

People hate flight shame—but not enough to quit flying

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Credit: Jahoo Clouseau from Pexels

Despite flying being the single fastest way to grow our individual carbon footprint, people still want to fly. Passenger numbers even [grew by 3.3% globally](#) last year alone. The hype around "[Flygskam](#)"—a global movement championed by climate activist Greta Thunberg that encourages people to stop traveling by plane—seems to have attracted [more media attention](#) than actual followers.

A [2019 survey](#) found that although people in the UK were increasingly concerned about aviation emissions—they were also more reluctant to fly less. This might reflect how flying has become normalized in society, aided by ticket prices which are [on average 61% cheaper](#) in real terms than in 1998. I'm increasingly asked by peers about how they can fly "sustainably," the "greenest" airlines, or the "best" [carbon](#) offsets to buy. People want to avoid [flight shame](#), without avoiding flights.

The industry has reacted quickly. Websites like Skyscanner, used to compare [flight](#) options between destinations, now show customers a "greener choice"—displaying how much less CO₂ a certain flight emits, compared to the average for that route. These [green choices are determined](#) to be flights that use more direct routes, airlines that have newer aircraft, or can carry more passengers.

While [there are cases](#) where two airlines operating the same route can produce very different emissions, on short-haul routes, emissions differences are invariably small—usually less than 10%. The greenest option would be to travel by train, which has as much as [90% fewer emissions](#) than equivalent flights. However, Skyscanner [stopped showing passengers](#) train options in 2019.

Meanwhile, popular budget airline Ryanair—whose CEO only recently admitted [climate change isn't a hoax](#) – now claims to have the [greenest fleet of air planes](#) in Europe. The company's modern, fuel efficient planes—alongside its ability to fill them with passengers—does make it the "greenest" air travel option out there. However, Ryanair had a total of 450 planes in operation in 2019 (compared to [only 250 in 2010](#)) – meaning that despite its fuel-efficient planes, the sheer quantity of fuel they burn is why they were named one of Europe's [top ten polluting companies](#) in 2019.

Last year also saw [carbon offset schemes](#) become popular. These

schemes allow passengers to pay extra so their airline can invest in environmental projects on their behalf—thereby making a flight theoretically "carbon-neutral." British Airways now offsets all of its customers' [domestic UK flights](#), while Ryanair also has a scheme allowing passengers to buy offsets for their flights, with proceeds going to projects including a whale protection scheme—which appears completely unconnected to [reducing carbon](#) at all.

Easyjet has also started buying offsets on behalf of all its passengers—costing a total of [£25 million](#) a year. This has apparently been a successful [PR move](#), with internal research finding that passengers who were aware of the offsetting policy were more satisfied with their flight than customers who didn't know.

Passengers might feel satisfied, but whether their offsets actually reduce carbon is less clear. [Critics question](#) the time-lag associated with offsets, especially tree-planting schemes. A plane that flies today pollutes today—but a tree planted today [won't remove carbon for years](#). As for "avoided deforestation" [projects](#), which aim to protect existing trees, proving these trees [wouldn't have survived](#) without offset funding is almost impossible.

Airlines often claim that their offsets [save high levels of carbon](#), at a conveniently low price. For example, Easyjet only invests £3 per tonne of carbon it emits in a carbon offset scheme. But such a low-ball investment might not even be able to give these carbon offset schemes the finances needed to actually offset the effects of one tonne of carbon. For context, the EU Emissions Trading Scheme currently [trades carbon at £21 a tonne](#), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change thinks carbon should be traded at a [minimum of £105 a tonne](#). Newer, and more expensive [offset models](#) – which extract carbon directly from the air look promising—but are hard to scale up.

The other danger of these cheap offsets is that travelers might believe they solve the problems caused by flying—so they won't change their travel behavior. Indeed, [one government minister](#) even argues that there's no need for people to fly less, because low-carbon and electric flights are around the corner. Despite reports that [solar or battery-powered](#) planes are coming to the rescue, current [plane](#) technology is going nowhere fast.

This is partly because jet fuel on international flights [isn't taxed](#), which leaves little financial incentive for the industry to invest in big technological shifts. Aircraft manufacturers Boeing even predicts it will [produce 44,000 planes by 2038](#) to accommodate the [8 billion passengers](#) flying each year by then. Those planes will look, sound and pollute much like today's ones.

Aviation is currently forecast to account for [almost a quarter](#) of global emissions, and be the UK's [most polluting sector](#) in 2050. And if the government's recent bail-out of [failing airline Flybe](#) is anything to go by, aviation will continue to be let off the hook.

Carbon offsets and "greener" tweaks might only help to further rationalize the status quo, and prevent tougher policies from coming into play—such as [taxing frequent flyers](#), or stopping airport expansions. But as climate-related natural disasters become more common, radically changing our attitude to flying will soon be unavoidable.

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