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CLIMATE CRISIS

Combatting climate change

How can we travel without costing the Earth? *Aspire* takes a look at the travel companies investing in climate action

Last year, in the midst of the worst crisis seen in modern times, something remarkable happened. With travel on pause and populations confined to their homes, global greenhouse gas emissions fell by roughly 2.4 billion tonnes – a 7% drop from 2019 and the largest decline on record. It was a silver lining to an otherwise utterly devastating situation – and it got people thinking.

While emissions are likely to rebound after the pandemic, many believe the change in our collective conscience is likely to remain. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic – buoyed by the Greta Thunberg movement, organisations such as Extinction Rebellion and the rallying cries of Sir David Attenborough – not only are consumers more climate aware, they’re keener than ever to travel responsibly. According to ClimateCare, 60% of people are willing to spend more on travel to ensure a lower environmental impact; 45% say sustainability is important when booking travel;



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and 36% would choose a travel company with a better environmental record.

But no matter how good our intentions, the travel industry is still a large contributor to the climate crisis. According to a 2018 study published in Nature Climate Change, emissions from tourism equate to 8% of the global total. If we want to meet the Paris Agreement’s target of limiting global warming to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels by 2030 – and the UK’s own target of cutting emissions by 68% by the same year (based on 1990 levels) – we need to make significant changes. So what is the industry doing to help clients travel more gently and, crucially, can we do more?

Carbon offsetting

Many believe carbon offsetting holds the answer. “Carbon offsetting enables both individuals and organisations to compensate for their unavoidable emissions through investing in ➔



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an activity [project] elsewhere in the world,” says Robert Stevens, director of partnerships at ClimateCare, which has provided carbon offset services to the likes of Carrier and Audley Travel. The projects must be independently verified to ensure they “reduce or avoid the equivalent value of emissions, therefore compensating for that specific impact”.

About 40 commercial airlines worldwide offer passengers voluntary offsetting schemes and smaller, private jet brands are following suit too.

TCS World Travel compensates for its footprint through a partnership with Sustainable Travel International, while Air Charter Service and VistaJet both offer clients the chance to offset emissions for an additional fee when booking. The latter says 80% of its client base have opted in to compensate for their fuel use-related emissions since the scheme was introduced, and claims to have offset almost 100,000 tonnes of CO2 on behalf of its customers.

A growing number of travel agents and tour operators have also started using carbon offsets to help balance out emissions. Agency group 360 Private Travel partners with Chooose to offset its emissions, claiming to have compensated for 112 tonnes of CO2 last year. Tour operator Cookson Adventures committed to carbon neutrality across all of its expeditions in 2020, working with its partner Carbon Footprint to develop an accurate and accredited calculator capable of modelling the total carbon dioxide emissions of its logistically complex trips.

“Some people tend to criticise organisations that endorse carbon offsetting because they believe we see it as a tool that solves everything. But that’s not the case at all,” says Henrik Guderud, co-founder of Chooose. “An avoided emission is always better than a compensated one. Individuals and corporations should constantly work to ensure that they reduce their footprint. But even good decisions come with a carbon footprint.”

Client awareness

Offsetting has its critics, and other travel professionals are carving their own path in the fight against climate change. Katie Terrington, of Katie Terrington Private Travel, used to factor a carbon offset fee into a client’s quote, but became disillusioned with where the money was actually going. Instead, she co-founded The Conscious Travel Foundation (*see box*), which educates members on responsible travel, and focuses on eco-conscious suppliers and tree-planting initiatives to balance out her client’s trips.

“I want to have a model where I can say to a client, ‘this is actually your emission’, so it’s connecting them to a story rather than just being a token of £50,” she says.

Karen Simmonds, founder of Clapham-based agency Travel Matters, also believes agents have a duty to offer sustainable alternatives to their clients. Simmonds plants a tree for every holiday sold via London charity Trees for Cities, provides options for rail travel where possible, and

works with companies like Flight Nook to promote the use of clean jet fuel.

She’s keen to get more agents on board too, founding the Make Travel Matter campaign and, last January, becoming one of 116 signatories of the ‘Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency’ declaration. “When we signed up to that, we wanted to be accountable and start really looking at how we measure our own business’ carbon footprint,” she says.

Controversy continues

But some experts warn more must be done. Hugo Kimber is the founder of Carbon Responsible, a carbon emission management company specialising in measurement, disclosure and reduction. He believes travel companies must be more transparent about their carbon emissions by routinely providing customers with information on their impact, as well as reducing their own carbon footprint and measuring the impact of supply chains.

He says: “It’s not about telling people they’re bad and it’s not about telling people that they’re doing a great job because they’ve just gone and bought some offsets. That’s a check-box exercise, it’s not an exercise in reduction and sustainable procurement.”

Kimber highlights the findings of the Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting report, released by the University of Oxford in September 2020. “What that is saying at its heart is once we really start to close in on 2030, the only sort of offsets that are going to be making a real difference will be those that are actually capturing carbon,” he says. “Trees will do that to an extent, but they take too long to grow and we’re talking about short time horizons here, like a couple of decades.”

Right now, it’s hard to think of any other C-word than Covid, but the climate crisis isn’t going away any time soon. The travel industry must work together to preserve the planet we all hold so dear. ●

CONSCIOUS TRAVEL

A selection of agents, destination management companies (DMCs) and representation companies have become the first members of The Conscious Travel Foundation (TCTF).

The organisation, which aims to mentor its members on sustainable travel and raise money for grassroots charities, now has 42 members.

Agents make up a large majority of the new cohort, including UK-based Beth Severino of BGS Travel Design, Edward Burke of Seventy Ten Travel, Julia Townsend of Goodacre & Townsend, Justin Huxter of Cartology Travel, Kirsty Williams of Humboldt Travel, Lucy Slater of Antilophia, Rebecca Puttock of Wanderlux, Roz Webster of Cream Travel, Sarah Mason of Mason Rose Private Travel and Vanessa Boz of Boz Around.

As well as 16 agents, 10 privately-owned DMCs, including Banyan Tours and EXP Journeys, and nine owner-operated representation companies have joined.

Seven hotels and lodges have also become inaugural members, including The Datai Langkawi in Malaysia and Blue Apple Beach in Colombia.

TCTF said its mentorship programme had been designed to support its members on their individual sustainability journeys by connecting them with a global network of leading sustainability advocates. There will be a second round of membership in June. theconscious-travel-foundation.com



THE CONSCIOUS
TRAVEL FOUNDATION