



8 Important Things Luxury Travelers Can Do to Make a Difference on Every Trip

I've learned a lot about how to make a meaningful environmental and community impact, even on luxury travel.

Eric Rosen | March 7, 2018



One of the hardest things about luxury travel for folks to wrap their heads around is the fact that some of the world's most luxurious hotels and experiences are in some of its poorest places. It feels wrong to spend \$1,000... per person... per night... to stay at a luxury safari camp when the village just down the road doesn't have running water. How can you possibly hope to have a "real," authentic experience with a disparity like that? Can luxury travel be green and make a difference?

Luxury travel presents some unparalleled opportunities to discover new places, cultures, and perspectives; to meet people whose lives are so very different from your own; and to have an impact for good in other parts of the world.

All that opportunity comes with responsibility, though. The more destinations we can visit, the more obligations we bear to learn about them in meaningful ways, to experience them in a culturally sensitive manner, and to be aware of the effects our visit can have on a place and its people both environmentally and economically.

Thanks to innovative entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and a general interest from the luxury segment of the travel market, this rarefied sphere also has the potential for positive outcomes in these destinations and the lives of those who call them home.

Here are some of the ways luxury travelers, and travelers in general, can do some good while seeing the world so that the trips they end up taking don't just end up feeling like a guilt trip.

1. Be fuel efficient.

This is a rather abstract consideration, but just like you'd drive the most direct route from point to point in order to save gas, when it comes to flying, opt for the fewest connections. Not only is it more convenient to fly nonstop, but it's more fuel efficient, and thus not as bad for the environment, when you're not making a bunch of connections.

It's also worth noting the aircraft you'll be flying. Newer-generation planes like the Boeing 787 Dreamliner use up to 20 percent less fuel than older gas guzzlers like the Boeing 767. It's just a little way to nudge your personal environmental impact downward.

2. Seek accommodation alternatives.

Not all luxury hotels are created equal. Some are opulent playgrounds for the rich and famous. Others take their role as a part of the local community seriously, with employment, environmental and philanthropic programs in place. And it's not hard to find the latter, if you do a little homework.

One such place was recently voted the No. 1 resort in the world for 2017 by *Travel + Leisure*: Nihiwatu, Founded by fashion magnate Chris Burch on the Indonesian island of Sumba, the property has just 33 exclusive villas and activities like an all-day spa safari to its cliff-top spa. But it also uses profits from the hotel as well as donations from guests to support the Sumba Foundation. The foundation funds sustainable community-based projects on the island and has built over 100 water wells, four medical clinics, manages malaria and malnutrition efforts, and provides school lunches for over 1,000 children.

Travelers can also book stays through reputable organizations like National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, which includes stunners like Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in Peru, Southern Ocean Lodge in Australia, The Brando in French Polynesia and the Ranch at Rock

Creek in Montana. The association extensively vets participating properties not only for exceptional service, but also for being leaders in sustainable hospitality and a commitment to protecting both the natural and cultural heritage of their locales.

3. Ask questions.

One of the great opportunities that staying at a deluxe property or touring with a high-end operator specifically offers is the access it grants you on several levels. You usually get a leg up on visiting restaurants, shops, and hidden gems other travelers might never even find out about. But because staff members tend to speak English (if not several languages), you can also learn firsthand what living in a place is really like straight from the source rather than the guidebook. Some hotels, like the Ritz-Carlton, Bali, even have cultural concierges on staff who can answer questions about local beliefs, customs and history as well as setting up special activities in the surrounding communities exclusively for guests.

This is one of the main attractions of luxury travel as I see it — the chance to interact on a personal level with locals who are only too happy to share their stories with you. You just have to care enough to ask.

4. Waste not, want not.

I'm always surprised by how much trash there is in the world, even in some of the planet's most remote, breathtaking landscapes. It's so disheartening to see rafts of plastic bottles floating down the Amazon and Mekong rivers, plastic bags blowing across the moon-like landscapes of the Atacama Desert, and piles of trash being burned in the midst of lush rice paddies on Java.

It's a small concession, but I pack two compact items to cut down on my personal waste. Instead of going through endless plastic bottles, I pack my own reusable water bottle. I also bring along a canvas bag so I don't have to throw out a plastic one every time I pick up souvenirs or groceries.

5. Save room in your suitcase.

Speaking of what to pack, if you're going to be visiting local communities or schools, spare a little extra room in your suitcase for school or hygienic supplies that might be needed there. Many safari lodges, for instance, provide some basic necessities to nearby villages and schools. If you plan to visit one, call ahead to see what supplies you can bring with you to help out.

Pack for a Purpose is a great organization that matches up the needs of communities across the globe with supplies that any traveler can tote along with them. Simply look up your destination and what supplies might be needed there. Then you can pack them and drop them off at a partner hotel when you arrive. It's as simple as that.

6. Shop fair.

I love wandering through the street markets of Asia, perusing the crafts stalls and fantastical foods at the Chiang Mai night market or the aisles of the Art Deco central market in Phnom Penh. But I try to avoid purchasing souvenirs there. Very few of the goods sold are actually made locally, so they're not really authentic anyway. They are also not usually produced or sold at living wages, meaning my purchasing power would just end up perpetuating unfair labor and trade practices.

Instead, I try to seek out fair-trade stores whenever possible. Are the prices higher? Yes. But are they worth it? Absolutely. Plus they're still usually quite affordable. Beyond providing living wages to artisans, fair-trade stores tend to work with entire communities on several levels that can range from funding civil projects and micro-loans to establishing entire cottage industries based on traditional local crafts that might otherwise disappear.

In Luang Prabang, Laos, there are two great examples. The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre is a museum of the country's 130-odd ethnic groups as well as a store selling handicrafts from handpicked communities. On the other side of town, Ock Pop Tok is a cultural center where visitors can learn traditional dyeing and weaving crafts, and purchase fair-trade products from villages the center works with all over the country.

7. Analyze activity plans.

One of my greatest travel regrets is having taken a four-wheel bike tour of villages in Cambodia outside Siem Reap. We barely saw anything as we roared through sleepy settlements past barely clad kids and across otherwise peaceful fields. How much better, I thought to myself, if I had opted for a bicycle tour where we could have peddled along the byways like the locals did, stopping in villages along the way and experiencing the countryside at a more natural pace. That was the last such tour I took. Instead, I've become much more careful about researching the exact itinerary and inclusions of excursions I book and making sure there's an opportunity to interact with locals beyond just passing through and handing out candy to village kids.

8. Pitch in.

Finally — and this is potentially the biggest and best way to give back — find a way to volunteer during your trip. But do it responsibly. With the rise of so-called “voluntourism” in recent years, there are myriad possibilities to build entire trips around volunteer work. Unfortunately, there are also plenty of for-profit tour companies, many of whom have spotty records in this arena. Instead, look for reputable organizations like Globe Aware and PEPY Tours that either partner with or themselves are non-profits with proven track records.

Even if you don't plan your whole journey around volunteer opportunities, it's still possible to spend a day or even a half-day doing something worthwhile like teaching English in a local school or helping a village construct a building. Again, don't just do something for the sake of an Instagram post. If you are considering pitching in, research your options and make sure that

whatever organization is offering you the chance to do this is involved in a long-term, meaningful and beneficial way with the communities into which they will take you.

Luxury travel presents both the perils and the possibilities of having an impact on the destinations you visit and the people who live there. With a little careful planning and consideration, however, you can ensure that what you do is of benefit to the places you go, and will make your experiences there that much more enriching.

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