

# Indagare®

## Behind Carbon Neutrality: Q&A with Sustainable Travel's CEO Paloma Zapata



*The Tropicano Project, courtesy Sustainable Travel International*

Reducing your carbon footprint is one of the biggest (and most controversial) topics of discussion—not just within the travel industry, but in the world at large. And there are a lot of questions. What does it mean to reduce your carbon footprint? How do you go about it? How can you be sure the companies and products you support are actually having an impact (and not simply “greenwashing”)?

In October 2021, Indagare announced our goal to become fully carbon neutral by the end of 2023. To do this, we have partnered with Sustainable Travel International, an organization committed to promoting sustainable tourism and to protecting the world’s most vulnerable environments.

“We do our due diligence,” says Sustainable Travel CEO Paloma Zapata referring to how her organization chooses which carbon offsetting projects to support. And she means it. Zapata began her career an engineer, and though she grew up a lover of environment, she never saw herself in the tourism space. “Not until I became aware of the negative impact tourism was having,” she says.

Having grown up visiting family in her ancestral home of the Dominican Republic, Zapata has seen the travel industry alienated local fishermen, and as serene beaches were taken over by overdevelopment. “I have seen how tourism exploited my country...and because I was visiting and seeing and being a tourist [out in the world], I wanted to be a part of the solution.” Since then, she has been a key player in numerous achievements in the sustainable travel space developing tourism master plans for countries including Belize and Ecuador; aiding in post-hurricane recovery planning for St. Martin and the Bahamas.

At Sustainable Travel International, their work targets “mainly developing nations,” Zapata says, “but we want to diversify across the world.” One recent initiative: the organization completed a study in the Seychelles, in which they identified how much tourism the country could handle while protecting and conserving the environment and local communities. This study and its recommendations had a direct impact on the Seychelles’s tourism development model.

Read on for more from Zapata, including types of carbon neutrality projects Sustainable Travel funds, Zapata's take on greenwashing, and why offsetting "blue carbon" may save the planet.



*Paloma Zapata, courtesy Sustainable Travel International*

In your portfolio of the projects you support for carbon offsetting, they skew mostly towards those supporting communities and reforestation as opposed to energy. Why are these the projects you've chosen?

"Carbon can be a very abstract concept. And it resonates when you can tell an impact story around our partners. Reforestation sequesters carbon whereas sustainable energy weens you off of carbon...So reforestation projects really resonate with people...[they] are all about regenerating the earth...And because they help maintain and revive the environment in addition to the jobs created out of these projects, the community benefits."

You also have some projects focusing on blue carbon

initiatives—projects that support coastal ecosystems, specifically mangroves, seagrass and salt marshes. How do these compare to more traditional reforestation?

“Blue carbon actually sequesters 10 times more carbon than reforestation, and we aim to do more of it next year. Soon every client portfolio will have a few blue carbon credits. These blue carbon projects tend to be both smaller and more expensive. But the biggest obstacle is while some smaller standard organization like Plan Vivo have verified the methodology behind blue carbon, the largest organizations responsible for setting standards for these carbon offsetting projects have not yet verified the methodology for mangroves and seagrass restoration.”

What are the verification standards you use?

“The main standards that Sustainable Travel International works with are VERRA (Verified Carbon Standard), Gold Standard, Plan Vivo, The American Carbon Registry and Natural Forest Registry, all of which have specific goals and criteria that a project needs to meet to be verified. Each individual project chooses which of these standards to apply for, and being verified by one gives a certain amount of legitimacy.

There are newer standards, too—like the Natural Forest Standard and Wildsense—that are more innovative than some of their older counterparts. The verification process is also significantly shorter which speeds up the timeline for the project itself. While the older standards are effective and reputable and are making some innovative moves, we want to be at the forefront.”



*The Tropicano Project, courtesy Sustainable Travel International*

A lot of people are talking about greenwashing. Can you speak to this and how it relates to the travel industry?

“[Sustainability] can be a space that is not very well regulated—and that people don’t fully understand. Planting a tree is not enough. You need to have a full conservation restoration project behind that, and that’s what these restoration projects provide.

Sustainable Travel International often has clients come to us saying ‘we know we need to do something, but we have no idea how.’ With these verified projects, every time a carbon credit gets offset it is recorded in a public database by the carbon verification

registry that approved it, allowing you to see what and who offset that carbon credit. With a donation, you don't know that. These projects were created for that transparency."

What would you tell people to reassure them that the projects you've chosen are having a real impact and that they are not greenwashing?

"They need to be verified. That's the first thing. But that doesn't mean there aren't holes. We dig deeper into each project to make sure that they are still functioning and to check out their documentation and collateral. We speak directly to them and interview the project developer to learn about their approach and make sure it's legit.

Working with us, you can guarantee third party transparency. We measure the carbon, validate the projects' approach and we explain everything."

## Further Learning: Zapata's Trusted Resources

For those interested in learning more about [how to reduce their travel carbon footprint](#).

For those interested in learning more about [Blue Carbon](#).

For those interested in learning what to consider in [choosing a carbon offset provider](#).

***Contact Indagare or your Trip Designer to learn more about Indagare's carbon neutrality efforts, Indagare Impact and to plan a trip that not only inspires and empowers you as a traveler, but also helps support the destination you've visited.***

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- Abby Sandman on May 19, 2022

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