

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Is climate change threatening luxury travel?

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Summers in Marbella are becoming hotter, impacting the travel season. Image credit: Marbella Club Hotel

By SARAH RAMIREZ

With the consequences of climate change becoming more apparent with each passing season, luxury hospitality brands and travel agencies are starting to see an impact.

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In recent years, sustainability has become top of mind among affluent consumers, who are increasingly aware of how their travel impacts the environment. More luxury travelers are opting to incorporate environmentally positive practices into their itineraries, while others are reconsidering or rescheduling trips to areas facing climate disasters.

"Sustainability is a huge trend in travel, of course," said Daniel Levine, business trends expert at the [Avant-Guide Institute](#), New York. "But every trend has a counter-trend and there is a huge impetus for travelers to catch dying destinations before they're gone."

"Just as there are 1,000 places to see before you die, there are another thousand to see before they die," he said. "Many of these places are suffering because of climate change, but the most popular destinations in the world are suffering due to over-tourism."

Climate change challenges

From wildfires to droughts and floods, natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more intense at an alarming rate.

This is attributed in large part to climate change and greenhouse emissions, and scientists and researchers believe these events will continue to worsen in the coming years and decades if serious measures are not taken.



Venice has faced problems from flooding and tourism for decades. Image credit: St. Regis

Even on a less dramatic scale, climate change is impacting the length of seasons and other weather patterns leading to more unpredictability and impacting vulnerable ecosystems.

Venice, home to luxury fashion boutiques and upscale hotels, is perhaps a harbinger on what to expect once climate changes begin to impact everyday life in a popular tourist destination. The famous sinking city has become even more vulnerable to flooding due to rising tides.

"Tourist hoards turned Venice into a museum of itself long before rising waters will swallow it," Mr. Levine said. "It's not kind to think about but the pandemic, which reduced visitor numbers overall, opened an opportunity for luxury travelers to visit places that would otherwise be overrun with the hoi-pollioie."

Pandemic aside, more extreme natural disasters also impact the travel industry.

In 2018, tourism authorities and hospitality brands throughout the Caribbean launched campaigns to promote tourism after a particularly busy and costly hurricane season ([see story](#)).

Many countries in Southeast Asia, including Maldives and Indonesia, saw serious declines in tourists following the catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. The tsunami killed nearly 228,000 people in 14 countries, devastating many beach and resort communities.

Some of these same areas continue to face other environmental challenges.

"Anecdotally, the Maldives is such a fragile environment being almost at sea level there's an awareness and actionable decisions about making more sustainable choices," said Carolyn Addison, head of product at [Black Tomato](#), London. "The [hotel] brand [Six Senses](#) has a strong sustainability mission and we've been working with them more than ever before in recent years."



Six Senses Laamu Maldives has banned single-use plastics and offers sustainability tours. Image credit: Six Senses

Ms. Addison also noted that while Black Tomato clients are not generally avoiding certain places due to climate change, there are exceptions after major events.

"Napa and Sonoma were avoided last year by some clients because of the wildfires which so devastatingly took over the region," Ms. Addison said. "But that said, this year has been a bumper in people return, sensitively, to support tourism in these wonderful regions and some wonderful new openings of note such as Stanly Ranch in Napa."

Similarly, following Australia's deadly bushfire season in late 2019 and early 2020 ([see story](#)), the country's leading

tourism body estimated the fires cost the hospitality industry \$690 million.

In January 2020, the Australian Tourism Industry Council began strategizing with the national government on a plan to promote travel but this soon became a moot point once the COVID-19 pandemic led to international border closures.

More than a year later, the hospitality industry continues to face a health crisis as well as the climate crisis.

This summer, wildfires and heat waves in Canada have already claimed the lives of hundreds. In July, a day of heavy rain triggered deadly flooding and landslides in Germany and Belgium.

Drought and water shortages are also a growing concern.



Lake Como is one of the deepest lakes in Europe, but it is shrinking. Image credit: Mandarin Oriental

"We predict that water is going to be the next big material issue affecting most people and industries as water access and quality are in rapid decline," said Diana Verde Nieto, founder at [Positive Luxury](#), London.

"By 2050, 685 million people living in over 570 cities will face an additional 10 percent decline in freshwater availability, at minimum, due to climate change," she said. "Some cities, such as Amman, Melbourne and Cape Town, can experience declines in freshwater availability by between 30 to 49 percent."

Italy's Lake Como recorded its lowest water level this summer, depleting fish populations and making the area at higher risk for rockslides. The iconic lake has been a luxury destination for centuries, and is home to several glamorous hotels, including a Mandarin Oriental property.

In drought-stricken California, the historic town of Mendocino is running out of water, leading inns to pay to truck in water and implement stringent conservation practices, per [CBS](#).

Hotels are bracing for more climate challenges.

"Climate change models have predicted that with warmer temperatures just 2 degrees higher than average and a reduction in rainfall caused by a shift in weather patterns, the Mediterranean region is likely to undergo a drastic transformation, with all of southern Spain becoming a vast desert that will lose its ability to support its native biodiversity and the human populations that depend on its ecosystems for their livelihoods," said Leigh Barrett, director of group sustainability at the [Marbella Club Hotel Group](#), Spain.

"This is obviously a horrifying long-term prospect for the future of the hospitality industry in Andalucia and, although we are yet to feel the effects of such doom and gloom predictions in Marbella's wonderful microclimate, the very early warning signs are there," she said.

Protecting biodiversity is key for hotels in unique climates

According to Ms. Barrett, summers in the region have become longer and hotter in the last four decades. The off-season is more frequently marked with more intense "gota fria" periods with cold fronts, heavy rainfall and flash floods.

"Here at the Marbella Club, we are taking these early warning signs very seriously and are investing in restoring our local shallow coastal ecosystems in an attempt to help mitigate against the potentially disastrous effects of climate change," Ms. Barrett said.

Sustainable strategies

More luxury hospitality brands are highlighting their sustainable offerings to cater to conscious consumers who want to be more proactive themselves.

"Travelers are more aware now of their impact on an environment but more in a positive way as they want to support the destination to help preserve it a beach cleanup, national parks hikes with a purpose, traveling off-the-beaten path in Venice to support actual locally-owned businesses," said Black Tomato's Ms. Addison.

"In essence, people want to leave places better than how they found them and we are seeing that across the board," she said.

A 2015 study by Tours.com found that an astonishing 55 percent of America-based travelers partook in volunteer work during a vacation within the past two years, with almost three quarters calling their charitable donations or philanthropic endeavors "important," "very important" or "extremely important." As "voluntourism" becomes increasingly common, brands must show that they care equally and assist travelers in partaking in volunteer work or gifting to maintain status and image ([see story](#)).

Interest in sustainable travel has only grown during the pandemic, particularly among affluents who were among the first to return to vacationing.

According to a report by Euromonitor International, a shift towards value-driven tourism will be crucial for survival, as forms of tourism marketing that focus simply on driving the number of visitors will no longer work after the pandemic. In the next five years, 59 percent of travel companies want to focus on developing sustainable products and services ([see story](#)).

"Once leisure travel began resuming earlier this year, we received a 200 percent year-on-year increased demand for environmentally focused, nature-based travel experiences," said Livia Manca di Villahermosa, founder and managing director of [Balance Holidays](#), London.

"We soon learnt that during the downtime provided by the pandemic, a brief pause from the daily routine and travel, our guests had come to terms of realizing just how pressing the wellbeing of planet Earth and subduing needless deterioration to it is, she said. "Their newfound answer is to travel sustainably and with the ongoing natural disasters, it further reinforces their position on the issue."

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