



The New Dangers of Undertourism in the Wake of COVID-19



Prayer flags in Bhutan, Courtesy Gina Paoloni

I consider myself part of the first generation of true global citizens. Born in New York to an Australian mother and an American father, who met in London in the 1950s, I made my first trip halfway around the world to Sydney at age eight. I spent a year of high school living with a French family and another year of college in Paris. My first job post-college was for a travel magazine, which led to my becoming a travel editor, then a travel entrepreneur. In the past 25 years, I've visited more than 100 countries and spent an average of a week a month on the road. The more glamorous assignments included interviewing Sir Richard Branson on his private Caribbean Island, shopping with Michael Kors in Paris and dining with three-star *Michelin* chef Alain Ducasse in his kitchen. But deep shifts in perspective occurred in other moments: meeting students in Iran eager to discuss American politics; being blessed by a monk in a hilltop monastery in Bhutan; walking with anti-poaching units in Kenya and waking alone at sunrise in the Namib desert.

Personally and professionally, I rode the wave of history's greatest travel boom, but I

believe that era—along with many of its benefits and costs—is over for good. I watched as airline travel went from a privilege that I put my patent leather Mary Janes on for in the 1970s—because then it was expensive and a big event to fly—to the era of mass-flying. My kids had passports before they were one years old and have been on a plane almost every school vacation, always in sneakers. When I began my travel career in 1990, international tourist arrivals worldwide were 435 million, by 2018 they were 1.4 billion.

Virtually overnight, COVID-19 has inverted the travel landscape. Until March, one of our industry's major concerns was [overtourism](#), a phenomenon that can be seen in the toll that Venice, Angkor Wat and Machu Picchu have paid for with their beauty, mystery and popularity. I sit on the board of the Center for Responsible Travel, a non-profit in Washington D.C., and last year, we held our summit on this topic, which we defined as “tourism that has moved beyond the limits of acceptable change in a destination, due to the quantity of visitors, resulting in degradation of the environment and infrastructure, diminished travel experience, wear and tear on built heritage, and/or negative impacts on residents.”

But now, I worry about its polar opposite: undertourism. A staggering 10 percent of the world's GDP lies in tourism, which has proven to be a particularly effective employment vehicle for vulnerable communities, including women and youth, as well as a powerful motivator for environmental protections and heritage preservation. There are regions in the rainforests in South America where indigenous tribes have been able to sustain their cultures and environments through tourism, instead of poaching or logging. In Africa, [Botswana](#) offers an incredible eco-model, where responsible lodges demonstrated so successfully the positive economic impact of photographic safaris that the government, for many years, banned hunting. You can find stories like these all over the world, from [Costa Rica](#), which contains five percent of the world's biodiversity and has been able to protect it by strategically shifting to a tourism-based economy, to [Bhutan](#) which purposefully focuses on a low number of high-paying, culturally minded visitors.

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All of these places rely on visitors, and will be devastated as airlines slash their routes and travelers stop coming. Already, poaching in Africa is on the rise, and the UN is warning of epic famines due to COVID-19—one factor being lack of tourism to countries like [Ethiopia](#). Of course, the cleaner waters in [Venice](#) and the Mediterranean, where sea life is returning, and the clearer skies in Nepal and [Kenya](#), where Everest and [Kilimanjaro](#) can be seen from great distances again, are blessings and must serve as a wake-up call. Air travel accounts for more than three percent of all carbon emissions,

and the speed with which nature has rebounded under lockdown is a clarion call no one can ignore. But if the pendulum swings too far, the ripple effects of undertourism will be tragic for the people and places that tourism abandons. Without tourism, islands all over the world will see overfishing and mass exoduses of their local populations.

In recent years, we had entered an era of “fast travel,” which, like fast food, is cheap and easy but not nourishing. People jumped on flights for an Instagram photo or to celebrate a bachelorette; they weren’t interacting with locals, learning about culture or community issues. Lockdown has forced an end to frenetic travel, but it has also inspired a seismic and irrevocable shift in values and attitudes in many. “When you walk in a rainforest, the slower you walk and the calmer you move, the more you see,” [Daniel Katz](#), the founder of the Rainforest Alliance recently told me in one of our [Global Conversations](#). “If I pull back from others and slow down, I will start to see insects I’ve never seen before or the eyes of the monkeys.” It strikes me that we’ve all been forced to slow down and pay attention, shifting our perspective.

I don’t have a crystal ball, but as the world re-emerges, I hope people will begin to travel in a more considered and responsible way and embrace slow travel. Initially, we will move in an expanding ring of concentric circles, first, in our own backyards, traveling domestically, allowing us to discover what we took for granted, but also supporting our nearest communities. Gradually, we will go further, depending on the policies of other countries, which may require “health visas” and screenings. The CDC may begin to rank countries for their health and safety (as the State Department currently does for political stability). People at different stages and ages will react differently, especially those with underlying health risks, all of this will be influenced (hopefully positively and quickly) by medical advances.

But it is clear we need to take fewer trips. We need to dive deeply into places, stay longer and consider our time and our impact. If the right place for the pendulum to land between overtourism and undertourism is in the middle, then the responsible traveler has to find the center for him and herself as well. We must broaden our global view, seek to understand how everything is connected, and make decisions that are informed, thoughtful and effective, not just for ourselves but for the greater world we love to explore. As Katz also said, “Once we visit a beautiful place, we become its stewards. We have a responsibility to support the people and places after we return home.” And it is in this sentiment that I see our biggest opportunity to effect positive change—as travelers, as world citizens, as humans.

When I think back on past travels, it is the people that have taught me the most. Whether it was my French mother, who introduced me to the joys of fresh cheese; or activists like Lebanese filmmaker [Nadine Labaki](#), who is championing revolution in

[Beirut](#) today; or conservationists like Dereck and Beverly Joubert, who launched Rhinos without Borders; or the students in Iran, who I spoke with the day after Trump's election. It is human exchange that provides the color, context and complexity that cannot be found in books or on the news but are fundamental to a broad and inclusive perspective. They are the community that I feel part of as a global citizen, thanks to travel, and one that I want my children to also be able to belong to.

When it is safe for us to travel again, I will be among the first ones out there: to revisit and support the destinations I love; to explore the ones still on my list; to seek with a new sense of purpose and urgency; to approach every place with respect and awe; to listen to its stories and carry them, like precious mementos, to share back home. And, above all, to connect with the people who give them humanity and to savor an unspoken agreement: that we will reinvent, reimagine and ultimately care for this new world together.

Learn more about Indagare Founder and CEO Melissa Biggs Bradley and the people she has met through her [Global Conversations](#) series.

- Melissa Biggs Bradley on May 12, 2020

