewardship is not viewed as a trade-off but as a component enhancing perceived authenticity and brand prestige (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Nevertheless, the relatively low frequency of explicit sustainability references indicates that, while guests value these efforts, they may not yet consider them defining elements of their experience. This finding echoes research by Kim et al. (2024), who note that sustainability initiatives often function as secondary satisfiers rather than primary motivators for luxury travelers. Consequently, Zornitza Family Estate could strengthen its competitive advantage by making sustainability more visible in its marketing and guest communication, reinforcing the alignment between environmental responsibility and the luxury experience.

5. CONCLUSION

Zornitza Family Estate exemplifies how strategic eco-branding can serve as a core driver of guest loyalty, competitive differentiation, and long-term reputational value, demonstrating that sustainability and luxury can coexist synergistically in the high-end hospitality sector. The case further underscores the strategic importance of aligning operational practices, communication, and community engagement to reinforce both environmental and social responsibility while maintaining the hallmarks of a luxury experience. For luxury hospitality marketing, these insights highlight that embedding sustainability into the core brand promise not only meets the growing demand for responsible tourism but also strengthens emotional engagement, differentiates the property in a competitive market, and positions the brand for sustainable growth. In this way, Zornitza Family Estate serves as a model for integrating eco-conscious initiatives into luxury service offerings, illustrating that environmental and social stewardship can enhance, rather than compromise, the perceived value of a high-end hospitality experience.

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