



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# More than a dream job: intersectional travel journalism and why it matters

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# Preface

This report was prepared by *The Straits Times* Travel Correspondent and Assistant Life Editor Clara Lock. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by SPH Media.

Clara reports on local and international travel trends, and unearths tips to help readers travel better. She views travel journalism as a conduit to explore socio-cultural issues such as geopolitics, sustainability, gender and cost of living. She has written about destinations such as North Korea, Bhutan, Morocco, and Uzbekistan.

# Introduction

The pandemic is over, and international travel is back with a vengeance. For the well-heeled wanderer, new frontiers have become ever more accessible – think Antarctica cruises, deep-sea tourism, and space expeditions.

The market confirms this tourism boom: after a four-year slump, air travel has returned to pre-pandemic levels. The travel industry contributes close to 10% of global GDP and is expected to generate US\$854.70bn in revenue this year, a figure that continues to trend upwards.

Yet travel is at an inflection point: demand intersects with a growing consciousness of our carbon footprint, spurring some to stay home.

“It is a conflicting time to be involved in travel journalism because travelling for leisure is a luxury that will come increasingly under the microscope,” said Mark Footer, travel editor of the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* (SCMP).

This awareness, most prevalent in Europe, is gaining traction in North America especially among the older, more well-travelled crowd. “Travel guilt” (sensing the irrevocable effect of your carbon footprint) battles with a desire to see the world.

Some take tangible steps to assuage their travel guilt, such as limiting their travel with a personal carbon budget – much like a holiday fund. Others purchase carbon offsets, which fund projects such as reforestation or investing in renewable energy plants that reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere by an amount equivalent to the carbon burned by your activity.

Globally, [8-10% of CO<sup>2</sup> emissions](#) are caused by the travel and tourism sector.<sup>1</sup>

Figures like these might be easy to ignore; the tangible effects, less so. In 2023 alone, climate change has brought about wildfires tearing through Maui and Greece, and heatwaves in Europe, North America, and China.

In the aviation industry, climate change has been linked to a rise in clear-air turbulence, which is virtually impossible for pilots to detect and avoid. There are delays at airports not designed for heat, ice, or snow. Passengers or their luggage are increasingly deplaned to lighten the load for aircraft in extreme heat or wind conditions. On top of all this, flight prices are going up as airlines pass rising costs on to passengers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabletravel.org/issues/carbon-footprint-tourism>

Travellers know this. The Swedish word *flygskam* (flight shame) caught on in 2018, along with the sense that vacations, far from being an indicator of luxury, were something to be scorned – for some people, at least.

But many more are not prepared to give up their holidays. Chris Haslam, chief travel writer at British daily *The Times*, said: “There is a sense of ‘I recycle, I walk to the supermarket, so I deserve this business class seat’.”

In Asia, where cross-border rail infrastructure is less developed and travel remains more of a novelty, attitudes have not caught up with those apparent in wealthy western countries. Data from consulting company McKinsey and online travel platform Trip.com reveal that [Chinese tourists are unwilling to pay extra for sustainable travel options](#), even as concerns about climate change are on the rise.<sup>2</sup>

Yet SCMP’s Footer believes a behavioural shift is coming. Chinese tourism has not been spared from the extreme weather brought about by global warming. This year, Beijing marked at least 28 days of air temperatures above 35°C, a new record. In Turpan, a city in the western Xinjiang province, mercury soared to 52.2°C – another national high.

“Every time you get a major climate event the consciousness gets pushed along a few degrees,” he said.

Then there is the human cost of travel, such as overtourism, cultural erosion and social ills. Venice buckles under the weight of cruise ship tourism and in Lisbon, a hotspot for digital nomads, locals are being priced out of their homes.

The reality is that all travel creates something of a negative impact on the environment. But the travel industry has become too intertwined with economy, employment, and class to cease.

If people are going to travel anyway, perhaps the value of travel journalism lies in harnessing that demand as a force for good. This is where intersectional travel journalism comes in.

Beyond top-10 listicles and glossy magazine itineraries, the media can educate, inform and shape more responsible travellers – so that tourists don’t just minimise harm, but create a positive impact in the places they visit.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://investors.trip.com/news-releases/news-release-details/new-report-promoting-sustainable-future-chinas-travel-industry>

# What is intersectional travel journalism?

Simply put, intersectional travel journalism is holistic travel reporting that intersects with issues such as climate, community development, geopolitics, and socio-cultural tensions.

It might highlight experiences where a tourist's dollar benefits local people. It could offer alternatives to over-touristed cities, or simply help readers understand the socio-cultural backdrop of a place – so they behave sensitively when they're there.

This might sound like too much do-gooding for a holiday that's meant to be fun. But conscientious travel feeds many aspects of what today's holidaymakers are looking for, such as allowing tourists to fully understand a place.

Take Oxford, for example, where I wrote this report. The city is synonymous with the university, but students have had a chequered history with the working-class community. At multiple points in its 927-year history, these tensions have spilled over into [physical clashes that have claimed lives](#).<sup>3</sup>

Today, “town versus gown” tensions have mellowed, but the two communities rarely mingle. Visiting the Harry Potter-esque city is certainly magical for tourists decked out in the movie's robes. But providing social context offers a realistic counterpoint, and a better appreciation of why many colleges resemble bastions, shrouding their beautiful grounds in fortress-like exteriors. A more intersectional understanding of the realities of the university lead to a better appreciation of the city itself – and a better tourist experience.

Those in search of “authentic” travel might find it in regenerative tourism experiences that funnel tourism dollars back to locals, such as immersive, non-performative interactions with [New Zealand's Maori community](#) in a remote part of the country that has been uplifted by the tourist dollar.<sup>4</sup>

And while most people don't set out to cause harm to a destination, sometimes they remain blissfully unaware. Consider the implications of outdoor bathtubs at luxury glamping sites in Australia, which grapples with a water shortage, or buffet spreads in destinations where food is scarce. Coverage that addresses the issues of a place, not merely its highlights, shapes travellers' expectations and behaviour.

Value-conscious travellers – and let's face it, that's all of us – would benefit from sidestepping the beaten path in search of quieter, more relaxing towns.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2013/02/11/the-ultimate-town-vs-gown/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20230801-kohutapu-lodge-a-model-for-regenerative-tourism-in-new-zealand>

Summer in Europe? Why not Graz, the culinary capital and second largest city in Austria, instead of Vienna or Salzburg? Or a trip to the underrated Balkans, where your tourism dollars will go further in the community?

The goal is simple, if idealistic: for tourists to leave a destination better than they found it. A lofty ambition perhaps, but one worth working towards.

# Why should publications care?

Travel is a lucrative beat. In 2023, [\\$280 million](#) of Southeast Asia’s digital ad spend came from the travel industry.<sup>5</sup> It was the eighth largest out of 17 sectors, bringing in more ad spend than big industries such as financial services, energy and fuel, and real estate.

Intersectional travel journalism creates new opportunities to sell advertising space to companies keen to plug their sustainability message, which will become more important as climate awareness grows and customers show support with their tourist dollars.

Content might come in the form of an advertorial, such as this [regenerative luxury campaign](#) by Red Sea Global (a Saudi Arabian developer) and travel website Skift.<sup>6</sup> The campaign included stories about new resorts with sustainability practices, such as running solely on clean power. Or a feature in Outside Magazine on [preserving pheasant habitats](#) in South Dakota, run by the state’s tourism board.<sup>7</sup>



*Travel publications such as Skift (left) and Outside Magazine (right) have run paid campaigns with brands keen to plug their sustainability initiatives.*

The advertising potential is tremendous. Airlines are now touting their use of sustainable aviation fuel, while hospitality chains are eager to promote the sustainable design and operations of their properties. Publications with a trusted track record of intersectional travel journalism will be well positioned to represent these brands.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/outlook/dmo/digital-advertising/southeast-asia>

<sup>6</sup> <https://skift.com/2023/07/27/paving-the-path-to-regenerative-luxury-travel/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/destinations/north-america/protecting-pheasant-habitat-in-south-dakota-is-a-team-effort/>

Yet, this comes with the risk of enabling greenwashing: when publications print a sponsored story on sustainable or regenerative tourism, it may be written by a branded content team, rather than by journalists. Depending on the contract, the client may have the prerogative to supply key messages to be woven into the copy.

Newspapers have a responsibility to perform due diligence on claims that a corporation is making, and could rope in a travel or environmental journalist to do so. More on this on page 18, where we discuss verifying claims.

For subscription-based publications such as *The Straits Times* (where I work) intersectional travel stories are a means of differentiation from the swathes of free online content.

Competition is fierce because the barrier to entry is low – anyone with a smartphone and a passport can be a travel content creator. Google “best things to do” in any city and there will be dozens of blogs to pick from. Online travel agencies and tour operators have gotten in on the content game too, using SEO-friendly articles to draw consumers to their website. When it comes to social media strategy, their teams are nimble and lean, and a threat to larger newsrooms.

But legacy titles such as *The Straits Times* retain the lion’s share of reader’s trust, and intersectional travel coverage can bolster that.

[Solutions journalism](#), or stories that interrogate responses to social problems and their associated results, are a realistic and uplifting alternative to the onslaught of “bad news” that drives news fatigue.<sup>8</sup>

More than mere feel-good stories, solutions journalism takes an analytical view of solutions to issues. Stories highlight individuals or organisations that are solving practical problems, and discuss both the strengths and limitations of the approach.

Such as the [restoration of India’s step wells](#), which are fêted for their architecture and could go some way towards solving the country’s water crisis.<sup>9</sup>

These stories inform and educate the news-avoidant reader, who, as this year’s [Reuters Digital News Report](#) points out, is likely to be drawn to positive stories that offer utility.<sup>10</sup>

If you’re an editor or journalist who’s convinced, here are five ways intersectional travel journalism can be done.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211012-the-ancient-stepwells-helping-to-curb-indias-water-crisis>

<sup>10</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>

## 1. Expand the genre

- Broaden the parameters of travel writing to intersect with science, culture, and economics, which would lend depth to a beat often dismissed by hardened news workers as “fluff”.
- Collaborate with writers from other sections of a publication, such as foreign correspondents, who can offer a local take on lifestyle news.

In newsrooms around the world, travel journalism is perceived as a “soft” beat. Editors and journalists I spoke to agree that beats like politics and crime get the bulk of resources and recognition. And [academic papers](#) concede a lack of research around travel and lifestyle news.<sup>11</sup>

But intersectional travel writers point out that their work is no different from any respectable feature. “My beat [within the travel desk] is conservation, climate change and sustainable tourism. It is seen as the hard edge of an industry that is mostly soft,” said Haslam of the *Times*.

Freelance writer Jessica Wynne Lockhart, who is based in Australia and writes primarily about Australia and New Zealand for an international audience, agreed. “A good travel story has no difference from, say, a science story. There are strong scenes, a nut graf, solid interviewees and data,” she said.

Her stories weave themes such as science and conservation into travel, including a feature in *Smithsonian* magazine on the [commercialisation of bush tucker](#), or indigenous Australian food.<sup>12</sup> Part foodie travelogue, part socio-cultural commentary on the appropriation of indigenous knowledge and resources, it is wholly immersive and educational.

Lockhart said such a niche helps freelance writers like her stand out in a saturated market. “A lot of people pigeonhole themselves as travel writers, but not every story that comes from a press trip needs to live in the travel section,” she said.

Upping the game of travel journalism, along with broadening its scope, makes it more enticing and feasible for other sections of a publication to contribute.

At *The Straits Times*, foreign correspondents take on everything from the [rise of baijiu](#) (a Chinese grain liquor) among young people, to [Kinmen](#)’s tension between

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<sup>11</sup> [https://eprints.qut.edu.au/74047/15/Hanusch\\_ANZCA09.pdf](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/74047/15/Hanusch_ANZCA09.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-next-superfoods-may-come-from-australia-180982660/>

tourism and geopolitics: the Taiwanese region is on the frontlines of its conflict with China, and the story spotlights how tourism has suffered for it.<sup>13, 14</sup>

## 2. Commission locally

- Commission local writers. Their cultural and historical understanding of a place offers fresh ideas that might elude the visiting journalist, and brings both depth and diversity to stories.
- Seek out these writers at conferences, through networking or good old word-of-mouth recommendations.

No one knows a place better than a local. Writers who are natives or long-term residents often have insight that is difficult for the visiting journalist to achieve. Language skills, along with their understanding of historical context and cultural nuance, are strengths that destination experts bring to a place.

Take Sri Lankan-based freelance writer Zinara Rathnayake, who writes about Sri Lanka and India for publications such as the BBC and CNN Travel. She draws from her years growing up in the country to spark story ideas, such as a [feature on jackfruit](#) for BBC Travel.<sup>15</sup>

The fruit was dubbed a food trend and “vegan sensation” by Western publications, but Rathnayake contextualised the fruit’s history as a staple during British rule and more recently, during the pandemic.

She highlights the various ways jackfruit features in Sri Lankan culture – in Ayurvedic medicine, as a hangover cure, served in modern cafes and cooked by women as part of the country’s Hela Bojun initiative, which allows them to earn a living. Family recipes round out the story.

Rathnayake sees her work as a way to tell accurate stories of home without it being exoticized or erroneously portrayed.

“Sometimes, writers from the global north view my country through a colonial lens – writing about places in a way that is alien, or looking at communities, traditions and cultures from a perspective of superiority,” she said.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/old-wine-in-new-forms-china-s-baijiu-brands-look-to-chocolates-coffee-and-nfts-to-attract-the-young>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/life/travel/in-quest-of-echoes-of-war-rock-oysters-and-singapore-connections-in-taiwan-s-kinmen>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200916-jackfruit-the-vegan-sensation-that-saved-sri-lanka>

She also cited examples of food writing by foreigners who misspelled names and ingredients in Sri Lankan cuisine.

Also debunking stereotypes is Lola Akinmade Åkerström, a Nigerian photographer, travel writer and author based in Sweden. For her, stories on food, tradition and culture are a way to tell representative stories of her home continent.

In a feature on [diversity in travel reporting](#) by the Al Jazeera Media Institute, she wrote:

*“Even in 2023, Africa is still fighting off the monolithic lens that has been applied to the entire continent. The need to overcompensate by showing and subconsciously focusing on affluence and privilege often leaves an equally important part widely open and vulnerable – the everyday middle. For an African writer who is tired of negative narratives, how can we also write with some objectivity?”<sup>16</sup>*

Engaging local writers also minimises the carbon emissions associated with producing travel content, a stance that more publications are adopting.

In 2019, the *New York Times*’ travel desk began [offsetting carbon emissions](#) for air travel by staff members on assignment.<sup>17</sup> And BBC Travel [reports on the carbon footprint](#) of its sustainability themed travel stories, a practice announced in 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Travel conferences, word of mouth and networking are all ways travel editors can discover local writers. Senior journalist at BBC Travel Ellie Cobb, whose role involves commissioning and editing, describes an outreach programme that involves calls for pitches, contacting writers’ groups and scouring local publications – especially in countries where the publication does not have freelance writers.

Cobb said the commissioning process is democratic and story-led: “Anyone can pitch us, from award-winning writers to those with no experience.” And a comprehensive [author brief](#) spells out everything from pitch format to examples of good stories.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2317>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/reader-center/travel-carbon-offsets.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20231031-why-and-how-does-bbc-travel-count-carbon>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20160106-bbc-travel-author-brief>

On the flip side, it is not always viable to engage a destination expert, and there is value in the experienced globetrotting travel journalist whom editors can rely on.

Research, interviews and a rigorous fact-checking process underpin the work of United States-based freelance writer Stephanie Pearson, who has received five [Lowell Thomas Awards](#) from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation including the 2023 Gold Award for Travel Journalist of the Year.<sup>20</sup>

Pearson, who is based in the United States and covers travel globally, says: “The beauty of a travel journalist is the ability to capture a place with fresh eyes, yet in a respectful way with awareness of the situation you are writing about.”

### 3. Funding and stacking stories

- Publications may fund investigative travel journalism pieces if they have the budget. Otherwise, it is possible to rely on hosted trips to spark ideas and gather contacts, then conduct interviews remotely later.
- Producing multiple stories from a hosted trip allows room for “service-journalism” type stories that will satisfy audiences and hosts, who may also be advertisers. Journalists can then take more time to work on a more holistic, in-depth feature.

Who should fund these travel stories? Who actually does? The answer depends on where you come from.

Freelance writers say legacy titles such as *National Geographic* or the *New York Times* have a budget for travel expenses, which goes toward things like transport, accommodation, and a fixer.

The size of this budget depends on “how well they know you and how badly they want the story,” one writer told me. In their experience, this can range from USD\$5,000 to \$10,000.

Some publications source sponsorships or media discounts from airlines and hotel groups, lowering the cost of a story. Many rely heavily on media junkets, where virtually all expenses are covered by the host. Few have the resources and principle of the *New York Times*, which scrutinises all free and discounted travel perks that contributors have taken in the last three years.

All this means objectivity can be tricky. Journalists understand that a hosted trip comes with the implicit expectation of positive coverage, even if it is gauche for

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<sup>20</sup> <https://satw.org/lowell-thomas-awards/>

companies to admit as much. (When it comes to influencers, however, it is common practice to agree on deliverables, and sometimes key messages of the brand, prior to accepting a trip.)

Throw in the fact that many travel companies are also current or potential advertisers, and there is little motivation to deviate from a positive story. Industry circles are small, and journalists – especially freelancers – are reluctant to risk being excluded from future invitations.

Yet a realistic take on conservation issues, balanced out with an appealing take on the destination, can compel stakeholders to take heed.

In 2008, a series of travel stories in British and U.S. newspapers and magazines criticised forestry practices in Australia’s island state of Tasmania – particularly the logging of old-growth forests, which have long stood undisturbed.

These stories “embed their criticisms of Tasmania’s forestry practices in text that celebrates the state’s wilderness,” [observed researcher Lyn McGaurr](#) in a 2010 research paper.<sup>21</sup>

She added that the economic value of tourism to small economies such as Tasmania’s means international travel journalism that criticises the destination commands the attention of relevant government tourism organisations, even if these stories did not directly lead to any tangible change.

Lockhart, too, has woven environmental cautions into her stories. In a story on [tourism and conservation in Australia’s Great Barrier Reef](#) for the *Toronto Star*, she writes:

*“It’s enough to give even a sceptic (me) a sliver of hope. Yet – I can’t help but think there’s a great white shark in the pool. Tourists have to fly to get to Cairns, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to be the leading cause of climate change.”<sup>22</sup>*

Although she feared backlash from her hosts, they found the story fair and balanced. which journalists may find heartening – public relations folks understand honest reporting, too.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700903068924> Lyn McGaurr (2010) Travel Journalism And Environmental Conflict, *Journalism Studies*, 11:1, 50-67, DOI: 10.1080/14616700903068924

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/can-travellers-help-save-the-great-barrier-reef-an-ambitious-research-project-is-drawing-upon/article\\_8d4ddcc8-0eaa-53f1-9d2e-ac38258f905a.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/can-travellers-help-save-the-great-barrier-reef-an-ambitious-research-project-is-drawing-upon/article_8d4ddcc8-0eaa-53f1-9d2e-ac38258f905a.html)

Many freelance journalists produce multiple stories from a single trip. The first story that comes out is the obvious one: a destination guide featuring places to visit, eat and stay, or something newsworthy, such as a new airline or resort. These stories are quick to write and typically do well among readers, while allowing brands to put out their key messages.

Then the journalist works on the deeper story – the investigative piece, the one that requires follow-ups with contacts they have made on the road.

With this approach, publications can appeal to a whole spectrum of readers. There is service journalism for the time-pressed traveller, and an in-depth read for those seeking big ideas. Outlets fulfil short-term commercial goals, while building trust among readers – which incentivises advertisers to associate with their brand.

#### 4. Entice and educate

- Entice travel junkies with unique, curated experiences that offer good value and make people want to visit a place.
- Educate armchair travellers by exploring a destination through the lens of an issue. This appeals to a broad audience base while producing meaningful stories.

##### Entice

Travel writing is meant to be immersive, which is why much of the genre is written in the first person. This serves the dual purpose of transporting the reader, and making sense of the destination.

Whether a luxury resort review or an examination of overtourism, first person storytelling is an approach that lends credibility. It says a journalist has been on the ground, curating travel picks for the well-informed reader.

In an era of churnalism and online content, sound recommendations build trust among readers.

Consider the paying customer. When *New York Times* Travel Editor Amy Virshup published an [open call for reader feedback](#) in 2018, many requests were value-driven.<sup>23</sup> Readers sought information on more affordable activities in destinations, rather than the high-end dining and hotels which often have the budget to offer hospitality to travel journalists and are thus frequently written about.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/reader-center/travel-journalism.html#commentsContainer>

*Reader Joy Fopiano wrote: “Please consider sharing ideas for hotels and meals that will not be “expensed”. Instead, please choose real places that are special that people may wish to explore that are fairly priced.”*

A fair price does not necessarily mean cheap: 83% of travellers from Singapore are willing to shell out for unique experiences, according to a [2023 survey](#) by online travel agency Klook and market research firm Milieu.<sup>24</sup> Especially if these experiences benefit the community or environment and come with a unique story to tell back home.

In the Osa Peninsula, for instance, a rural yet beautiful corner of Costa Rica, travellers can go on [gold hunting tours led by former miners](#) – a nod to the area’s history that also benefits small family-run tourism enterprises.<sup>25</sup>

Nic Newman, lead author of the Reuters Institute’s 2023 Digital News Report, says one way to appeal to news-fatigued audiences is through stories of hope and utility.

Viewed through the lens of travel, such stories help readers travel better and more smartly. Framing intersectional travel journalism this way keeps stories appealing for readers, while channelling tourism dollars into communities that need it.

Position sustainable travel as a new take on luxury.

Haslam, who has been on the travel beat at The Times since 2008, said: “Sustainability has always been sold as the vegetarian alternative to luxury travel, which is like chocolate cake. Why would you have the lentils when you can have the gateaux?”

He believes the best thing he can do on the travel beat is to work towards a redefinition of luxury. To point out the [consequences of travel](#), but also offer alternatives to the champagne/oysters/butler model of luxury that has taken root over the past couple of decades.<sup>26</sup> Reframe sustainable options as the height of luxury, because when that catches on among top-tier brands, it will trickle down to the mass market.

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<sup>24</sup> [https://www.klook.com/newsroom/travelpulse-2023-q3q4/?spm=Newsroom.NewsArticle\\_LIST&clickId=de2977526e](https://www.klook.com/newsroom/travelpulse-2023-q3q4/?spm=Newsroom.NewsArticle_LIST&clickId=de2977526e)

<sup>25</sup> <https://elcolectivo506.com/when-gold-is-green/?lang=en>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/has-climate-change-killed-the-classic-med-summer-holiday-p37ptf87s>

It's much like barefoot luxury, which loosely refers to properties that attempt to immerse the traveller in the natural environment, while minimising their carbon footprint.

Cempedak and Nikoi, two private islands in Indonesia, exemplify this. Villas skip the air conditioning (a bold move in Southeast Asia's tropical humidity) and are designed instead to maximise air circulation.

The result is "high gratification in ways that matter for enjoyment and low-fi in ways that matter for the environment," according to a [review of both islands by the \*Financial Times\*](#).<sup>27</sup>

"The role of the travel journalist is not to hit the public with a stick but to offer them a chocolate cake," said Haslam. People don't want to be shamed for their choices – but they can be gently coerced into an appealing alternative. Make it sustainable, but make it sexy.

### Educate

As the pandemic showed, the travel sector remains enticing even if one is not going anywhere. People love to travel, and they like knowing unexpected things about the world.

Newman's concept of utility, simply put, means that publications should strive to make readers feel erudite.

A story on the [LGBTQ revolution in Bhutan](#), for instance, a country better known for its monasteries and landscapes, makes a great dinner party anecdote.<sup>28</sup> And SCMP's Destinations Known is an op-ed series that explores tourism-related issues in popular destinations, such as non-profit organisations in Bali [cleaning beaches and waterways](#) and trying to end illegal dumping.<sup>29</sup>

Footer of SCMP says his aim isn't necessarily to get people out the door, but to give them a realistic impression of what's out there.

"Our job is to entertain readers for 10 to 15 minutes and give them the full picture so they can make informed decisions on how to spend their money, time and carbon budget wisely," he said.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/ccc2dc69-aa79-44c1-a316-51bd6ea6751b>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-11-10/himalayan-kingdom-bhutan-lgbtq-revolution>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/travel/article/3231354/tsunamis-trash-bali-based-river-warriors-clearing-indonesias-beaches-and-waterways-waste-and-helping>

## 5. Fact-checking and verifying claims

- Collaborate with climate journalists to evaluate the claims of travel companies. Ask direct questions. Avoid brands that fudge the answers and spotlight those that do it right.
- Journalists are positioned to set the agenda for good sustainability practices – the hope is that in time to come, companies will fall in line.

Before championing something as being sustainable or regenerative, it is essential to establish whether this is really the case. Greenwashing is all too common in the hospitality sector, and claims of a company's carbon footprint or offsets are difficult to verify.

Yet verification can be tricky for a single journalist in unfamiliar terrain who is reporting on companies presenting a varnished reality.

Collaboration is one way around it. Diego Arguedas Ortiz, climate journalist turned Associate Director of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network at the Reuters Institute, suggested teaming up with an environmental reporter to deep dive into climate or sustainability reporting.

“The issue with climate change is that most reporters don't have a lot of baseline knowledge. In newsrooms, you have people with various types of expertise, so working together relieves the climate or travel journalist from the sole responsibility to uncover a specific issue,” he said.

Other times, all one might need is a good reporter's instincts, keeping their eyes open for things that don't add up. Such as single-use plastics at a property that claims to be eco-friendly, or air conditioning that does not shut off automatically when guests leave a room.

Ask the public relations representative or general manager of a property if something doesn't add up. Ask, too, about evidence of impact.

If companies are being opaque (deliberately or otherwise) about their sustainability practices, spotlight those that are upfront instead. Brands rely heavily on organic media coverage to reach consumers; this is due to trust in news organisations. Rewarding companies with good sustainability practices is a way to incentivise others to do it better.

Jetwings Hotel, a Sri Lankan chain with more than 30 properties across the country, is one hospitality brand that gets it right. Its owners, the Cooray family, are so committed to sustainability that they travel mainly by public transport.

“They’ve established farms, invested in local talent, reintroduced native rice varieties to reduce dependency on imports. And, in an astonishing feat that shames the big brands, have succeeded in using biomass, solar and biogas from kitchen waste to meet 80% of energy needs at one hotel and 76% at another,” wrote Haslam of *The Times* in an [op-ed](#).<sup>30</sup>

Look for travel agencies that weave sustainability into their brand, and ask them too. [Seek Sophie](#), a Singapore-based travel company, curates experiences in Asia that benefit communities and are respectful of wildlife and the environment, along with offsetting carbon emissions for experiences booked on their platform.<sup>31</sup> Staff try out most experiences before they are listed on the platform, and speak to conservationists and members of the local community to verify an operator’s claims.

Co-founder Jacinta Lim said: “We’ve been in these places for years, so we’re constantly having these conversations and seeing how things evolve. As with most [nonsense], it comes out over time – so there are some cases where people give us the whole song and dance about the work they’re doing, and we find out that it isn’t true after a while and stop working with them.”

None of these are foolproof, but it can help prevent false claims and greenwashing from making their way into a story.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/our-notion-of-luxury-is-as-morally-unacceptable-as-drink-driving-rrq899xdg>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.seeksoophie.com/our-mission>

## Conclusion

Despite their value, intersectional travel stories will likely remain the minority – a third or less of travel stories, according to journalists and editors I spoke with.

Demand for service journalism remains strong. Time-pressed working professionals want plug-and-play travel itineraries, and virtually everyone wants to know how to score cheaper flights and hotel rooms. When it comes to clicks, these stories perform much better. So, here's a quandary – is the in-depth travel story still worth the time and effort, knowing you could obtain more clicks with a service journalism piece?

Yes, according to Footer of SCMP. He said: “I think the appetite for informed travel will grow as the problems facing the world get worse. Even if reader numbers aren't high on a specific story, I hope readers will be educated and entertained, and what they pick up will accumulate and lead to better tourism practices.”

Overall, weaving into travel journalism an intersectional understanding of the destination from a social, sustainable, economic, and cultural perspective, adds to the traveller's experience. The work is essential, even if the process of shifting attitudes can feel incremental. The goal is to shape consumer behaviour, creating a generation of responsible travellers, so the world we leave to future generations will remain one that is worth seeing.