

Earth-Friendly Forays

By LAUREL KALLENBACH

On a Galápagos Island beach, two sea lion pups are playing king-of-the-hill on a flat-topped rock. With each wave that washes over the rock, the two-week-old pups lose their balance and tumble head-over-flippers onto the sand. I'm standing 10 feet away, snapping photos and laughing at their antics.

After a week of hiking and snorkeling in the Galápagos Islands with Ecoventura, an environmentally responsible tour company, I've grown used to seeing wild animals in their natural habitat. In this paradise, 500-pound Galápagos tortoises lumber about munching on leaves. Some are so old they might have been hatchlings when scientist and evolution theorist Charles Darwin visited the islands in 1835. Here, I've also had a front-row seat to see a flightless cormorant mother peck and squawk at a marine iguana sunning himself too close to her chick. Both the bird and reptile live nowhere else on the planet besides these 13 isolated, volcanic islands in the Pacific.

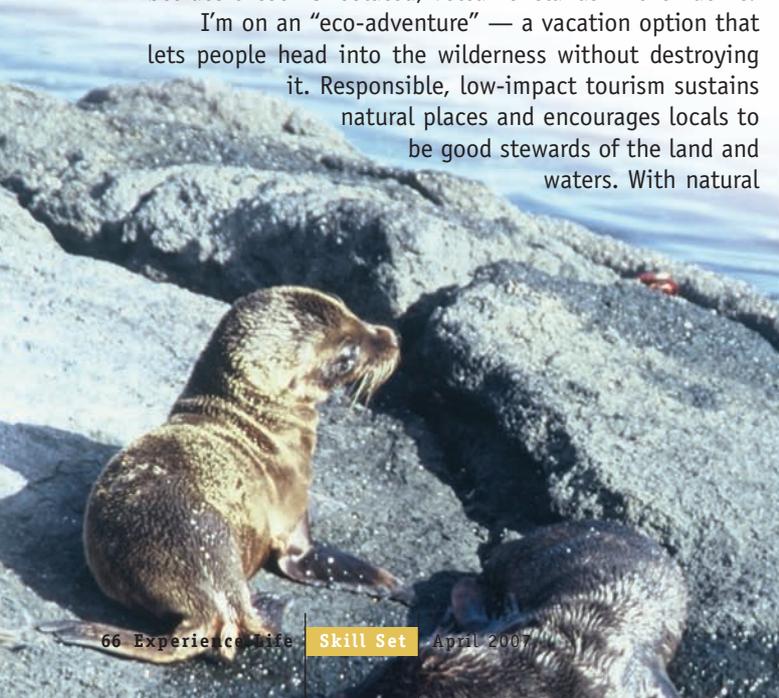
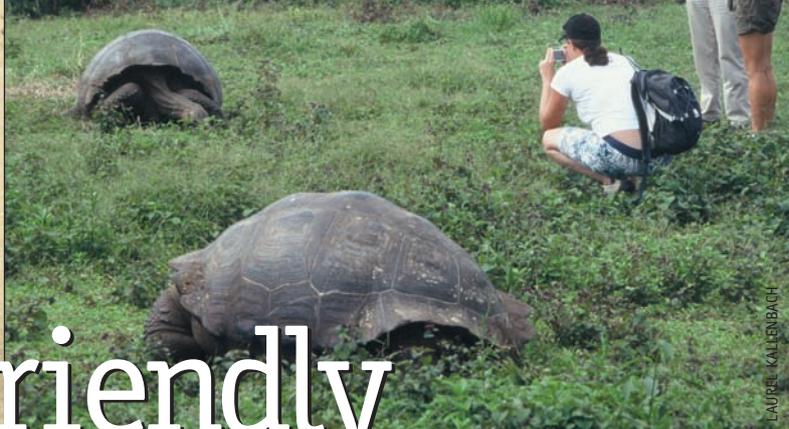
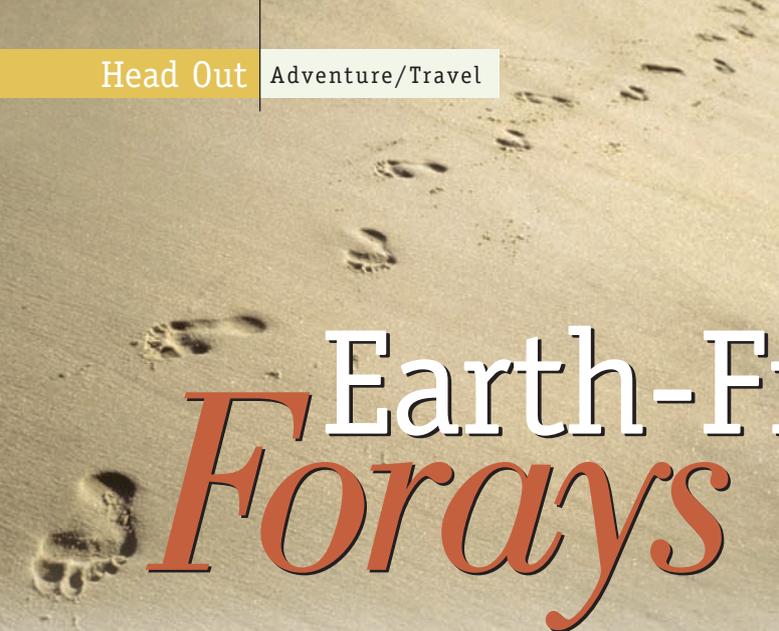
I'm on an "eco-adventure" — a vacation option that lets people head into the wilderness without destroying it. Responsible, low-impact tourism sustains natural places and encourages locals to be good stewards of the land and waters. With natural

Outdoor excursions restore and rejuvenate your body, but if you travel with the environment in mind, your vacation can also help restore some of the world's most pristine wilderness.

ecosystems worldwide increasingly threatened by development and climate change, eco-adventures are an important antidote to conventional mass tourism, which contributes to pollution and erosion, disturbs wildlife, and brings unwelcome influences to once-isolated cultures.

My Ecoventura trip, for example, has been recognized by the Rainforest Alliance's SmartVoyager, a sustainable tourism certification program. It accommodates visitors aboard yachts that carefully manage fuel and augment their water supply with desalinated ocean water. When we disembark to explore an island, we're careful to take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints. Our naturalist guides instruct us not to touch or feed the animals that live in this desert landscape — not even the Galápagos mockingbirds, which thirstily eye our water bottles.

On board the boats, we're conservation-minded, too: We dump no waste into the ocean, and we take hasty, water-saving showers using biodegradable soap and shampoo. A portion of our food is grown locally with few or no pesticides. To help fight global warming, Ecoventura purchases carbon-dioxide offsets for all its voyages, so tourists know their vacation has less impact on climate change.



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Clockwise from top middle: Visitors snap photos of giant tortoises on Isla Santa Cruz in the Galápagos Islands; a red-footed booby eyeballs the camera in Darwin Bay; Surfrider volunteers participate in a beach cleanup; Alaska's ANWR was established to protect unique wilderness areas and wildlife.

The Conscientious Adventurer

"Avid, active people tend to appreciate natural areas and want to protect the places they've come to love," says Peter Krahenbuhl, cofounder

and vice president of Sustainable Travel International (STI), a nonprofit that promotes responsible tourism. Eco-adventurers are also more likely to explore remote wilderness areas for an ecological experience — even when it means forgoing posh accommodations.

Ecotourism isn't on every traveler's radar quite yet, but it's definitely an emerging trend. In 2004, ecotourism/nature tourism grew three times faster worldwide than the tourism industry as a whole, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Is your Maine-coast sailboat idyll or Himalayan trek an eco-adventure? Some people define ecotourism as any vacation in the outdoors, but industry leaders such as Krahenbuhl agree that ecologically savvy people go the distance to lighten their impact on nature — including sometimes paying a bit more. Like any travel, ecotourism

prices run the gamut — from backpacker accommodations to luxury eco-lodges. In general, what you pay for on eco-adventures is access to pristine outdoor settings, lower-impact accommodations and a closer, more beneficial working relationship with local communities. At eco-lodges, you'll often find "rustic luxury" — clean, comfortable rooms furnished in accordance with the local environment. You're likely to get great food and excellent service from local people, and nature or activity guides who are financially vested in the business. What you *won't* be paying for are TVs, phones, computer access, casinos or nightlife. The more remote the destination, the higher the cost, but that's also true of remote or exclusive locales that aren't ecologically oriented. Prices at eco-lodges may be slightly higher, but are, in general, comparable to similarly scaled conventional lodges in the same region.

One way to travel ecologically (and economically) is to explore closer to home. You might be surprised at the natural beauty within a short journey, and less driving and flying means fewer carbon-dioxide emissions. Better yet, skip the fossil fuels altogether and use muscle power — paddling, pedaling, walking — to reach your destination.

If, however, your heart is set on climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, you can offset the climate damage created during your airplane flight to Africa by investing in renewable-energy and energy-efficiency projects that reduce carbon emissions, a process called "carbon offsetting."

For my Galápagos trip, I logged onto the STI Web site (www.sustainabletravel.com), where I learned I had created 2.5 tons (!) of carbon dioxide on my roundtrip flight to Ecuador. It cost just \$45 to assuage my eco-guilt.

The idea behind carbon offsetting, explains Krahenbuhl, is that if you produce carbon dioxide in one place, "you reduce an equal amount somewhere else." It's not an exact science, clearly. But it's a start. →



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YOUR ECO-ADVENTURE AWAITS

Explore nature and respect area environments by following the code of an eco-adventurer.

- **TRAVEL RESPONSIBLY.** Stay close to home or purchase carbon offsets for any air or road travel. Lighten your impact on local resources.
- **LEAVE NO TRACE.** When you enter a wilderness, take care to leave little or no evidence of your presence. Stay on trails, remove your trash and waste, and don't disturb animals or plants. (For more, see *Web Extra!*)
- **PATRONIZE LOCALLY OWNED BUSINESSES** so that local residents benefit economically from your visit and from preserving the area.
- **CHOOSE A SUSTAINABLE OUTFITTER.** Ask the company how it protects the areas you will be visiting, how it

cares for natural resources, and how it supports local or indigenous people. (See Resources on page 68 for directories of responsible outfitters.)

- **LEARN ABOUT YOUR DESTINATION.** The more you understand area ecosystems and cultures, the more respectful and appreciative you'll be when you're actually there.
- **SHOW YOUR GRATITUDE.** Consider spending an afternoon of your visit giving back. Pick up trash from a beach, clear brush from a trail, or volunteer to help with a community project.



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Arctic wildflowers thrive in 24-hour daylight; Rick Erkeneff rides a wave he helps protect; dinghies shuttle Galápagos vacationers to minimize damage to fragile beaches.



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Arriving ecologically at your adventure destination is a first step; the next is calculating who profits from your excursion. The travel and tourism industry generates \$1.3 trillion in the United States alone, reports the Travel Industry Association of America, but most of that money goes to giant corporations that own hotel chains and cruise lines.

“True ecotourism provides economic benefits to local communities who then have more incentive to preserve their wildlife, land, ecosystems and indigenous culture,” Krahenbuhl explains.

He has firsthand experience. In graduate school, he worked on a conservation project in the Ecuadorian cloud forest. “We helped the people establish small-scale ecotourism so they had a viable economic alternative for putting food on their tables *without* cutting down trees.”

The Power of Preservation

Can going to a place actually help preserve it? Unfortunately, tourism is paradoxical. When too many people flock to beloved wildernesses, nature suffers. For instance, as many as 4 million people visit California’s popular Yosemite National Park annually, and their vehicles spew so much pollution that vistas are often clouded by a brown haze. On the other hand, if a beautiful place goes unnoticed and unappreciated by tourists, it’s more likely to be developed or exploited for its natural resources.

Take Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), which has been the source of a perennial debate over oil drilling. On a backpacking trip there, Janet Cerretani, a Boulder, Colo., advertising art director, realized the value of its remoteness. “ANWR is one of the last truly wild places left in our country,” she says. “You hike for days without seeing anything man-made. From the air, it looks somewhat barren, but if you land your plane and get out, you’ll see it’s a beautiful, thriving, untouched place. It’s been the same for thousands of years.”

Inspired by this unspoiled land — a vital habitat for gray wolves, grizzly bears, caribou, Dall sheep, migratory birds and arctic flowers — Cerretani is working to raise public awareness by documenting ANWR through photography and by using her advertising and marketing skills to support environmental issues. “I like the idea that there’s somewhere

left in this country where animals can live undisturbed,” she says. “ANWR is definitely worth preserving — even if 99.9 percent of Americans never see it.”

Surfing for Solutions

People who appreciate the outdoors — by canoe, on skis or while hang-gliding — can support their favorite places by joining local efforts or donating to environmental and conservation causes.

Over the years, surfer Rick Erkeneff has watched many prime surf spots in Southern California deteriorate. “Mini-malls, beach parking lots and multimillion-dollar coastal developments shore up the sand. Surf conditions are dependent on the shifting sandbars, and less sand means less-than-ideal waves,” says the Dana Point resident.

The Surfrider Foundation enlists boarders to help protect beaches and oceans. Erkeneff got involved with the group when he realized the beaches weren’t clean or safe for his two young daughters. Surfers nowadays contract ear, sinus and throat infections because contaminants such as fertilizer, pet waste, agricultural chemicals and spilled motor oil wash into the water.

With Surfrider, Erkeneff coordinates litter cleanups, organizes preservation projects and helps educate beach lovers about environmental issues. He finds that beach activism is almost as satisfying as hanging 10.

“I’ve caught the ecology bug,” he admits. “Now I tell local and visiting surfers: ‘If you’re out here loving the waves, you need to get active. Every little bit helps.’” ●

Laurel Kallenbach is senior editor of *Natural Home* magazine.

WEB EXTRA!

For a list of tips on traveling without a trace, see the online version of this article at experiencelifemag.com.

RESOURCES

WEB

Ecoventura: A carbon-neutral adventure-tourism company in the Galápagos Islands that operates trips aboard the Flamingo I, Eric and Letty yachts; 800-633-7972; www.ecoventura.com

International Ecotourism Society: Search for an eco-outfitter or eco-trip; www.ecotourism.org

Planeta.com: A global journal of practical ecotourism, including info on guides and destinations; www.planeta.com

REI Adventures: Find carbon-neutral outdoor adventures around the world; www.rei.com/adventures

Surfrider Foundation: A grassroots environmental organization that works to protect U.S. and Puerto Rican oceans, waves and beaches; www.surfrider.org

Sustainable Travel International: Supports travelers and travel providers that protect the cultures and environments they visit. Search its eco-directory for sustainable destinations and tour companies; www.sustainabletravel.com