

Overcrowding has left hill stations dirty and dry, but some tourists are trying to be mindful on the road, carrying their own cloth bags and cutlery, and segregating waste

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We are using mineral water to brush our teeth," says Neha Scott, general manager at YMCA, Shimla. The hill town has been in the news throughout this week following an acute water crisis that's had locals sharing 'don't visit Shimla' messages on social media.

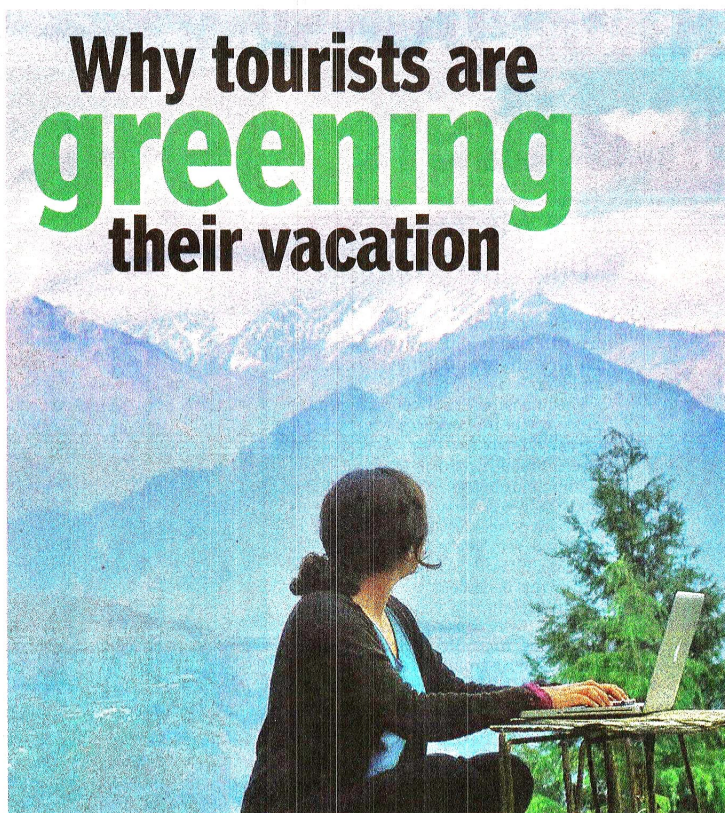
Tourist destinations in India are reeling from the effects of 'overtourism' — water scarcity, traffic congestion, litter and pollution. And a handful of mindful tourists are trying to be responsible on the road, following practices that preserve the ecology and respect culture, while still supporting the local economy with their spends. They pick homestays powered by solar panels and use public transport, rather than infinity pools or safaris in fuel-guzzling SUVs.

Charanya Chidambaram, 33, and her husband Rishabh Chawla only book homestays, carry their own water flasks and cutlery so that they don't use plastic, pack disposal bags, and segregate their garbage every day. The couple has travelled extensively in Europe, especially in Slovenia and Austria. Homestays are not always cheaper than hotels, but they are often the greener option.

"We leave a carbon footprint when we take flights, so we try to compensate by generating minimal waste wherever we stay. We choose homestays because we can cook a bit, do our laundry and meet locals," says Chidambaram, a food blogger.

It's not just Shimla that's feeling the effects of too many tourists. Across the country, from Mussoorie to Kodaikanal, a rise in tourist numbers, climate change, garbage, contamination of water sources, pollution, and unbridled construction have upset the delicate balance of the hills. Most hill towns were established in the British era to support populations of a few thousand and infrastructure hasn't been upgraded since. Last year, for instance, 32 lakh tourists visited Ooty, the popular hill town in Tamil Nadu that stretches over a 4km radius. "During the season in May-June close to 5,000 vehicles enter Ooty. You can well imagine the traffic," says a harried resident.

Higher disposable incomes, cheaper flights and cruises, and bragging rights on social media are encouraging people to travel like never before. UN's World Tourism Organisation predicts that India will have 50 million outbound tourists by 2020. Domestic travel, too, has grown by 13% from 1991 to 2016, according



BACK TO NATURE: Writer Shiviya Nath (above in Sarmoli, Uttarakhand) makes sure she books homestays that conserve energy and water, and contribute to the local economy

to the tourism ministry. A study published in Nature last month said India has the world's fourth-largest carbon footprint from tourism.

"Tourism is an unsustainable practice, at least way we do it. It leads to carbon emissions and generation of trash. But one can be considerate while travelling. For example, use resources from the local economy. Why would you go to, say Rajasthan, and order a parma ham and rocket pizza? But people do that," says Padmaparna Ghosh, a writer and wildlife conservation graduate who tries to minimise consumption while travelling.

Indians are aware of the consequences of their wanderlust. According to

a survey by Booking.com, 97% of Indian travellers want to travel sustainably in 2018, with 88% of them willing to pay a premium to ensure the same.

Small steps go a long way towards reducing your carbon footprint. Ghosh carries her own water bottle, fabric tote bags and re-usable coffee cup to reduce plastic consumption.

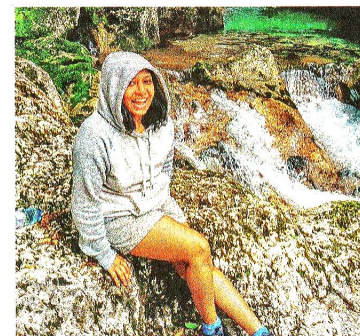
Well-known travel blogger Shiviya Nath advises travellers be more responsible when visiting an ecologically-sensitive region such as Ladakh. "While choosing a company to plan your trip or trek, ask how they deal with waste, conserve water and energy, support the traditional way of life and contribute to

the local community," says Nath who blogs at The Shooting Star.

If travellers are becoming responsible, so are the hosts. A Farm of Happiness, a farmstay in Ratnagiri, minimises its carbon footprint by using fuel-free power back-up and farm equipment. "We don't use too many lights at night and have just a few vehicles," says Rahul Kulkarni, who started it in 2014 and gets bookings for about 100 days a year.

Often, locals take it upon themselves to save their world from the tourist onslaught. In Goa's Rivona village, young people take turns to keep watch on visitors who flock to the local Takazor spring in summer. Tourists often litter the place, dirtying the spring, which is also the main water source for the village.

Some international destinations have capped the number of visitors to preserve the local ecology and provide a breather to its harried residents. This month, Venice began experimenting with "people counters" at the most heavily trafficked areas, like its historic bridges. The numbers are shared real-time on the city's website and social media feeds to discourage people from going to places chockfull with foot traffic. Capri and Garda, also in Italy, are considering similar



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—CHARANYA CHIDAMBARAM | FOOD BLOGGER

crowd control measures. In Dubrovnik, Croatia's popular old town, visitors are turned away when a cap is reached after UNESCO raised fears about damage to the old buildings in the World Heritage Site. On June 1, Thailand's popular Maya Bay, made famous by the Leonardo DiCaprio film The Beach, was closed to tourists for four months to let the coral reef, damaged mainly by tourist boat anchors, recover.

When it comes to travel this saying rings true: "Take nothing but memories, leave nothing but footprints".

(With inputs from Shantha Thiagarajan)

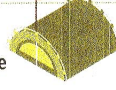
TAKE A RESPONSIBLE VACATION

Avoid single-use plastic — spoons, water bottles, bags



Avoid cruises, they emit as much or more CO2 than airplanes

Book homestays, treks that are eco-friendly



Be water wise, especially in dry regions like Ladakh



Use public transport and your feet as much as possible

Be sensitive to local culture, people and habits

