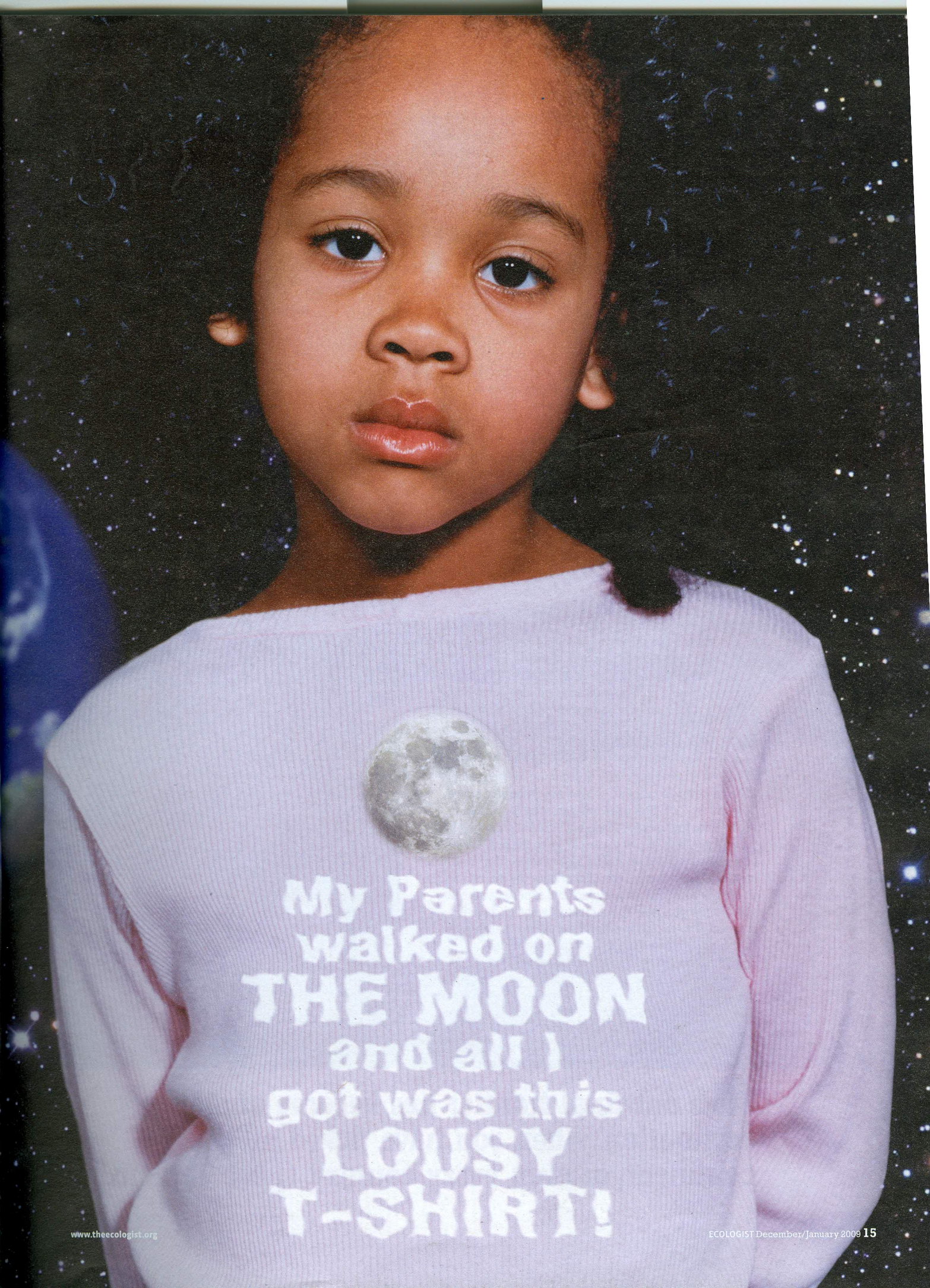


Out of this world?

There's only so much fun you can have with your feet on the ground. Once adventure tourism has hit the heights and plumbed the depths of our own planet, there may be only one place left to boldly go... **Paul Miles** looks at why we travel, its environmental impact, and where on Earth – or off it – our final destination might be »



My Parents
walked on
THE MOON
and all I
got was this
LOUSY
T-SHIRT!

Imagine. You stand alone on the deck of a riverboat as the Amazon jungle awakes, no other humans in sight. Suddenly, two river dolphins appear. They arch through the sunlight's reflection towards you, then jump and wiggle in the air, showing off pale bellies.

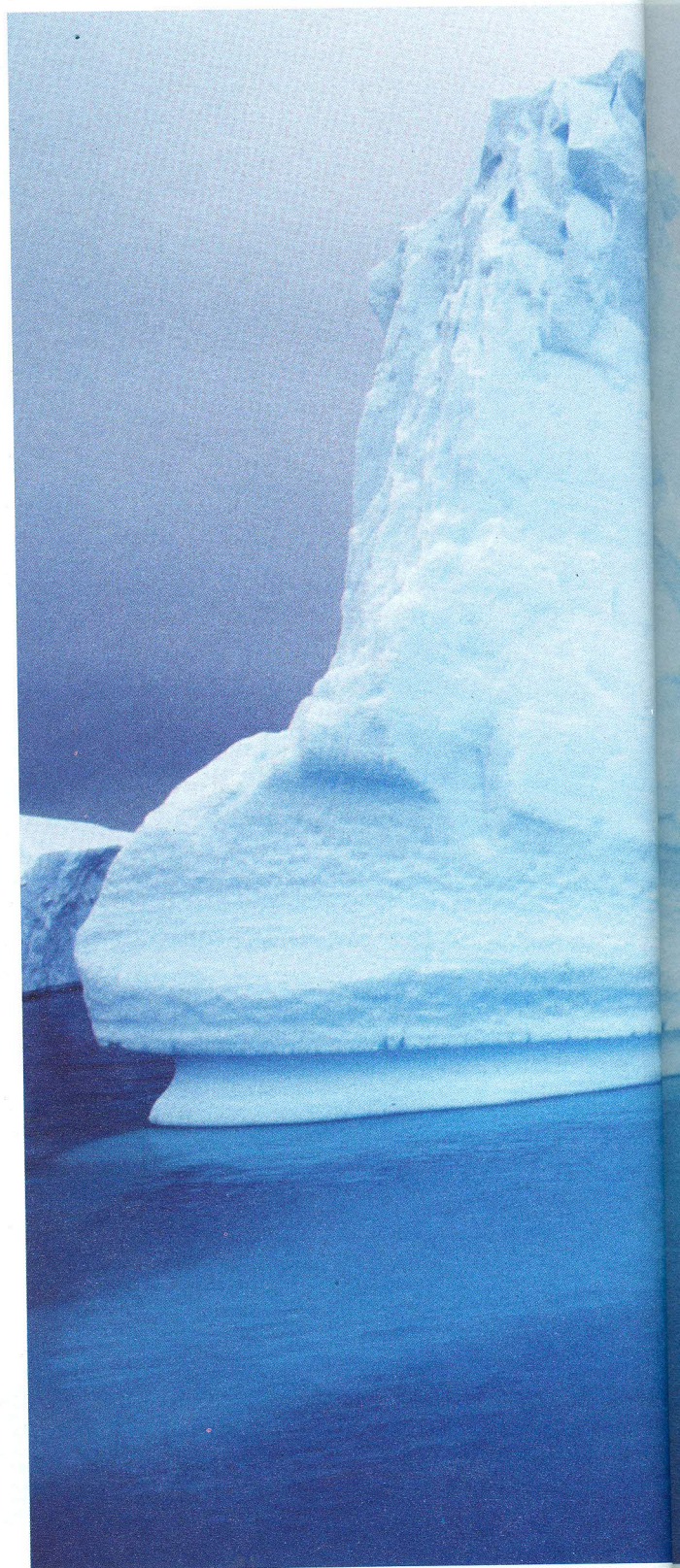
I have a confession to make. I am a travel writer and photographer. Communing with dolphins in the Amazon; spotting polar bears in the Arctic; snorkelling with humpbacks in Tonga; diving in Papua New Guinea; skydiving in New Zealand – these are just some of the experiences I have been privileged to enjoy as 'work'. Nature and adventure tourism are two of the fastest-growing sectors of the worldwide tourism industry. It seems we can't get enough of the wonders of our planet, and if it comes with a burst of adrenaline, even better. We have visited every extremity of Earth, not as pioneering expeditioners, seeking to further world knowledge, but as tourists travelling, comfortably, for our own enjoyment.

Cruise ships with the capacity for 3,000 passengers visit Antarctica. There is bingo on board. An American woman I know, whose hobby is 'collecting countries', 'walked around the world' at the North Pole on her 90th birthday. Afterwards there was tea and cake on the nuclear-powered ice-breaker.

Each year, there are new superlatives: highest, deepest and, despite the recession, 'most expensive'. In October, one company, High & Wild, dropped solo and tandem skydivers into the sky from above Everest: at nearly 9,000m, it was the world's highest commercial skydive. Downwards, you can dive 4,000m below the waves in deep-diving submersibles, with Deep Ocean Expeditions and, upwards, fly to the edge of space in a Russian MiG fighter with Space Adventures. The world's most expensive package holiday is a million-dollar stay at a (publicity-seeking) hotel in Abu Dhabi.

Entering the space race

Now, for those who have 'been there and done that', our final frontier has become another destination. When you have ticked off every continent, or even every country, space beckons. In 2001, American businessman, Dennis Tito, became the first private space adventurer. Since then five others have followed. Now you can go to the moon. US-based Space Adventures offers a lunar expedition for \$100 million (at least) per person. 'Experience the majesty and wonder of earthrise,' and 'explore and experience the far side of the moon,' says the company's website, as if the prospect of a rocket trip around the moon is barely more extraordinary than a sunset cocktail in the Masai Mara. The UK agent for the trip is Bristol-based WildWings, which also specialises in nature tourism. (Fancy your luck spotting the world's rarest sea-bird, the 'almost mythical' magenta petrel? Then book a place on the £3,879, excluding flights, 'Sub-Antarctic Islands of Australia and NZ' tour.) Isn't it incongruous that a nature tourism company sells rocket trips? 'Seeing Earth from space is the ultimate natural



'Now our final frontier has become another destination. When you have ticked off every continent, or even every country, space beckons'

Tourism has already
come to Antarctica –
will adventure
holidays be next?



history experience,' rebuffs the managing director of WildWings, John Brodie-Good. 'Many people argue that it was the first photo of the Earth from space [taken in 1959 by the US satellite Explorer VI] that started the modern environmental movement.'

Britain's own space buccaneer, Sir Richard Branson, promotes space tourism as a means to save the planet. Virgin Galactic plans to start commercial space tourism in 2009. For \$200,000, you will be able to join five other passengers on SpaceShipTwo for a two-hour flight reaching 110km above Earth (space is defined as starting 100km above the surface of our planet.) 'All passengers will be able to leave their seats and float in zero-gravity should they wish, and enjoy a view of space and the Earth stretching for around 1,000 miles in every direction,' says the press factsheet, 'Galactic at a glance'. So far more than 250 people have made reservations, paying deposits totalling in excess of \$35 million. At the press launch, Branson boasted of the 'transforming effect' a space flight will have on 'thousands who'll travel with us': 'Seeing the planet from out there, surrounded by the incredibly thin protective layer of atmosphere, helps one to wake up to the fragility of the small portion of the planet's mass that we inhabit and to the importance of protecting our Earth'. Virgin Galactic has calculated the carbon emissions for a space flight as being 'approximately 60 per cent of a per passenger return commercial London-New York flight'. This equates to 1.5 tonnes of CO₂. Tricorona Climate Partner, a major player in the international carbon market, says Virgin Galactic was 'reluctant' to make data available for it to verify the figures. Managing director Per Egstam says, with some understatement, that 1.5 tonnes 'seems quite low for taking someone into space'. But Branson is adamant: Virgin Galactic will be a force for good for the environment. A reusable spacecraft and unpowered re-entry and landing are two 'environmental credentials' listed. And in September the company announced that the spacecraft would be used to facilitate research into climate change by carrying research instruments for the US government's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Voyages of discovery

One of the first space tourists will be scientist Professor James Lovelock, who, in a well-judged PR exercise, has been promised a free trip by Branson. 'It will give me a chance to see the planet from outside. It was that view from space that set me on course to seeing Earth as a quasi-living entity that regulates its composition and climate,' says the scientist who developed the 'Gaia theory'. 'Going into space means a lot to me personally.' But will Lovelock's endorsement of Virgin Galactic persuade others to buy tickets? After all, Lovelock, who estimates that as many as six billion of us will perish because of climate chaos before the century is over, seems to relish controversy. He promotes nuclear power, despite other tried and tested technologies such as solar-thermal. He thinks long-haul flying is essentially bad for the planet, yet considers personal efforts to fly less to be meaningless. 'It's already too late,' he says. Lovelock sees



Above: Tourists in their natural habitat, watched by a cheetah in the Masai Mara park reserve in Kenya
Pictured: Dive as deep as you like or fly as high, the next goal of tourism will literally be out of this world

'Safari parks in Africa, coral reefs in the South Pacific, rainforest in South America: many owe their conservation to the tourists paying to visit'

space tourism as a valid scientific experiment that could see relatively low-emitting 'coasting flights' to the other side of the world become a reality. Wouldn't that justify a few space tourism flights? Perhaps, as he says, there is too much 'old-fashioned puritanism' in the green movement? 'All greens do if they become too puritanical is to make themselves exceedingly unpopular, and they won't be listened to on more serious and important things,' he warns. Perhaps part of the meaning of life is a sense of enjoyment and a widening of our horizons. For many of us this means travel and increasingly unusual travel experiences.

This is the view of psychologist and travel specialist Professor Robert Bor of London's Royal Free Hospital. 'Travel gives us a perspective on our place and size in the world, how and where we fit with others,' he says. 'It shines light on our own lives in a way that we do not normally experience when at home. In this sense, travel is psychologically beneficial.' He credits the allure of space tourism to

dissatisfaction with more simple pleasures. 'If we look at modern life, there is a drive constantly to work harder, to excel and be super-successful. "Ordinary" and "comfortable" may be too mundane. The same applies to some holidays. Space tourism is perhaps the ultimate expression of this.'

Will high-spending amateur astronauts come back down to Earth 'transformed', inspired to save our fragile planet? Maybe a CEO will cancel a logging concession. Another will invest millions in carbon capture technology. A celebrity might donate all her wealth to environmental causes. If so, might not the benefits of space tourism outweigh the environmental costs? Or would it be better for the planet if these high-flying space cadets spent their \$200,000 ticket money here on Earth? That can pay for a lot of good works.

There is no doubt that tourism is important to the global economy. The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reckons that the industry accounts for 5 per cent of the world's economy (and a 'proportionate' 5-7 per cent of global carbon emissions). Even with a world recession, the UNWTO predicts tourism will continue to grow, forecasting 1.1 billion arrivals worldwide by 2010. According to the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership, funded by the Department for International Development, 'tourism makes significant contributions to national GDP in the majority of countries with the largest numbers, and highest proportions, of poor people. The Gambia, Laos, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, Zambia and Kenya stand out as being poor countries where tourism is a highly significant economic sector'.

The science of sustainability

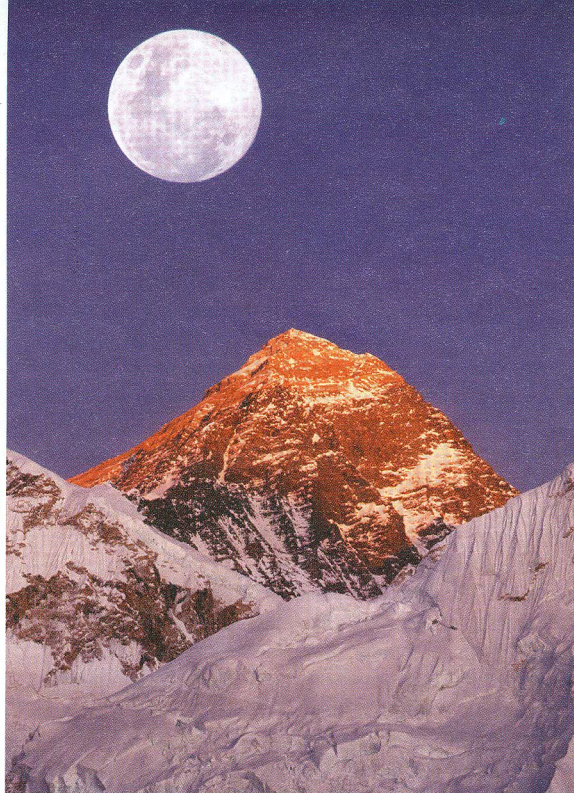
Tourism protects conservation areas, safeguards heritage, revives traditions, provides employment and generates foreign exchange. Safari parks in Africa, coral reefs in the South Pacific, rainforest in South America: many owe their conservation to the fact that tourists pay to visit them. As for heritage, culture and employment, in Britain, industrial heritage is being restored thanks to tourism. In Panama, the Embera tribe is reviving traditional dances. In Kenya, a new school is training Masai to become safari guides. Worldwide, \$700 billion is generated in tourism receipts.

Holidays can change tourists for the better, too. People donate money to charity or become active campaigners as a result of firsthand exposure to poverty or environmental issues. Others hope tourism, like an idealistic beauty queen, will bring world peace. The International Institute for Peace Through Tourism aims to 'bridge the north-south divide through sustainable tourism development'.

'Sustainable' or 'responsible' tourism has become a scientific skill. There are postgraduate courses and an International Centre for Responsible Tourism. Mainstream travel companies, such as TUI, now employ sustainability product managers. Tourism is championed as a pathway towards the UN's Millennium Development Goals. In 2008, a set of 'global sustainable tourism criteria' was launched, stipulating, for example, that businesses must 'contribute to the support of biodiversity conservation, including supporting natural protected areas and areas of high



Mount Everest is last year's ultimate travel achievement – next year's hovers tantalisingly close in the night sky



biodiversity value'. In 2009, businesses that meet the criteria will brand themselves with a Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council logo, just as sustainably caught fish bear the Marine Stewardship Council logo.

All these and many other arguments are held up as justification for government continuing to support and subsidise the expansion of air travel, despite Prime Minister Gordon Brown's pledge to reduce carbon emissions by 80 per cent from 1990 levels by 2050.

Although tourism is undoubtedly more benign than many industries, however, are local benefits worth the impact on the world's climate? Kelly Haynes of Tourism Concern, which describes itself as 'the only organisation in the world challenging international tourism', says: 'it is clear that the economic benefits [of tourism] just aren't getting through to the most vulnerable'. Other NGOs agree. According to the World Development Movement, 98 per cent of the population of the Dominican Republic lives in poverty, despite it being the most popular destination in the Caribbean, itself the most tourism-dependent region in the world. It is well known that as much as 75 per cent of tourism income 'leaks' from host countries back to foreign-owned companies.

After the 2004 tsunami, governments pledged to rebuild the tourism industry of affected coastlines more equitably. Yet Tourism Concern has uncovered evidence that millions of pounds of aid money is being used inappropriately. Fishing communities have lost their homes, while hotels and villas are being built on beaches. The government of Kerala has allocated £12.5 million from the Tsunami Rehabilitation Programme to the state tourism board, Kerala Tourism, and spent it on 'beautification measures to attract tourists' rather than on rehabilitating communities.

If the industry can make such blatant errors with

limitless aid money, what hope is there of it doing things right in the name of profit-making commerce?

Sadly, perhaps tourism is just another industry, its raison d'être to make a profit offering an escape from the drudgery of daily life. It sells us 'paradise' – unspoilt beaches, jungles, mountains and happy, smiling natives. Yes, sometimes it is in the industry's interest not only to conserve but also to positively enhance the local environment and community, because, increasingly, that's what we want. There are fine examples of tourist lodges funding the reintroduction of endangered species into restored habitats and the construction of schools and clinics. All too often, though, behind the pristine stage set things turn ugly. Tourism wreaks environmental and social havoc. Even in destinations where ecotourism is championed, damage ensues. A recent study by the University of California and the Wilderness Society showed that coyotes and bobcats were severely disturbed by the presence of ecotourists in their habitat. Elsewhere, in the name of tourism, fragile ecosystems are blatantly destroyed, invasive species deliberately introduced, scarce water supplies diverted to golf courses, beach access for local people curtailed, migrant workers treated as slaves, employees paid less than minimum wages and residents forcibly relocated to make way for tourism development.

It is not too surprising when companies more concerned with luxury than social responsibility make mistakes, but when, for example, Wilderness Safaris, a company with a hitherto good record on social and environmental matters, goes ahead with a safari camp – complete with swimming pool – in Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve, when nearby Basarwa (bushmen) are denied access to water, it seriously challenges the hypothesis that tourism is a force for good. 'The [Botswana] government has the gall to tell the bushmen to make the 400km round-trip to collect water from outside the reserve when tourists will be showering and sipping their drinks nearby,' says Stephen Corry, director of Survival International, which campaigned against the safari camp, due to open in December 2008. 'Many tourists will stay away when they know the background.'

Destination unknown

The international tourism industry is already under severe strain. Recession, peak oil and concerns about climate change all mean fewer airline passengers, a fact that cheers many. (The travel information company OAG reported in October that the world's airlines – those left in business – would offer 451,000 fewer flights and 46.3 million fewer seats in the remaining three months of the year.) The era of mass, cheap travel is heading to the exit. Bad-news stories about environmental or social impacts on top of existing troubles will not be welcomed by a struggling industry.

Perhaps to 'stay away' is the answer? Or at least not promote growth? The New Economics Foundation has shown that, because of high leakage rates, the loss to developing countries from a theoretical halt to aviation growth in the UK would not actually be that great. For the Dominican Republic, for example, it would amount to just 0.48 per cent of expected

'After the 2004 tsunami, £12.5 million was spent on "beautification measures to attract tourism" rather than on rehabilitating communities'

'Behind the pristine stage set things turn ugly. Tourism wreaks environmental and social havoc, even where ecotourism is championed'

GDP. Alternatively, if the tourism industry is to argue that tourism is a major income earner for poor countries, it needs to reduce leakage rates by, for instance, sourcing more local staff, building materials and produce.

Small island states, many of them tourism destinations, are among the most vulnerable to climate change. 'If we don't deal with climate change then ultimately, tourism is dead anyway,' says Sam Clarke, chairman of the Stop Climate Chaos coalition. There are solutions. 'We have to hope for more regional tourism rather than just look at long-haul, and we have to price carbon into the economy properly.

'If we're talking about equity and justice for the poor of the world it would certainly involve us getting off aeroplanes and thinking of something else, such as increasing the aid budget,' he says. There are other ways for countries to benefit financially from conserving rainforests, after all. The UN's Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) scheme is one.

The soaring popularity of 'voluntourism' holidays, where paying 'volunteers' help scientists monitor the health of rainforests or assist farmers on organic farms is an understandable response. Increasingly people feel they

need to justify their holiday's environmental cost by giving something back. But isn't this robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Where do we go from here? Space? The Amazon? Cornwall? Home? Perhaps underlying the whole debate is the biggest question of all: why do we travel? To 'gain perspective on our place and size in the world,' as Professor Bor says? Alain de Botton, author of *The Art of Travel*, thinks not. 'The finest journeys are those that can be taken within our own minds, without leaving the house, indeed without straying far from the bedroom,' he says. He quotes philosopher Blaise Pascal: 'All of man's unhappiness stems from his inability to stay alone in his room'. That was no doubt easier to do with the view of rural 17th-century France from his window, rather than grey, urban, overcrowded 21st-century Britain. But maybe examining the familiar anew broadens our horizons as much as visiting foreign climes. De Botton has led holiday tours of the M1 and Heathrow. It's not quite the same as a fortnight on a quiet isle, but perhaps, before we plan our visit to outer space – or even the Outer Hebrides – we need to ask if what we're really seeking is simply our inner selves.

Paul Miles is a freelance writer and photographer