

How tourism can alleviate poverty

By Lori Robertson



The Travel Foundation has helped develop a ticketing system for Maasai village tours in Kenya that redirects fees to the community to invest in education and sanitation. (Harry Hook/Getty)

Visitors to developing countries often want to do something about the poverty they're exposed to. But the mere act of travelling can make a difference.

The number of international travellers reached one billion for the first time in 2012 – and that means more money for the industry. According to the [United Nations' World Tourism Organization](#), tourism makes up 5% of the world's Gross Domestic Product; it accounts for one in 12 jobs worldwide; and it's either the number one or number two export earnings for 20 of the 48 least developed countries, including Tanzania and Samoa.

"Tourism has been described as the world's largest transfer of resources from rich to poor, dwarfing international aid," said Salli Felton, acting chief executive of the [Travel Foundation](#), a UK-based charity that works with the travel industry on sustainability issues.

But getting tourism money to the poor can be easier in theory than reality. Many times, tourism dollars – such as those spent at foreign-owned resorts or tour operators – don't stay in the traveller's destinations. In addition, Felton explained that "developing countries often also import equipment, food and other goods from abroad to meet the expectations and standards of holidaymakers". That means hotels and restaurants aren't buying goods locally and supporting jobs and businesses in their home countries.

Still, experts see progress – and potential. There are many examples of small, local projects that have helped lower-income communities. For example, travellers can take part in [Maasai village tours in Kenya](#), where nearly all of the tour fees once went to outside guides instead of the villagers. But the Travel Foundation helped develop a ticketing system that redirected fees to the community, who used the money to invest in education and sanitation.

Micro loans to local entrepreneurs have also gotten a lot of attention in recent years. Kristin Lamoureux, director of the [International Institute of Tourism Studies](#) at The George Washington University in Washington DC, said there are many examples of local people just needing the capital to get a business off the ground – giving the example of a woman in the Dominican Republic who received a small loan to start a juice stand, later expanding to six stands and 12 employees. And there are also community-owned enterprises, such as the [Chalalan Ecolodge in Bolivia](#), which was set up with financial help from the US-based environmental organisation [Conservation International](#). Chalalan has been fully owned by the local community since 2001, providing income to 70 families and employment alternatives to logging and hunting.

But large travel operators – such as major hotel chains – are increasingly playing a role as well. Small-scale tourism development is good, Lamoureux said, “but we also need to be focusing on the big players”. And the news there is fairly good: “10 years ago those hotels were encouraging guests to re-use their towels; now they’re talking about social welfare.”

For instance, Ritz Carlton has a [Community Footprints](#) social and environmental responsibility programme that, among other initiatives, has hotels and their staff partnering with local organisations on children issues, hunger and poverty through mentoring, volunteering and youth training programmes. Guests can also participate through half-day “voluntourism” opportunities, such as planting trees in Atlanta, Georgia, with a local initiative that aims to bring more trees to urban communities, or sorting donated food items for a hunger relief organisation in Philadelphia.

The big hotels and major attractions also have “a greater awareness that just creating jobs doesn’t necessarily mean you’re creating economic alternatives for the poorest of the poor”, Lamoureux said. There’s more attention to educating and mentoring youth so that they can work in a professional environment, and also grooming those employees to move into middle and upper management. “I really think that will be a major initiative of the tourism industry... in the next 10 to 20 years,” Lamoureux added.

Travellers also can take action themselves. Felton recommended asking travel agents about a hotel’s ownership or whether it’s affiliated with a sustainable certification program, such as [Travelife](#), which awards hotels that meet social and environmental responsibility criteria. Lamoureux suggested asking what tourism providers’ social responsibility policies are and how many of their employees and managers are local residents. Travellers should also “get outside of the walls of the hotel and try to use their purchasing power”, Felton said. Eat at local restaurants, shop local and use local guides. “You’ll get more out of your holiday and ensure local people benefit from your stay.”

Lori Robertson writes the Ethical Traveller column for BBC Travel. You can send ethical dilemmas to bbcethicaltravel@gmail.com.

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