

Why Tourism Should Die & Why It Won't

"Sustainable" travel is an oxymoron.

These aren't easy days for travel touts. The class of journalists who enjoy combed experiences at Hawaiian resorts and Michelin-starred restaurants don't normally generate a lot of public compassion. But I couldn't help feeling a few pangs of sympathy for the writers and editors who put together *The New York Times'* recent Travel package "52 Places to Go in 2020."

This is the annual feature meant to draw visitors to heretofore-neglected world gems. Far more apparent in this year's roundup, however, was the running theme of "responsible tourism." Words like "sustainability," "green," and "conservation" were shoved into every other euphoric blurb like the last pair of shoes jammed into a suitcase already bursting at its zippers. In Sicily, grassroots groups have pledged to use less plastic. In Uganda, proceeds from gorilla trekking permits go toward conservation efforts. Read the piece front to back and you might conclude the entire planet has morphed into one giant, eco-friendly playground, with new nonstop service to Ulaanbaatar and Lima making access easier than ever.

It's all bullshit, of course. A 2018 study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change* announced tourism alone—that's nonessential pleasure travel—is responsible for 8 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The traveling public is freaking out. It knows about flight shaming; it loves Greta Thunberg; and it's ready to bid au revoir to Volvic, Dasani, and plastic straws. But it still wants to sit on a beach in Aruba.

This puts travel media in a tricky spot. In a somewhat tortured explanation accompanying "52 Places to Go in 2020," *Times* Travel editor Amy Virshup noted that climate concerns prompted the jump onto the "eco" bandwagon. This acknowledgment was preceded by pages selling *Times*-branded "Journeys" to Ethiopia, the Galapagos, and other faraway markets.

Last week *The Washington Post* fretted over the same issues in a story headlined, "**You want to be a responsible tourist. But what does that even mean?**" Advice came from newfound groups like the Center for Responsible Travel and Travel Care Code.

It's easy to make fun of people putting Band-Aids on bullet wounds. And the *Times'* spin on sea-level rise at Grand Isle, Louisiana—"Does a place appear more hauntingly beautiful when you know it's disappearing?"—was tastelessly macabre. (The answer is no. It's just haunting.)

But these aren't bad people promoting travel. It's just that they're engaged in the impossible task of reconciling international tourism with a genuine desire to neutralize tourism's impact on climate change. The trouble is these concepts are incompatible.

Telling people to "be thoughtful about lodging" and "mind what you eat"—two Earth-saving tips from that Washington Post story—is like trying to sober up by switching from gin to beer.

As evidence piles up about the deleterious impact of global tourism, the travel media charade is starting to feel like the almost comical hypocrisy of Trump surrogates ginning up increasingly contorted justifications on cable news for a worldview that's becoming more detached from reality by the day. Even if unintentionally, the opening spread of the *Times* package elegantly summarized the problem. The left-hand page touted Bolivia's "efforts toward sustainability," hyped a "new environmental focus" in the British Virgin Islands, and included a helpful reminder that "with that mile-thick ice sheet melting fast, and two new international airports slated to open in 2023, the time to explore an untrammeled, intact Greenland is now." The opposite page (in my West Coast edition) was taken by a full-page ad for Emirates airline: A woman alone in business class sipped from a flute beneath the seductive offer of "Champagne?" in 130-point type.

Tourism is an addiction. In 2019, the United Nations World Tourism Organization announced international travel had increased to a record 1.4 billion tourist arrivals. It predicted a 3–4 percent increase in international travel in coming years.

By some measures, travel and tourism is the world's largest industry, bigger even than oil and petroleum. According to the World Atlas, tourists account for 60 percent of all air travel. Forget the pain it'd cause Emirates. The economic impact of even a modest reduction in global tourism would be cataclysmic. All 50 states and most countries have become dependent in some fashion on tourism revenues. Travel is an important way we signal status. According to one survey, most 18–35-year-olds would rather travel than have sex.

All motorized transport is a problem—cruise ships generate 21,000 gallons of sewage per day, much of it flushed into the ocean—but the primary offenders are airplanes. According to U.K.-based Earth Changers, another outfit dedicated to "sustainable tourism," **aviation emissions account for 3.2 percent of total global carbon emissions. That figure could rise to 12 percent by 2050.**

Perhaps even more troubling, the 2018 study pinning 8 percent of global carbon emissions on tourism relied on data collected between 2009 and 2013. It's already badly out of date.

"I would expect a bigger number as our society travels more frequently and relies more on aviation," Ya-Yen Sun, senior lecturer at the University of Queensland in Australia and one of the study's lead authors, told me. "Tourism has expanded by 3.9 percent annually, [more than] the global economy for the eighth consecutive year, and total passenger-kilometers in aviation increased at 7.9 percent annually since 2011." Meanwhile, she added, the world has seen "no significant breakthrough in how to mitigate tourism emissions."

Those counting on that breakthrough magically materializing will be counting for a long time. A multitude of factors make biofuels and other renewables either impractical or in the realm of fantasy for mass aviation.

"With electric aircraft, the problem is that energy density of batteries is much lower than that of jet fuel, which means that all-electric, large, long-range aircraft are a long way off and may never be feasible, barring substantial advances in battery technology," said David Zingg, director of the University of Toronto Institute for Aerospace Studies. Small and slow solar-powered aircraft like Solar Impulse and Solarship make for hopeful headlines. But all sorts of limitations render them little more than aeronautical curiosities.

"The surface area of commercial aircraft is simply insufficient to provide the necessary power," Zingg said. "Solar power would only be feasible for fast, heavy aircraft if some way of accessing more solar power than the aircraft would normally be exposed to were invented. One has to be very careful saying that something is impossible, but a fully solar-powered, fast, heavy aircraft may be impossible or close to it."



Virtual reality continues to be pushed by futurists as a travel surrogate, but I can't imagine anyone who's actually used VR thinking this is true. The world's most famous VR tourist to date is Mark Zuckerberg, who was lambasted for his virtual tour of hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017. The internet called the tone-deaf Facebook CEO a "heartless millionaire" for using a natural disaster as the aesthetic backdrop to promote the Oculus Rift VR system. The insensitivity of the timing overshadowed Zuck's similarly absurd statement about VR capabilities: "One of the things that's really magical about virtual reality is you can get the feeling that you're really in a place."

No, you can't—for a variety of reasons. As Gizmodo explained in a piece titled "The Neuroscience of Why Virtual Reality Still Sucks," the main problem is latency. This is the tiny but perceptible delay between when you move your head in VR and when the image in front of your eyes changes, "creating a mismatch between the motion we feel (with our inner ears) and the image we see (with our eyes). In real life, the delay is essentially zero."

Even given improvements, VR will never replicate an impromptu assignation with a stranger in a foreign land or the sensation of biting into a chunk of roasted lamb from a street vendor the moment before you spot a roach crawling out of his pile of uncooked skewers. Every time we hear some flack telling us VR allows us to "go for a swim with tropical fish in the Great Barrier Reef" or behold Mars while "walking on its dusty red surface" (as an article on AR/VR Journey claimed) we should all be screaming: "No, it doesn't!" VR is a pretty slick upgrade from those View-Master 3D stereoscopes people in the 1950s used to look at reels of transparency images featuring the Grand Canyon and the Eiffel Tower. But neither it nor any other as-yet-unknown technological breakthrough is going to replace real travel—its wonders, its inconveniences, and its ability to forge new connections.

The only actual way to mitigate tourism's impact on climate change is for humanity to stop traveling. This, too, is impossible to imagine.

I've called travel an addiction, and I believe it's a particularly powerful one. After reading that *Times* "52 Places" package, I decided to test this pessimistic view with Dr. Ken Allen, a professor of psychology at Oberlin College. Allen taught a course last year called "**The Science of Self-Destructive Behaviors.**" Though it was designed around maladies like alcoholism and eating disorders, the course description precisely described the travel community's vicious relationship with its own compulsion:

"Self-defeating behaviors are a universal part of the human experience. We occasionally delay unpleasant situations at the expense of increased anxiety, pursue exciting activities with potentially harmful consequences and favor short-term pleasures over long-term positive outcomes."

"It's a spot-on comparison," Allen told me, offering a tidy explanation for why human beings appear genetically predisposed to fly Economy Plus from Los Angeles to Ireland, even if doing so expends six months' worth of their typical carbon dioxide emissions at home. "In general we're 'hardwired' to seek things that bring us immediate reward or reinforcement even if those things might have long-term harmful consequences to our health or the health of the planet."

This carefree, avoidant disposition is compounded by something called "diffusion of responsibility." This is the socio-psychological phenomenon in which, faced with a public crisis, people figure somebody else will take care of things.

"We're kind of assuming scientists or someone else is going to fix the problem (of climate change) because we all have this information," Allen says. "I don't have much faith that people are going to change with the current ways that we're delivering this information to them. The expectation is, we tell people how bad this is for them, they'll respond by modifying their behavior. We know that's not true."

Short of regulations and fuel taxes on a scale that would restructure the entire global market, people probably aren't going to stop traveling. More likely, as the world becomes ever more distressed by over-tourism—the 145 million annual overseas trips currently taken by Chinese tourists alone is expected to surpass 400 million by 2030—the travel journalists we rely on for hot tips and insider advice will simply conjure new ways of assuaging our guilt. That may serve the interests of their airline underwriters, but it won't be doing the planet any favors.

I take no joy in saying so. I like travel as much as you do, and I'm not stopping either. Where's the line between hypocrite and addict? I suspect we're all going to find out sooner than we'd like.

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