

Making Ripples

Summer Ecotourism Adventures

by Amanda Bancroft

What do sea turtles, tree houses, national parks and zip lining have in common? You can experience all of these adventures and much more through local and global ecotourism! If you're planning to travel this summer, consider ecotourism as an exciting option available to your family.

Ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." Regardless of whether you're enjoying a luxury resort and eco lodge in Costa Rica or roughing it while hiking in the Ozarks, many different experiences can be defined as ecotourism. Simply visiting a natural area, however, is not.

The International Ecotourism Society's motto is "uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel." One of their most frequently asked questions is *How is ecotourism different from nature tourism?* The answer is that ecotourism is a principle-based variety of "nature tourism," which basically means tourism in a natural area and does not necessarily abide by a certain code of ethics. In contrast, ecotourist destinations should meet the following guidelines: minimize impact, create environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, include direct financial benefits for conservation goals as well as local people, and raise awareness of the host location's political, environmental, and social climate. So, hiking Devil's Den is not exactly ecotourism, even though it's not a bad idea!

Visit EcoTourism.org for resources and information about their programs, destinations, and credit courses and internships for students. One of these resources is [ecoDestinations](http://ecoDestinations.org), which connects travelers to ecotourism opportunities. Their website states that "when executed mindfully, and with the minimum impact, travel can inspire cultural awareness, tolerance, and commitment to environmental responsibility." You might work with local people to help save an endangered species while staying in sustainable lodgings, for example.

In Hot Springs, Arkansas, Lookout Point Lakeside Inn B&B has green practices including recycling bins in guest rooms, repurposing used items, energy-efficient building design, CFL bulbs, organic food, native trees, shrubs, and flowers planted to feed native pollinators and other wildlife, and shower pump bottles for shampoo and conditioner which eliminates 4,000 little plastic bottles from the landfill annually. Other Arkansas B&Bs provide discounts for guests who carpool or arrive via bicycle, and you can occasionally purchase a carbon offset package if you drive or fly.

You might also participate in “voluntourism,” which is traveling as a volunteer to a place where you can relax and make a difference through a variety of programs requiring little skill or benefitting from your professional experience. Heavily researching your opportunities ensures that you get an authentic ecotourism experience and avoid fake, unethical operations. There’s no substitute for research! Having an amazing adventure at a relaxing destination while making a difference in the world is worth the effort, and you’ll thank yourself for the upfront investment - especially while you witness baby sea turtles hatching on a beach in Mexico!

Or if birding is more your style, AllIndiaBirdingTours.com offers researched and tested birding trips in both the northeast and northwest of India and including parts of Bhutan. You can participate in guided bird tours in a diversity of habitats, including evergreen forests, desert, grassland, coastal mangrove forests, tropical deciduous forests, and more. These eco regions combined support 1,200 of the world’s bird species within India.

If birding sounds boring, have an adventure on safari in one of Botswana’s fifteen ecotourism certified camps and lodges. One of these, Tubu Tree Camp in the Okavango Delta, provides remote locations for leopard-viewing! Visitors can still have a comfortable experience in Africa, even off the beaten path of civilization.

For a more laid-back experience, check out Cristalino Jungle Lodge in Brazil, recognized by National Geographic as a top ecolodge. You can stay in eco-friendly bungalows in the middle of a 28,167 acre private reserve and enjoy nature walks and other activities.

Black Sheep Inn, located in Ecuador, is a great place to practice your Spanish this summer while traveling more sustainably. It’s one hundred percent community operated, and is ranked among the top ten eco-resorts by Delta Sky Magazine and the top fifty eco-lodges by National Geographic. The Inn offers visitors hiking, horseback riding, and excursions to various Andean cultural and environmentally significant sites nearby.

A journey for the mind is part of any trip, too: at the intersection of colonialism and global collaboration, cultural appropriation and budding multicultural families, environmental destruction and conservation, ecotourism focuses on educational experiences but leaves us with more questions than answers. If one must travel, ecotourism may be our best choice.

Ripples is an emerging online educational center inspired by a holistic approach to making a difference. Follow our journey to live sustainably and make ripples with our lifestyle at: www.RipplesBlog.org.