

great places

The A, B, Cs of Sustainable Travel

How to offset the climate costs of exploring the world

By Sandra Ramani

There's no doubt that travel can have positive, even transformative, effects, from helping to connect us to other cultures, to giving us perspective on our own lives. In recent years, as air travel has become more accessible, particularly in developing nations, it has also helped a new audience discover the wonders of exploring the world—while at the same time exponentially increasing the impact on the planet.

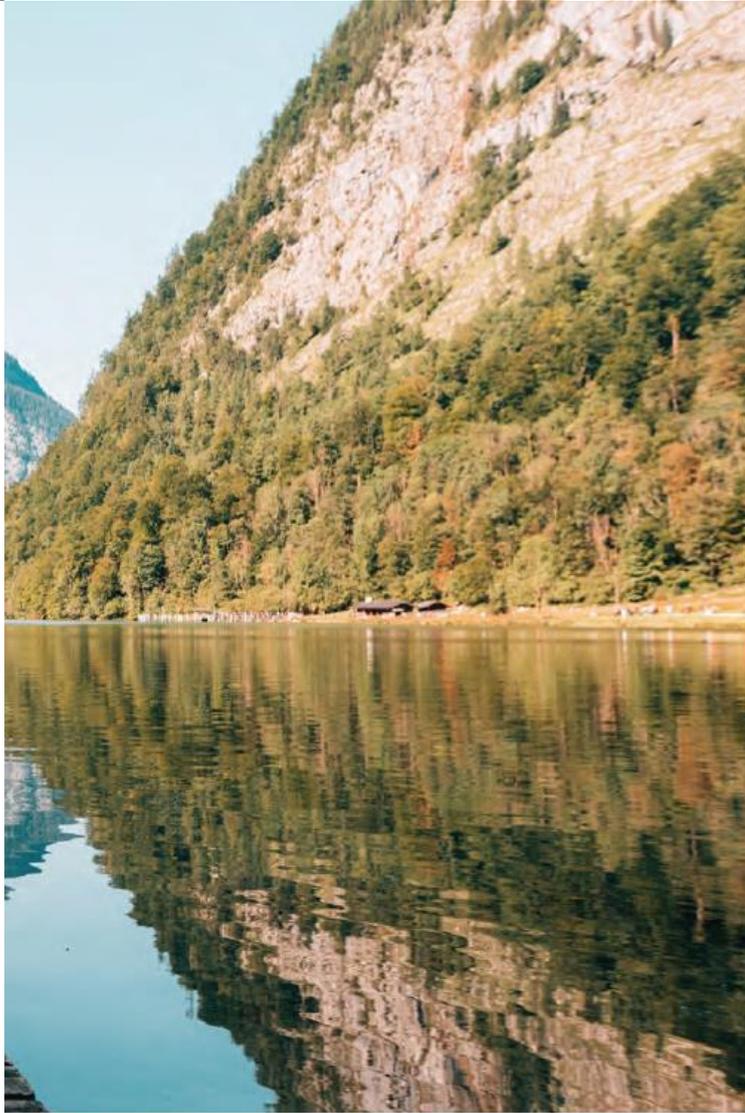
According to aviation industry statistics, it's expected that over 4.72 billion passengers will fly on scheduled commercial flights in 2020, a figure that has many wondering what the future holds for sustainable travel—and what that term will even mean.

"Tourism has its benefits, but it also comes at a cost," says Alexa Poortier, founder of NOW, an innovative organization that provides both consumers and the hotel industry with tools, information and actionable initiatives focused on sustainable travel (*itmustbenow.com*). "The carbon footprint, the competition for resources, and the impact of overtourism on both communities and the natural world—this is the negative aspect. If we don't do anything, then every year the numbers will get worse. And then the question will be, in the years that we were supposed to be doing something, what were we doing?"

Poortier and her husband, Onno—both long-time veterans of the global hospitality industry—started NOW in 2014, and first zeroed in on

the issue of "greenwashing" in the hotel business. "If you just see signs asking you to reuse your towels or sheets—but nothing else about where the money and energy saved is going—then it's greenwashing," she notes, adding that these practices are also not necessarily effective, as changing to a reusable energy provider and using smart devices with eco cycles would allow linens to be washed every day, anyway. "Most big hotels groups have sustainability programs, but they are not consistent, and often the staff is not trained in them, or the programs have not been independently verified."

To tackle this, NOW gives away tools that help hotels calculate the cost and savings of green practices, conducts workshops and consults with brands one-on-one to develop more effective programs. It also partners with organizations that address issues like poverty, child welfare and social responsibility (which can be related to tourism), and provides a no-fee booking service through which travelers can connect with eco-smart hotels, and find tools to calculate and offset their footprints. In the years since NOW was formed, Poortier has been encouraged by some of the developments she's seen, citing things like the United Nations treaty that mandates sustainability in travel and tourism and the CORSIA agreement for offsetting CO₂ emissions in air travel. Ultimately, though, she believes real change will be driven by



consumers. “Travel is a business, so the only way the industry will change is if the masses tell them to,” she says.

Fortunately, there appears to be movement on that front, too. A 2019 OnePoll study commissioned by adventure tour operator Exodus Travels (exodustravels.com) found that more than 79 percent of American travelers want to become more ethically conscious in their future adventures, while TourRadar, the largest online marketplace for multiday tours, reports that 60 percent of travelers would choose a more environmentally friendly travel option, and 71 percent are more likely to choose a tour that does good to the local region and its people—even if it costs more.

“As we enter this new decade, we’re seeing companies reacting to this shift in consumer behavior in more focused and innovative ways, embracing challenges like sourcing local food, leading the rewilding movement and even embarking on the world’s first zero-waste challenge,” says Jillian Dickens, CEO of Bannikin Travel & Tourism, a Toronto- and Hong Kong-based consultancy that focuses on responsible and experiential travel. “In 2020, we will see the travel industry confronting its role in climate change even further, and determine how to be a positive force in this global conversation.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

As with most things related to the climate crisis, figuring out what you can do to personally make a difference can feel overwhelming. But as Poortier notes, it all starts with just being inspired to educate yourself and make informed choices. “People should still travel—we just need to feel good about doing so,” she says. “And ultimately, you have the wallet, so you have the voice.”

GET OFFSETTING

Use an accredited and calibrated program to calculate your carbon footprint and learn what you can do to offset it. Many airlines are also touting their new environmental initiatives, so try to book with one that has a CO2 offset program.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Choose a hotel that has been independently certified for its sustainability practices. There are so many certification programs out there, but among the most rigorous is Australia-based EarthCheck—so look for its seal of approval.

HONOR THE DETAILS

Look for hotels that are open about all aspects of their environmental practices, whether that means using organic linens in the rooms, natural products in the spa or local materials in its décor and furnishings.

RIDE THE RAILS

As reported by the BBC, rail travel produces less than half the carbon emissions per passenger than driving a car. When in places with excellent rail connectivity, such as the U.K., Europe and Japan, hop a train instead of a car or plane for a more responsible—and scenic—trip.

CELEBRATE COMMUNITY

Sustainability is about more than eco-friendly practices—it’s also about minimizing impact on local communities and cultures. Look for hotels and tour companies that support local charities or schools, encourage guest connections with residents, are integrated into the community, and that make a positive impact on the destination. Seek out ways you can get involved as a visitor, too.

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If your dollar is your voice, use it by supporting companies that are making a difference—and that line up with your values. For example, depending on the destination, this might include supporting cruelty-free animal experiences, female-run businesses, resorts that have reforestation programs, or brands that partner with causes close to your heart. Be conscious of where your money goes.

TRAVEL OFF SEASON

With destinations around the world reeling from overtourism and some, like Venice, already implementing congestion fees, consider traveling during off season. Not only will the crowds be thinner, but you’ll be supporting a tourism community during its slower months—and the rates might be cheaper, too.