

How green is green?

Demystifying green tourism in the age of climate change

BY SEAN ARTHUR JOYCE

A photograph of two hikers sitting on a grassy mountain slope. The hiker on the left is wearing a yellow shirt and a blue cap, and is writing in a notebook. The hiker on the right is wearing a black jacket and a blue bandana. They are surrounded by green grass and rocks, with a backdrop of rugged mountains and patches of snow under a blue sky.

Green, I want you green.
Green wind.
Green branches.

—Federico Garcia Lorca, *Somnambulist Ballad*

To go green, or not? For savvy travellers these days, that is often less the question than understanding what exactly it *means* to go green. Buying carbon offsets with your airline ticket is easy and inexpensive enough, but does it really accomplish anything besides a salved conscience? Buying a package tour that bills itself as “ecotourism” is one thing, but do the tour operator’s policies extend to the host community and indigenous people whose lives are most affected by the impact of tourism?

What are the options?

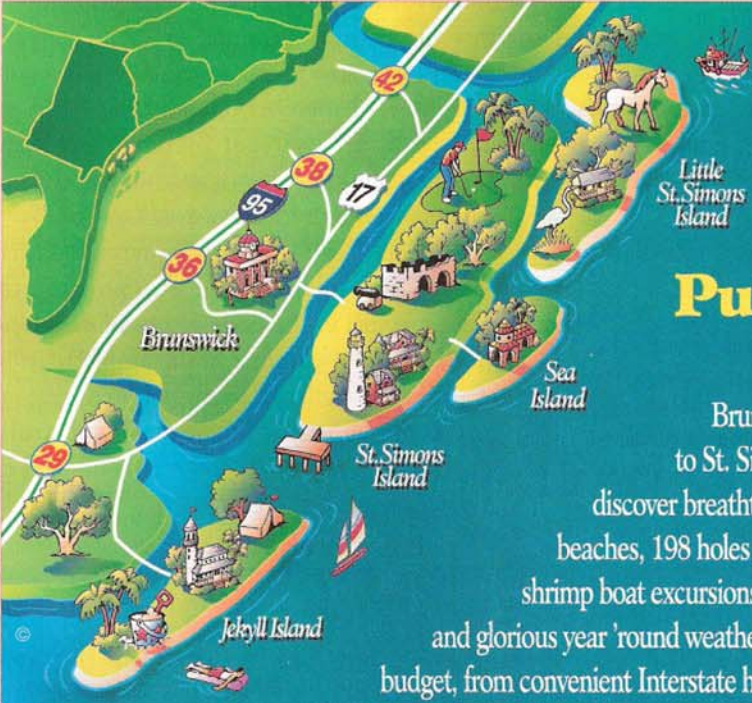
The question is hardly academic to the industry. According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), “There is now broad consensus that tourism is both affected by, and contributing to global warming. However, there is considerable debate as to what exactly and how much needs to be done about it.” TIES sponsored an international workshop in Berlin in February this year called *Travelling with Climate in Mind—Business as Usual or Staying at Home?* The workshop preamble noted that the “business as usual” approach to tourism is no longer tenable and in fact, “may have devastating effects on the well-being of host destinations and the future of tourism itself.” And as extreme weather events become more

common everywhere, it’s no longer just island destinations that have to worry about the impacts of climate change.

Naturally, the “stay at home” solution is no more an option for the industry than business as usual. But travel consumers are increasingly concerned about their global footprint as awareness of climate change reaches an all-time high. A global ecotourism fact sheet produced by TIES notes: “More than two-thirds of U.S. and Australian travellers, and 90 per cent of British tourists, consider active protection of the environment and support of local communities to be part of a hotel’s responsibility.” Meanwhile in Europe, 20–30 per cent of travellers are aware of the needs and values of sustainable tourism, while 10–20 per cent of travellers actively seek “green” options.

According to TIES, the “sun and sand” market has matured and its growth is predicted to remain flat, while ecotourism and nature tourism is growing at three times the rate of the rest of the industry. But the Berlin workshop concluded that the industry is still catching up to consumer demand, even as consumers admit they haven’t fully faced up to the challenge. While three out of four surveyed at the workshop said they believe tourism contributes to climate change, only six per cent said they offset their emissions. Many tourism exhibitors admitted not much has been done yet to “green” their businesses.

left: Feeling truly connected to the natural world is both a human need and deeply rejuvenating. *Adventures in Good Company*



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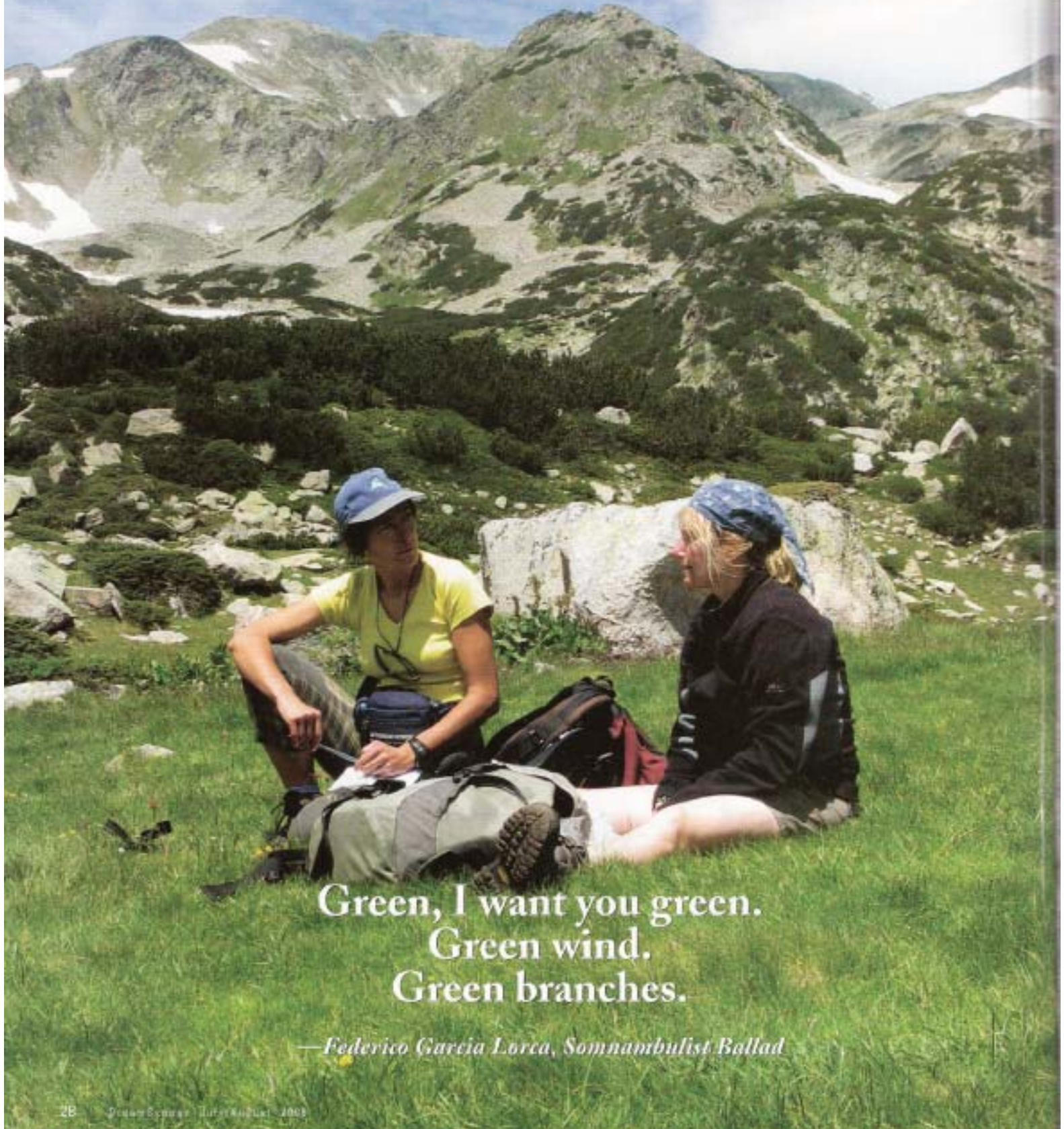
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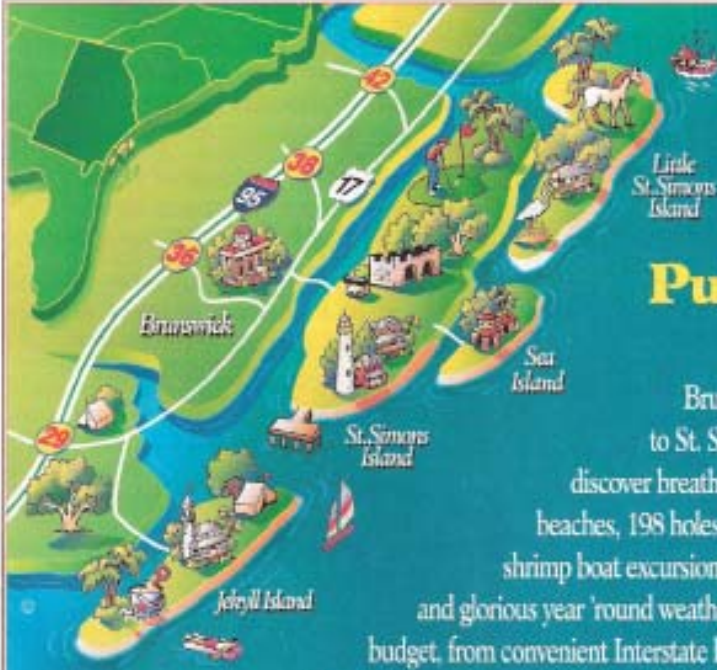
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Walking the talk

The explosive growth in ecotourism should be a fine motivator for business operators. But what about tourists, who want to do the right thing but are wary of “greenwashing,” businesses looking to cash in with a green label without really walking the talk?

Thankfully there are non-profit groups like TIES and Sustainable Tourism International (STI) that offer both practical green travel guidelines and even directories of tourism operators who are ahead of the wave. But before you start booking the tour it helps to have some idea of what to look for. The industry is still in the early stages of defining green certification standards for tour operators and even universally agreed-upon definitions. As with so many industries, “green” tourism has fragmented into ecotourism, sustainable tourism, adventure tourism, geotourism, nature-based tourism, responsible tourism, and even pro-poor tourism.

But groups such as TIES offer some useful guidelines, such as this definition of ecotourism: “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.” The practical impact of these principles means that true ecotourism seeks to “minimize its impact, build environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provide direct financial benefits for conservation, financial benefits and empowerment for local people, and raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental and social climate.”

top: The Cariboo Mountains in B.C. offer some of the most varied and scenic hiking anywhere in the world. *Adventures in Good Company*

Ask the hard questions

But again, how? TIES Director of Training and Education Christina Cavaliere offers some practical tips.

When booking a hotel, find out if it is minimizing its impact in any way possible, e.g. conserving water resources, efficient energy use and recycling, etc. Is the local community employed at multiple levels, not just as cooks and housekeepers, but in management positions as well?

Find out how your tour will incorporate and thereby help preserve local culture and customs, and how the local community is financially empowered as a result.

Does the tour operator support conservation efforts by helping to fund land conservancies or conservation scholarships for local students?

The ecotourism industry is well aware that success could also be its own undoing as the numbers increase. Is an attempt made to limit the size of hiking parties in sensitive areas? Is a “leave no trace” policy in place to ensure pristine areas aren’t cluttered with tourist litter?

And what about those pesky carbon credits? As with so many things in life, not all are created equal. If tour providers offer carbon credits, ask to see details. Where does the money go? What tangible projects will it fund to lower carbon emissions or help host countries reduce their footprint? Some operators will actually take responsibility for carbon reduction themselves. Canadian-based Amerika Venture, a cultural ecotourism and adventure tourism operator, plans to plant more than 3,000 trees per year. U.S.-based NativeEnergy uses carbon-offset donations to build wind energy projects, solar array and methane conversion projects on native American and native Alaskan land. Carbon-offsets paid for by STI member/operators are used to fund similar projects worldwide. But start by modifying your travel habits. Instead of travelling six times a year for three days, travel once a year for three weeks.

Groups like TIES are working on industry certification standards for ecotourism, but these are still in the early stages of development. In the meantime, it’s a simple matter of asking the right questions of tour operators to cut through the “greenwash” and truly go green. That way you can still travel AND help save the planet. ■

travel planner *i*

For more information, visit:
 The International Ecotourism Society (TIES): ecotourism.org
 Sustainable Travel International (STI): sustainabletravelinternational.org
 NativeEnergy: nativeenergy.com
 Amerika Venture: amerikaventure.com

“GREEN” TRAVEL TIPS

- Just as with charity, green begins at home. Start by giving your house a vacation while you’re away. Save energy by putting lights on a timer and set the thermostat so that neither heat nor air conditioning comes on.
- While you’re packing the sunscreen, toss in a water filter and reusable water bottle and bring biodegradable soap.
- Once there, buy local and spend local. Stay at a B&B if available and use local buses, car—or better yet, bicycle—rentals and restaurants. Hire local guides.
- Where recycling facilities do not exist, bring home your recyclables.
- Pay entrance fees to parks and protected areas to help support conservation.
- Buy local handicrafts from the artisan where possible, and pay a fair price. Don’t buy products made from endangered species.
- Be careful where you step. Follow the advice of local guides to avoid damaging sensitive flora on hikes.