

Greening your summer vacation

TRAVEL By Elaine Glusac - The New York Times

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OJIMA ABALAKA/NYT

The United Nations has proclaimed 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development with a goal of promoting positive change in travel with regard to social inclusion, environmental protection and economic equality. (Ojima Abalaka/The New York Times)

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The United Nations has proclaimed 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development with a goal of promoting positive change in travel with regard to social inclusion, environmental protection and economic equality.

But what does that mean for the everyday traveler planning a summer vacation? Homework. While the United Nations has a roster of forums, talks and conferences on sustainable tourism this year, travelers themselves are left to sort the good practices from the bad, the indifferent or the downright cynical.

“The problem with doing responsible travel trips is that it does take a little bit of work,” said Martha Honey, executive director of the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), a nonprofit in Washington. “There’s not one definitive, dependable website where everything is covered. It takes a little investigation, but that can help enrich a trip because you’re learning about the destination as you’re investigating.”

One new resource, the Travel Better Club from Sustainable Travel International, a nonprofit focused on green travel, aims to develop an online community of travelers sharing experiences and recommendations (the fee is \$25, waived if the coupon code iTravelBetter is used). The group has about 2,000 members, and the site offers a 30-minute online training course on evaluating sustainability in travel.

Geared toward millennial travelers, the new app Adventure Junky makes a game of sustainable travel practices, awarding points for low-impact experiences and showcasing destinations and travel operators that offer them. Friends can play against one another or compete globally for bragging rights.

Sustainability is a big-umbrella term that addresses the economy, communities and the environment. Here are three aspects to consider as you plan.

Transportation

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, transportation accounts for 27 percent of annual greenhouse gas emissions, the kind that trap heat and warm the planet. Transportation, which includes everything from food trucked across the country to car commuting, is second only to electricity production in those emissions. Since 1990, total emissions are up about 4 percent, and the agency attributes the increase in transportation emissions to the growth in travel.

The remedy is not to stop traveling, which is a major economic driver, particularly in emerging countries, but “to do it smarter,” said Honey of CREST. “Look for larger, more fuel-efficient engines. Try to travel on nonstops. Going down and coming up creates more emissions. And where there are alternatives like trains and buses, do those. Try not to do short-haul flights.”

Carriers like United Airlines and tour companies such as AdventureSmith Explorations offer carbon calculators on their websites that allow travelers to determine the effect of travel and make a commensurate donation to carbon reduction projects such as wind farming and reforestation. The adventure travel company Wild Frontiers includes the offset fee in its airfare.

Costs depend on the programs supported. At United, the nearly 10,000-mile round trip between Newark, New Jersey, and Honolulu could recently be offset with a \$14.78 donation to a wind farm, or \$17.74 to help protect a forest in Peru.

Natural Habitat Adventures, which specializes in wildlife trips, includes the cost of offsetting travel on the ground — everything from airport transfers to electricity used at a hotel — in its pricing. Offsetting international airfare is encouraged but optional.

“When it comes down to it, carbon offsetting is a creative way to drive funding toward great conservation projects that help the earth,” said Ted Martens, vice president of marketing and sustainability for Natural Habitat.

Green Operations

Like Natural Habitat, the tour company Intrepid Travel also carbon-offsets its operations both on trips and in its offices. But for independent travelers, selecting sustainable accommodations and activities remains a task of wading through certifications and evaluating eco-claims.

Costa Rica and Australia are among countries that certify the eco-strength of hotels, tour companies and attractions. Costa Rica, for example, has awarded one green leaf, the minimum, to a dolphin swim program and five, the maximum, to the green tour operator Osa Wild. States such as Wisconsin also run certification programs.

To evaluate a certification program, check to see if it has been reviewed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, an independent nonprofit that has established standards for sustainability in travel.

“They’re sort of like policemen for the sustainable tourism industry,” Honey said.

Responsible Travel, an English agency that specializes in sustainable holidays, hands out World Responsible Tourism Awards that are another good source for finding eco-friendly operators.

When shopping for a hotel, travelers should ask about environmental practices. Alila Hotels & Resorts in Bali aims to be waste-free by July. Inkaterra offsets the effect of its lodges in Peru by investing in the protection of 42,000 acres of forest, among other programs. Cayuga Collection, which runs eight lodges in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, offers back-of-the-house sustainability tours. At Lapa Rios in Costa Rica, pigs are fed restaurant scraps and produce the biogas that fuels some of the cooking stoves.

“Recycling is the last thing you want to do and only if you haven’t been able to avoid creating waste,” said Hans Pfister, an owner of the Cayuga Collection, which bans plastic bottles and drinking straws from its properties. “Remote places are not capable of dealing with plastic trash because they don’t have the infrastructure.”

Social Impact

Increasingly, green tourism operators are focusing on the human factor, or the effect on local people. Is the tour company staffed by locals? Is the hotel locally owned, and therefore keeping the money within the community rather than shipping it to a foreign headquarters? Do tourism businesses support environmental or educational projects? Do employees earn a living wage? Can travelers learn from the locals and vice versa?

“We are used to talking about what your carbon footprint is, but what is your handprint?” Pfister asked. “Your handprint is spending two hours interacting with a community or buying art directly from the person producing it, not in a gift shop, which has a carved toucan made in China. Your handprint could be going on a local fishing tour and leaving a positive impression. It’s all about creating relationships.”

On the social side, eco-tourism operators hope travelers will return home not just with gorgeous photographs, but also with new waste-reduction practices, a zeal for conservation to share with friends and a determination to support organizations like the World Wildlife Fund.

“Our biggest opportunity is through this influence that we have with travelers and using these experiences to inspire them,” said Martens of Natural Habitat Adventures.
