

Out and About

Journeys Completed or Contemplated

The truth about sustainable travel?
Tread lightly and try not to break anything.

I BROKE ANGKOR WAT

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I stared at it before turning to my friends, mortified.”*

The crowd faced east, awaiting the rising sun. Seeking a little space from which to observe what was billed as a transcendental moment, our little group of friends wandered across the open grass to a freestanding pavilion of delicately carved 12th century stone. In bracing myself between the footing and the window sill, I pulled away a chunk of rock about the size of a loaf of bread. I stared at it before turning to my friends, mortified.

“You guys, I broke Angkor Wat.”

Angkor Wat is a splendid, ornate, iconic temple complex, and for many travelers, it is the primary reason they go to Cambodia. More than 2 million visitors go to Angkor Wat annually. I was one of those visitors. A college art history class ages ago alerted me to the temple’s existence, and I swore to make the trip one day.

A few days before reaching Siem Reap, the town where hotels, restau-

rants and shops are overrun with travelers on their way to this monumental site, I’d spoken with a couple who’d been at the complex a few days before.

“It’s intense,” the young Australians told me, “but look up. If you look above the crowds, you’ll appreciate it more.”

And then, there we were, in a veritable traffic jam coming from the town of Siem Reap; scooters and buses and bicycles and elephants — yes, elephants, even! — entering Angkor Wat, all on the same narrow road, through the same elegant archway. “Look up,” they’d said, and there were the serene faces of the Buddha, presiding over clouds of visitors. Magnificent; literally a travel dream come true. An experience darkened with a very real example of the impact of my presence; this chunk of stone in my regretful hand.

I had not actually broken Angkor Wat. Closer examination showed that this place had been broken before —

newer concrete stuck to the place the stone had been, evidence of the last shoddy repair. It was dry as dust; my feet had merely kicked the stone free from the last visitor who’d done the exact same thing in this exact same place. The pavilion’s lower steps were a patchwork of original stone and bandages, worn smooth in places from the tread of hundreds of thousands of feet, the grip of hundreds of thousands of hands. And the ground around us was littered with bits of rock similar to the piece in my hand.

Yosemite Valley, California. Cinque Terre, Italy. All these glorious treasures worn down by our feet, and in some cases — like the prehistoric paintings found in the caves near Sarlat in France and Altamira in Spain — worn away by our very breath. These great temples at Angkor Wat, and Bagan, and Borobudur. But who can say you should not go and see these wonders?

Sustainable travel, green travel, ecotourism — these are all buzzwords to salve our feelings about traveling to delicate places. Green-washing, it’s called, and it often has nothing to do with legitimately reducing or managing the human impact of travel; it’s about marketing. The operator who booked my trip to Antarctica spelled it out with no apologies, a rare exception in a market flooded with businesses capitalizing on the branding power of sustainability.

“Eco? We don’t use the word. We burn thousands of gallons of diesel to get to the Antarctic Peninsula, and that doesn’t account for the flights to get people down to the dock, and the supplies ... to call it ecotourism would be a lie.”

So what’s a traveler to do?

If you want to lower the impact of your travel on the world, start at the very beginning of the process. If your “sustainable” tour operator offers you a

plastic bottle of water, they’re not in the business of sustainable travel. There are dozens of little details you can notice to sleuth out if your travel provider is genuinely in the business of green travel, from how much paper is used in the booking process to what’s in the parking lot. You can buy carbon offsets to mitigate the impact of your flights on the environment, and there are lots of other leads you can chase to make sure your trip is green. Organizations like Sustainable Travel International publish guidelines to help you evaluate the true green-ness of your adventures.

All this is important, but it can be exhausting and turn your desire to experience something natural or rare into a chore, sucking the fun out of the process. There’s an easier way. Focus on your own small actions, every day, not just when you’re traveling.

Travel can be a great catalyst for those actions — while traveling Viet-

nam, I was genuinely dismayed by the plastic bags littering the countryside. Since then, I’ve rarely been in a supermarket — or on a vacation — without a reusable bag. I carry a water bottle and, if I’m going to places where the tap water is suspect, a water purification kit. Unless it’s utterly impractical — and there are cases where this is true — public transportation gets my money, not the rental car companies.

It takes thoughtful research, but I try to spend my money at local businesses, avoiding multinational chains that may create jobs but actually benefit those out of the region more than they benefit local people. I strive to be a thoughtful traveler, polite, careful and observant of local rules and customs.

And I try not to break anything.

It’s that simple. Other people want to see the places we want to see, so let’s not stop them. And let’s do our best to leave them the way we found them. ♦