



How to Spot the Travel Industry's eco-spin  
Lofty claims made by airlines, resorts, others often just empty promises  
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Book an airline ticket, save the planet.

Re-use the towel in your hotel, stop global warming. Rent a hybrid car, reduce our dependence on fossil fuel.

Lofty promises made by airlines peddling gimmicky carbon offsets, resorts hawking convoluted green initiatives and companies with shiny new fleets of high-maintenance cars to rent.

And empty promises.

In fact, there's no credible evidence that the greening of travel is saving the Earth. But here's what we do know. A recent Deloitte survey found that nearly half of all travelers try to be "environmentally friendly" when they're traveling, and almost a quarter of them are willing to pay more for green hotels, resorts and rental cars. Another poll by Travelocity found that almost three-quarters of active travelers were prepared to pony up more cash for a greener getaway.

In other words, travelers want to *feel* socially responsible — and the travel industry, true to character, is more than happy to take their money. Even if it's doing nothing meaningful to help the environment. There's a term for this clever repackaging of its polluting ways: greenwashing.

"Greenwashing is undeniably present in the travel business," says Hugh Hough, president of Green Team, a company that specializes in working with sustainable travel destinations and travel-related companies. "But there are steps travelers can take to distinguish travel providers who are legitimately cleaning up their act from the more cynical providers who are just cashing in on an opportunity."

### **Look at the planes — not the airline**

There's no deficit of green schemes in the airline business. The latest stunt is Virgin Atlantic's test flight of an aircraft burning a mixture of standard jet fuel and biofuel. But Michael Miller of the Orlando-based aviation consulting firm Green Skies, says a real alternative to jet fuel is a decade or more away. For an airline to be "green" today it needs to make a top-to-bottom commitment to saving the environment (a handful of carriers, among them Virgin Atlantic, FlyBe and Continental Airlines, have, he says).

But most fall short. "We are at a stage right now where companies are trying to be environmentally responsible but also business responsible," he says. "They want to have it both ways, and they're having a hard time." Until there's a credible ratings system for green airlines — Miller is planning to unveil one soon — he recommends looking at the planes, not the airline. "If you have a choice, fly on a more fuel-efficient plane, like a newer Boeing 737, instead of an MD-80," he says.



## **Find the stamp of approval**

Don't take a travel company's word when it claims to be eco-friendly. If it says it's green, check it out. "The key to differentiating sincere efforts from trend-hopping shams lies in the details," says Raphael Bejar, chief executive of Airsavings SA, which develops airline carbon offset programs. "Which carbon offset program is partnered with an established environmental group, or which car rental company's fleet has more fuel-efficient vehicles?"

For example, the U.S. Green Building Council certifies "green" buildings. Another group, the Green Building Initiative, markets a rating system called Green Globes to validate a resort's commitment to everything from greenhouse gas emissions to land-use planning. But there is no internationally recognized group that certifies travel industry products based on their environmental practices — yet.

## **See the big picture**

Hotels are figuratively falling all over themselves to out-green each other. Most of their efforts look sincere but have a negligible effect on the environment. So you're washing fewer towels? Good for you. That's not saving the planet — it's saving you money. You're recycling? Nice, but in many places, that's just following the law. You installed water-saving showerheads? Great, now can you convince those Americans who insist on taking two showers a day to cut back? Being socially responsible, say experts, isn't just about adopting one or even several "green" practices, but changing the way a resort and its guests think about the environment and their limited resources.

Alex Pettitt, host of the TV show "Mainstream Green," says some eco-resorts have really "missed the boat" when it comes to being green. "They lower their water consumption, but don't have a sustainable design," he says. "Or they'll offer eco-trips, but the facility itself is an ecological wart." Pettitt and other experts in sustainable travel say you have to look at the proverbial forest as well as the trees when you consider a hotel's environmental efforts. A laundry list of green initiatives does not make your hotel green. Instead, it's something far more difficult to pinpoint — something ingrained in the corporate culture, almost to the point where it goes without saying that everything it does takes sustainability into consideration.

## **Find out if it works**

One question you must ask yourself when booking a green vacation is: How sustainable is each component? It's easy to write off a plane running on biofuel as unworkable, at least for now. But what about the golf resort that bills itself as green but then irrigates the desert in order to offer guests a lush lawn to play on? How about the full-service hotel that practically scolds you for not reusing your towels, but then stocks its minibars with overpriced water bottled in landfill-clogging plastic? And don't even get me started on cruise ships ...

