



The Field Guide

for Travelers Who Refuse
to Be Tourists

There's a better way to travel.
It's eleven pages long.

Don't read this. Use it.

This isn't a manifesto to read once. It's a filter to keep on your phone and then pull up at the moment that decides everything—when you choose a stay, an operator, an excursion. **Three lenses, one filter, one checklist.** Read it once. Then use it forever.

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- 1** Who is responsible?
Own the part no certification can
 - 2** Where your money goes
See what drains and feeds a place
 - 3** Who it harms or helps
Recognize the harm sold as a highlight
 - 4** Who it leaves out
Vet a trip on the access it won't advertise
 - 5** The greenwashing filter
Tell a real claim from a sticker
 - 6** The Cape Town wheel
Hold all seven principles in one image
 - 7** The field checklist
Carry the whole guide on one screen
 - 8** Where this comes from
Trace every claim to its source
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Sustainable is the goal. Responsible is you.

People often use the two words as if they mean the same thing. They don't. **"Sustainable"** describes a destination—a state the whole system should reach. **"Responsible"** describes a decision—the action someone takes to get there. And that someone is you.

As Professor Harold Goodwin, who pioneered the field, puts it: there has been **"too much talk of sustainability and too little taking of responsibility."**

Sustainable Tourism asks

- Is the industry doing enough?
- Are governments setting the right targets?
- Will this destination still be here in fifty years?

A goal, measured at the level of the system.

Responsible Tourism asks

- What am I doing—right now, with this booking?
- Where is my money going, and who does this trip affect?
- Am I leaving this place better than I found it?

An action, taken at the level of one traveler.

No certification, no government, no operator can make your trip responsible. **That part was always yours.** Responsibility, as Goodwin says, is free—"you can take as much of it as you can handle."

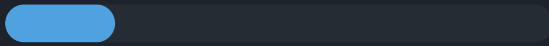
Follow the money. Follow the €100.

The same €100, on the same island, takes a completely different path depending on who you book with. Distance is not what drains a destination—but structure is. This is the one number that changes how you travel.

THE ENCLAVE EURO

€20

stays local. ~€80 leaves—foreign-owned resorts, imported food, overseas operators.



THE ROOTED EURO

€90

stays & recirculates—local guesthouses, family tavernas, local guides, village co-ops.



Keep your euro on the rooted path

- Book **locally-owned** stays, not chains or foreign-owned resorts.
- Eat at **family tavernas** that cook with local and seasonal ingredients.
- Hire **local guides**—the wage stays in the village.
- Travel in **shoulder season**; spread out beyond the hotspots.
- Buy **direct from makers**—potters, weavers, farms.

Ask before you book

- Who **owns** this place—and where do the profits actually go?
- Where does the **food** come from?
- Are the **guides local** and fairly paid?
- Does any **revenue stay** in the community?

Figures describe typical package vs. locally-sourced structures, not a measured result for any one destination. Sources: UNEP / UN Tourism (all-inclusive leakage); UNCTAD (leakage by economy type); OECD (local value added per tourism euro).

Some highlights are built on suffering.

The cruelest harms in travel are the ones sold as highlights—a photo with a tiger, a visit to an orphanage, or an elephant ride—packaged as compassion or adventure, but paid for in animals and children. The rule is simple: **if an animal performs or a child is the attraction, walk away.**

Travel without the harm

- Skip **elephant and donkey rides, whale and dolphin shows, and big-cat selfies**, as wild animals don't perform without cruelty.
- Never visit or volunteer at **orphanages**; most orphans have living parents—and the trade separates families.
- Choose **genuine sanctuaries**: no riding, no petting, no breeding.
- Buy only from **artisans directly**; don't haggle people down to nothing.
- Treat a place as a **home, not a backdrop**.

Ask before you go

- Does any **animal perform**, or get ridden or touched?
- Are **children** being used as an attraction or a fundraiser?
- Who **profits**—the community, or an outside operator?
- Is this someone's **home or sacred site**?
- May I **photograph** this—did I ask first?

Sources: World Animal Protection (captive-wildlife entertainment); ReThink Orphanages and UNICEF (the harm of orphanage tourism). More at ethicaltourism.com.

A trip is only as accessible as its weakest link.

Accessibility isn't a wheelchair symbol on a website. It's a chain—airport, transfer, entrance, room, bathroom, excursion—and the journey breaks at the first link that fails. "Accessible" is a marketing word. Specifics are the truth.

Verify the whole chain

- Confirm **every link**: arrival, transfer, entrance, room, bathroom, the things you came to do.
- Ask for **measurements and photos**, not just the word "accessible".
- **Book direct** so you can confirm specifics with a human.
- Check **step-free routes**, not just a lift—lifts can break.
- Build in **margin**: time, rest, a plan B.

Ask before you book

- Is the **whole journey** step-free, or just the room?
- How **wide** are the doorways? How high is the bed? Is the shower roll-in, or does it have a lip?
- Are **staff trained** to assist—and is equipment available?
- Can you see a **photo or a video** of the actual space?

The chain of accessibility and the right to step-free, verifiable access trace to the UN CRPD and UN Tourism's "Accessible Tourism for All". More at [inclusivetourism.com](https://www.inclusivetourism.com).

“Eco” is a sticker. Proof is a number.

The more sustainable a brochure sounds, the more it usually hides. Greenwashing trades in warm words—“eco”, “green”, “natural”—with little behind them. Harold Goodwin’s test cuts straight through it: of anyone who claims to be responsible, ask three things: what are they taking responsibility for, what are they actually doing (and how much), and what have they achieved?

Real responsibility answers with specifics—numbers, measured results, named partners—while greenwashing changes the subject.

Trust signals

- ✔ **Independent certification** against a GSTC-recognized standard (Travelife, Green Key, EarthCheck), or B Corp.
- ✔ **Specific numbers:** % local staff, % local sourcing, energy, water.
- ✔ **Named partners** and commitments you can verify.
- ✔ **Honesty** about what isn’t solved yet.

Red flags

- ✘ Words like “eco”, “green”, and “natural” with **nothing measurable** behind them.
- ✘ A **self-made award** or no third-party check.
- ✘ **Stock nature imagery** doing most of the talking.
- ✘ Certified as “eco-lodge”, “reef-safe”, etc. —but **by whom?**

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) recognizes a standard once it meets the specific GSTC Criteria—and accredits the bodies that certify against it.

THE FRAMEWORK · WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

Seven principles. One idea.

Everything here descends from one document—the Cape Town Declaration (2002). Its seven principles are one idea in seven facets: **leave a place better than you found it.**

The distance between a tourist and a traveler is measured in the conversations they have.



Source: The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (2002).

Before. During. After.

Every lens in this guide, distilled to a working checklist. **Check off each box as you book.**

Before you book

- Choose locally-owned stays and operators
- Travel in shoulder season
- Skip the overtouristed hotspots
- Fly less, stay longer
- Offset the flights you can't avoid
- No performing animals, no orphanage visits
- Look for a GSTC-recognized certification
- Run the operator past all three lenses
- Verify the accessibility chain, if you need it

While you're there

- Eat local, hire local, buy direct
- Refill—refuse single-use plastic
- Stick to marked trails
- Keep your distance from wildlife
- Ask before photographing people
- Respect sacred sites and local customs

After you travel

- Leave honest reviews that name responsible operators
- Share what worked; flag what didn't
- Keep the relationships—recommend, return
- Carry one habit home

The three lenses

- 1** **Where your money goes.**
Follow the €100—keep it local.
- 2** **Who it harms or helps.**
Refuse cruelty sold as a highlight.
- 3** **Who it leaves out.**
Accessibility is a chain—verify every link.

The filter

“Eco” is a sticker; proof is a number.

Of any claim, ask what they are taking responsibility for, what they are doing (and how much), and what they have achieved. Trust only specifics and named partners; distrust vague claims and self-made awards.

If you cannot tell where the money goes, who it affects, and who it leaves out—ask, or book elsewhere.

Don't take our word. Take theirs.

No claim here rests on our authority. Every figure and framework traces to a primary source.

- › [The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism \(2002\)](#)
- › [UN Global Code of Ethics for Tourism — UN Tourism \(UNWTO\)](#)
- › [Responsible Tourism: Using Tourism for Sustainable Development — Harold Goodwin \(2016\)](#)
- › [Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals — UN Tourism](#)
- › [GSTC Criteria — the global baseline for sustainable tourism](#)
- › [Sustainable Tourism: economic impacts & leakage — UNEP](#)
- › [‘Overtourism’? Managing urban tourism growth — UN Tourism](#)
- › [World Animal Protection — captive-wildlife entertainment](#)
- › [ReThink Orphanages / UNICEF — the harm of orphanage tourism](#)
- › [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities — United Nations](#)
- › [Accessible Tourism for All — UN Tourism](#)

Two companion resources go deeper on the ethical and on the inclusive lenses—[ethicaltourism.com](#) and [inclusivetourism.com](#). Full citations live on each.



Letters from inside the question

*“Most people who write about responsible tourism are observing it.
I went to live inside it.”*

The guide ends here. The fieldwork doesn't.

Once a month, I write a letter from my tiny mountain village on Crete—the field notes, the raw research, and the questions I haven't answered yet. Everything that doesn't fit in a guide. Written for travelers who refuse to be tourists. No noise. Free.

responsibletourism.com/letter →

Share freely.

Steven spent a decade making documentaries in the places tourism forgets—fieldwork that is now held in the archives of the UN's International Labour Organization. Then he went to live in one. He is completing an MSc in Responsible Tourism Management, holds GSTC certification, and earned his ICRT credentials under Professor Harold Goodwin, who pioneered the responsible tourism movement. He writes here not as a detached observer, but as someone who chose to live inside the question—and is actively building the answer with [CRETAN®](#).