

TOP 10 ECO-DESTINATIONS in North America

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Save fossil fuel and money by traveling to environmentally responsible lodging closer to home.



You don't have to leave the United States and its contiguous neighbors, Canada and Mexico, to find cutting-edge ecotourism. North America offers a range of environmentally responsible destinations, from sub-Arctic territories to tropical beaches. So why are they so hard to find?

In Africa, Australia, or South America, you'll encounter a host of eco-lodges that practice low-impact tourism involving indigenous people. Yet within U.S. boundaries, ecotourism on that scale is scarce.

This is partly because environmentally responsible tourism has its genesis in developing nations, explains Martha Honey, executive director of the International Ecotourism Society. "Ecotourism's roots go back to Latin America and Africa during the 1970s, with worldwide awareness of the cutting of rainforests and poaching of animals such as rhinos and elephants," she says. "U.S. ecotourism has been hampered because we don't have a centralized government organization such as a national tourism board. It's grown up here in a more disparate way—community by community—but ecotourism is here."

Eco-lodge landscape architect Hitesh Mehta, who works for ESDA, a Ft. Lauderdale, Florida-based planning firm, has another theory. "Americans are wonderful ecotourists," he says. "They love traveling, staying in environmentally responsible places, and meeting local people—and they're willing to pay for those experiences. However, when it comes to development of eco-lodges, America has an abysmal record." The problem, he opines, lies with development and investment companies that demand quick financial returns rather than the higher initial capital and longer-term paybacks of ecotourism.

Defining ecotourism

"Tourism is, essentially and inescapably, environmentally destructive," says Brian Mullis, president of Sustainable Travel International. He notes that according to British "footprinting" company Best Foot Forward, a round-trip traveler flying from London to Brazil uses twice the annual carbon emissions of an average African and half the average annual carbon emissions per person globally.

That's why *Natural Home* advocates travel a bit closer to home. And, we suggest you choose your destination according to these principles:

- It's built using environmentally sound methods and/or operates with alternative energy sources.
- It minimizes human impact on natural habitats and promotes resource conservation.
- It sustains the well-being of local people and/or indigenous communities.
- It helps raise visitors' environmental and cultural awareness.

The following North American accommodations will delight environmentally and socially conscious travelers. Most of these aren't perfect—and a few don't hit all aspects of ecotourism—but as they're continually supported by eco-travelers, they're sure to evolve.

