

Go green: my eco-friendly travel tips

Emma Sparks, published Apr 20 2018



Snorkelers should feel privileged to be witness to sights like this © Emma Sparks

Before my four-month jaunt, I took some time to educate myself on the things I could do to make sure my trip had a minimal impact on the environment. There's no shortage of info out there – in fact the sustainability movement is well and truly blossoming – but with so much advice alongside a scrum of trendy companies hustling to assure you their products and services are Mother Nature-approved, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

Where to start? Here are my simple tips for an eco-friendly trip.

1) Pick the right route and destination(s)

For a long-term trip, pick a route that can be achieved mostly overland. Zipping around the world on a multi-hopper airfare is incredible for you, but less-so for the environment. We chose to stick to [Central America](#) so we could slow down and see more in each country before moving on by bus or boat.

For short trips, consider taking the train or bus rather than flying to your destination, if possible; it may take longer, but it'll be an adventure for sure! Check rome2rio.com for possible routes.



Eco-friendly initiatives on the beach near Montezuma, Costa Rica © Emma Sparks

2) Invest in a reusable water bottle and tote

We all know that it's time to stop buying disposable plastic water bottles. But so many of us continue to do so out of sheer convenience. In the past I tended to buy a big bottle at the airport once I got through security, then refilled it for the duration of my trip. But that's still not sustainable and it's not what cheap plastic bottles are designed for either.

There are tonnes of long-lasting options out there; [S'Well](#) and [Chilly's](#) stainless steel bottles keep liquids cold and come in an array of Pinterest-worthy designs, while Camelbak products come with handy spill-free spouts and loop handles – ideal for hanging from a backpack ([my trusty canteen](#) is scratched but in-tact after four months away). Other highly-praised brands include [Klean Kanteen](#) and [Hydro Flask](#).

Pack a tote or 12 for your spontaneous shopping trips too!

3) Choose a truly sustainable hotel

The NOW project has recently launched [a booking tool to help travellers](#) pick the right hotel for them. What makes it different is the level of detail it goes into to track the sustainability efforts of each hotel, going beyond energy efficient light bulbs to highlight positive employment policies, menu alternatives (gluten-free? No problem), waste reduction initiatives and community projects. I'm looking forward to seeing their network grow! The [NOW online magazine](#) is also packed with stories and advice for eco-conscious travellers.



Refillable amenities at Yemaya Island Hideaway and Spa, Little Corn Island, Nicaragua © Emma Sparks

4) Eat green

I turned vegetarian just over a year ago, mostly for environmental reasons (yes, [Cowspiracy](#) played a part in that decision). Veganism would be even greener (no eggs or dairy? Argh!), but I'm still adjusting to meat-free meals. For now I'm so pleased to know that my diet is less harmful to the environment than it was before – and swerving meat can even help avoid traveller's tummy.

As an ex-hardcore carnivore, I understand that going veggie is not everyone's idea of fun. So what else can you do? Eating locally-sourced food can be a good place to start; seasonal fruit and veg only, and seafood if you're on the coast, for example. In some remote island nations imported goods can be impossible to avoid, but generally, attempting to eat foods grown and produced in your destination is an eco-savvy move.

5) Scrutinise your toiletries

Next time you travel, take a look at your wash bag. Most sewage/waste systems can't handle wet wipes, so try to forgo those (look up '[fatbergs](#)' if you need convincing); invest in reusable miniature bottles for your shampoo and body wash, instead of buying throw-away items at the airport; and aim to use products sourced from ethical companies that use natural ingredients. I'm a fan of [Neal's Yard Remedies](#) and [Faith in Nature](#). And ladies, forget the tampons. [Lunette](#) will change your life.



A happy sloth at Toucan Rescue Ranch, where no guests hold the animals © Emma Sparks

6) Choose ethical tour companies and activities

Most people know by now that cuddling big cats and riding elephants simply isn't cool. But what other things should curious travellers be looking out for? Try to find companies or activities that give back to the communities on the ground – bonus points if they're run and owned locally too. [I went on my first G Adventures tour](#) at the beginning of my big trip – partly because of their relatable sustainable tourism policy: 'Don't just see the world. Make it better.' On the Mayan Trail tour we had the opportunity to visit indigenous Mayan communities and experience a Guatemalan homestay, happily putting our dollars into the pockets of people on the ground.

7) Be aware of your waste

Grubby clothes, ripped sleeping bags, fraying flip flops.. It's tempting to shed your stuff on the road (ahh, the joys of a lighter backpack), but remember that not all nations are equipped to dispose of waste efficiently. If you can hold onto your rubbish until you get home, do it. Better yet, find a way to recycle or donate items that may be of use to others in the area. This is also a good reason to pack light before you jet off!



We tried to avoid unnecessary flights on our big trip – but this one reminded us of the power of Mother Nature © Emma Sparks

8) Offset your carbon emissions

Long-haul travel increases your carbon footprint dramatically. [Sustainable Travel International](#) allows you to offset your carbon footprint by calculating a monetary fee based on your carbon output. If you'd rather pay your bit in smaller, more affordable chunks, why not set up a direct debit donation to an environmental charity of your choice?