



# low-impact tourism



## what is it?

It's about sustainable travel and leisure activities that are respectful of wildlife, local people and cultures - including travel that minimises our negative impact on the environment and the places we visit. Here are the main impacts that low-impact tourism aims to reduce:

**Social & cultural:** the uncontrolled growth of mass tourism is leading to overcrowding of popular destinations. Barcelona, a compact city of 1.6 million, welcomed 32 million tourists in 2016. The city council has taken measures to limit the number of beds, imposed a moratorium on new hotels and banned Segways or other motorised transport in the old town. Platforms like Airbnb, which allow anyone to rent out unlicensed accommodation to tourists, are being blamed for facilitating increasing numbers of visitors, driving up house prices and leading to a dearth of available rental property. Rising rents drive out local businesses and eateries, to be replaced by rows of uniform shops selling ubiquitous tourist tat until every city and beachfront becomes indistinguishable from the last. Tourism often ends up destroying the very landscape and culture that attracted visitors in the first place.

**Economic:** in poorer countries, people are routinely evicted to make way for hotels, resorts or golf courses. Those in work usually have to accept low wages and poor working conditions. In places like Nepal, porters regularly struggle up mountains in flip flops alongside trekkers kitted out in the latest high-performance gear. Worse still are all-inclusive resorts and hotels. With everything laid on, guests spend no money in local restaurants, bars or shops. In countries like Haiti or Jamaica, cruise operators fence off large chunks of the islands, creating an artificial 'Jamaican/Haitian experience' which they control 100%. Guests jet in and out with little contact with



*There's enough beautiful, remote, romantic and natural scenery in the UK to last a lifetime.*

locals and profits fly out of the country with them and into the pockets of corporations.

Cruise liners are giant floating all-inclusive resorts that sail under a 'flag of convenience', allowing them to register the business in a country of their choosing. They must then adhere to the tax, safety, labour and environmental laws of that nation (they don't choose countries with the most rigorous ones). Cruise ships can get through 2-300 tonnes of low-grade heavy fuel oil (HFO) per day - one of the world's dirtiest fuels. These floating cities disgorge thousands of passengers who flock straight to the main attractions, overwhelming them. As with all-in resorts, these tourists contribute little to the local economy.

**Environmental:** flying uses huge quantities of fuel and emits a colossal amount of carbon. Aviation fuel is heavily subsidised, making greener transport like train travel look astronomical by comparison.

Construction of resorts and hotels may involve bulldozing pristine landscapes and diverting essential resources like water away from the local community. Ski runs and golf courses are responsible for tree-felling, destroying habitats, displacing wildlife and using huge amounts of water and energy.

Events like the Running of the Bulls in Pamplona have become popular with stag and hen parties, attracting thousands of young foreigners every year. What the tour brochures don't show, however, is the bulls being poked with sharp sticks or cattle prods, kicked and punched as they run in a blind panic towards a slow, agonising death in the bullring. Supporters of so-called sports like bullfighting or canned hunting (breeding big game animals for release into the wild to be shot) argue that they bring in funds for the upkeep of nature reserves. However, there are other ways of finding this revenue without prolonging a cruel and unethical culture.



*Many popular destinations have become theme parks; in Venice, a population of around 60,000 is swamped by 30 million tourists per year.*



All over the UK, you can find holiday cottages like this timber 'eco-lodge' on a smallholding in Lincolnshire, with wood stove, compost loo and electricity supplied by wind and sun.

## what are the benefits?

Tourism is an important source of income for many countries, particularly where traditional industries are in decline. It can open up opportunities to members of the community excluded from more lucrative occupations. Small-scale tourism of this kind, where travellers stay and eat in local businesses or directly employ local people, ensures money stays in the local community rather than going to multinational tour operators.

Money from sensitively-managed wildlife or nature tourism incentivises and pays for the creation and upkeep of protected natural areas. For example, gorilla trekking in countries like Rwanda has played an important part in ensuring protection of the animals and their habitat. Similarly, a number of developing countries have successfully retrained former poachers as rangers, protecting the animals they once hunted. It's hard to convince people struggling to feed their families of the need to conserve wildlife or natural spaces without giving them a reason to do so, but if animals become more valuable to the local community alive than dead, then there's a greater incentive to protect them.

Last but not least, travel provides an opportunity for cultural exchange, to engage with and learn about other people. Initiatives like Couchsurfing take this further and give travellers the chance to stay with local people in their homes for free and learn about their lives first-hand.

## what can I do?

Think about taking breaks closer to home. The UK has some spectacular landscapes and historic cities. Shun packages, large chains or all-inclusive establishments. Stay and eat with families or small, locally-owned businesses. Check out sites like the Ethical Travel Guide or Ethical Volunteering. You can find out a lot for yourself too. For example, a search for "shark cage diving, issues" or "volunteering in an orphanage, concerns" will pull up as many hits exposing the darker side as it does glossy advertisements.

Volunteering seems like the ultimate ethical holiday. However, while organisations like VSO demand proven skills and experience in order to match volunteers to suitable projects, not all operators are so scrupulous. You may be taking work away from local people. Working with orphans has become hugely popular, but children may be rented, bought or stolen to meet demand. Vulnerable children require specialised care by experienced professionals, not inexperienced volunteers. Some conservation projects would collapse without volunteers. However, proper field research rarely involves contact with animals so be wary of any project that offers this.

It's not possible for everyone in the world to fly regularly, so is it too idealistic to imagine beautiful places with strong communities and jobs that people enjoy, with no need to 'escape'? How about seeing the world when you're young, overland – an experience you'll never forget - then give up flying and focus on building a strong, safe, fun, unique, beautiful community where you live. Ask yourself whether two-week holidays or city breaks really broaden the mind, or whether: 'Without stirring abroad, one can know the whole world; without looking out of the window, one can see the way of heaven; The further one goes, the less one knows (Tao Te Ching).

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/lowimpact-topic/low-impact-tourism](http://lowimpact.org/lowimpact-topic/low-impact-tourism) - info, courses, links & books, including:
- Helen Babbs, *152 Wild Things to Do*
- Polly Patullo, *the Ethical Travel Guide*
- Demi Taylor, *Adventure Britain*
- [couchsurfing.com](http://couchsurfing.com) – stay with locals
- [ethical.travel](http://ethical.travel) – country-by-country
- [tourismconcern.org.uk](http://tourismconcern.org.uk), fight exploitative tourism

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials.

Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

[facebook.com/lowimpactorg](https://facebook.com/lowimpactorg)

[Lowimpact.org](http://Lowimpact.org)

[twitter.com/lowimpactorg](https://twitter.com/lowimpactorg)

Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502