

Can travel build back better — and greener?

Tackling climate change is not just on the G7 agenda; it should be part of our holiday plans, too

Francisca Kellett | Sunday June 13 2021, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times

All eyes are on a little cove in Cornwall this weekend, and all the talk (well, quite a lot of it) is about climate change. It's one of the key focuses of the G7: discussions about a new climate change treaty, Rishi Sunak's agreement to mandate climate reporting, and Boris Johnson's [push for a global Marshall Plan](#) to tackle climate change. Then there's the "Clean Green" initiative, focused on sustainable development — building back better, if you like, as we emerge, bruised and battered, from this pandemic.

So far, so green. But what about the travel industry? [It has arguably been among the sectors hardest hit by Covid](#) — so is that also going to build back better? Because, pre-pandemic, it contributed to 8 per cent of global carbon emissions; transport from tourism alone represented 5 per cent. And that's not even touching on issues such as overcrowding and community exploitation. In other words travel often wasn't very clean or green. And now that it's in a desperate crisis, can it afford to care?

"It has to," says Jeremy Sampson, CEO of the Travel Foundation, a charity that helps travel companies be more sustainable. In the past 18 months, he says, destinations have lost the benefits of tourism, but they've also lost the negatives such as overcrowding. "Communities and governments are taking a hard look at the impact it had in the past and are looking at how to do it better."



Carbis Bay, in Cornwall, is hosting the G7 summit this weekend

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In fairness this was going on before the pandemic. The big players in the hotel industry, for example, were falling over themselves to pledge environmental improvements. IHG, which owns Holiday Inn, has said it will eliminate its 200 million single-use mini-toiletries by the end of this year. Hilton Hotels has set carbon and water-reduction targets aligned with the Paris Climate Agreement. Accor, which includes Sofitel, has pledged to eliminate all single-use plastic items by 2022, and Visa, Booking.com, Skyscanner and Tripadvisor joined forces in 2019 to create Travalyst, which aims to bring sustainable travel into the mainstream.

Responsible Travel, which organises eco-conscious holidays, says this trend has been a long time coming. “We saw phenomenal growth in the five years pre-Covid,” Justin Francis, the CEO, tells me. “People are being more thoughtful about their holiday choices. It’s no longer just about price and destination.”

Has the pause in international holidays strengthened this, given us time to rethink how we travel? Or are we all just desperate to get abroad and sod the consequences? “There is pent-up demand and there will be a rush to get back travelling, short term,” Sampson says. “But at the same time there is also a reckoning going on about the industry’s impacts long term.”

The latest sustainability report from Booking.com backs this up. Results from 29,000 travellers in 30 countries suggest that the past year has been something of a watershed moment, with 61 per cent stating that the pandemic has influenced them to want to travel more sustainably, and 81 per cent saying they want to stay in sustainable accommodation.

So how can you make your holidays more environmentally friendly? A good start is seeking out smaller, independent companies that have more power over their supply chains. Intrepid, for example, is certified as sustainable by B Corp, while Steppes Travel pledges £100 per person towards conservation and women’s education programmes. There are booking platforms that specialise in sustainable accommodation, including [kindtraveler.com](https://www.kindtraveler.com) and [itmustbenow.com](https://www.itmustbenow.com).

Next, ask yourself if you have to fly. Your flight is 80 per cent of a holiday’s carbon footprint, but if you’re travelling to mainland Europe, driving or taking the train will reduce this considerably. There’s carbon offsetting, of course, but many in the industry think it’s just greenwashing. “The moment you start telling people their carbon is offset, they stop caring,” says Xavier Font, professor of sustainability marketing at the University of Surrey. “They think they can fly as much as they want.” Even the industry acknowledges that offsetting can only be an interim measure.

Investment in new technologies is key, and thankfully there has been a leap in the past year. The Jet Zero Council, a partnership between the government and aviation industry, is aiming for net-zero aviation by 2050. British Airways is investing in hydrogen-powered technology, while easyJet is involved in building a battery-powered plane.

Really, though, sustainable travel is about being more thoughtful. It's about flying less, spending longer in destinations and choosing accommodation that benefits the local community — all of which can make a holiday a better experience.

“Travelling responsibly isn't all about being altruistic,” Francis says. “It's about a deeper connection to the destination we're visiting and it's about improving the experience. It's a win-win.”

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