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## Doing more good than harm to the planet

### How to choose sustainable travel options

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From diesel buses kept running outside ancient ruins, their engines driving the air conditioning for those trooping around the historic site, to the polluting effects of the airplanes that transport us around the world, travel is an easy target these days for those who would see us reduce our environmental impact.

But travel can also be positive - it can contribute to the viability of local communities, it can connect people to cultures around the world, and it can even open our eyes to where we can help the world the most.

So, is it possible to travel without damaging the world?

"Sustainability is possible," says Simon Hudson, professor of tourism and marketing at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business.

He cites Machu Picchu as an example, saying that officials there realized they couldn't open their doors to as many people as wanted to visit, because in the end what they had would be destroyed - hence, the visitor limits.

"A lot of the time, sustainability is seen as being green and environmentally responsible," he says. "But for me, there's three elements to it: the environmental side but also the social side and the economic side."

This isn't being driven simply by the green movement, but by travellers themselves. He notes that tourists aren't comfortable visiting countries with troubled ethics, such as Myanmar.

"People are moving away towards experiences," he explains. "They are looking for more connection with communities and with people within those communities. It's a trend away from all-inclusive theme parks towards nature-based and educational tourism, and that can have a very positive impact on both the tourist and the community."

Canadian-based G.A.P Adventures ([gapadventures.com](http://gapadventures.com)) is one company operating within the sustainable travel niche around the world.

"Most of our trips are small-group adventures," says Ned Ambrus, manager of the Calgary G.A.P concept store. "It impacts the travellers because it provides a small and intimate cultural experience, but it also helps the environment because it allows us to use public transportation and to stay in local hotels or inns, or with families.

"The important thing is that we get out and we get involved and we interact where we can. We really see and taste and experience culture, not just look at it through a window."

The company offers carbon offsetting for those concerned about countering the greenhouse gas emissions from their transportation, and is planting a tree this year for every client. G.A.P has also founded Planeterra, a non-profit foundation for which it pays all

administration costs and helps to fund.

"It was founder Bruce Poon Tip's idea," explains Planeterra manager Danielle Weiss. "The whole idea of G.A.P is that we operate responsibly, and this is the way for us as a company and for our travellers to give back to the communities, to support them and help them meet their needs."

Planeterra supports approximately 20 projects worldwide, working with porters and weavers in Peru, for example, helping with turtle habitat protection in Costa Rica, and assembling wheelchairs for landmine victims in Cambodia.

Closer to home, Bellstar's Spirit Ridge Resort and Vineyard ([spiritridge.ca](http://spiritridge.ca)) in Osoyoos, B.C., has been designed with its surroundings in mind.

"Because of the desert environment, one of the biggest elements is water conservation," explains Bellstar Resorts spokesperson Jessica Harcombe, noting that the resort and its golf course use xeriscaping and low-flow plumbing fixtures to conserve water.

"The neat thing is that you have the Desert Cultural Centre on site, which specializes in educating people about the sustainability of the environment in terms of both plant and animal species," she says.

"The desert link-style golf course actually maintains the bulk of the course as natural habitat, the vineyards are using a drip irrigation system, and both Spirit Ridge and Nk'Mip Cellars try to buy as much local and organic produce as possible to decrease cost and environmental emissions."

Sustainable travel that makes a positive impact on the planet is possible - as long as you choose wisely.

### Checking off the essentials

Sustainable Travel International ([sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://sustainabletravelinternational.org)) offers plenty of information for those interested in travel that tries to have a positive impact on the world. They offer this checklist of items to consider when planning your adventures:

- . What's the operator's environmental policy?
- . Are they a travel provider with good conservation ethics?
- . Do their guides foster a respect for the environment and encourage visitors to do the same?
- . Is the local economy benefiting financially from your trip?
- . Will you be using public transportation on your trip?
- . Is the travel provider efficient in its use of natural resources such as water, energy and building materials?
- . Does the travel provider focus on reducing, reusing and recycling?
- . Are you prepared to immerse yourself in and accept cultures different from your own?
- . Will the food be organically/sustainably grown or produced locally?

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