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The Big Question: What is 'greenwashing' in travel and how to spot it?

Eco-friendly. Green. Sustainable. They're buzzwords that appeal to travellers who are concerned about the planet. But what do they really mean, and how can we tell if a hotel or tour operator is *really* taking positive action to address the climate crisis?



The practice of "greenwashing" refers to when a hotel, tour operator or destination makes a lot of noise about being environmentally sustainable, but doesn't actually do much about it. "While 'greenwashing' can sometimes be challenging to spot, there are certain signs to look out for, including vague or unsupported claims of being eco-friendly or 'green', without specific details like measurements or year-over-year comparisons," says Michelle Woodley, president of Beyond Green, a global portfolio of sustainable hotels. "For example, a statement such as, 'We believe in reducing single-use plastic,' is very different than 'In 2023, we reduced our single-use plastics by 25 per cent'."

<https://www.exploretravel.com.au/story/8654294/how-to-know-if-your-travel-is-genuinely-sustainable/?cs=31442>

Amanda Ho, CEO of Regenerative Travel, an association of sustainable travel companies, says it's important for savvy travellers to do some research before they book. "If a property is committed to regenerative values, they will be proudly sharing it," she says. "Increasingly, we are seeing properties monitor their impact with data."

There is a lack of clear, easily understandable information on sustainable travel options, Ho says. It's not as simple as looking for one industry-recognised symbol or label. Beyond Green developed its own criteria based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and other industry-best practices. It conducts inspections of member hotels every 24 months to ensure that each is "walking the walk" across the three key pillars of sustainable tourism - Nature, Culture and Community - while also assessing how they actively track, monitor and manage their sustainability performance over time.

Arguably, one of the best indicators of an organisation's commitment to sustainability is B Corp status, says Gayle Higginbotham, Africa travel specialist and founder of Oculus Travel. "There is a rigorous process to qualify for B Corp status and ongoing reporting and it's globally recognised," she says.

Higginbotham works only with lodges and partners that operate according to sustainable principles. An easy test she uses is whether the property serves takeaway coffee in disposable cups or water in plastic bottles.

"For a lodge or hotel, this sounds like a simple task," she says. "However, it requires thought and commitment and implementing systems and processes, which many operators less committed to operating sustainably would not bother to do."

Ultimately, travellers have enormous power to champion sustainable practices through their actions and spending choices. Higginbotham says you can make a difference in easy ways such as not touching wildlife, being aware of the waste we generate and respecting local customs.

"To be a regenerative traveller, ask yourself three questions when you're on your next trip," Ho says. "First, how can you support the local community through your choice of hotel or experiences? Second, how can you slow down to embody the essence of the place? And finally, what can you learn and share with the locals that you meet?"