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## Traveling More Sustainably During a Pandemic



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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As the pandemic stretches on, staying home is not always an option. Even if they are traveling less, more and more people are finding it necessary to travel during the pandemic. But thanks to COVID, traveling has gotten less sustainable. Naturally, COVID safety tops travelers' list of concerns. Unfortunately, many of the things we do to stay safe when we travel increase the carbon footprint of our trips. As people prioritize safety over sustainability, the bright side is that people are becoming more aware of the tradeoffs they are making.

### Sustainable Travel Survey

#### What Do You Think?

**Would you give or accept a lab-grown diamond as an engagement ring?**

- Yes
- Maybe
- No
- No opinion

NEXT

A recent [survey](#) conducted by carbon-offset company [Cool Effect](#) looked at the impact of the pandemic on travelers' choices about sustainability. Of the 2,017 Americans who took the random double-opt-in survey, 58% had traveled since the start of the pandemic. While those who travel are more likely to complete an opt-in survey than those who stayed home, it's clear that many people are still traveling. And of those survey respondents who traveled, 70% admitted they've been traveling with less consideration for their carbon impact.

## Safety First

Many of the ways that travel has become less sustainable are directly related to safety precautions such as using more disposable items and more chemicals for cleaning. Pre-pandemic, many people were trying to reduce or eliminate their use of [single-use plastic](#) at home and while traveling. Sometimes going as far as bringing their own flatware [on flights](#). During the pandemic, 68% of travelers reverted to single-use plastic while on the road. A similar number admit to going through more disposable masks – this is presumably compared to how many they use when at home, since few Americans wore [disposable masks](#) at all pre-pandemic. Nearly 60% used more [disposable gloves](#) and slightly more than half of travelers increased their use of hand sanitizers during their trip.

The impacts of this extra waste are significant. The U.S. generated nearly [35.7 tons of plastic waste](#) in 2018, the last year for which data is available. It's estimated that the pandemic may have [increased plastic waste](#) by 20%. But at least for now, the disposable masks and extra cleaning supplies are necessary. They may even be the most environmentally friendly option when compared to the [environmental cost of getting sick](#).



Slow travel, such as by train, is more sustainable than flying if you have the time.

Photo: [Anna Shvets](#)

Bedding

## Carbon Offsets

Even if you're stuck with disposable utensils for your next trip, you can reduce your carbon footprint without increasing your COVID risk. Many airlines have established partnerships that make offsetting your flight's emissions easy by allowing you to fold the expense into your ticket purchase or selling offsets during the flight along with other SkyMall goodies. Even if your airline doesn't have a carbon offset program, or if you are not traveling by plane, you can [purchase carbon offsets](#) on your own.

More travelers are getting on board with offsets than ever before. More than half of the 2021 survey respondents (57%) have purchased a carbon offset compared to only 44% in last year's survey.

A quarter of those who said they had not purchased offsets were unsure about what offsets are. Their confusion is understandable. The concept is simple: Those who cannot avoid carbon emissions from a particular activity pay money towards an environmental project that will eliminate that amount of carbon emissions elsewhere. But in practice, figuring out which offset program to support and how much to buy can be confusing.

Of respondents who reported they would not buy a carbon offset (or would not buy one again), 29% were unsure where the money would go and 27% didn't know how purchasing an offset would help. Those travelers who are concerned about where the money goes are wise to wonder. Carbon offset programs are not without [controversy](#), and not all programs are created equal. Even among respectable programs, there are two very [different approaches](#): true carbon offsets and energy certificates. If you want your offset purchases to be more than just a feel-good exercise, you [need to research](#) them carefully.

## Other Sustainable Strategies

Offsets are only one of [many options](#) for traveling more lightly on the Earth. [Slow travel](#) is more sustainable if you have the time. Where possible, avoid cruise ships and airplanes in favor of ferries and trains. When you reach your destination, choose [sustainable lodgings](#); support small, [local businesses](#) in your destination rather than big chains; and choose your [souvenirs](#) carefully.