SHOULD WE STOP FLYING AS SUSTAINABLE TRAVELERS?

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There’s a trend going around of sustainable travel bloggers and other influencers that stop flying is the solution.

While we completely respect that, we aren’t one of them.

In this article, we’ll look at why we are not quitting flying (entirely). However, first we’d like to quickly look at why flying is so problematic to begin with.

**Why is Flying Bad?**

In a nutshell, flying produces a massive amount of carbon emissions. In a time when climate change is a crucial issue, it’s paramount that each of us take responsibility for our personal carbon footprint.

If you’re a frequent traveler who flies a lot, then your carbon footprint is likely astronomical.

Consider that a roundtrip transatlantic flight emits around 2 tons and then compare that to the global average of 4.9 tons emitted per person per year – just in that one flight you’ve used up over half! In most African and Asian countries (China being a huge outlier as the #1 polluter), an individual doesn’t even reach 1 ton of emissions per year.

If you’re a data nerd, [you can check out this list](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?year_high_desc=true) put out by World Bank on carbon emissions per country and per capita. But the US contributes the second largest amount of emissions to the atmosphere at around 16-17 tons per person, over 14% of all emissions. And considering Americans fly a lot and [American airlines have an abysmal carbon footprint](https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/1/11/18177118/airlines-climate-change-emissions-travel), there is a lot of room for improvement both in the American lifestyle and in American corporations.

Ok. So now that we are on the same page about just how detrimental flying is for the environment…how can we possibly say that we aren’t going to stop flying?

And while we encourage people to reduce their flights, why aren’t we telling others to stop flying?

There’s no doubt about it: the constant flying that privileged travelers do needs to be reduced. We just don’t believe that urging everyone to stop flying is a realistic solution.

There are several factors at work, but keep this in mind throughout the article: sustainable,[responsible travel isn’t exclusively about emissions](https://www.alternativetravelers.com/sustainable-travel-tips/). Yes, this of course plays a major part. But there are other things to consider when talking about sustainable travel.

**Most People Won’t Stop Flying**

Okay, let’s get this out of the way first: when we talk about people, we are talking about the privileged travelers and inhabitants of developed countries that have the means to travel at all. Aka those that are reading this article. And as we’ll discuss later, we’re not saying to fly somewhere every weekend. Excessive flying is definitely a problem. We’re just not sure that it’s realistic to call for a flying ban.

We admire and applaud people who can completely ban flights. We’re not hating on people who have stopped flying. In fact, we thank them because they’ve started this conversation!

There are many different ways of sparking conversation online. Everyone has a different approach and everyone identifies with something or someone different. A public figure who has vowed not to fly and speaks up about why might inspire others to do so or cut down their flights. So we aren’t diminishing the impact that anti-flyers can have.

HOWEVER.

That’s not our approach. We prefer practicality and solutions for people who aren’t ready or can’t (for reasons we’ll discuss below) quit flying. Also, we practice what we preach. We aren’t going to stop flying entirely right now (again, for reasons we’ll get to below). So obviously we’re not going tell others to do so.

We’d rather open a discussion about how to travel more mindfully (which does include reducing flights) rather than simply tell people they need to stop. Quitting flying seems insurmountable and impossible for most travelers. Many people will relegate this into the category of “That’s for hardcore zero waste/sustainable travelers and doesn’t apply to me.”

However, the fact is that the industry is harming our environment in a massive way. And you can still have an impact just by reducing your consumption. The so-called “reducitarians” have a huge positive impact on the environment.  [It’s not an either-or situation](https://www.fooddive.com/news/whats-driving-consumer-desire-for-plant-based-foods/446183/). Reducing our impact applies to many lifestyles.

The reality is that most people won’t be able to quit flying at the drop of the hat.

Let’s look at some of the reasons why.

**Travel Can Change Your Worldview**

We are incredibly privileged to have traveled to many countries and to have lived abroad for several years. Our experiences abroad have opened our eyes to how people live in other parts of the world.

We’ve lived in other cultures and know that not everyone has the same way of life or priorities. We’ve witnessed firsthand the effects of overtourism and environmental destruction caused by human activity.

Experiencing these things has driven our desire to create this blog. We’ve been inspired to share what we’ve learned with others on how to live and travel more sustainably.

But the catch is – if we had never traveled, we never would have reached that conclusion. So we’re not going to tell others who haven’t traveled as much that they should stop flying.

It’s easy to quit flying once you’ve been to dozens of countries. But what about the people who haven’t? If you’re fortunate enough to be a frequent traveler, imagine you had never been to any of those places?

Would you really take them back from yourself? Would you be the same person if you hadn’t traveled?

Traveling can give us a better appreciation for nature, other cultures, and our fellow humans.

**Flying to Developing Countries Can Have a Positive Impact on Communities**

The economies of many developing or underdeveloped countries rely massively on tourism. What if people stop flying to these places? Their economies would decline even further. Impact travel can be an important force for change. Travelers can have a positive benefit on the communities they visit

Perhaps instead of earning a living in a factory or mine, locals in Southeast Asia can conduct tours teaching traditional crafts, such as textile weaving. Or open a hospitality business such as a guest house, restaurant, or massage studio.

This is an incredibly salient point to be aware of as the possibilities are endless for economies to grow with tourism.

For travelers who recommend quitting flying, I’d wonder what replacement economy they have for these destinations that are highly dependent on tourism.

**Flying for Work (It’s Not That Easy to Stop Flying)**

Again, a lot of the people taking flying bans work for themselves or online. They can afford to take longer getting places. And while more and more people are working online and/or for themselves these days, us digital nomads are still in the extreme minority. We have tremendous luxury to have much more control over our time than most.

Try telling your boss that you are no longer going to be meeting with clients because you have taken a flying ban. Then see how long you keep your job.

If you currently travel for work, while you might be able to reduce your travel, you probably won’t be able to get out of every work obligation that requires flying. Luckily, more and more companies are recognizing the benefits of video conferencing over in-person meetings. If you have to fly a lot for work, it might be worth talking to your boss to see if you can reduce your work flying. It’ll save them a ton of money too!

**So..What Can We Do as Sustainable Travelers?**

Specifically in terms of carbon footprint (which is where flying has a huge impact), you can reduce yours in several ways:

Carbon offsetting: Offset the flights that you do take. This means contributing to a program that works to reduce greenhouse emissions.

Explore your own backyard more: Instead of hopping on a plane every long weekend, how about going on one or two international trips a year and spend those shorter vacations closer to home? You’ll be surprised what fun you can get up to closer to home – plus you’ll save money, time, and the hassle of flying. Lesser known destinations close to home will benefit much more from your spending than flying to a place like Venice which is already buckling under too many tourists.

Hold Airlines Accountable: Ask airlines (social media or email work great) what they’re doing to reduce their environmental impact. Are they investing in biofuels or more efficient planes? Are they working to reduce plastic use? Support airlines that are committed to sustainable initiatives when you do fly.

These are just a few examples of how to reduce your carbon footprint. It’s easy for a frequent traveler to say: “We’re stopping flying and you should too.”

What is more difficult is to actually understand where others are coming from and look at the nuances of the situation. Solving some of humanity’s biggest problems is not simply an either/or situation, climate change included.

Again, the people that fly frequently are a small percentage of the population. But it’s growing as the availability of budget flights increases. We all need to reduce and be more responsible about our flights – that much is obvious and true.

We intend to reduce our flights as much as possible and travel overland wherever we can – it’s much more fun, rewarding, and obviously way less of a carbon footprint. And for those who are able to stop flying – more power to you!