

Ecotourism

by Linda Baxter

Imagine the scene. You're sitting in the hot sunshine beside the swimming pool of your international luxury hotel, drinking your imported gin and tonic. In front of you is the beach, reserved for hotel guests with motor boats for hire. Behind you is an 18-hole golf course, which was cleared from the native forest and is kept green by hundreds of water sprinklers. Around the hotel are familiar international restaurant chains and the same shops that you have at home. You've seen some local people - some of them sell local handicrafts outside the hotel. You bought a small wooden statue and after arguing for half an hour you only paid a quarter of what the man was asking. Really cheap!

Is this your idea of heaven or would you prefer something different?

Nowadays, many of us try to live in a way that will damage the environment as little as possible. We recycle our newspapers and bottles, we take public transport to get to work, we try to buy locally produced fruit and vegetables and we stopped using aerosol sprays years ago. And we want to take these attitudes on holiday with us. This is why alternative forms of tourism are becoming more popular all over the world.

But what is ecotourism?

There are lots of names for these new forms of tourism: responsible tourism, alternative tourism, sustainable tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, educational tourism and more. Ecotourism probably involves a little of all of them. Everyone has a different definition but most people agree that ecotourism must:

- 1 conserve the wildlife and culture of the area.
- 2 benefit the local people and involve the local community
- 3 be sustainable, that is make a profit without destroying natural resources
- 4 provide an experience that tourists want to pay for.

So for example, in a true ecotourism project, a nature reserve allows a small number of tourists to visit its rare animals and uses the money that is generated to continue with important conservation work. The local people have jobs in the nature reserve as guides and wardens, but also have a voice in how the project develops. Tourists stay in local houses with local people, not in specially built hotels. So they experience the local culture and do not take precious energy and water away from the local population. They travel on foot, by boat, bicycle or elephant so that there is no pollution. And they have a special experience that they will remember all of their lives.

This type of tourism can only involve small numbers of people so it can be expensive. But you can apply the principles of ecotourism wherever you go for your holiday. Just remember these basic rules.

- Be prepared. Learn about the place that you're going to visit. Find out about its culture and history. Learn a little of the native language, at least basics like 'Please', 'Thank you', and 'Good Morning'. Think of your holiday as an opportunity to learn something.
- Have respect for local culture. Wear clothes that will not offend people. Always ask permission before you take a photograph. Remember that you are a visitor.
- Don't waste resources. If the area doesn't have much water, don't take two showers every day.
- Remember the phrase "Leave nothing behind you except footprints and take nothing away except photographs." Take as much care of the places that you visit as you take of your own home. · Don't buy souvenirs made from endangered animals or plants.
- Walk or use other non-polluting forms of transport whenever you can.

Be flexible and keep a sense of humour when things go wrong.

Stay in local hotels and eat in local restaurants. Buy local products whenever possible and pay a fair price for what you buy.

Choose your holiday carefully. Don't be afraid to ask the holiday company about what they do that is 'eco'. Remember that 'eco' is very fashionable today and a lot of holidays that are advertised as ecotourism are not much better than traditional tourism.

But before you get too enthusiastic, think about how you are going to get to your dream 'eco' paradise. Flying is one of the biggest man-made sources of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Friends of the Earth say that one return flight from London to Miami puts as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as the average British car driver produces in a year. So don't forget that you don't have to fly to exotic locations for your 'eco' holiday. There are probably places of natural beauty and interest in your own country that you've never visited.