LOTOURISM:
Low Impact, Low Cost, Localized, & Lonely –
The Ecotourist on a Budget and Redefined

by Katrin Siff Einarsdottir


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I studied ecotourism and wrote my masters dissertation on the discrepancies between defined and actualized ecotourism since I have always battled with the ‘ecotourist’ identity. I liked to think I was an ecotourist, also called an alternative tourist, sustainable tourist, or an environmentally friendly tourist. But then these terms lead us to more definitional inconsistencies, since "eco" and "environmental" and "sustainable" are all buzzwords overused and often misunderstood.

After completing my thesis, I realized the term ecotourism is a vague, green-washed term, whose definition is undecided among academics, and sometimes unidentifiable in practice. I like to travel, and I love the natural world we live in, but often-times carbon emissions and ecological impact contradict my obsessive compulsive desire to go all over the place, taking boats, planes, cars and buses at an unsustainable rate. It’s easy to feel guilt about my carbon footprint in spite of being unclear where I can accept accountability for planes and buses that will take their routes with or without me.

However, it is possible to have an ethical travel consciousness without identifying as an ecotourist. Ecotourists pay more for greener experiences and off-set their flights by planting trees. But for sustainable tourism to become a thing of elitists is unfair. Ecotourism has also been set aside from culture tourism, offering strictly nature and adventure getaways in wild areas, but humans are an intrinsic part of nature and the true ecotourist should still be touring the cities and villages people call home. Mass tourists take their flights and book their all-inclusive hotels or cruises but travel intensively for only one or two weeks. My travel style has fused and forgiven aspects of both styles of...
tourism, into something I have coined “lotourism”. It is a philosophy of travel for the weary backpacker who wants to see the world and everything in it. They do not pay more, but pay less, and see more, over longer periods of time, with fewer modes of transport taken by traveling locally and avoiding long-haul flights.

I had the idea to invent a new word to describe the way I travel since it doesn’t suffice to say I’m a backpacker, just a traveller, a tourist, or an ecotourist. I want a word that describes my travel mentality and approach to seeing the world in a more sustainable way. I have a dialect of English my friends call Katrin-speak, but this isn’t a word I’m pulling from that English vocabulary - it’s more like a philosophy of travel that I’ve adopted and want more people to share. "Lotourism" is a theory of tourism that isn’t captured by any other one word.

I like to think I travel sustainably, but not just sustainably natural-resource-wise. I am financially resourceful, traveling with minimal luggage, staying with locals, and traveling slowly but steadily over short-haul distances. I can live off $10 a day or less in some places. I never stay in hostels or hotels, but couchsurf and make new friends everywhere I go. I have one small backpack and all my possessions and necessities for 3 months in it, a 35L-20kg bag.

I’m not really a backpacker, since I avoid backpacker hostels and hate being defined by the stuff in a bag on my back. I’m not always a tourist, since I try my best to camouflage into my surroundings and see things from a local perspective. I adopt the local way of living, eat where locals eat, dance the way they dance, dress as indiscriminately as possible, and don’t say much unless I’ve learned the local language since I never want to be that white girl screaming English in slow motion to someone who has no idea of what I’m saying. I’m definitely a traveller, but so is the American guy sitting in business class flying to Dubai for a 2 hour business meeting before returning to London via Dakar for dinner in England’s most authentic Turkish restaurant. So I’ve realized there are different types of travellers, performing different types of travel, and when asked how I travel, my new answer is "I'm a lotourist."

Lotourism, in a nutshell, is like ecotourism, but redefined and on a budget. It is travel that is low-impact, low-cost, localized, and lonely.
1) **Low-impact**: your footprint on the natural environment is minimal, which means your carbon footprint is low, your use of exhaustible or non-renewable resources is low, you create minimal or no waste, you do not contribute to the degradation of natural environments, your touristic activities and choice of transport/accommodation/or anything else travel-related is based on an educated, informed decision to be of as low-impact as possible. Your footprint on the local or host culture is minimal, which means you learn and engage in cultural exchange so far as you do not negatively impact any local traditions or customs, you are a low-profile and low-maintenance guest, imparting little change or judgment excepting what is beneficial or desired for cultural exchange.

2) **Low-cost**: you travel on a tight budget, which requires you to avoid tourist traps like all-inclusive vacations, hotels, and organized tours. You avoid shopping and buy almost nothing but necessities, spend your money on simple travel (preferably terrestrial, like trains or buses, going short distances rather than long-haul flights), and stay with locals that you know through friends, family, or travel communities like couch-surfing. You don’t buy souvenirs or foods made of unsustainable resources (i.e. rare wood products, turtle shell jewellery, eating rare or endangered animals) but contribute to local arts and crafts or culture in other ways. You avoid renting cars or hiring taxis and take the local transportation, or better yet, walk more. Cycling or hitch-hiking are also lotourism friendly.

3) **Localized**: you stick around in an area long enough to know it, see every corner (especially outside the city centre or touristic attractions) and the surrounding suburbs or country side. You stay where you want to be, living a day approximating the usual life there. You spend your money in such a way that financial resources go directly into the pockets of locals (locally-owned businesses, local guides, surrounding farms instead of imported/mass produced foods) and you support the local economy (avoiding international tour operators or foreign-owned companies in all your purchasing decisions).

4) **Lonely**: last but not least, you travel alone, travel by yourself to be better immersed in your surroundings, alone with your thoughts and feelings to fully absorb, process, and understand your new environment. Be vulnerable, meet local people, avoid speaking your own language, catering to the needs of a travel companion, or doing anything that you don’t feel like doing or going
anywhere you don’t feel like going. Leave your Lonely Planet/Frommers/Fosters/etc. at home and just ask people for help as you go, talking to as many strangers as you can. Don’t stay in hostels where you’ll get swallowed up into a group of other tourists, don’t travel with a tour group or on a big bus with “rich tourists, coming your way” printed on the license plate. Travel more spontaneously, irresponsibly even, at the mercy of a local tip, with the adrenaline-rush of taking the wrong bus or the long bus, ending up on the wrong train, showing up in a place you have no clue about, learning from scratch and not a guide book. You can go for as long or short as you want, book one-way tickets, have undefined destinations, a flexible schedule, and a trip planned only one day ahead at a time

So, for any other lotourists out there, get the word out on the new word. And, if you understand the idea, agree with the philosophy, and like the way it works in travel, spread the word so more lotourism can exist in this globalizing, traveling world of ours.