Images **Christopher Griffith/Trunk Archive (aircraft); Chad Moore/Trunk Archive (sky)**

Would You Ever Give Up Travel?

Facing some hard truths about the environmental impact of her globetrotting lifestyle, an intrepid traveller questions the ethics of wanderlust in the 21st century

By Jessica Iredale

Of all the questions you could've asked of a responsible human being in the 21st century in our collective journey to attain a more sustainable, conscientious lifestyle, why did it have to be this one: would you ever give up travel in the name of climate change?

We are all now acutely aware of the real-life impact on this fragile planet we inhabit of what once seemed like harmless, everyday habits. So we gave up fast fashion. We gave up single-use plastic bags and water bottles. We gave up straws. But must we really give up travel, a subject that only in recent times was considered a noble pursuit of the global-minded citizen? Actually, when I was asked that question a few weeks ago, it was rather uncomplicated from a personal point of view.

My answer was a straight-up, "No".

And it still is to a great extent, even as research has revealed the staggeringly depressing difference to the average person's carbon footprint that even one summer holiday can make. To wit, last July I took a roundtrip flight from New York City to Athens, Greece—my first three-week vacation ever, and one I felt was hard-earned, only to learn that I was responsible for 7,985kg of carbon jettisoned into the atmosphere, according to the statistics of the online ICAO carbon emissions calculator. And this wasn't my only trip that year. I flew to Paris twice, Geneva once, London once, Greece again, plus domestic travel to Austin, Miami and Palm Beach, Florida, for a total of roughly 4.8 metric tons of carbon. It's the kind of number that is easy to face, but just as easy to hide from. As I reminded myself, the amount of travel I clock is on par with, or significantly lower than, many of my peers and colleagues who have no qualms about flying around the world, taking mileage runs in the pursuit of a higher frequent flyer status.

But something has changed in the weeks since I was first asked this question. The novel coronavirus now known as Covid-19, already rampaging for months in Asia, started spreading westward closer to my typically inoculated home in New York City. Only days after dozens of my colleagues in the fashion press had travelled to Italy and then France to watch runway shows on the hour, every day for weeks on end, came word that American Airlines and Delta had cancelled flights between New York and Milan after a severe outbreak occurred in Europe. "I can't fly to New York any more," a friend WhatsApped me from Milan. Even those who were able to return faced directions from their employers to self-quarantine at home for two weeks or more. Anna Wintour included. I can't remember travel restrictions hitting so close to home since those horrible days and months after 9/11.

That could have been me. For 12 years I had been doing the Fashion Week tour of duty—flying from New York to London, London to Milan, Milan to Paris, Paris to New York—participating in a biannual fashion circus that comes with a colossal carbon price tag even when it's business as usual. According to a recent report released by Zero to Market, Ordre.com and the Carbon Trust, travel related to retailers during the runway cycle resulted in about 241,000 tons of CO_2 emissions a year. Now, as the days go by, there are more reports of massive global event cancellations, corporate travel restrictions and more that underscore just how irresponsible we've all been for so long.

Admittedly, speculating on the coronavirus's impact on global travel is a bit of a digression from this question at hand—would I give up travel to help the planet?—but let's admit this epidemic has added a massive wrinkle to the mix. Travel and flight shaming from a carbon footprint point of view has been gaining traction in Europe for years, but I hadn't really considered it before. It amped up exponentially when teenage Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg sailed to New York by solar-powered sailboat for the United Nations climate change summit last August. Now, for millions of people, travel has been taken off the table entirely due to a disease that's out of their control.

"I think what is going to happen is that people are going to be more careful about where they travel, how and why," says Maita Barrenechea, a partner in Argentinian luxury travel service Mai 10, who notes than many of her clients have rerouted or changed travel plans since the onset of Covid-19. She thinks that if the spread of the virus continues, travel will stop entirely, and that, regardless, years from now people will look back nostalgically on the days when they jumped on a plane for a meeting instead of jumping on a Zoom call or a Google Hangout.

This serves as a stark reminder that there are natural forces at play that are far larger than any one of us, the travel-addicted individuals fuelled by eons of ignorant and irresponsible human behaviour. It's certainly enough to make one think twice about booking that flight to the Maldives, even if you still opt to take it.

For many of us, travel had become less a privilege than a given right. Air travel specifically had never been more available and more affordable. Some European flight routes on budget carriers were cheaper than an Uber ride from Lower Manhattan to the Upper West Side, even though getting there wasn't always pretty. With the onset of mass air travel, the inflight experience became increasingly degrading at the economy level. But so what? What was seven hours of sitting upright overnight, knees to tray table with a cramp in your hip and your seatmate's bare feet just a pinky toe away in economy, when you awoke and deplaned in Rome, Barcelona, Dubrovnik, wherever? There was always headache wine to dull the pain along the way, and when you got there, everyone would know that you had achieved the semi-glam kind of life when you posted it on social.

If that's too shallow a dismissal of the average travel experience, there are still the socioeconomic and cultural benefits of travel to so many people to consider. Tourism boosts local economies, reduces bigotry and allows us to see friends and family. But we weren't being responsible, leading to a backlash against social media and influencer culture that is undeniable. Not only does Instagram glamorise an elite portrayal of travel that is unattainable for most, it has also driven people in droves to the most photogenic sites, alarming conservationists and angering locals. For example, Yosemite National Park's annual firefall phenomenon drew more than 2,200 people on one single night, leading the park to close two of the best vantage points because of overcrowding and pollution. Look at Cinque Terre in Italy, which had to institute crowd-control policies to stem the tide of tourists, or the

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'super bloom' of Southern California that drew swarms of influencers—all doing it for the 'gram.

Google "travel shaming" or "flight shaming" and you'll find loads of articles about the effects that mass global travel has inflicted on the planet. In late 2018, the International Air Transport Association released a 20-year report estimating that the number of air passengers could double to 8.2 billion by 2037. At the time of the study, the Asia-Pacific region was predicted to be the biggest growth driver, with China on track to overtake the US as the number one market for air travel. With those numbers come other numbers. Scary ones. There's no end to them.

Of course, travellers' guilt has led to some measures that are being taken to offset the carbon emissions. Carbon offsetting—the practice of supporting measures to take as much carbon out of the atmosphere as you're putting in, by planting trees and such—has become a huge business in and of itself. Everyone is doing it: Amazon, Google, Kering, LVMH, even Sir Elton John, who last year offset the former Duke and Duchess of Sussex Harry and Meghan's private jet ride to John's home in the south of France. On a larger scale, under the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation, the aviation industry set the goal of achieving carbon-neutral growth from 2020 onwards and cutting CO_2 emissions to half of where they were in 2005 by 2050. Do we even buy this?

Critics, and anyone with a healthy dose of scepticism, are right to wonder if it's really that easy to justify a hedonistic vacation by planting a tree. Buy some offsets and absolve your carbon sins. I would argue that actions taken to counter carbon emissions require much regulation. After all, every tree planted can be cut down if no one's looking.

Philippe Lacamp, senior vice president, Americas, of Cathay Pacific, says that other more long-term actions are being made by the aviation industry. Cathay was at the forefront of the Corsia pact, the carbon offsetting and reduction scheme employed by the global airlines industry. He says it was also the first airline to invest in a biofuel company, Fulcrum Bioenergy, in 2014. It uses a blend of biofuel and regular fuels on certain routes. It's also "light-weighted" its planes because less weight means less fuel burned, done away with single-use plastics and started making in-flight carpets out of recycled nylon. Electric planes are a long way off. But long-haul electric flights will likely never get here, says Lacamp.

One of the biggest obstacles is that all of this innovation costs a lot of money, and the customer doesn't want to incur the penalty. "If you say, 'Do you prefer to fly with a sustainable airline?' Most customers are like, 'Oh yeah, I would,'" says Lacamp. "'Would you pay a hundred bucks more?' 'No.' And I can tell you that—I can tell you that empirically."

It's funny what behaviours people are willing and unwilling to change. Barrenechea says that many of her clients have asked for itineraries that include train travel instead of flights, especially in Europe where the rail system is strong. They don't want to go to over-travelled areas. They opt for locally sourced food and avoid wasteful hotel buffets. She has more requests for walking tours, bike tours and visits to rural areas because they're more ecological. She says people are more likely to carry on bags than check them in because that is lighter and burns less fuel. Some customers are even proud to fly economy over business because the carbon impact is lower.

Have any of Barrenechea's primo customers given up their private jets?

"No, not really," she says. "I think they don't feel that guilty because they are usually donating so much money and contributing to so many charities and conservations and so on that they probably feel that they're already offsetting."

But back to the question at hand: will I give up travel, knowing what I know now? Were flying private in my personal budget, I would probably give it up and continue to offset as much as I could. I like to think I will pay US$100 for a more sustainable flight if it means I don't have to give up travel wholesale. I really don't want to. As it goes for most beautiful, interesting, exciting places in the world, the whole point is being there.