

# What COVID-19 can teach tourism about the climate crisis

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The global coronavirus pandemic has hit the tourism industry hard worldwide. Not only that, but it has exposed a lack of resilience to any type of downturn, according to new research from Lund University in

Sweden. While the virus may or may not be temporary, the climate crisis is here to stay—and tourism will have to adapt, says Stefan Gössling, professor of sustainable tourism.

Tourism has been under pressure even before the current pandemic paralyzed the world. The [airline industry](#) has seen declining profits, and flying has become cheaper. The platform economy—AirBnB, booking.com and TripAdvisor, to name some of the few dominant global players—has further toughened the market. Tourists book shorter stays, meaning destinations have to attract a higher volume of travelers.

"Even though we have warned for decades that a virus, for example SARS, could significantly affect tourism, nobody expected a virus to have this kind of impact," says Stefan Gössling.

In the same way, there have been clues that another looming crisis is starting to affect tourism. The demise of UK tour operator Thomas Cook in 2019 was attributed to the summer heatwave leading to fewer bookings—and the heatwave has, in turn, been attributed to a changing [climate](#).

"Imagine several crises of similar magnitude to COVID-19. Extreme and unpredictable weather, a global food shortage or other consequences of climate change. And since this will possibly go on for longer than the current pandemic, the [tourism industry](#) will suffer greatly," says Stefan Gössling.

Gössling says there are a few tangible guidelines for both the industry and tourists to pivot towards, that would make [tourism](#) more resilient as well as climate friendlier. Encouraging destinations that are closer to the traveler, making stays longer and keeping profits local, are some ways to move away from the focus on volume and energy-intense products:

- Increase the length of stay or the length of days in packages sold.
- Focus on closer markets, long-haul travelers are the ones contributing to vast emissions of greenhouse gases.
- Rethink the food that you serve, organic and regional can benefit farmers nearby.
- Move towards a high-value model, where individuals spend more.
- Think about what you buy: a lot of the profit is made by foreign-owned, global platforms such as AirBnB and booking.com.
- Rethink carbon-intense travel, for example cruise holidays.

Despite this advice, there are many conditions that are beyond the grasp of individual businesses, says Gössling.

"Even if you are a small family-owned business that does everything according to the sustainability book, you may still suffer the consequences of climate change. Many of the major structural changes will of course have to come from [policy makers](#)," Stefan Gössling concludes.

**More information:** Stefan Gössling et al, The Low-Carbon Imperative: Destination Management under Urgent Climate Change, *Journal of Travel Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0047287520933679](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520933679)

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