

Trek with a clear conscience

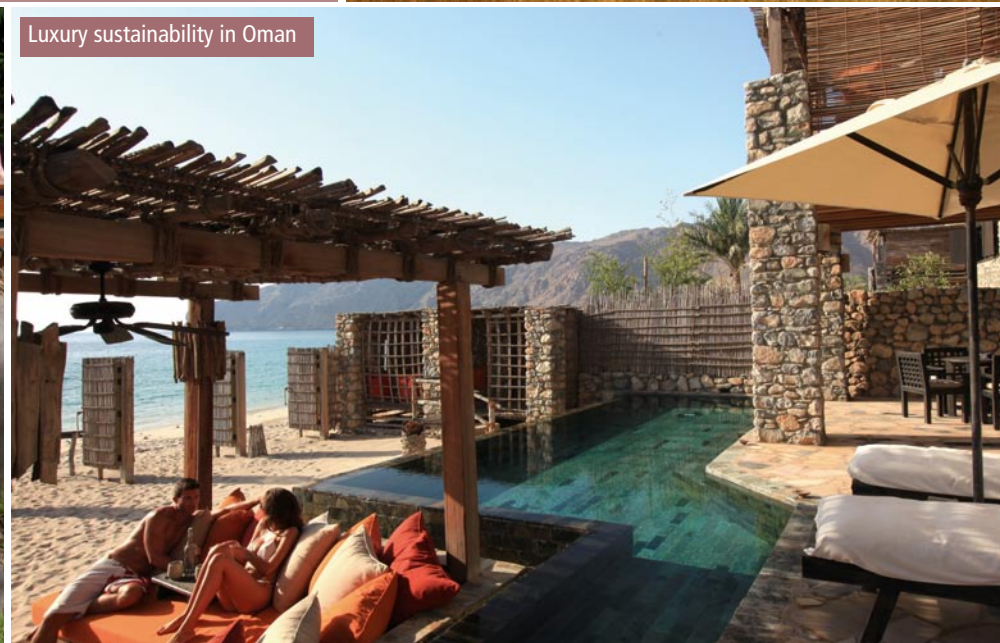


Eco-travel

THE WORLD



Luxury sustainability in Oman



like us on facebook/tntmagazine

BIGTRIP

A little respect

Eco-travel isn't just trendy; it's something we should all be striving for as we wander the globe. Here's where to start

WORDS LAURA CHUBB

Unfortunately, in many cases eco-travel has become more of a marketing tool than a commitment to sustainable tourism, displaying all the hallmarks of trendiness by being more concerned with style over substance. It seems as though anyone can build a tree house nowadays and call it an eco-lodge, whether it is truly environmentally friendly or not.

And as ever-more corners of the world open up to tourism, it appears inevitable that travellers' footsteps will become ever-more keenly felt. Just think of the story we reported last week about rare tarsiers in the Philippines committing suicide under the glare of tourists' flashbulbs'. Though you might like to think that people know better in this day and age, there is plenty of evidence that they do not.

One of the best ways to limit the impact of rogue operators and irresponsible governance is for you to set the standards – only take your business to places that leave you with a clear conscience.

Here are some of our favourite eco-experiences from the road. Not an exhaustive list, but it makes a good place to start.

ECO-TREKKING

NEPAL

Fortunately, one of the best places in the world for trekking is also one of the best for doing it responsibly. Eco Trek Nepal is something of a one-stop-shop for ethical treks around the must-do Annapurna range, and also offers adventures in nearby India, Tibet and Bhutan.

HOW GREEN? The operator's eco-camps rely on recyclable accessories, as well as using non-polluting fuel supplies and bringing back non-degradable materials from the trip for recycling. The company also supports a cleaning campaign that removes waste from the mountains.

SUSTAINABILITY Guides are employed from the local community to ensure sensitivity to local customs and culture. The company also purchases local products where possible to give back to the economy.

DO THIS Eco Trek Nepal offers a boggling array of adventures, from scaling peaks to jungle safaris. You can choose between camping or teahouse trekking (the latter guarantees you a comfortable bed and a hot shower), and

remote trekking is also a specialty, allowing you to discover the hidden Himalayas.

ALSO AVAILABLE Trekking and mountain-biking in Tibet; exploring the mountain hamlets of Bhutan. Tours range from four to more than 20 days; prices will vary. You should also check out Imaginative Traveller's Annapurna Community Lodge Trek, where you stay at locally run lodges in the area's more remote, untouristed parts. Imaginative Traveller offers trips all over the world – from South Africa to Burma – and keeps group sizes small to limit environmental disturbance. (ecotrek.com.np; imaginative-traveller.co.uk from £495pp.)

THAILAND

Pooh Eco-Trekking in northern Thailand has garnered an exemplary reputation for authentic and respectful hill tribe treks – to the extent that rogue operators have started trading under similar names to benefit from Pooh's repute.

The man himself (that'd be Pooh) warns that 'eco-trekking' is often used merely as a marketing term in Thailand, and that many treks visit hill tribe villages that exist for tourists rather than being genuine local communities.

Pooh offers a more 'real' experience, taking small groups further into the hills and using local guides with in-depth knowledge of the tribes and their environment. (Two to three days from £65pp, pooh-ecotrekking.com.)

ECO-SAFARI

AFRICA

An African safari is one of the most thrilling experiences a traveller can have – but you want to make sure that you don't get close enough to disturb the wildlife.

SUSTAINABILITY Rainbow Tours works with African camps and lodges that have been certified by the FTSA, the South African fair trade in tourism body. Operators have been chosen for their "groundbreaking contributions to sustainability", which include using solar-panel-powered lighting and making hefty donations to local communities (including, in the instance of the base camp in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve, providing school bursaries for the children of staff).



Find a farmstay in Ibiza



ALSO AVAILABLE It's also worth noting that Rainbow Tours operate in South America, allowing you to go trekking all over the continent with a clear conscience. Check out the Amazon tours in particular; prices vary. (rainbowtours.co.uk.)

Back to Africa, and Mumbo Island on Lake Malawi is highly recommended. The island is uninhabited by people, save for a community-run eco-camp complete with solar-power bucket showers, wind-up torches and compost drop loos.

Each private tent features a locally carved bed, reed-walled showers and hand-stitched hammocks, all of which have been lovingly created by local hands using sustainable materials.

It's an incredible chill-out spot, albeit one punctuated with the odd jump when a 1.2-metre-long monitor lizards shuffle over. You'll also spot blue crabs, acid green vine snakes and pied kingfishers. (From £1080pp, kayakafrica.net.)

One more place we can't recommend enough is the Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Project in The Gambia. Sleep in a safari tent among baboon-infested trees and take a tour of the three islands home to rehabbing chimps, many of whom were abused in the pet and entertainment industries. Only eight people can stay at a time, so it feels exclusive, and local villagers are employed as guides. The project also teaches conservation to local communities, preventing the spread of poaching, etc. (From £100pn, chimp rehab.com.)

ECO-DIGS

SPAIN

Fancy sleeping in an Afghani or Mongolian yurt, but can't be arsed with the long-haul flight? Then get yourself to Andalucia, Spain, where the Hoopoe Yurt Hotel offers



Moroccan mountain lodge



a number of themed yurts in a private meadow setting, complete with ecological loos and solar power. Nearby are old villages, dramatic gorges and mountains, plus the kitesurfing mecca of Tarifa is just a two-hour drive away. (From £108pn, yurthotel.com.)

MOROCCO

Kasbah du Toubkal is a mountain retreat perched in the Atlases, within the tiny village of Achein, giving a taste of remote Moroccan life. Local labour and



Lovely Mumbo island on Lake Malawi

environmentally friendly building materials have created a lodge decorated in the tradition of the local Berber community. Local guides take you mountain trekking and on walking tours of the village; it doesn't get much more removed from tourist-saturated Marrakech than this. (From £133pn, kasbahdutoubkal.com.)

OMAN

It ain't cheap – and that's an understatement – but the Six Senses Hideaway at Zighy Bay is one of the most incredible eco-stays anyone is ever likely to have. Within the secluded bay, enclosed by mountains on one side and the Gulf on the other, you'll stay in a mock Omani village – only one where your villa comes with a private infinity pool. The resort processes its own water, which is provided in reusable glass bottles, and has a vegetable garden to help stock the kitchen. Guests are provided with bikes to cycle around the grounds, and you can even volunteer to help out with rebuilding Zighy Village, which lies further down the beach. And just when you thought it couldn't get any more awesome, for a (not small) fee you can arrive in the resort by paraglider, and will be met by a private butler when you touch down on the beach. (Packages from £560pn, sixsenses.com.)

FARMSTAYS

IBIZA

No, we've not gone mad – far, far away from the clubs, this farmstay on the north side of the island will show you a very different Ibiza. Stay in an apartment in a restored 400-year-old farmhouse, tend the vegetable garden and borrow a bike to explore the surrounding countryside. Solar energy, rainwater collection and recycling give the green credentials. (From £120pn, canmarti.com.)

ITALY

An eco-friendly tour geared towards foodies, 'Slow food, slow foot' guides you through the rolling hills and secluded villages of southern Italy, providing plenty of opportunity to walk off the masses of local, homegrown fare you'll be stuffing in along the way. Cooking classes are included, and you'll stay at a variety of ranches and farms. (From £560pp for five days, walkbasilicata.it.)

SOUTH AMERICA

Fancy living at an old hacienda in Ecuador, or ranching in Chilean Patagonia? Check out southamerica-inside.com, which partners with NGOs, small businesses, local farms and schools to provide an immersive experience, whereby you'll live within, and contribute to, the local community. The organisation specialises in farm stays in off-the-beaten-path areas, promising "a different way to discover the world". (From £210pp for two weeks.)

WWOOF

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms works with hosts all over the globe to offer travellers a chance to help work land in return for a roof over their heads and hot meals. You're not expected to know much about farming when you arrive, but you are expected to learn and graft. All hosts are certified as farming using ecologically sound methods. Prices vary according to region. (wwwoof.org) ■

Photos: Malawi Tourism, Thinkstock

CLOSER TO HOME

Here are some of the UK's best eco-stays:

CHEWTON GLEN TREE-HOUSE SUITES, HAMPSHIRE

New for 2012, these luxury tree-house suites offer panoramic views of the New Forest from floor-to-ceiling glass windows and the opportunity to shower under the stars. They claim to boast "impeccable eco-credentials".

See: chewtonglen.com; prices available once open.

TREE-HOUSES AT FAIR OAK FARM

Hidden in the trees on Fair Oak Farm in East Sussex, a collection of eco-lodge tree-houses offer a private stay in the midst of the Sussex countryside. Built from sustainable timber, the farm has also implemented a wildlife protection plan in the area, which includes the setting up of rare owl enticement nests and bird boxes.

See: fair oak farm.co.uk; from £75pp for two nights.



ECO-LODGES IN DEVON

Stay in a cute wooden eco-lodge on Wheatland Farm in Devon, where your holiday home is powered entirely by renewable energy (much of it from the farm's own wind turbine). Also a proud winner of gold approval from the Green Tourism Business Scheme and Devon Wildlife Trust.

See: wheatlandfarm.co.uk; from £70pp for two nights.

PRESELI VENTURE ECO-LODGE, WALES

Get out of the trees and stay in an eco-lodge on the Welsh coast. This energy-saving 'adventure lodge' in Pembrokeshire is not only a sustainable place to stay, but also offers activities including coasteering, sea kayaking and surfing.

See: preseliventure.co.uk; from £39pppn.



NEXT WEEK

New for 2012: Where you'll be travelling next year