

**SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL**

# **THE JOY OF SLOW TRAVEL**



**Re**  **set**

**lessons from  
lockdown**

# THE JOY OF SLOW TRAVEL



For many the pandemic slowed down everyday life, now, Slow Travel could be here for the long haul

One of the clearest signs of the global pandemic disrupting the rhythm of everyday life was in changes to travel. Millions of people either stopped travelling completely, reduced the amount they moved about or changed the type of transport they used. As people largely **stayed at home**,<sup>1</sup> they began to think about travel differently, and creative tips on how to have a **break at home**<sup>2</sup> abounded. One couple **made a beach**<sup>3</sup> in their sitting room, a UK TV personality took her family **camping in their own back garden**<sup>4</sup> and a US city authority gave tips **on having fun at home**.<sup>5</sup>

Even as the severe lockdowns ended, those who did travel further afield took breaks without flying. The **Hiking Hens**<sup>6</sup> took women in Northern Ireland hill walking for the first time, **self-guided city walks**<sup>7</sup> sprang up in Manchester, and most of Europe saw a **boom in cycling leisure trips**.<sup>8</sup> Now that people are able to move further afield once more, there's an opportunity to act on what we learned in the pandemic and keep going with the flow of slower travel.



Originally connected to the Slow Food movement, which was started by Carlo Petrini in the 1980s to resist the opening of a McDonald's in Rome, the concept of "Slow Travel" aims to defend and nurture regional traditions, gastronomic pleasure and a slower pace of life. It also has a growing focus on sustainability and self-care; carrying out activities that are healthy for the mind and body, taking time to meet people and savour sensations in an unhurried and environmentally friendly way. Slow tourism is **forecast to grow**<sup>9</sup> by an average of 10% per year, bolstered by the experience of the global pandemic, and set to become a viable alternative to more energy-intensive and stress-inducing holidays.

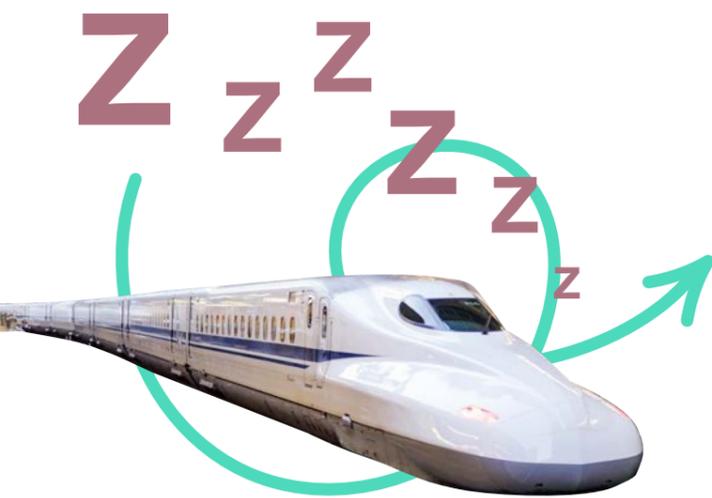
A large part of Slow Travel is about getting there sustainably, which means walking, cycling or using ground-based public transport. These greener modes of transport have long been overshadowed by the heavily subsidised airline industry. But the pandemic caused a major change in attitudes towards flying, as planes were grounded for long periods, **airlines went bust**<sup>10</sup> and airports **stood empty**<sup>11</sup> – some even taken over by local **wildlife**.<sup>12</sup> Flying was suddenly recognised as non-essential for most people, as priorities shifted to protecting key workers, friends and family by not going anywhere. The skies held only birds and the air was cleaner.

airports stood empty



Europe saw a boom in cycling leisure trips





There are also signs of a deeper systemic shift as **France has adopted new regulations**<sup>13</sup> that bans short-haul flights where train routes are available, and is developing a **network of overnight sleeper trains**.<sup>14</sup> Sweden's transport authority also announced it would invest in **new international sleeper trains**<sup>15</sup> running between Stockholm and Hamburg as well as Malmö and Brussels. Trains offer realistic international transport options in key holidaymaking regions like Europe, and within many countries, although they are hampered by airlines' tax privileges. The **flygsham movement**,<sup>16</sup> which started in 2017 in Sweden and encourages people to stop flying completely, also gained supporters worldwide. Meanwhile, travel companies have sprung up to serve no-fly itineraries, and others in regions where rail is not yet a viable option have **redesigned holidays**<sup>17</sup> to reduce their impact on the environment.

The collapse of tourism caused real damage to nations dependent on overseas visitors, throwing an estimated **100 million**<sup>18</sup> people out of work. But slower travel, much less reliant on polluting aviation, offers the tourism industry new opportunities to 'build back better'. Such alternatives gain fewer headlines, but could signal a better, more mindful way to travel. With more local tourism, and greater numbers of sustainable transport options, the concept of Slow Travel offers a viable alternative to the hassle of old-style conventional tourism and can bring more benefits to host communities. For travellers, this shift could enable more enjoyable, healthier and **less damaging trips**,<sup>19</sup> with benefits for our mental health, our intercultural knowledge and local hospitality sectors.

**"We have to completely rethink what 'going on holiday' means. For decades, travelling has been a necessary evil, rather than being an enjoyable part of the experience. I, for one, have always hated the dehumanising experience of air travel, never mind the carbon price tag. Spending hours in an airport, undressing in public and realising too late you have holes in your socks and your trousers doesn't stay up without your belt, being made to dump any forgotten liquids you may still have about your person. I'm a strong advocate of buy less, buy quality, in all aspects of consumption – and holidays don't have to be the exception to this."**

Paula Owen, founder & CEO of Green Gumption



Mass tourism often results in the concentration of visitors at a relatively small number of overburdened locations in just a few global cities or celebrated beauty spots. Here, the impact of visitors can be huge and damage the very things people go to see. In 1974, the Galapagos Islands authorities set an original target of **12,000 visits**<sup>20</sup> annually, but this was later revised to 40,000 and visitors now top 225,000. This kind of tourism is **no longer sustainable**,<sup>21</sup> and there are many **groups of people**<sup>22</sup> now rediscovering the joys of wildlife watching in their own backyard.

The impact on wellbeing also adds a vital string to Slow Travel's bow. After all, this is what a holiday is supposed to be about. The experience on arrival at a famous destination is rarely the one described in the brochure or Instagram post. Often it is crowded, expensive and feels far less special than anticipated. In contrast, during the pandemic, people discovered local places of beauty, often drawn by nature, and enjoyed them with the friends and family they were able to see. Some have predicted a more extensive global shift and **desire for more immersive and meaningful experiences**.<sup>23</sup> People want their money to go to people who need it and their **time to be spent well**.<sup>24</sup> **Companies**<sup>25</sup> are springing up in an attempt to supply this, but the industry is still in the nascent stages with huge potential to grow.



**"For me, travelling slowly is not just about the type of transport we choose, it's also about the type of experiences we engage in. As we push toward a wellbeing economy that nourishes people and planet, travel must involve deeper connection with and contribution to place and local communities – rather than simple extraction."**

Samie Blasingame, Stay Grounded

Slower travel is all about the journey, the company and the connection with place and people, finding your own way using public transport, cycling or walking, **allowing yourself to explore**,<sup>26</sup> talking to people and enjoying the local delicacies. This might mean staying with a family, learning a language or doing a course with a local craftsman. And it might mean **doing this in your own region**<sup>27</sup> or a neighbouring country, rather than on the other side of the world. This could have the effect of spreading out the impact of tourism more evenly and lightly across any given city, country or region, allowing resources and areas rich with biodiversity to recover. The pandemic has taught us the importance of those we love, of experience over stuff, and that simple pleasures are often all we need. Slow Travel feeds our need for experience, connection and adventure, and will play a crucial role in the future of tourism.

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# Re→set

## lessons from lockdown

This guide has been made possible by the support of ClimateWorks Foundation – [climateworks.org](https://climateworks.org) – and is published by the Rapid Transition Alliance – [rapidtransition.org](https://rapidtransition.org) – where you can find many of these examples explored in more detail.

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