

Pursuits

Travel

This Is How Tourism Must Shift to Actually Address Climate Change

A new report released during COP27 reveals that only one scenario could possibly reduce emissions in time.



Iberostar Cozumel has ambitious climate plans, including a strict no-single-use plastic policy. *Source: Iberostar*

By Lebawit Lily Girma

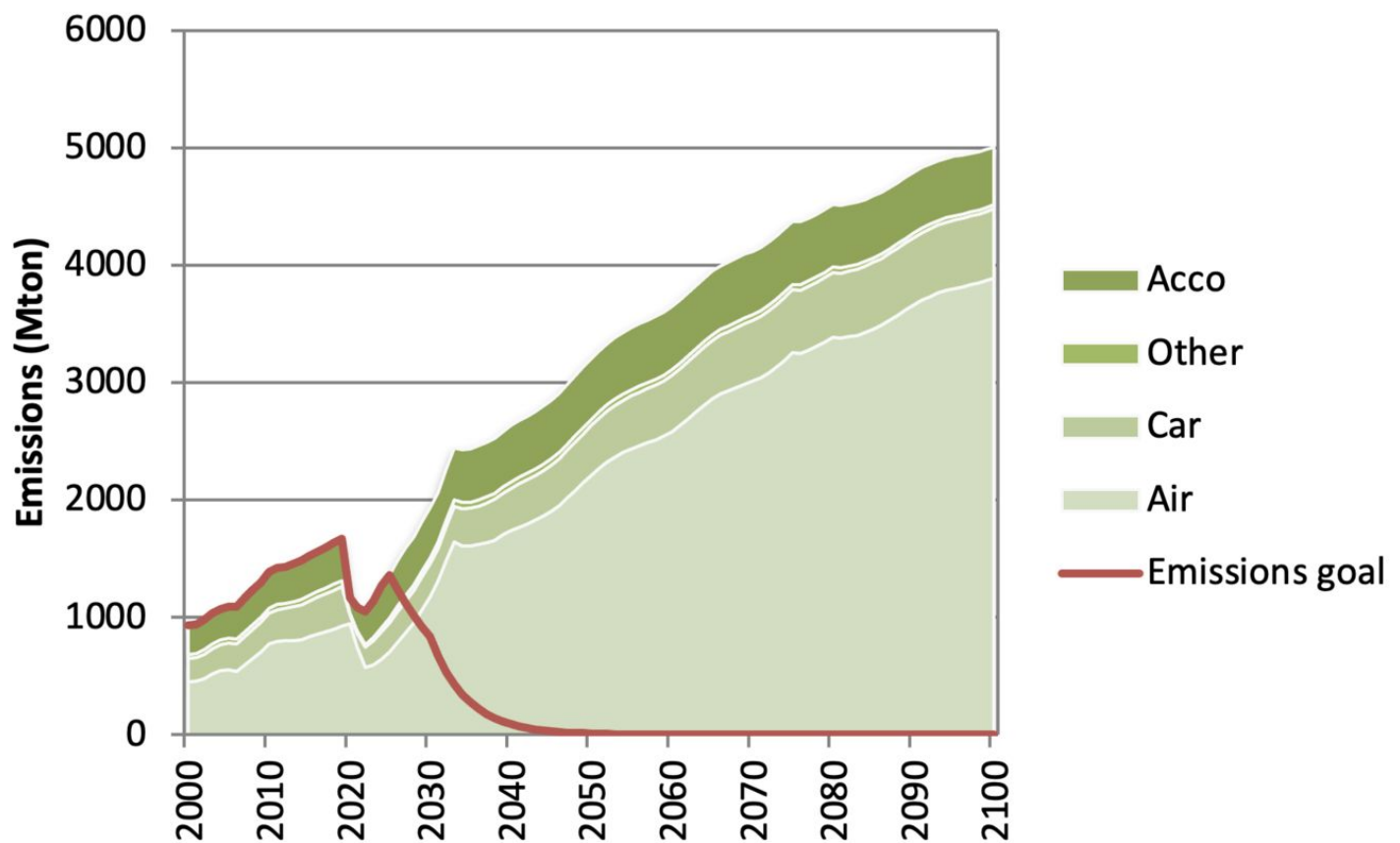
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If you're concerned about climate change and wondering whether you should travel to far-flung places as often as you used to before the Covid-19 pandemic, it's a valid question. You're not going to like the answer.

An estimated 11% of global greenhouse gas emissions are due to tourism, and that's predicted to double by 2050, the year scientists have forecast as the tipping point for all sorts of ecological disasters. By then, our planet will have warmed 1.5C (2.7F) above preindustrial times. By the end of the century, the figure looks to be 2C (3.6F), with that half-degree making a huge difference. If emissions are left unchecked, this warming will accelerate, bringing forth a distinctly heightened level of cataclysmic weather patterns.

So how can tourism fix its emissions problem? It just needs 100% sustainable aviation fuels by 2050 to power air travel. It can grow, mostly by increasing the share of short-haul trips over time—from 69% in 2019 to 81% by 2050—while global travelers (that's you) rein in the number of long-distance flights you take every year ... until at least 2050.

Once everybody sticks to this impossible-to-imagine scenario, you can return to jetting back and forth across the globe with impunity. You could do it even more if you like.



Tourism as usual would double emissions from it by 2050. *Source: Travel Foundation, Envision 2030 Report*

Those are the unsurprising, yet troubling, findings of a report from the Travel Foundation released in alignment with COP27 in collaboration with the Centre of Expertise Leisure Tourism and Hospitality, Breda University of Applied Sciences, European Tourism Futures Institute, and Netherlands Board of Tourism and Conventions. It was shared exclusively with Bloomberg ahead of its release on Monday.

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The longest-distance flights are defined as round trips of more than 9,941 miles—e.g., New York to Cairo, or London to Bangkok. They are the hardest to decarbonize, the report explains, which is why they must remain static at 2019 levels for the next 27 years in order for tourism to reach net zero. (Net zero means to curb emissions as close to zero as possible.) This is despite simultaneously increasing other modes of low-emission transport, such as electric cars, high-speed trains and hydrogen buses.

“Our hope is to spark further dialogue and to help destinations and businesses recognize that the business-as-usual scenario is not all that likely in the future,” says Jeremy Sampson, chief executive officer of the Travel Foundation. He notes that the report’s scenario comes with its own pain points and is not all that realistic.

The report focuses on movement from Point A to Point B and doesn’t take into account other huge sources of emissions in the travel industry, such as cruises or embodied carbon in hotel construction.



The Grand Palace in Bangkok will see far fewer tourists from outside Asia if the report's findings are followed. *Photographer: JACK TAYLOR/AFP*

How It Was Calculated

Paul Peeters, professor of sustainable tourism transport at Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, performed simulations for the report using the “Global Tourism and Transport Dynamic Model” tech platform he developed in 2017, plugging in data he’s been gathering since 2005.

Peeters’s model considers the overall tourism industry, including all overnight trips—defined as at least one night away from home (international or domestic) for the purpose of vacation, business or visiting friends and relatives. It addresses up to 20 distances traveled, accommodation providers and major transport modes, minus cruise ships, through 2100. Seven optional factors are thrown into the simulation: sustainable aviation fuel, electrification and energy efficiency, infrastructure improvements, taxes, offsetting, travel behavior, and travel speed.

The first three (fuel, energy efficiency, infrastructure) reduced emissions the most, but even maximizing them was not sufficient to reach net zero by 2050 when accounting for the certainty that tourism will grow. Even maximizing all seven factors proved insufficient, Peeters says; hence the need to cap the growth of long-haul aviation at 2019 levels.

“Technically, it can be done,” says Peeters. “The economy is growing. Your freedom to travel is basically the same, but the distances change. You should not fly six times per year from the US to Europe.”

Left unchecked, long-haul aviation is expected to quadruple its emissions by 2050 to reach 41% of total tourism emissions, the report shows. As it stands, long-haul flights are not yet back at 2019 levels, Peeters said in a statement.



Refueling an Airbus A350 passenger plane with sustainable aviation fuel, a key necessity for travel to reach net zero. *Photographer: Nathan Laine/Bloomberg*

The larger takeaway of the report: It may be possible to act now, but the near-impossible extremes required to reach net zero by 2050 simply confirm that the tourism industry faces crisis.

Every sector of travel would have to throw all it has behind climate action without delay to make a dent in emissions. Travelers will need to think harder and care more about how and where they travel. Like most industries, tourism remains in slow motion as it begins to tackle its negative impact on a planet whose health is vital to it.

How This Affects You Now

After 18 years of relative inertia since the tourism industry made its first climate promises, 300 initial signatories, including the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the World Travel & Tourism Council, committed to the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism in 2021 to halve tourism's emissions by 2030 and eliminate them to near zero by 2050. This is in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement among 196 countries to reduce global warming, and to which the US just recommitted.

As this push accelerates, travel businesses and destinations are beginning to change how they operate. They intend to lead travelers—you—to experience places and activities differently.

Major holiday and tour operator TUI, for instance, began offering new sleeper train trips as a substitute for six short-haul routes in Europe. Tour operator Sunweb, in the Netherlands, is also focused on offering overnight train trips to Belgium and the French Alps this winter and to the south of France in summer 2023.



Sunweb is working with European Sleeper, which aims to build a network of night trains. *Source: Sunweb*

On a far more micro level, Ziptrek is the first adventure outfitter in Queenstown, New Zealand, to offer consumer-facing labeling to show customers what their emissions would be when selecting among

competing zipline tours. “It’s the right thing to do, and it’s the trajectory of tourism,” says Trent Yeo, executive director at Ziptrek Ecotours.

This is admirable. When it comes to climate change, we’re all in this together. But it’s minuscule in the face of the systemic changes governments and tourism boards need to enact. (Remember, nobody gets to New Zealand without taking a long-haul flight.)

The trick for the traveler will be to learn about your carbon footprint, if you don’t already understand it, and to be able to sort among companies that are making a real effort versus those that are greenwashing their way into your travel decisions.

Booking.com, powered by climate-tech platform Choose, will soon show carbon emission listings on flight and hotel results, allowing travelers to filter lower carbon emission results from a range, for instance. “It is to take it one step further and include individual travelers, who are the bookers, to understand their carbon footprints early on in the decision process,” says Andreas Slettvoll, CEO of Choose.

Iberostar Group released its own ambitious decarbonization roadmap on Nov. 8 at COP27, which is partly marketing (it wants 60% of guests to choose the brand for its sustainability actions by 2025) and partly action (a 2030 net zero goal and nature-based carbon compensation projects at its 97 resorts across four continents).

Eco-Efficient Marketing

Because consumers alone will not solve anything, governments, hotels, tour operators, cruise operators and the aviation industry need to lead with additional policies to encourage better decision-making.

To that end, the Netherlands is considering an eco-efficiency index of its visitors, says Ewout Versloot, a sustainability strategist working with the tourism board. This means dividing the amount of revenues a tourist brings in by the amount of carbon dioxide emissions the tourist triggered traveling there. That index would indicate which long-haul market the government should direct marketing dollars toward to help reduce emission impacts.

“If we realize that we might be less dependent on long-haul source markets, maybe we can identify those markets that might be most valuable to us,” Versloot adds, noting this approach is part of the Netherlands’ road map to climate neutral tourism that was released in September.

Peeters agrees. Finding markets that are a little shorter haul is desirable; even a 10% reduction in emissions is a welcome achievement for destinations, he says. Tour operators might also change the destinations they offer, particularly to travelers generally focused on booking any “sun and sea” experience rather than a specific place.



Solar panels being installed in West Africa's Cape Verde. *Photographer: Chris Willan/The Travel Foundation*

Winners and Losers

This sort of destination picking required by the Travel Foundation's report brings up the inevitable inequities that tourism-dependent destinations and regions in the Global South would face—for instance, Barbados, Indonesia and Thailand, as well as all of Africa and South America. When richer countries are the main culprits in emitting carbon dioxide, who should bear the economic loss of diverting tourist dollars to destinations closer to them?

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“Do we need to cap the Global South or do we need to cap some of the highest-volume airports in that long-haul aviation? This is exactly the discussion we need to be having in this unprecedented, collaborative way,” says Megan Morikawa, global director of sustainability at Iberostar Group. “If we’re making assumptions on who the winners and losers should be, we’re going to end up making decisions that might make equity issues even worse.”

As it stands, destinations in the Global South are already feeling outsized human impacts from climate change and vainly awaiting compensation from richer nations. Exacerbating the problems are a lack of access to greener technologies that Europe can access and to funding for tourism businesses to adapt and decarbonize rapidly.

For Kyle Mais, chairman of the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism, this concerns destinations that are farther from the US—the region’s main visitor—than say, Jamaica is. “There will be difficult conversations out of COP27, but we stand ready to play our part.”



Mambo Beach near Willemstad in Curaçao. *Photographer: DANIEL SLIM/AFP*

“Tourism ‘as a force for good’ should be stripping out carbon,” the Travel Foundation’s Sampson says. “A shift to less flying around during a period of time has the potential to make tourism genuinely more

local and a better experience for visitors. This type of tourism can also deliver better benefits for the community while reducing some of the unintended burdens from tourists.”

What’s clear from this report is that drastic changes are needed from the tourism industry: Individual travelers should question their choices, such as long-haul trips, but it’s the travel industry that needs to let go of the status quo. For now, even in the face of a climate crisis that’s increasingly impacting destinations, the sector is making big promises while changing little under the hood. Without meaningful progress, your trips of a lifetime may become exactly that—viable only as you live and not for the generations to come—and your bucket lists a pipe dream.

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