

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

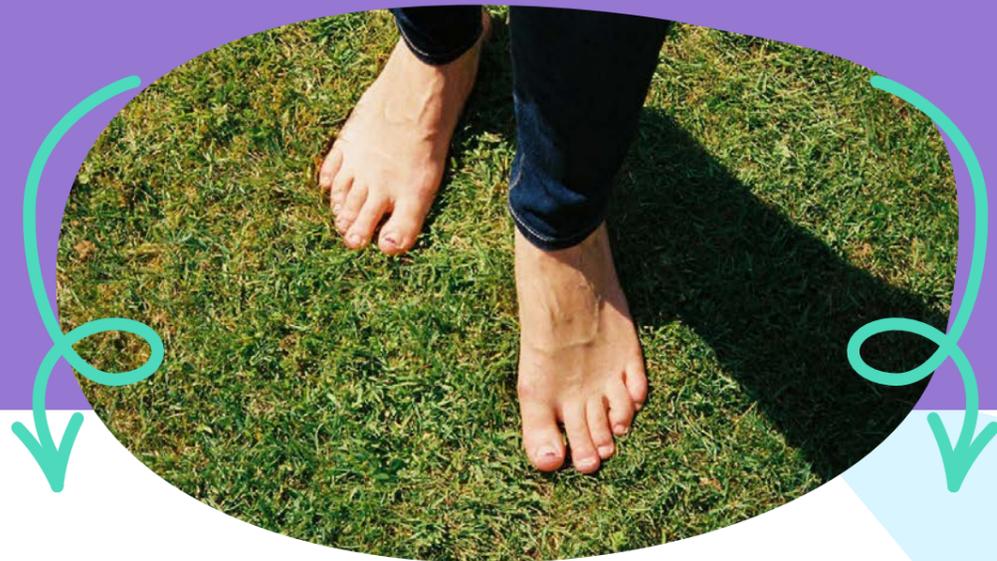
**GREEN TRAVEL
NOW MEANS
STAYING GROUNDED**



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

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With aviation halted and foreign travel restricted, people quickly found the benefits of keeping their feet on the ground and new ways to enjoy a journey

When realisation of the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic hit, overnight it became impossible to get on a plane and fly to a far-flung destination, for work or leisure. From 2019 to 2020, air travel **fell by 60%**,¹ which is an overall reduction of 2,703 million passenger trips. Last year, passenger numbers were **still down by approximately 49%**.² But the drop in people flying, and the restrictions to movement brought in to contain the pandemic, did not hamper the human desire for adventure – nor people's demand for sustainable, slow and more grounded ways of travelling.

When it comes to frequent flights, and the centrality of flying to the common image of a holiday, a critical question is how **the disruption caused by the pandemic might permanently alter behaviours and habits**.³ This question matters especially for flying because of its **oversized environmental impacts and the fact that these are experienced unequally**⁴ across and within populations around the world. Even before the pandemic took hold, flying was an activity reserved for just a small slice of humanity. Estimates vary, but approximately **80% of people have never stepped foot on a plane**.⁵ The richest 10% of humanity, however, **use 75% of all aviation fuel**.⁶ Despite this relatively small number of passengers, **aviation contributed roughly 5.9% to all the human-caused greenhouse gas emissions released in 2018**.⁷

“The UK Climate Change Committee and International Energy Agency are both clear that we need to restrict air traffic growth. Particularly of long-haul leisure, business, and short-haul flights which can be replaced by ground transport. As we will soon blow our carbon budget for 1.5°C, increased policy and regulation of the aviation industry is inevitable. The quicker we transition, the greater chance we have of ensuring a sustainable future for aviation workers.”

Finlay Asher, Safe Landing⁸

Last year, passenger numbers were still down by approximately 49%



As the pandemic spread across Europe, with planes at a standstill, people looked to the often overlooked train to help them move around and, in the process, the sleeper train emerged as a **low-carbon substitute to the excesses of budget air travel**.⁹ The Swedish government has since promised to invest in two new routes to connect the cities of **Stockholm and Malmö with Hamburg and Brussels**.¹⁰ France too has **revitalised the overnight service between Paris and Nice, with tickets as low as €19**,¹¹ and French President **Emmanuel Macron used his Bastille Day speech as an opportunity to bring the idea of sleeper trains back to the nation**.¹² He appears serious about this promise too, as **France has adopted new laws that ban short-haul domestic flights where alternative train routes are available**.¹³

Some existing routes saw such a huge surge in demand during the pandemic that capacity has been increased. The **sleeper train that runs through the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia**¹⁴ was originally supposed to be a summer service, **but due to such high demand has been upgraded to a daily service**.¹⁵ In Sweden, the birthplace of the **flygskam movement**¹⁶ (in which people aim not to fly at all – the word translates as ‘flight shame’), the demand for sleeper trains amid the global pandemic was just as high as before COVID-19 took hold. **Air travel in Sweden, on the other hand, fell by more than 80% during the pandemic**.¹⁷ The rejuvenation of the train in the Swedish public imaginary has had a cultural impact too, with **pop songs released celebrating the wonders of train travel**,¹⁸ and the term **Tågskryt**¹⁹ – literally meaning ‘train brag’ – entering the lexicon as testimony to the joy and pride of choosing the grounded travel option and a counterpoint to flygskam.



The renewed romance of twin bunks and couchettes during the pandemic could have been caused by a simultaneous shift in values. Unable to fly and travel long distances by air, people took a pause and questioned why they travelled so far for holidays, or to work, in the first place.

One **study conducted in Norway**,²⁰ one of the European countries **where people take the most flights per capita**,²¹ found that the forced disruption caused by the pandemic led one in three polling respondents to reflect on whether they should travel as much as they had before the pandemic's onset. **People realising the futility of much of their air travel was a growing trend before**,²² but may have been **accelerated by the pandemic and the widespread move to remote working and limited commuting**.²³ Another **study from Norway**²⁴ recently reported that a reduction in work-related air travel was linked with higher levels of wellbeing, **describing flying less as a ‘synergic satisfier’ that fulfilled the needs for identity, freedom, leisure, and creation**.²⁵

These sentiments are not the sole preserve of Scandinavia either. People all around the world realised over the course of the pandemic how their transport habits have an impact on the health of the planet. An **international survey**²⁶ found that for many, of the available options it would be easiest to give up flying in order to fight climate change, with 40% of Europeans agreeing, 38% of Americans and 43% of Chinese respondents. The **same survey**²⁷ found that 37% of Chinese citizens, 22% of Europeans and 22% of US Americans intended to avoid flying due to concerns over the climate crisis.

“The pandemic has been hard for us all, but one thing it showed us is perhaps we don’t need to travel far to have a good time. Forced to stay put, we turned to destinations closer-to-home for our annual break. But, as restrictions ease and travel picks up once more, how can we make sure that people continue to opt for the low carbon options? One thing we urgently need is for low-carbon options to be much cheaper, convenient and accessible. When the channel tunnel opened, the plan was to run night trains through it from all corners of the UK. This would be a game-changer in terms of our European holidays – but only if it’s affordable. The UK government needs to abandon its prioritisation of air travel and instead focus on the low carbon options with meaningful investment, to increase the number and capacity of trains and keep ticket prices low.”

Anna Hughes, director of Flight Free UK

These altered sentiments created fertile ground for demands for a better, more sustainable and grounded transport system. A recent survey conducted in the UK **found 93% of respondents**²⁸ supporting the idea of better-integrated public transport coordinated by local government authorities. Specifically relating to aviation, **89% of respondents supported the idea of raising the costs of flights, particularly for frequent fliers**.²⁹ The desire for new transport options can be understood in the wider context of people wanting to see systemic and far-reaching change after the pandemic subsides. **Nearly three-quarters (72%) of adults, from across 27 countries, said they want their life to change significantly after the pandemic, with nearly nine in ten (86%)**³⁰ saying they would like to see the entire world change significantly to become more sustainable and equitable.

As the pandemic pushed many into a state of flux, travelling differently was one way in which people could remain grounded amid the uncertainty and chaos. The sleeper train, once sidelined by the excesses of budget air travel and a cultural appetite for instant gratification, is now back in vogue thanks, in part, to the global pandemic disrupting the everyday lives of billions of people. And with concern over the climate crisis at an all time high around the world, policy and travel choices could be permanently altered.



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