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# Tourism Day: How to ditch plastic and other sustainable travel tips from Mumbaikars

Premium

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Tourism is not only about promoting scenic locations but also about preserving them. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising need for sustainable travel, three Mumbaikars point out how plastic is playing spoilsport and why people need to research more when they travel



*On one of her many travels in in Uttarakhand, Adithi Muralidhar spotted a Rusty Cheeked Scimitar Babbler in garbage, the sight of which irks her. Photo Courtesy: Adithi Muralidhar*

It was on a trip to Turkey in September 2018 with her husband and friends that Mumbaikar Khushbu Merchant first took stock of the amount of plastic she was carrying with her. They ended up using and throwing a lot of plastic bottles for water, cups and forks too. She explains, “The usage of water bottles was major. I remember on this one day between the six of us, we had close to 10 different sizes of plastic bottles that we had used.”

While she was always conscious about her environment footprint locally, where she avoided using plastic bags at the neighbourhood vegetable shop, this was different. “I realised I need to take major steps towards practicising sustainability while travelling,” she adds. From her next trip, which was to Germany, she started carrying a foldable cutlery set and good quality water bottles labelled with names and that was the beginning of her sustainable journey.

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Every year, National Tourism Day is celebrated in India on January 25 to educate people about the importance of travelling and [tourism](#). While many people today are travelling a lot more due to better incomes and even posting about holidays on Instagram, how many are really travelling consciously? The idea of travelling sustainably has been around but with the increasing amount of pollution, the need to be careful about the impact we have on the environment is very much needed. Merchant is only one of many who have learned about the effect we have on the environment when we travel.



*Camping has been one of the hacks for Aayushi Yadav to avoid staying at properties, which are not environment-friendly. Photo Courtesy: Aayushi Yadav*

### The plastic menace

It has been easier for Aayushi Yadav, another Mumbaikar from Goregaon, who has been regularly travelling since 2015 and going on frequent treks due to her interest in outdoor activities. She started by doing something most of us have adopted these days – carrying a water bottle that can be refilled, to avoid using plastic bottles. She says, “In the group, we did not litter the trail and carried our waste back with ourselves to dispose of it in the city. I consumed seasonal local food which eliminates the urge to carry processed food that is stored in plastic.” Carrying food in plastic, she believes is responsible for the most amount of waste. In fact, Merchant, like Yadav, eats local food and looks for accommodations offering this service too.

Apart from that, Yadav and Merchant recommend using public transport, shared rides, cycles over cab drives, trains over planes, which are not only cost-effective but also efficient because private vehicles are avoided. Spending the night at a village temple or simply opting for homestays or camping in shared tents has been another hack that Yadav has followed to avoid staying at properties, which are not environment-friendly. However, the 28-year-old believes there is a lot more to be done and it is not just an individual effort but also a collective effort and research is at the centre of it all. The Mumbaikar believes it is not only important to research about the place one is visiting but also the group one is going with and their practices. There are enough places which are yet to be explored or are relatively lesser known & one must research well in advance before planning to travel so that we can collectively reduce the burden on overcrowded destinations.

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*Khushbu Merchant always looks to eat local food and for accommodations offering this service. In Dehradun, she found a place that served food on leaves and used bamboo cutlery. Photo Courtesy: Khushbu Merchant*

### **Misconceptions and the need to be trendy**

Even with so much scope for sustainable travel, Yadav believes that a common misconception with the concept is that people think they have limited choices. “People think you need to spend more and it will leave you dissatisfied with the experience because you need to compromise on your comfort in order to travel sustainably,” she explains.

Adithi Muralidhar, a city-based zoologist who is also a sustainable traveller, agrees with Yadav and says compromising may rarely occur and people should not think of it as living in rudimentary locations because today even a five-star resort can have sustainable practices in place. However, she says one needs to be aware of the practices because eco-resorts may not always have eco-practices. “A lot of green-washing happens in this domain. We need to be aware of it,” she warns.

Muralidhar adds, “Practising sustainable travel isn’t expensive because it is more about planning things well in advance and that takes time and effort.” She has particularly been conscious about proper waste disposal since her college days and the littering she has seen on her many travels irks her every time. The nature-lover adds that people often think sustainable travel is about making sure the environment is preserved but it is actually also about ensuring that the locals in the area aren’t harmed by our actions and thus preserving the cultural environment in the process. These not only extend to the wildlife, yoga retreats and trekking but also to a heritage site, city or town.

On the other hand, Yadav blames the social media boom and the need to visit trending destinations which has plagued tourism in the recent past. Even travel companies encourage it for the sake of business but that ends up polluting the place. “I have visited Rajasthan and seen places like Udaipur, Jaipur and Jodhpur, popular trekking routes in Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, which have been converted into dumping grounds with little to no waste management system and still increasing number of tourists,” says the frequent traveller. Yadav adds that traveller friends have told her it is visibly the same for other trending destinations such as Ladakh, Spiti, Kashmir and Meghalaya.





Adithi Muralidhar has particularly been conscious about proper waste disposal since her college days and the littering she has seen on her many travels irks her every time. In Picture: Littering in Lonavala. Photo Courtesy: Adithi Muralidhar

Effects of Covid-19 pandemic on sustainable travel

While sustainable travel is the future, it is hard to ignore the effect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on travel. Unlike Muralidhar and Merchant, Yadav has seen the bright side of it. She says that the fact more people are opting to stay for longer durations means that it will reduce the need to use transport frequently. The retail merchandise planner has also observed that more people are opting for homestays, which feels like their home and because of that, they are taking more effort to research. With homestays having home-cooked food and curated experiences at cost-effective rates, Yadav is happy as it reduces the impact on the **environment**.

Over the years, people have been attempting to pack less and only take essentials with them but now have to pack the Covid essentials and take precautionary measures which are another concern, according to Muralidhar and Merchant. The former believes that now people may be packing more items like sanitisers, instead of travelling light and minimalistic. “An increased preference to eat and drink in disposable cutlery, buying bottle water and the added trash in flights like PPE kits that we wear for just an hour or two and then discard it. A lot of it is not in our hands, but some of it is,” she points out. The fact that people may opt to travel alone now more than before, adds Merchant, will end up increasing the fuel consumption leading to pollution in the end and the effects of plastic will be felt for years to come.

The effects of the pandemic still loom large but these travellers believe it is important to start small and Muralidhar has some food for thought. She says, the next time people are sipping chai at the local tea stall in a scenic location and enjoying the bliss, she asks them to think about where their chai cup is going to be disposed of and if the stall owner even has the facilities to do it.

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