

'Flight shame' has Swedes rethinking air travel

April 10 2019, by Johannes Ledel



It turns out Swedes have a word for guilt over the carbon footprint of air travel

Saddled with long dark winters at home, Swedes have for decades been frequent flyers seeking out sunnier climes, but a growing number are changing their ways because of air travel's impact on the climate.

"Flygskam", or [flight](#) shame, has become a buzz word referring to feeling guilt over the environmental effects of flying, contributing to a trend that has more and more Swedes, mainly young, opting to travel by train to ease their conscience.

Spearheading the movement for trains-over-planes is Sweden's own Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old climate school striker who refuses to fly, travelling by rail to the World Economic Forum in Davos and the climate summit in Katowice, Poland.

A growing number of public figures have vowed to #stayontheground, including Swedish television skiing commentator Bjorn Ferry who said last year he would only travel to competitions by train.

And 250 people working in the [film industry](#) signed a recent article in the country's biggest daily Dagens Nyheter calling for Swedish film producers to limit shoots abroad.

An anonymous Swedish Instagram account created in December has been shaming social media profiles and influencers for promoting trips to far-flung destinations, racking up more than 60,000 followers.

"I'm certainly affected by my surroundings and (flight shame) has affected how I view flying," Viktoria Hellstrom, a 27-year-old political science student in Stockholm, told AFP.

Last summer, she took the train to Italy, even though the friends she was meeting there went by plane, as that would have been her second flight within a few weeks.

"The only way I could justify going there was if I took the train," she said.



Swedes often feel the need to get away during the long winter months

Train bookings up

The Scandinavian country's location far north—it is 4,000 kilometres (2,500 miles) from the northernmost town of Kiruna to France's Cote d'Azur—as well as its robust standard of living, the popularity of charter trips and the rise of low-cost airlines have all contributed to making Swedes big flyers.

Researchers at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg last year found that Swedes' per capita emissions from flying between 1990 and 2017 were five times the global average.

Emissions from Swedes' international [air travel](#) have soared 61 percent since 1990, their study said.

Swedes' concerns rely on solid data: the Swedish Meteorological Institute said last week that the average annual temperature was rising twice as fast in the country as the global average.

In March, the World Wildlife Foundation published a survey indicating that nearly one in five Swedes had chosen to travel by rail rather than by air in order to minimise their environmental impact.

The trend was most noticeable among women and [young people](#), it said.

Meanwhile, a survey published Tuesday in Sweden's leading travel magazine Vagabond said 64 percent of those who travelled abroad less last year did so because of climate reasons.

National rail operator SJ reported a 21 percent boost in business travel this winter, and the government has announced plans to reintroduce night trains to major European cities before the end of its mandate in 2022.

The number of domestic flight passengers was projected to be down by 3.2 percent in 2018, the transport authority said in its latest figures from September, though the number of passengers on international flights rose four percent.



Slow? Yes. But also easier on the conscience than planes

So far the "flight shame" trend hasn't had the same traction among Sweden's neighbours, although Finland has spawned its own version of the expression, calling it "lento-häpeä".

Is 'flight shame' real?

Other parts of the developed world may not have a word that's quite as catchy—making do with #flyingless or #stopflying—but average CO₂ emissions of 285 grams per air kilometer, compared with 158 for cars and 14 for trains, have given many pause.

Fausta Gabola, a French-Italian student in Paris, is no longer sure that she should take up an offer to study in Australia on a scholarship.

"It's my dream to go there," she told AFP. "I applied without thinking too much about it and now I have a dilemma. I would feel like a hypocrite if I went."

French political scientist Mathilde Szuba said any no-fly decision effectively puts distant countries out of reach.

"There is no easy substitute for flying," she told AFP. "You can't go to faraway places without taking the plane."

Back in Sweden, some experts say that changing travel patterns are not always a direct result of "flight shame".

Frida Hylander, a Swedish psychologist, said shame, and the fear of being shamed, was a powerful motivator, but she also cautioned against overstating its importance.

Other factors were at play, Hylander said, citing as an example Sweden's unusually hot summer last year which caused massive wildfires and may have sparked wider concerns about [climate change](#).

"You should exercise caution when pointing to one single factor," Hylander said.

A new flight tax introduced in April 2018 may also have played a role, she said, as well as the bankruptcy of regional airline NextJet, which led to the closure of a number of domestic flight routes for several months.

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