

Tourist Destinations and Climate Change: How to Travel Respectfully

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June 5, 2023



With lots of sandy places to spread a towel, shipwreck diving sites, and waves begging to be surfed, the Outer Banks of North Carolina have all the ingredients for a dreamy beach vacation. Yet, the people who live in this sought-after summer destination are communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

"With climate change, you have more intense storms and the Outer Banks could really be taken out," said Emily Benton, 18, one of the more than 35,000 full-time residents of the barrier islands that jut out into the Atlantic Ocean. "When the tourists come here, they're not thinking about that. They're thinking about having a good time and being with their friends or their family, and I get that, but I do think they need to think about the future and what they can do so that doesn't happen."

Some areas of the Outer Banks, which spans nearly 200 miles, have lost more than 200 feet of shoreline in the last two decades, with some spots now losing 13 feet of beach per year, according to Yale Environment 360. At the same time, the area has seen an increase in tourism and development.

"It's such a double-edged sword because we need the tourists, but they bring the traffic," said Benton. "People will come onto the beach with their big diesel trucks and have all these fumes coming out. There are houses going up everywhere, there's all this construction on the roads, and all that [development] can contribute to climate change. The beach used to be super wide, but it's becoming so much more narrow and it's crazy to think that the beaches are eroding that quickly. The ocean is eating our community."

It's not a problem unique to the Outer Banks or even coastal communities. From [Hawaii](#) to [Spain](#) to [New Zealand](#) to Italy's [Cinque Terre](#), places worldwide are grappling with balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the need to preserve and protect the land their lives are built on.

"When we're on holiday, we stay in a place someone else calls home. We essentially become temporary residents. We make use of local resources and infrastructure like water, power, roads, housing, hiking trails, it's a long list," said Justin Francis, the cofounder and CEO of [Responsible Travel](#). "But we don't pay for any of those services. That can put a huge strain on popular and fragile destinations and the people who live there."

But that doesn't mean traveling should be off-limits. Francis, Benton, and others believe that travel can benefit a destination and even help inspire people to address the climate crisis, but that does mean how we think about travel will likely need to change.

"When thinking about travel, I do think of carbon," Clare Flaherty, a 17-year-old lives in Narragansett, Rhode Island, and ambassador at [The Climate Initiative](#). "However, I do believe there is a balance. We can fully experience visiting new places and not only lessen our impact or carbon footprint but make a positive change."

Twenty years ago, when Francis helped to launch Responsible Travel, a company that works to make sure its trips support communities and preserve nature, terms like "responsible," "sustainable," "eco," and "regenerative" travel were rare. Now, a quick Google search reveals thousands of hits and Francis says travelers are asking more questions and doing more research.

"We became used to the phrase '[leave no trace](#),' this idea that we should take nothing but photos and leave nothing but footprints," Francis said. "That doesn't feel like enough anymore. Increasingly, travelers ask about the positive impact their trips will have on the places they visit."

Flaherty would love to travel to Africa, a continent she knows is [disproportionately vulnerable to climate change](#), but instead of not going, she plans to look for a way to make a difference, no matter how small. "I hope to experience it and be part of the change," Flaherty said, adding, "An activity I always seem to do no matter where I go is hiking. If possible, I organize

a small group, always providing collection units for us to pick up trash or plastics. It is a small, easy thing for me to do on an activity I would be doing anyway. It's my small thank you to the host location. Small changes make a difference."

For Flaherty and others, it's also about being very conscious of the needs of the location they're traveling to. As the climate crisis increasingly impacts some destinations, residents of places like Hawaii have asked visitors not to come while others, like Bhutan, have imposed tourism fees.

"I think listening to folks is really important," said Sena Wazer, a recent graduate of the University of Connecticut, who works in climate justice in Washington, DC. "I think it's really significant to think about places like Hawaii where... native folks are saying please don't come. That is a situation where I would not want to travel to that place for leisure."

While the climate crisis already asks much of us, there are several small ways to travel more regeneratively in addition to not visiting places where tourists are asked not to come.

Fly less: There's no way around it: To travel sustainably, we need to fly less frequently. It's estimated that aviation accounts for about 4% of human-induced global warming. Activists like Greta Thunberg have given up air travel entirely and others have signed onto no-flight pledges or are limiting the number of flights they take. Don't be fooled by "carbon offsetting," Francis said. "We can't offset our way out of the climate crisis. It's much better to directly reduce emissions and help restore nature."

Choose local, plant-based meals: You can significantly cut your travel footprint by choosing local, plant-based produce. "Ask questions like where are they sourcing their food," said Amanda Ho, the owner of Regenerative Travel, a platform that hosts an independent collection of hotels that must meet specific environmental standards such as sourcing food from local supply chains.

Opt for public transportation: Traveling to your destination by train or bus can also be impactful, Ho suggested. And don't forget to think about how you'll get around once you arrive at your destination. Instead of hiring a car or taking a big tour bus, locally guided trips by public transportation, foot, bike, or even kayak can be a fantastic experience," Francis said.

Be resource conscious: As we do at home, switch the lights off, keep showers short, and avoid plastics by packing a tote bag and a reusable water bottle.

Go off the beaten path: Consider the time of year and where you're traveling. Can you travel during an off-season or to a less-popular destination? "There are so many incredible places that are off the beaten tourist track. Do a little research and you might find a less-visited city or island to explore," Francis said.

Stay longer: Ho encourages those who can to travel less but stay in one destination for an extended period. "We are trying to encourage these more immersive stays, so people can take time and slow down."

Known as slow travel, longer trips instead of multiple smaller ones not only reduce the carbon emissions associated with getting to and from destinations, but also during the stay as it reduces turnover emissions at a hotel or rental, and longer stays may also benefit local economies more than small ones.

Be mindful of your surroundings: Be conscious of your impact on local communities, such as where you stay. For instance, many short-term rentals are pricing people out of homes, while major hotel chains often send more money out of communities in a process known as tourism leakage. Look for locally owned guesthouses or independent, locally owned hotels and extend that mindfulness to your day-day activities. "Have the mindset that people live here," Benton said. "I try to be extra nice to the local coffee people, try to know where I'm going in traffic, and be more aware of my surroundings."

Travelers have power and their choices can influence the world for better — or worse.