



Ten Ecotourism Tips for the Ethical Traveller

Ecotourism can benefit some of the world's most incredible places and the communities who call them home. And as travellers, we can help ensure that ecotourism is a powerful force for good by making informed travel choices. But it's not always easy!

Follow these ten tips to help ensure that your next adventure has the best possible benefit for the places and people you visit, and the planet as a whole.

1. Consider conservation

Ecotourism, as defined by [The International Ecotourism Society \(TIES\)](#), has three 'pillars': conservation, communities and education/interpretation. These three pillars describe how a tour company can aim to have a positive impact and are a good guide for evaluating their ecotourism practices.

Does the company contribute directly or through partnerships to conservation causes? For example, do they help conserve the natural areas that they work in? Do they partner with a conservation group or support a project, research or a specific area? How do they minimise their impacts in the area they work and beyond?

2. Consider communities

Ecotourism is just as much about social impacts as environmental effects. Companies should help support the well-being of local communities and empower them through employment opportunities, other financial benefits or capacity building.

Does the company contribute directly or through partnership to community causes? For example, do they generate financial benefits for local people to help overcome poverty? Do they have a policy for hiring locally or train local staff? Do they respect local and/or Indigenous rights, beliefs and traditional ways of life?

3. Consider education and interpretation

Ecotourism can be a powerful force for good from the local to global level by promoting awareness, understanding and appreciation for the environment, society and culture.

Does the tour provide positive experiences for both guests and hosts, while minimising negative impacts? Does it facilitate positive learning exchange opportunities based on mutual openness and understanding? Does everyone come away more aware of environmental, social, political and cultural issues?

4. Consider sourcing

Where a product comes from and how it is produced has big implications for environmental and social sustainability.

Many companies manage their day-to-day operations, such as recycling, energy use and carbon emissions - but ideally a company will be committed to sustainability at all levels of their supply chain. This means that the materials they use are produced in an ethical and environmentally-conscious way.

Does a company make use of local food products that benefit local farmers and minimise carbon emissions, or do they ship in products from overseas with a high carbon cost? Do materials purchased have safe standards for their workers and the local environment?

By choosing suppliers carefully, a company not only gets its own house in order, but helps ensure that suppliers get theirs in order too.

5. Consider carbon

Climate change not only threatens ecosystems and wildlife, it also threatens people. Too often it disproportionately affects poor people in developing countries who have limited capacity to adapt.

As a traveler, look for companies that manage their on-site carbon emissions, minimise carbon emissions in their supply chain and encourage visitors to follow low-carbon practices.

But don't just expect the company to take responsibility; you can also take responsibility for your emissions when you travel. Because the carbon emissions associated with long-haul flights have such a disproportionate impact compared to other impacts associated with travel, offsetting your flights means you'll fly with the freedom of knowing that your trip really can be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

6. Choose certified operators or tours

Certification schemes ensure that tours, attractions or accommodation meet comprehensive predetermined standards verified by an independent third party.

For example, a company may need to comply with criteria for everything from waste disposal and product sourcing, to wildlife interactions and cultural sensitivity, all verified transparently by trained auditors.

The **Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria** set the international standard for tourism, but there are many other great international and national schemes such as **EarthCheck** and **Rainforest Alliance**. Keep in mind that small ecotourism businesses may lack the resources to become certified, so don't necessarily write them off – instead ask about a company's sustainable practices and see where they are on their journey.

7. The devil's not only in the details!

All sustainability initiatives are positive, no matter how big or small. But keep in mind that reusing bath towels or avoiding plastic water bottles - although important! - are just one piece of a much more comprehensive picture. Sustainability includes everything from sourcing products to fairly compensating staff; and a company's carbon emissions or hiring policies could easily eclipse the good done by reusable water bottles.

8. Beware of 'greenwashing'

Let's face it, we like knowing that we're doing a good thing and we're happy when that's validated. But we live in a world where it's easy to paint a picture of sustainability.

If a company's description of their practices is too vague ('eco-friendly', 'green') or too technical ('natural capital'), you have every right to question them. If a company can't explain in simple terms what they do or don't do, they may not be worth your business.

9. Ask!

Don't be afraid to ask questions – and more questions! At worst you'll learn if a company's not the right choice for you and at best you'll learn something interesting or even encourage a tour operator to re-think their practices.

At Terra Incognita, we have asked companies to respond to questions about conservation, local communities and education, listing their responses in full on our website. But if an answer isn't satisfying to you, don't be afraid to dig in and ask for more information.

10. Review and spread the word

It takes a fair bit of time and energy to research travel companies. If, in the course of your research or travels, you stumble across a company that is not living up to its image, or a company blows you away with their amazing practices, don't keep it to yourself. Your voice has the power to help ensure that, as tourism continues to grow, it grows as a positive force for people and planet.

*Do you have an idea for how to choose an ecotourism experience?
We'd love to hear from you!*