



FREQUENT FLIER

Passing Through but Leaving a Lasting Impression

By JEFF GREENWALD
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Travel often turns my expectations upside down. In 1999, I visited Iran with a small group of Americans to watch a total eclipse of the sun. On the afternoon of the event, I found myself alone in Esfahan's vast Khomeini Square: one American among 50,000 Iranians.



Dwayne Newton

Jeff Greenwald is executive director of Ethical Traveler. He says ethical travel includes respecting local customs and bargaining fairly.

Just before the sun disappeared, a small but noisy demonstration erupted about 50 yards from me. American flags were set ablaze, and fists pounded the air.

As TV cameras rushed in for better shots, something unexpected happened. All the Iranians sitting nearby rose to their feet, and formed a protective circle around me.

A small boy took hold of my finger; a young man placed his hand on my shoulder. One older man, with a black turban and thick white beard, leaned toward me with a disgusted expression.

"You see those people?" He pointed at the demonstrators. "They should get a job."

Aldous Huxley was right. To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.

When strangers in strange lands impress you with unexpected care and generosity, you start to wonder about your own impact as a traveler: how much your dollars benefit local businesses, what your visit does to the environment and how your behavior — your ability to listen, as well as to speak — affects the world's impression of who you are.

Ethical travel is the natural outgrowth of these questions. It's being mindful of what everyone who travels, for business or pleasure, should remember. This includes knowing where your money is going, respecting local customs, bargaining fairly and remembering to pack your sense of humor.

On a recent trip to Laos, I forgot mine. I spent 10 minutes arguing about being charged double the paltry local price for a ferry ride.

Travel itself is now the biggest industry on earth; even bigger than oil. As a result, travelers have the power to affect global policy in very tangible ways. I began to

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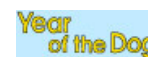


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understand this in 1996, when [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#), the democratically elected and still-imprisoned leader of Burma, asked tourists to avoid her own country.

What we do as travelers really does matter. I remember being stunned when I learned that the faux pizzas and French fries I was eating on a trek to Everest Base Camp were contributing to Nepal’s deforestation, since extra firewood was needed to cook these tourist favorites. After that, I stuck with dal bhat, rice with lentils and veggies, and came to prefer that hearty dish over those other empty calories.

Sometimes I’ve had to give up more than pizza. A couple of months ago, I was scuba [diving](#) in Fiji. As my local guides and I motored out to a reef, we spied an orange buoy in the water. The buoy, we knew, marked a longline: an illegal foreign [fishing](#) line, hundreds of miles long, strung with thousands of hooks. These “walls of death” catch everything — dolphins, sea turtles and exotic fish.

Instead of diving, the Fijians and I spent the afternoon destroying as much of the longline as we could. Not the leisurely day I’d anticipated, but far more satisfying than seeing an empty reef on my next visit.

And that, I guess, is the whole idea of ethical travel: making sure there are great places to come back to.

*By Jeff Greenwald, as told to Christopher Elliott.
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