

How to avoid airport chaos by choosing flight-free travel this summer

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Passenger train passing by downtown Montreal city. Tony Tremblay/iStockPhoto / Getty Images

Pandemic travel restrictions have lifted, and those eager to return to flying are creating a boom in bookings. But many environmental advocates are encouraging us to stay grounded, repeating the message that air travel is destroying the planet. Wasn't the pandemic supposed to be the pause we needed to reflect on our unsustainable travel habits?

As Ariella Granett, co-founder of Flight Free USA, says: "People are struggling with this cognitive dissonance. They know what we should do, but they're still not quite ready."

According to the David Suzuki Foundation, fossil-fuel emissions from flights stay in the atmosphere and will continue to warm it for hundreds of years; by 2050, a quarter of all carbon emissions could be from flying. To put things into context: You'd have to drive your

car for a year to match the emissions produced from a single flight from Toronto to Barcelona.

In the years leading up to the pandemic, guilt was already starting to grow among would-be holidaymakers. In 2018, Swedes Maja Rosen and Lotta Hammar launched Flygfritt, a campaign and non-profit whose name translates to “flight free.” A year later, the general flygskam, or flight shame, movement also began in Sweden and sparked conversations and change around the globe, particularly in Europe.

Of course, it’s easier to eschew flights in places where alternative transportation links are well maintained, accessible and relatively affordable. In North America, where distances between states and provinces are huge and train journeys are expensive, flight-free pledges can seem like more of a sacrifice.

Still, some North Americans have pledged to stay grounded for at least one year, as per Flygfritt. And others are going even further.

Nathalie Laplante, who lives in Val David, Que., hasn’t been on a flight for 15 years. The most recent trip she made by air was to Fernie, B.C., from Montreal for a six-month skiing trip with her then partner. While there, she read *Heat* by political and environmental activist George Monbiot.

In the 2006 book – essentially a treatise on how to live a zero-emission lifestyle – Monbiot argued that a necessary 87-per-cent reduction in emissions meant that most planes needed to be grounded. “I realize that this is not a popular message,” he wrote, “but it is hard to see how a different conclusion could be extracted from the available evidence.”

Laplante was moved by his warnings. “It became very clear as I read how much of an impact aviation has on climate change,” she says. “He exposed the truth and the alternatives to flying.”

She made the return journey to Montreal by train. It took three days but had the unexpected effect of giving her a sense of place and pride in her country. “There was no jetlag or harsh contrast between the place we left and the place we arrived at,” she says. “It was so gradual. It was an experience that made us realize how much beauty there is in our own country and how much there is to explore.”

Staying grounded doesn’t mean Laplante never travels. She is currently planning a 10-week road trip with her family, including her three children, for this winter. They’ll journey through British Columbia then along the West Coast to California, homeschooling as they go.

Yes, she’s still burning gas. But over all, “slow travel,” as such trips have been dubbed, contributes less to greenhouse gas emissions – and more to local economies, proponents say. Tourists have greater opportunities to contribute to the places they visit through

volunteering, renting accommodation from locals or buying from small businesses.

For a recent 20th-anniversary trip, Laplante and her partner briefly considered flying to another country, but ultimately decided to visit Quebec's Gaspé region instead. "It didn't feel like a sacrifice at all," she says. "It was a proof-of-concept for me at that point. If, for this big occasion, we don't feel that flying is necessary, when will it be?"

She understands, however, the toll long absences can have on families who live apart. Even Monbiot in *Heat* gives the okay for flights when they are necessary to cover "love miles" to see family and friends, differentiating them from "the toll of cross-country shopping trips, or unnecessary vacations, shopping trips to New York, parties in Ibiza, second homes in Tuscany."

Many years ago, Laplante took a trip to Ireland. It was a wonderful experience, but when she later travelled to the much closer Îles-de-la-Madeleine in her own province, she couldn't believe how similar and transformative the landscapes were. "It really made me question, why did I go so far when I have this in my own backyard?"

How to go flight-free

Share your news

If you're ready to sign up for a flight-free pledge, it's important that you let others know about it by using the hashtag #FlightFree2022 and posting on your social media accounts, Granett says: "A pledge made that nobody knows about is worthless." She would like to see less travel boasting posts on social media and more pledge shares. "What if the narrative was reversed, and we talked about the pride in living within our carbon budget. ... Could that influence people?"

Small steps count

If you have vacations already booked, want to visit family living abroad or must fly for work, all is not lost. You can still move toward taking fewer flights overall. "My advice would be to take it one trip at a time. Don't see it as so rigid," Laplante says. "The most important thing is to ... become aware of the impact." Curious about the impact of a potential trip? Enter your flight plan into the [Flight Emission Map](#) to see the carbon emissions it will generate.

Change your mindset

Flying has become so commonplace that we jump on flights for weekend sporting events or to see a concert. "Eighty per cent of the world's population has never flown before and never will," Laplante says. "Who are we as the 20 per cent worldwide to say, 'I need to travel?'"

Give back

If you continue to fly, consider paying into carbon offsetting programs, such as [Terrapass](#) or [Plan Net Zero](#), that undertake conservation projects or give back to local communities. And don't forget the emissions are still being released into the atmosphere.

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