

Take only memories, leave only footprints

Plastic bottles, endless clean towels, short-haul flights: we don't need them.
Hugh Francis Anderson reflects on the growing need for a greener travel industry

I'M often told that travel writing is the dream job, one that I'm lucky to have. However, I'm also aware that it must be one of the least eco-friendly vocations I could have set out to pursue. The very nature of my job requires me to board an inordinate number of planes; this year alone, I've taken more than 30 flights in search of stories across the globe. If my carbon footprint could talk, it wouldn't be saying anything good.

At a time when global consciousness surrounding sustainability has reached commendable heights, my guilt is somewhat alleviated by the rising interest in eco-friendly travel. I've long held the opinion that mass change comes when consumers call for action—and that's exactly what seems to be happening. Hotels, tour operators and airlines surely can't help but listen.

However, in hotels across the globe that aim to provide guests with a heavy dose of sustainable luxury—no mandatory laundry service, the removal of single-use plastics, locally sourced, seasonal menus and even eco-activities on offer—I'm often left wondering how green their credentials actually are. At present, sustainability within the luxury travel industry is unregulated.

Our thirst for wanderlust shows no sign of slowing down: according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of people crossing international borders every year, has grown from 25 million to 1.2 billion since 1950. That's a sixth of the population and a 49-fold increase and there's no way that those numbers aren't having a fundamental impact on the globe.


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Tourism is big business. It accounts for one in 10 jobs across the world and generates more than £2.5 billion every day. That money is often vital to both local and national economies. To travel or not to travel; planet versus people.

In response, the UNWTO has established its own definition of sustainable tourism, one that 'takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'. It offers little in the way of guidance—in fact, it just sounds quite tiring.

Hotels themselves have responded by taking to social media to broadcast their eco-friendly manifestos and garner support from the celebrities and influencers who crop up time and time again on our newsfeeds and on the pages of our newspapers and magazines. Some have openly invested in green resorts.

When beginning to put pen to paper for this article, I was swimming in a beautiful pool, in an incredibly remote part of the world. The hotel it belonged to boasted about many of the above initiatives: locally sourced food, little to no plastic and minimal use of electricity. There was, however, a series of fountains that I realised, over the coming days, ran 24 hours a day. They were mesmerising, but would I have missed them if they weren't there? Would I be happy to sacrifice them for some kind of green greater good?

To not travel is not the answer—after all, Hans Christian Andersen once wisely said that 'to travel is to live'. Change is needed, however, and it's the consumer who has the power to change how we travel for the better, whether that's using word of mouth, social media or direct interaction with the industry. The more of us who call for sustainable alternatives, the more the hotels, resorts and groups will be forced to listen. 

How to go green

- Calculate your carbon footprint—WWF's online calculator (<https://footprint.wwf.org.uk>) takes minutes to use and it'll give you handy tips on how to reduce your environmental impact. Alternatively, Carbon Fund (<https://carbonfund.org>) gives you the opportunity to offset your emissions by donating to projects across the globe
- Travel with a reusable water bottle and refuse bottled water and plastic straws wherever possible. Jumeirah Vittaveli in the Maldives converts sea-

water into fresh drinking water. It's served in recycled glass bottles, which means it saves roughly 50,000 plastic bottles a year

- Try to avoid regular, short-haul flights (anything under 500km (310 miles)). If you can, drive. Alternatively, choose airlines with higher occupancy rates and newer models of efficient aircraft
- Do your research before you book and don't be afraid to question hotels and companies. A growing number of properties are installing effective waste-management systems and solar-energy or hydroelectric power sources