

The face of sustainable travellers is evolving: Here's how

By [Clinton Thom](#)

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The face of sustainable tourism has changed dramatically over the past few decades. What was once a fringe sub-category typically associated with young backpackers is now very much in the mainstream, and has been for some time. Today, hotels and other accommodation providers around the world know that most visitors expect some level of sustainability.



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In fact, Booking.com's 2023 [Sustainable Travel Report](#) found that 76% of travellers want to make their trips more sustainable. While many point to barriers of cost and opportunity preventing them from doing so, the fact that the demand for sustainable travel is so high illustrates how many people recognise its importance.

But it's also important to remember that the needs, wants, and expectations of sustainable travellers are constantly evolving. It's critical, therefore, that organisations in the sector stay on top of the latest trends and ensure that they provide guests and clients with the kinds of experiences that will keep them coming back time and time again.

Taking self-responsibility seriously

One significant example of the evolutionary shifts taking place in sustainable travel, and which players in the hospitality industry can easily jump onto, is the growing degree to which travellers take responsibility for their own sustainability. The Booking.com report mentioned above, for example, found that guests increasingly turn off the air conditioning and other appliances in their rooms and reuse towels. It also found that 55% now carry reusable water bottles when they travel.

Accommodation providers can cater to this desire for self-sustainability in several ways. They can, for example, provide guests with information about which appliances produce the most energy savings when turned off. They could also ensure that guests have convenient ways of refilling and refrigerating their reusable water bottles.

Another area where travellers increasingly take their sustainability seriously is how they travel around a destination. Accommodation providers can cater to this by informing guests how to access local public transport options and also by pointing them to attractions that are within walking or cycling distance or are near public transport hubs.

Sustainable luxury

Another big ongoing evolution in sustainable travel is the convergence of sustainability and luxury. That may seem odd if you still conflate luxury with conspicuous consumption, but sustainability is now something that many will pay extra (even if it's just a little) for.

Herbs, fruits and vegetables that are grown on-site, or nearby by small-scale empowerment projects, and cooked according to seasonal availability now trump having a wide array of products from around the world on hand at all times. Similarly, electric vehicle (EV) airport shuttles, on-site solar panels (instead of diesel generators), and environmentally friendly linens can all be status symbols for a certain kind of traveller.

And far from old-school perceptions of sustainable travellers roughing it in basic accommodation, these shifts don't mean any sacrifice in comfort. Everything still feels, and is, luxurious - it's just better for the planet and local communities alike.

Bleisure and sustainability

That desire to make existing travel experiences more sustainable has extended to some of the newer ones too. Post-pandemic, one of the big trends to emerge was combining business with leisure (Bleisure). The trend, which has been embraced by a wave of digital nomads; families looking to maximise their travel opportunities; and organisations looking to bring together employees and other stakeholders, is increasingly being married with sustainability too.

On one hand, that means bleisure travellers will look for the business part of their stay to have the same level of sustainability as the leisure part. But it also means that they'll want business and leisure options that allow them to actively give back as they enjoy their stays.

Facing the future

Looking into the future, sustainable travel will continue to evolve. As artificial intelligence starts to become more capable, for example, many providers may be tempted to adopt it for a variety of functions. If they do so at the cost of human jobs, particularly in a country with unemployment levels as high as South Africa's, it will cost their ability to demonstrate sustainability.

Ultimately then, as sustainable travel continues to evolve, it will be important for players in the travel sector not to get caught up in every single emerging trend. That's as true for accommodation providers as it is for everyone else. What they should do instead is look for the models of sustainability that work for them, their guests, and the markets they operate in.

Get that right and they'll be able to naturally evolve with shifts in sustainable travel rather than trying to play catchup.

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