

A Guide to Responsible Travel

(by Krista Nieuwstraten)

Last year the popular Thai island Koh Phi Phi closed to tourists. After years of excessive tourism caused extreme damage to coral reefs, a complete tourist ban was necessary to give local ecosystems a chance to survive. Luckily, recent reports indicate marine life is slowly returning. Nonetheless, the closure of Koh Phi Phi should serve as a wake-up call to the world. Traveling has a huge impact on the planet, and unrestricted tourism comes at a high price. Low-impact alternatives to mass tourism, beneficial to local environments and communities, are what's needed. Responsible travel is the way forward.

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Why the world needs responsible travel

Overtourism

The case of Koh Phi Phi doesn't stand on its own: numerous places are suffering from overtourism. The closure of Koh Phi Phi came right after the closure of Boracay in the Philippines, another Asian island suffering from heavy pollution. The ancient Inca site Machu Picchu in Peru has been marked 'in danger', as it's struggling to manage growing visitor numbers. The European hotspots Amsterdam, Venice and Barcelona currently discourage tourists from coming, as local residents complain the cities become increasingly unlivable. The list could go on, but the picture is clear. Popular tourist destinations are struggling to deal with the effects of mass tourism.

The growth of tourism

Tourism is a large and growing industry. Nowadays, traveling is more accessible than ever. With living standards increasing and transport prices decreasing, traveling is affordable to more and more people worldwide. The Internet has made information on traveling destinations widely available, and even places that were once remote and largely unknown are being discovered by mainstream tourism. This growth is likely to continue or even accelerate in the following years. Responsible travel is needed more than ever.

Negative effects of tourism

The growth of tourism clearly poses some real challenges. Traveling can have detrimental environmental, socio-cultural and economic consequences. Environmental consequences include the destruction of natural resources and biodiversity, as demonstrated in Koh Phi Phi. Mass tourism also puts pressure on host societies when it comes to maintaining their own cultural identity. Important sites often lose their relevance to local people, and traditional rituals and artefacts get commercialized.

Pushed to the background

On top of that, local people don't always have a say in what happens to their land and in some cases don't even profit from the financial benefits of tourism. It's not unusual for foreign investors to buy up land and build big resorts, where they employ only foreigners or hire locals at low wages. While they make big money off of the place, most of it flows directly into their own pockets and out of the country. Not exactly what I'd call a fair deal.

Benefits of traveling

Of course, it's not all bad. Traveling can have positive consequences as well – of which I as a travel fanatic am very aware. Traveling can lead to a greater appreciation of the world's natural and cultural diversity. I'd never really known the beauty of our planet until I started to travel, and I connected to the most amazing people from all kinds of backgrounds traveling the world. Exploring different cultures taught me there are many different ways to live life, and my way is not the only or the right way.

Traveling for a better world

Most importantly, traveling showed me the world is full of good people and most of them are willing to help – as opposed to the image you might get when watching the news on television back home. Traveling is therefore the perfect antidote to xenophobia, racism, and fear and hatred of the unknown, and a great way to promote cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

An uncomfortable question

Some think traveling responsibly involves minimizing the negative consequences of traveling, and leaving a place the same way we found it. Others take it one step further and say we should have a positive impact on the places we visit. Now, I will go ahead and pose the uncomfortable question: is this really possible? In all honesty, I think it's impossible to completely eliminate the negative impacts of traveling. Traveling from A to B generally causes emissions, and our very presence has an effect on the people living in the places we visit. But is this also a reason to stop traveling?

The end of traveling?

I don't think that's the solution either. For one thing, traveling is part of human nature, and stopping people from doing so is just not realistic. More importantly, if we'd stop traveling, the world would be deprived of the potential positive consequences of it as well. We'd be throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The solution

A better solution would be to keep traveling – but with awareness of our impact, while trying to create meaningful and positive experiences for all parties involved, and making

sure future generations get to experience it too. And this is exactly what responsible travel aims for.

picture 1: hiking in Myanmar

The meaning of responsible travel

The start of a movement

Some decades ago, a movement was born that focussed on protecting natural environments from the negative effects of tourism. It was called ecotourism, and its motto “take only photographs, leave only footprints” is still famous today. Over the years, the awareness of the impact of traveling has grown, and so has the movement. It has broadened its scope to include types of travel that are concerned not just with environmental effects, but with socio-cultural and economic effects as well. Responsible travel is the umbrella term used to describe the different forms of travel belonging to this movement.

Terminology

Besides responsible travel, some frequently used terms are ethical travel, conscious travel, sustainable travel, ecotourism, community based tourism, and fair trade tourism. These terms overlap, but each of them puts emphasis on a specific element of responsible travel. For example, conscious travel focusses on awareness of one’s footprint, while sustainable travel is primarily concerned with preserving opportunities for future generations. Community-based travel ascribes particular importance to cultural exchange and providing benefits to indigenous communities, whereas fair-trade travel attempts to make sure the financial profits of tourism are shared equally between all parties involved.

Common ground

What all these concepts have in common is that they provide low-impact alternatives to mass tourism. They represent types of traveling that are less invasive, more beneficial to local communities and environments, and aimed at gaining a better understanding of the cultures and places that are being visited.

Definition

In 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development issued the Cape Town Declaration, that characterizes responsible travel as travel that:

- minimizes negative economic, environmental, and social impacts;
- generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry;
- involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances;
- makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world’s diversity;

- provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues;
- is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence.

A simpler but maybe just as effective definition of responsible travel is: “making better places to live in, and better places to visit”. Note that the order of this sentence is not coincidental – local residents come first.

A win-win-win situation

Although traveling responsibly may sound like a heavy and dreary task, it’s actually the opposite. It doesn’t mean you have to take all the fun or comfort out of your trip, that you have to spend a lot of money on some fancy eco-resort, or go totally back to basic and travel on a shoestring (unless you want to of course). All it takes is a willingness to make your trip meaningful and some extra effort to make that happen. That extra effort is likely to pay itself back, as responsible travel tends to be a more rewarding experience. Put simply, you put more into it, but you get more out of it too. Responsible travel thus creates a win-win-win situation, where the traveler, the local people, and the environment all benefit.

Forms of responsible travel

Volunteer travel

Some forms of travel lend themselves especially well to responsible travel, because their very nature makes them particularly suitable for cultural immersion. Volunteer travel, also called voluntourism or volunteerism, is one of those. Volunteering is a great way to get to know a society from an insider perspective and give back at the same time.

Doing your homework

A few words of caution are appropriate though. It’s important to make sure you can actually contribute meaningfully, by choosing a project that matches your skills and having a sufficient amount of time available. It’s also essential to research the volunteer organisation carefully, as the voluntourism industry unfortunately has a fair share of scams, including fake orphanages that deliberately keep children in adverse conditions to generate tourist dollars. Doing your homework before signing up is a must.

Work exchange

Another type of travel that tends to make a good match for responsible travel is work travel. In a work exchange travelers receive free accommodation and food, in exchange for a certain amount of hours of work. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement, and as travelers and locals often work together, it promotes exchange of knowledge and skills.

Language learning travel

Language learning travel is another interesting option, and can be anything from a short course to start off your trip to a full-year program. Being able to speak the local language transforms your traveling experience, because it allows you to connect to local people on a deeper level. It shows and invokes respect, enables new friendships, and allows for a deeper understanding of the local culture and way of life.

Sleeping over

Staying with locals is another great way to add meaning to your travel and get to know a place from a different point of view. Apps like Couchsurfing connect travelers with local hosts offering a bed free of charge. Hosts are usually happy to show their town and have you mingle with their friends, making this a great way to meet people while traveling around.

Travel operators and accommodation

If this is not your thing, you can choose to travel with ethical travel operators and pick sustainable accommodations. Operators specialized in responsible travel offer travel packages designed with ethical considerations in mind. Green businesses such as eco-lodges or eco-resorts aim to minimize their ecological footprints, and in some cases make positive contributions to local environmental projects as well.

picture 2: sleeping in a treehouse in Laos

Greenwashing

Certification helps travelers recognize sustainable accommodations, but as the popularity of eco-friendly accommodations has grown, so has the amount of providers trying to take advantage of this. Greenwashing refers to providers making false claims about their business practice to appear more environmentally friendly than they really are, and has unfortunately become a widespread phenomenon. As with voluntourism, researching your accommodation upfront is key.

Responsible travel as a mindset

When it comes down to it though, none of these types of travel really guarantees you're traveling responsibly. In the end, responsible travel is about the traveler's mindset more than anything else. It's about having an open mind, being curious about the places you visit and the people you meet, about wanting to make real and meaningful connections, and not just taking but giving as well.

Turning intentions into action

You don't have to embark on a specially designed trip to practice responsible traveling, and it can manifest itself in simple everyday behavior and gestures. You can stay at a five star eco-resort, but if you don't respect the local employees, you're far from a responsible traveler. You can be Couchsurfing, but if you're just trying to take advantage of your host,

you're actually the opposite of a responsible traveler. The most important thing is not the type of travel you choose, but how you behave during your travels.

How to be a responsible traveler

I believe there's no right or a wrong way to travel, and responsible travel is not about being the perfect traveler. What matters is being conscious of your impact and making decisions to the best of your ability. In doing so it helps to have some general guidelines and to know which issues require attention – hence the following list of subjects and tips. Although I don't claim to have the absolute truth or ultimate solutions, I do encourage everybody to think these issues through and take a stance.

- **Preparation** When preparing for a trip, it's useful to read up on the place you're going to visit. If you're making the effort of traveling to another part of the world, it makes sense to take an interest in the place. Having some background information is likely to make your trip more interesting, and equips you for making conscious travel decisions.
- **Itinerary and planning** When deciding on an itinerary, consider avoiding places suffering from overtourism. When it comes to planning, I'd argue against traveling too fast and only visiting touristic highlights. If you're looking for an authentic experience, traveling slow, choosing destinations off the beaten trail, and allowing time for spontaneous and unplanned things to happen is key. In the end, these experiences often make the best memories.
- **Specific (political) circumstances** Some countries and places require special consideration. This applies for example to countries known to violate human rights. Some claim we should boycott these countries, while others don't believe in boycotting. Another example concerns isolated and vulnerable communities, that haven't had a lot of contact with outside visitors yet, and according to some might be better off left alone. In each case you'll have to decide for yourself what you think is best – but make sure you weigh all the pros and cons.
- **Local traditions and dress** This is basic travel etiquette for any (responsible) traveler. It's essential to inform yourself about and show respect for local traditions and customs, for example by showing appropriate behavior at religious sites and dressing in accordance with local customs. When you're traveling you're a guest in someone else's country, and a good guest doesn't make a mess of the place.
- **Sleeping, eating, and shopping** This point can be summarized in two words: go local. It matters that the ones profiting from your money are local people, instead of big bosses or international businesses. Staying in small homestays rather than big chain resorts, eating at local restaurants, buying original local products, and choosing local guides, all help to achieve this.
- **Transport** While traveling in most cases will cause at least some emissions, you can still try to minimize them. The best thing you can do is to avoid flying as much as possible, and to consider offsetting the emissions when you have no other choice.

Apart from that, traveling on foot or by bike is obviously most eco-friendly (and allows you to really experience the places you visit), and shared vehicles such as buses or trains are preferable (and often a good way to mingle with local people).

- **Garbage** Being mindful of the garbage you leave behind is always important, but even more so when traveling, since host countries and natural destinations don't always have effective waste management facilities. It's useful to carry a refillable water bottle, or tools for sterilization of water, such as a Steripen or purification tablets. You can also bring your own reusable grocery bag, cup, cutlery, and straw.
- **Animal welfare** When aiming to travel responsibly, attractions endangering animal welfare are to be avoided. This includes attractions such as elephant riding, picture taking with tigers, and dolphin shows. Some operators claim to offer ethical attractions involving animals – it's up to you to do your research and decide whether you think their claim is valid.
- **Picture taking** Taking pictures of people requires sensitivity. I know from firsthand experience people constantly wanting to take your picture makes you feel like some kind of circus monkey, and nothing is more annoying than people trying to take your picture secretly. You should always ask for permission, and accept that a no is a no. Also, if you really want to experience a place, it helps to put the camera down sometimes. Having some nice pictures is great, but making nice memories is even better.
- **Bargaining** In some places bargaining is expected and necessary to get prices down to acceptable levels, but that doesn't mean you have to drive an extremely hard bargain. A few cents could be very little for you, but a lot for local people. Ask yourself if you really want to get the price all the way down to the bottom, or let them have that little extra. On the other hand, paying inappropriately high amounts of money is not advisable either, as this creates false expectations towards future travelers. Just be willing to pay a fair price.
- **Donations** Although often made with the best intentions, donations can have adversary effects. Randomly handing out gifts might make you feel good about yourself, but could ultimately do more harm than good. If you really want to make a contribution, consider donating to a local institution such as a school. They will know what is needed in the community and will be able to distribute it fairly.
- **Meeting people** If you see the persons you meet as people offering a product or service in exchange for money, a meeting is just a business transaction. But if you see them as real people with an interesting story to tell, a meeting can turn into an unforgettable experience. Traveling responsibly means having a genuine interest in the people you meet, and being willing to share your own story with them. This the key to making meaningful connections.
- **Attitude** An open mind may very well be the most important thing to bring along on your travels. When you're visiting another country and culture, you're likely to come across people, customs, ideas, and ways of life different from your own, that may

seem strange. Instead of judging them, try to be curious. Observe, talk, and try to understand. You'll be surprised by the lessons you'll learn along the way.

picture 3: making new friends in Indonesia

Tourism is on the rise, but so is the awareness of the impact of traveling. The responsible travel movement is the solution to challenges posed by mass tourism, and it's the way forward. Of course every traveler has his own style and preferences, and that's perfectly fine. It doesn't take away from the fact that every traveler can do something to make a positive contribution – for the benefit of all. What's the impact you want to have?

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