



Environment



by
**Siobhan
Norton**

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Why responsible travel is about far more than reusing your towels



Waste from cruise liners is a growing problem in the Caribbean (Photo: Getty)

How eco-friendly are you when you travel? OK, so there are the giant jet engines spewing fumes into the atmosphere, but what about when you arrive? Most of us feel we've cleared our conscience by reusing our towels as per the friendly reminder card in the bathroom, or by turning out the lights when we leave our hotel room. Out and about we don't litter, of course – take only pictures, leave only footprints.

But the tourism industry is a far bigger animal than simply the actions of its hotel guests. Globally, it is now the largest employer. This year was declared the International Year of Sustainable Tourism by the UN, although the message has been somewhat lost in the maelstrom that is 2017.

Environmental impact

The reality is that tourism is having a devastating impact on the environment. Every year, cruise ships in the Caribbean are estimated to produce more than 70,000 tons of waste – often dumping it just miles from islands that don't have the resources to cope with it. Some trekking trails in Nepal and the Andes have been nicknamed "toilet paper trails" because of the huge amount of rubbish left behind. Some golf courses in developing countries use as much water as 60,000 rural villagers.

With the US pulling out of the Paris climate accord and environmentalists warning that the world's climate is reaching the point of no return, the need for sustainability has never been more urgent.

With that in mind two leading players in the travel industry have set up a legacy project aiming to help the industry thrive while protecting the planet. Husband and wife Onno and Alexa Poortier founded [NOW](#), an online portal providing discussion, research, innovations and inspiration on how to travel with a conscience.

Scarred forests

"I used to travel a lot to Indonesia, flying over Borneo," says Onno. "When you looked out the window it was just black, covered in jungle. Now you see scars, all yellow, with so many trees burnt. Every day half a city of forest is disappearing. People have to be aware of what is going on."



Both believe that "greenwashing" is a problem. "As long as I've been in the industry, energy conservation has been a concern, but it was more to save money for the hotel. It wasn't about the environment," says Onno. "Now they say they are being 'eco' by asking you to put your used towels in the bath, but it's no longer enough."

The travel industry is booming – it is projected that the number of international visitor arrivals will top 1.8 billion a year by 2025. The Poortiers say an industry-wide overhaul is needed.

"It's about inspiring and educating the traveller," says Alexa. "To us success means if you want to go on a cruise and you're looking for a company to book with, we will list it there and you will be able to make the right choice – or maybe decide not to take a cruise, because you don't want to dump all that waste into the sea."

What about Ecotourism?

Ecotourism has become a bit of dirty word across the travel industry. While the idea of low-impact travel appealed to many, stories began to emerge of companies slapping an "ecotourism" label on their trips without having to meet any environmental standards. This

was greenwashing at its worst – exploiting local cultures and resources without giving back to the community. Ecotourism began to be viewed as, at best, cloyingly worthy, and at worst exploitative.

Alexa is wary of “green” labels. “There are around 400 companies that are giving out a butterfly, a stamp, a badge and saying that you’re eco-friendly now,” she says. “Well among those 400, most of them are sending you a checklist – you check it off and they give you a badge. And that’s all it is.”

The game-changers

Some companies are making a real difference, they say. “One example of a real game changer is the Alila group,” says Alexa. “Not only are they zero-waste in their hotel, they buy the garbage from the communities around them and recycle them. All the plastics are made into lamp oils.” The Poortiers remain hopeful, and believe millennials will make a difference. “Millennials are the largest group of travellers,” says Alexa. “Yes, people say they’ve had a charmed life, but they want to give back. They’re the ones that say we have the wallet, we have the mobile phone, we are empowered.”

Resilience, not prevention

They have also been buoyed by the support they have received. The founder of EarthCheck, the world’s leading sustainability certification group, has joined NOW’s board, as have several other industry leaders. But they say the need for change has never been more urgent. “We’re no longer talking about prevention, we’re now talking about resilience,” says Alexa. “We need to create a stronger planet to survive the floods, to survive the changing climate. “Travel influences how countries treat their people, the indigenous tribes, the environment. If it makes them money, they’re going to save the mountains, the rainforests – they’re going to prevent the loggers from chopping down their trees. Travel is crucial, but we need to do it with some responsibility.”

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