

Green travel tips

How to leave nothing but a footprint in your travels
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A man rides his bike in a bicycle shed in Amsterdam earlier this year. Bicycles are a great form of transportation to see sights while traveling without impacting the environment.

Many people hear the terms "green travel" or "ecotourism" and picture someone sleeping in a treehouse in the jungles of Borneo or canoeing down the Amazon. But this type of eco-adventure is just one end of the green travel spectrum. You don't need to sacrifice creature comforts or go off into the middle of nowhere to be a green traveler; you can visit big cities or small villages, and stay in small ecolodges or luxury hotels. All that's required is an effort to preserve and protect the environment of the place you're visiting — and it's easier than you might think.

Want to learn how? Read on ...

What is green travel?

"Green travel" is one of many catch phrases — like ecotourism, sustainable tourism and responsible travel — that are bandied about with increasing frequency these days. But what exactly do these terms mean?

There are various shades of difference among all these terms, but at the heart of the matter is the importance of protecting the natural and cultural environment of the places you visit. That

means conserving plants, wildlife and other resources; respecting local cultures and ways of life; and contributing positively to local communities.

Why go green?

With nearly 1 billion tourists crisscrossing the globe every year, it's more important than ever for travelers to minimize their individual impact on the earth's natural and cultural treasures. The potential negative effects of tourism are both local and global; oceanfront hotels contribute to beach erosion in Hawaii, rising numbers of visitors threaten the fragile ecosystems of the Galapagos Islands, and carbon dioxide emissions from planes are a growing contributor to global warming.

Taking a green approach to travel is an easy and essential way to protect the places you love to visit, not just for yourself but for the travelers who come after you and for the people who will continue to live there long after you've flown home. As an added bonus, it often makes for a more rewarding, authentic travel experience, encouraging deeper connections with the people and places you visit.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't necessarily have to pay more in order to travel green. While offsetting the carbon emissions from your air travel will set you back a negligible amount (usually between \$10 and \$40 per flight, depending on the length), you can find green lodging options in all budgets, from hostels to luxury hotels. And earth-friendly transportation options like biking, walking and taking public transit are often cheaper than taking a cab or renting a car.

Choosing a green hotel

There are a number of Web sites that list environmentally friendly hotels, B&B's and lodges around the world; these are a good place to start. Keep in mind that each site has its own guidelines for rating properties, so you'll want to do your homework to make sure that the hotel meets the standards you're looking for.

A few questions to ask before booking your hotel:

- Is the hotel locally owned and operated? If not, is it at least staffed by local employees?
- What kind of recycling programs does the hotel have (aluminum, plastic, paper, gray water, composting)?
- Do guests have the option to reuse towels and sheets instead of having them changed every day?

- What programs does the hotel have to reduce consumption? Examples include energy-efficient lighting, low-flow toilets and showers, and alternative energy sources like solar or wind power.
- How does the hotel contribute to the local community?

During your stay

Even if you're not spending the night in an ecolodge or green hotel, there are still several easy steps you can take to make your stay more eco-friendly.

- Keep your showers short, and shut off the water while you're brushing your teeth.
- When you leave the room, turn off the air conditioning, heat, television, lights or any other electric devices.
- Reuse your sheets and towels instead of having them changed every day. Many hotels will not replace your towels if you leave them hanging up neatly; if you're not sure, write a note for the housekeeping staff or notify the front desk.
- Bring your own toiletries and drinking cup rather than using the prepackaged ones provided. If you do use the hotel's toiletries, take them with you and use them at home or during the rest of your trip.
- Know your hotel's recycling program and sort your trash accordingly. If your hotel doesn't recycle, consider taking your empty bottles or other items home with you to recycle them there.
- Give your hotel feedback. Express your appreciation for any eco-friendly programs it currently offers — or if it doesn't, encourage the management to go green in the future.

Getting around

Transportation — particularly air travel — is where most travelers have the biggest environmental impact. According to USA Today, a flight from New York to Denver produces as much carbon dioxide per passenger as an SUV produces in a month. To minimize your environmental footprint, try the following steps:

- Offset the carbon emissions produced by your flight.
- For shorter trips, take the train instead of flying — especially in Europe or other regions where train service is fast and frequent.
- When renting a car, choose the smallest vehicle that can comfortably accommodate you. Decline any "free" upgrades (which will cost you more in gas).
- Rent a hybrid car.

- Taking a long road trip? If your personal vehicle is large and not very fuel-efficient, consider renting an economy car instead. You'll save gas and avoid putting miles on your own vehicle.
- Whenever possible, use public transportation instead of a taxis or rental cars. Better yet, walk or bike.

Responsible sightseeing

When it comes to visiting the world's most beautiful places, the old adage rings true: Take nothing but photographs, and leave nothing but footprints.

- Travel with a tour operator that's environmentally responsible. Before you book, be sure to ask about group size (smaller groups tend to make less of an environmental impact), whether the tours are led by locals, how the tour operator gives back to the community, and what kind of lodging is included.
- When hiking, always stay on marked trails and maintain a safe distance from any animals you encounter. Deposit your trash in marked receptacles or take it with you when you leave. Light campfires only in established fire rings and be sure they're completely extinguished before you leave.
- When snorkeling, do not touch the coral or stir up sediment, as these actions can damage the reef's fragile ecosystem.
- Try to buy local products whenever possible instead of those that have been flown or shipped in from overseas. You'll support the local economy and get a taste of native cuisine. Do not, however, buy souvenirs or other products made from endangered animals or plants — in most cases you can't get them through Customs anyway.
- Treat the locals with respect. Learn a few words in the native language, be open to cultural differences, and read up on the area before your trip so you're sensitive to issues of dress and behavior.
- Consider taking a volunteer vacation to give back directly to the place you're visiting.