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LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

by

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🔊 RE·SPON·SI·BLE TRAV·EL

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PHRASE:

Being socially, economically, and environmentally aware when you travel.

The goal of this guide is to provide a comprehensive but succinct overview of why we all need to put the pillars of responsible travel at the forefront of every trip. We believe that's a goal many travelers and travel companies can agree on. The challenge is that some concepts around responsible and sustainable tourism can be daunting and overwhelming, resulting in delayed action or, even worse, denial of the urgency to implement solutions. Our aim is for this guide to break down the basic principles and offer tangible, actionable solutions that will inspire both consumers and industries to apply responsible practices to everyday travel.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dayvee Sutton

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Dayvee Sutton and Ketti Wilhelm are travel journalists with decades of experience in the industry. Dayvee is a national travel correspondent and expert who covers everything from fun holiday experiences, to breaking news stories like navigating travel in the pandemic, and important issues like the climate crisis, which can be seen on popular national news networks and talk shows.

Ketti has a master's degree in sustainable business and energy, and is the founder of the website Tilted Map, about how to travel and live more sustainably. We've both seen and experienced first hand the deep and important benefits of tourism to both travelers and local economies, as well as the harm and opportunities for essential improvements. We believe it's time to give both sides of the coin equal weight.

Why is this so important?

THE SIMPLE ANSWER IS THAT YOUR TRAVEL SHOULDN'T CAUSE HARM.

So fundamentally, the way the industry exists, our travel causes harm. But that's just the start of this discussion.

And while it may sound like climate change is only the environmental perspective, with millions of people already being displaced from their homes as "climate refugees" every year, and primarily in less wealthy nations, climate change is a decidedly social problem, as well.

The incentive to make travel more sustainable is also obstructed by many economic factors: Most obviously, tourism is an important part of the GDP for many countries — especially less wealthy ones. This makes aggressively implementing practices that could make impactful changes a challengeAny disruption (as we saw during peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic) affects the bottom line, in sometimes financially catastrophic ways. In the U.S., travel and tourism generates nearly 2 trillion dollars annually, which is nearly 3% of the GDP. According to the International Trade Administration, the industry supports 9.5 million jobs in the US alone. Globally, about 10% of all jobs are from tourism.

But it's not just a question of GDP. Mass tourism has made travel cheaper and easier to access. In some cases, it's become yet another disposable product, and many travelers behave differently than they do at home. Behaviors like taking longer showers

eating more, using more products in single-use plastic, and being generally more wasteful increase the environmental impact of tourism when compared with the tourist's everyday life.

Additionally, travel and tourism can cause socio-cultural harm to the host communities. This includes the dilution of traditions, debilitating overuse of infrastructure, locals being pushed out and priced out of their communities, and more.

There are many examples throughout the world where local populations have suffered because of tourism. So it's essential to recognize both the negative and positive effects of globalization and global travel. Globalization is the process of the world becoming increasingly connected. Are destinations changing faster than is healthy or sustainable in the name of attracting global tourism revenue?

So there are many layers to unpack in the discussion of responsible travel. That brings us back to this document, which has the goal of making some of these ideas more tangible and less abstract, in order to better understand why they matter, and leave you — as a traveler — with concrete solutions you can implement for your next trip.
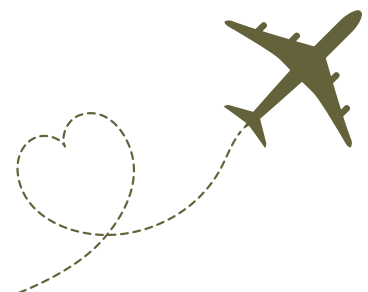
TERMS & PILLARS

Responsible travel, regenerative tourism, sustainable travel, eco-tourism, green travel... the list can go on forever (and make a person want to change the channel). While we should not look at all of these terms as synonyms, we're not going to waste time dwelling on their definitions, either. Although there is overlap between some of the concepts within these ideas, we'll consider **responsible travel** as the umbrella term for all the other concepts above.

There are three pillars that the industry agrees these concepts are filtered through. The United Nations World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as:

"Tourism 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."

Since people often think of sustainability as only encompassing the environmental portion of that definition, we'll use the term "responsible tourism" to talk about all three.

So, let's unpack the ideas behind these pillars, and then land on solutions to help with your journey.

Pillars of

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

ENVIRONMENTAL

SOCIAL

ECONOMIC

ENVIRONMENTAL

The environmental pillar of responsible tourism refers to the efforts to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the natural environment, and to promote its conservation and protection. Examples of environmental impacts are pollution, depletion of natural resources, destruction of ecosystems,habitats and biodiversity, and climate change.

The priority of most companies and governments in the tourism industry is to maximize profits. So more sustainable practices — whether it's using recycled materials,reducing food waste, or switching to cleaner fuels — take a back seat.

CARBON EMISSIONS

Air travel is one of the biggest and most visible culprits of climate change. Since 1970, total global CO_2 emissions have increased by about 90%, with emissions from fossil fuel combustion (including air travel) and industrial processes contributing about 78% of the total greenhouse gas emissions. Only about 11% of the world's population has ever flown; and at most 4% has flown internationally. But avoiding air travel entirely would be an extreme step for those of us who are used to it as part of our modern lifestyles.

Still, there are ways to minimize that footprint and decrease your environmental impact. These include using carbon calculators to find the most efficient method of transport for each trip, opting for trains over planes when possible, and choosing the most efficient airlines and aircraft when we do fly.

OVERTOURISM

The world's top tourist destinations are so for a reason. They have a fascinating allure, often thanks to awe-inspiring natural landscapes or historical structures built by ancient and modern civilizations, which, in many cases, has been drawing travelers for generations. Frequently, governments have protected these sites by designating them as national parks, preserves, and monuments — however the effectiveness of these measures varies wildly from excellent to almost meaningless. And in many cases — from Cambodia's Angkor Wat, to the old towns of many European cities, to small towns that are destinations for outdoor travel —over-tourism is still deteriorating not only the natural landscapes and ecosystems, but also the quality of life for local people and the quality of the experience for visitors.

NOISE POLLUTION

In places with a tourism boom, noise pollution follows. Excessive or disturbing noise that disrupts the balance of natural sounds (and silence) in an environment can be very disruptive. This noise pollution is often caused by human activities, such as transportation, construction, industrial processes, and even loud music. The sounds of planes and helicopters from the air can be disruptive to local people and animals on the ground. Tourist vehicles like ATVs, jet skis, and snowmobiles, as they rip in and out of natural habitats, create disruptive noises that can force animals to change their natural activities.

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Excessive and poorly directed light disrupts ecosystems and has proven, severe health effects on humans.

LIGHT POLLUTION

Excessive and poorly directed light disrupts ecosystems and has proven, severe health effects on humans. Exposure to artificial light at night can disrupt our circadian rhythms, which can lead to a variety of health problems, including sleep disorders, depression, and increased risk of certain types of cancer.

It also disrupts the natural patterns of wildlife. Many animals rely on the natural cycle of light and darkness to regulate their behavior. Light pollution can disrupt this cycle, causing animals to become disoriented, interfering with migration, and altering their breeding cycles. For example, sea turtle hatchlings have been shown to mistake artificial light for moonlight, and become disoriented, leading them away from the ocean and towards roads, where they may be hit by cars.

Much of the light produced by artificial sources is directed upwards, where it is wasted. This means that much of the energy used to produce the light is also wasted. Lights on hotel buildings,highrises and billboards accumulate and make it impossible to see the night sky. This is also a particular concern for astronomers, who rely on dark skies to study the universe.

WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS

The more tourism increases, the more opportunities travelers will have for interaction with wildlife that naturally prefer to be left alone. Often, tourism encroaches on natural habitats, which disrupts wild animals' natural hunting and breeding cycles. And that's only the best case scenario.

The **development of infrastructure** and tourist facilities can destroy the natural habitats of wildlife. This results in the displacement or extinction of countless species.

Travelers may also unintentionally **introduce non-native species** into a new ecosystem, disrupting the balance of the ecosystem and affecting the survival of native species. For example, invasive plant species may outcompete native plants for resources, or non-native animals may prey on native animals or carry diseases that the native animals have not evolved defenses against.

All too often, travelers fail to recognize animal autonomy — that animals have their own lives and needs. When entering their territories, visitors should avoid disruptive behavior. This means avoiding actions that restrict their freedom or encourage them to act against their natural instincts — even when with the best of intentions. For example, we must avoid feeding wild animals, as this teaches them to depend on humans and abandon their natural instincts, often altering entire ecosystems.

World Animal Protection, a UK non-profit, believes at least 550,000 wild animals are kept in unethical tourist attractions globally, and that 110 million people will visit these attractions per year.

It's understandable why people want to have encounters with animals, but the ugly truth is that many of these animals are kept in inhumane conditions, drugged, abused, and caged just for tourists' entertainment.
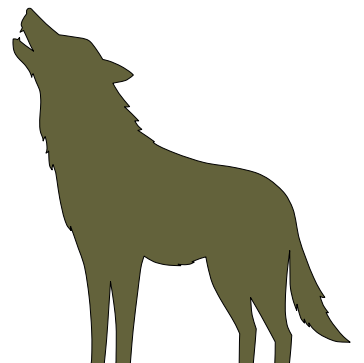
SOCIAL

The social pillar refers to the impact that your travel has on the community you are visiting. By choosing travel options that directly benefit local people, and minimize interference with local ways of life, you can travel more responsibly.

When discussing this pillar, it is important to acknowledge that the tourism industry we have today is built on the foundations of colonialism.

Colonialism is defined as, "control by one power over a dependent area or people." It occurs when one nation subjugates another, conquering its population and exploiting it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people.

When the tourism industry elevates destinations that cater to Western standards as being "easier" or "more accommodating", it's an approach to travel that is rooted in colonialism and exploitation. The opposite approach would be taking a place as it is, and traveling to experience a different way of life, as opposed to seeking out the comforts of home. As travelers, we often simplify destinations to mere products: "mountains retreats," "beach towns," "a tropical paradise," or "a charming city."

Instead, we should remember that our "destination" isn't a "paradise," but is someone else's home, with all the complexities of our own towns and cities. It may even be ancestral and sacred land, deeply connected to the spirituality and history of the people who live there.

And diminishing destinations to their surface features also leads to oppressive behavior — which is often built into the infrastructure of the location that has evolved into a tourist site. Picking and choosing which elements of a destination and its culture we want to experience, while disregarding or diminishing the rest, is a form of exploitation and appropriation. Of course, no one goes on vacation looking for discomfort. But we should remember that resorts designed to isolate us from any kind of genuine interaction with local people and their customs often take away prime real estate from local communities and give little in return.

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APPROPRIATION & OPPRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of certain elements from another culture without the consent of the people who belong to that culture. For example, visiting a market in India, buying a bindi (a sticker or painted dot worn in the center of the forehead) to wear during your visit can be a rude way of playing dress up.

Examples of oppressive behavior and cultural appropriation can include:

- Wearing traditional clothing from another culture without understanding the significance of it.
- Participating in cultural activities without being invited, or without taking the time to learn the meaning of the activity.
- Taking photos of people without their permission.
- Buying souvenirs that are made from endangered or protected animals.

VOLUNTOURISM

We all understand the intentions behind voluntourism — to give back to a place, rather than simply take. But more often than not, the practice leaves harm once a tourist's temporary "service" is complete.

The problem is in the name. "Voluntourism" is based on tourism — meaning a short, temporary visit, rarely long enough to understand the true needs of a community, which are often assessed by foreign entities that set up the programs without even consulting with the communities on what they want or need.

When families and children are involved, bonds are created and then broken in an often destructive way. When building projects are involved, many examples show projects being poorly built and then abandoned, with local resources left drained. Communities receiving volunteers want to be great hosts, so they often use their own resources to present their best food and accommodations, sometimes sacrificing their own well-being and comfort, so that visitors can feel that they've done something good
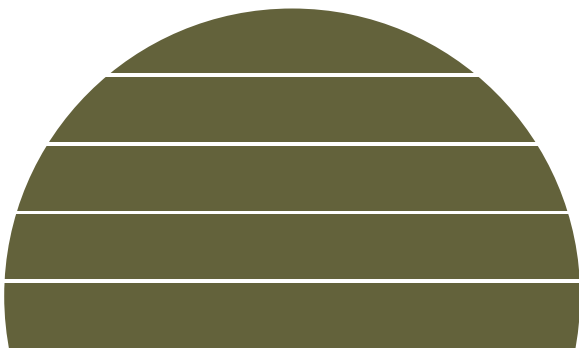
ECONOMIC

The economic pillar of responsible travel is about who reaps the financial benefit from tourism.

Many private foreign companies set up shop in tourism destinations, taking a piece of the pie (often almost the entire pie) away from local businesses and individuals.

Additionally, as tourism in a destination grows, so does its dependence on the industry. New businesses are formed to provide services just for tourists, and those geared toward locals are pushed out.

There's a fallacy that just by showing up in a destination, your travel supports local communities and economies by creating jobs and generating income for locals. But more often the case is that local people end up in low-wage jobs in service of a foreign corporation whose profits are invested far from the community you visited. Unless you diligently research and question where your tourism dollars are landing, your visits can cause harm through tourism leakage.

Tourism leakage happens when the revenue generated through tourism is lost to other countries or economies.

According to the United Nations, tourism leakage on average is 50% (unfortunately, it's higher in developing nations, where the revenue is most needed, and lower in more developed nations).

Here's a rough example, based on a $1,000 weekend trip to Cancún. Let's say you spent $200 on a Delta Airlines flight, $500 on your hotel stay at the Marriott, and $300 on local restaurants, cabs and shopping. Even assuming the best, 70% of this trip was leaked out of the local community to foreign businesses, while only 30% remained in the local economy.

When tourists spend money that flows into and remains in a local economy, there's economic benefit to host communities. But when the majority of tourists' expenditures goes to international chains and corporations, local economic benefit is minimal, and businesses owned by locals usually won't stay open long.

Additionally, destinations need income from tourism to manage the negative impacts of tourism. That's money to clean and manage beaches, public spaces, and maintain infrastructure to keep both travelers' and locals' experiences pleasant.

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How you can

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Hopefully, this guide to the three pillars of sustainability has helped you understand how tourism can contribute to oppression, inequality, and environmental harm. The following will give you some **quick ideas for solutions** to consider implementing in preparation for and during your travels.

We encourage you to start with whatever you're most comfortable tackling on this list, and use our **additional resources at the end of this document**. You don't have to do everything today; what's important is to start taking some action, instead of letting overwhelm stop you from making any change.

PRACTICE ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Avoid places suffering from over-tourism.
Choose destinations less traveled or travel in shoulder- and off-seasons.

Avoid single-use plastics.
Travel with a reusable water bottle, and refillable toiletries containers or (even better) solid toiletries that come in plastic-free packaging. This guide from Tilted Map will help you pack a full toiletry kit without any plastic packaging.

Refuse wasteful products, even when they're free.
Say no to free bottles of water, and leave hotel mini shampoos where they are.

Minimize your carbon footprint.
Pack lighter, take direct flights, stay longer, use public transport, eat less meat, and choose the most efficient airlines and aircraft for each route you fly. This series from Tilted Map will help you find lower emission flights and transportation.

Respect natural resources.
Practice "leave no trace" on hikes and in urban areas. Pick up trash you find, and avoid collecting shells and other natural "souvenirs" that are part of an ecosystem (they'll be used by another animal if you leave them).

Avoid unethical encounters with animals.
Avoid tours and experiences where you ride animals not meant to be ridden, or encounter animals in an unnatural way. Do research on all animal experiences and ask questions, because wildlife deserves a wild life.

Be mindful of the accommodation you choose.
Research their practices on recycling, water, and electricity use. This guide from Tilted Map will help you find more sustainable accommodations.

PRACTICE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Exercise anti-oppressive behavior.
Avoid culturally appropriating activities or wearing traditional items without being invited to do so. Be aware of your own cultural biases. Don't assume your help is wanted or needed without asking. . Don't comment on physical appearances.

Avoid exploitation.
Don't demand or expect that locals speak your language, or speak English. Don't over-haggle in markets. Be aware of human trafficking situations and be prepared to contact local authorities if you're suspicious that someone is being trafficked or held against their will.

Research before you go.
Learn a bit about the history, culture, and customs of the places you're visiting. You'll feel more comfortable, and locals will appreciate the effort.

Respect local culture and traditions.
Remove shoes, cover legs and shoulders, practice silence, be mindful of worshippers when visiting sacred and religious sites or when requested.

Approach traveling to destinations as if visiting someone's home.
Their house, their rules.

Avoid unethically sourced souvenirs, gifts, and foods.
If you have an opportunity to purchase, or are presented with a gift of a "rare" animal or animal part that is "traditional" to the culture, politely refuse the offer.

Take photos of places and things.
Be mindful of taking pictures of people, especially children, always ask for permission before snapping, and offer to share the photo with the subject. In some cultures, items you might not expect can be sacred, so read about the culture before you go, and always ask for permission.

PRACTICE ECONOMICALLY RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Support locals directly.
Buy from local artisans, markets, and shops. Only purchase souvenirs that are made in the country you're visiting. Stay in hotels and eat at restaurants and accommodations owned by locals. Plan to tip when appropriate.

Choose community tourism projects.
Hire local guides, take excursions, and experience homestays that are owned and operated by locals in the community you're visiting.

Avoid chain businesses.
Marriotts, McDonalds and Starbucks coffee shops are now common in many destinations around the world, but they don't benefit local communities. Choose to experience something local instead.

ABOUT GREENWASHING

None of the topics in this document are new, and companies know that travelers like you are interested in them. There's a rising tide of awareness, and a massive appetite for sustainable, responsible, and eco-friendly products and experiences. That's great news, because lots of companies are run by people who feel the same way, and are genuinely creating more sustainable options.

But at the same time, plenty of unscrupulous companies are simply slapping a "green" label on things without any meaningful sustainability improvements. This is known as greenwashing, and it's important to know how to recognize it.

First, look for improved processes, inputs, and emissions, not just band aids on those things. Here are two examples: Offering recycling bins to collect plastic water bottles in a hotel is good. What's better? Offering reusable glasses and dispensers for filtered drinking water so that there's less plastic waste to be recycled.

Similarly, when companies brag that they offset their carbon emissions, it can be a good thing (although it's often less beneficial than you might think). What's better? Reducing their emissions, through increased efficiency, investment in renewable energy and other improvements, so that there are few emissions to offset.

The most important tip we can give about spotting greenwashing is to look for — and ask for — details. For example, a company might claim it "donates a portion of proceeds to protecting the environment." But go a little deeper. How much do they donate? To which organizations? For what projects? How long have they been doing it? What have the results been? Any company making genuine sustainability efforts will be able to answer these questions easily and clearly, and will be happy to do so. If that level of detail isn't provided clearly, be skeptical. And ask.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IS FUN

(and Easier Than You Think)

There's an unfortunate misconception that responsible travel means giving something up. But we wholeheartedly believe that it's actually an invitation to enjoy richer, more meaningful and more unique travel experiences.

It's important to understand that your travels will never perfectly meet *all* of the benchmarks of responsible travel. Perfection isn't our expectation, nor should it be your goal.

Rather the goal is to increase and support the collective efforts from the entire industry — airlines, hotels, restaurant owners, tour operators, other businesses, and individual travelers — to improve their approaches to all three pillars of responsible tourism.
We should try to keep our footprints as small as possible, and aspire to use our travels to reinforce a positive connection between tourism, the environment, and local peoples.

It really is simpler than it may sound. But it's also urgent, and non-negotiable. We need to take action on all fronts now. Sustainability is a journey, and improving our impact starts with small, everyday changes.

There's a myth that if you opt to be a conscious traveler you can't have fun. But that's not true. We believe you'll find a more rewarding travel experience once you are sure that your travels have a real impact and benefit locals as much as they benefit you.

Another myth is that you can't have luxury experiences while being sustainable. But, if you follow the guidelines in this document, you will find that responsible travel is possible whether you want to be a backpacker or enjoy five-star luxury.

The most important thing is that every traveler has a chance to make a difference. Let's not waste that power.

TOOLS & RESOURCES

For tools and resources recommended by the authors visit:

HTTPS://TRAVELWITHDAYVEE.COM/RESPONSIBLETRAVEL/

HTTPS://WWW.TILTEDMAP.COM/RESPONSIBLE-TRAVEL/

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