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TALES FROM THE FRONTIER

Green Class



The fuel efficient Boeing 787 Dreamliner.

Photograph by Tongho58

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More Tales From the Frontier

- Lessons From the Grand Canyon

By Costas Christ

From the June/July 2012 issue of National Geographic Traveler

A cool mist falls as I navigate among moss-covered trees and clumps of nettles, grabbing at vines to pull myself up Mount Visoke in Rwanda. It's 1987 and mountain gorillas are teetering on the edge of extinction—there are fewer than 300 of these great apes left in the wild. My guide stops suddenly and motions for me to get low to the ground. He grunts, alerting the gorillas that humans are in their midst, then he slowly parts the underbrush: Ten feet away is a family of five; the silverback gazes at me and then continues digging up shoots to eat. It remains one of my most indelible travel memories.



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Today, thanks in part to tourists visiting with distant primate cousins in the jungle, the mountain gorilla population has more than doubled—a step back from the brink of extinction. An incredible achievement. Ah, but here's the rub: To reach these precious wildlife enclaves travelers must fly, spewing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and accelerating climate change that threatens the Earth we aim to protect.

So how do we get air travel right, both now and for the future? It's a nagging issue that airlines are increasingly under pressure to address. Aviation actually contributes some 3 percent of global carbon emissions. Compared with deforestation, which accounts for almost 20 percent of harmful CO₂—more than all forms of transportation combined—that isn't much.

Yet more planes are taking off each year and releasing carbon—up more than 11 percent from 2005 to 2010. In response, airlines are investing heavily in green technology, like upgrading old fleets with newer, more fuel-efficient aircraft. Case in point: Singapore Airlines recently added to its popular JFK service the Airbus A380—one of the most advanced planes in the sky, which has the potential to burn some 20 percent less fuel than most other aircraft. In April, Japan Airlines launched the first long-haul flights of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner nonstop from Boston to Tokyo, billed as the world's first "eco-friendly" airplane for its lighter composite construction, fuel-efficient engines, and improved aerodynamics (All Nippon Airlines started flying the Dreamliner on short hops last year). But on a planet already facing the impact of climate change, from the bleaching of coral reefs to the shrinking of sea ice, many say it is not enough.

In January 2012, the European Union demanded that airlines reduce emissions or pay a pollution tax in order to land on European runways. But many airlines are balking at the potential price—\$670 million in 2012 alone and predicted to rise, according to one study. More than two dozen countries have objected to the rules as expensive and unfair.

One airline that has agreed to abide by the new EU rules is Virgin Atlantic. "We need to be thinking much bigger," says its visionary founder and CEO, Richard Branson. "We have to replace the conventional dirty fuels we rely on that are destroying the planet." Branson has pledged more than a billion dollars toward alternative-fuel research in a bid to change aviation history. Last October, Virgin announced it is getting closer: Using technology to recycle industrial waste gases from steel production, it has developed an alternative fuel that Branson claims will halve the carbon emissions of today's standard jet fuel. Virgin plans to launch the first "demo" flight within the next 12 months and begin long-haul routes in two to three years. "This is a major step toward radically reducing our carbon footprint from air travel," Branson told me.

That is the kind of approach needed so we can maintain the conservation benefits flying can deliver: In Brazil, nearly half of the Pantanal, arguably the world's largest freshwater wetland, has become a giant holding pen for the beef industry; that tourists are willing to travel there to see its rare wildlife may help save it from destruction. And in the seas from the Philippines to the Solomon Islands (the famed Coral Triangle), home to more fish and coral species than any other place on the planet, tourism dollars are a key incentive for governments to create marine reserves as a refuge from high-tech fishing trawlers. All of which keeps me taking off for far-flung destinations.

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Until we can fly green class, what's a well-meaning traveler to do? Here are a few stop-gap measures: Buy carbon offsets from a reputable, independently audited group (two good ones are myclimate.org and climatecare.org) so that when you take to the skies, the carbon emitted is neutralized by renewable-energy projects. Also, that old travel tip to pack lighter has a new green meaning—fewer pounds of luggage add up to a lot of fuel savings. Book yourself on the most ecological route—routeRANK.com is a travel search engine endorsed by World Wildlife Fund that can help you do that. And consider longer but fewer trips: Beyond the carbon savings, you'll benefit from the deep dives into local nature and culture.

What's next on my bucket list? Indonesia's Tanjung Puting National Park on Borneo. In this remote rain forest frontier resides another distant relation also dangling on the thread of extinction—the orangutan. Tourism is helping to keep that thread from breaking. Call it the power of travel.

Editor at large [Costas Christ](#) writes about the changing world of travel. E-mail your comments to Travel_Talk@ngs.org.

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