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5 Sustainable Travel Ideas

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Listening to [Kristin Davis recount her first trip to Kenya](#) at the [Condé Nast Traveler World Savers Congress](#) in Singapore last week, I felt like she was telling my story. Except in my case, I did not run into an orphan baby elephant. Instead, I almost got charged by an elephant mother. But my visits to villages and schools were just as transforming.

In 2003, I traveled to Africa for the first time. It was a safari trip in Kenya. Before that trip, most of my travels had been to cities and the occasional beach resort. I loved the challenge of learning to navigate a new city, the more foreign the more fun. I saw my trip to Kenya more as a work obligation; I didn't think I would be all that interested in getting up early in the morning just to watch animals lying about in the wilderness that was devoid of any fanciful architecture. By the end of the 10-day trip that took me from Nairobi to the Laikipia District to the Masai Mara, I was looking at the world through a different lens.

Most empowering was the idea that travel can change lives. By bringing travelers into the lives of local communities, the lives of both are transformed. In Masai Mara, where tourism had developed for longer than Laikipia, I saw better health and education facilities and more girls staying longer in school. I heard stories of hope and aspiration. And of course, I experienced a new found appreciation for nature and its wonder and beauty that I had never experienced from watching a Discovery channel documentary.

From this trip, the idea of "impact travel" took hold. But then a trip to China's Lijiang area quickly made me realize the other side of the coin. Tourism brings economic benefits, but those benefits don't always go to local communities. Also, the drive to attract tourists and tap their spending power in a short time can create long-term negative effects on the environment and culture. [Lijiang](#) was an example of the Disneyfication of a charming, old town in set amidst countryside that had once been described as Shangri-La.

China's countryside is so captivating in its beauty. So a group of friends and I embarked on what seemed to us at the time of a simple plan to establish a route of comfortable guesthouses that would give young people an opportunity to stay in their villages rather than leaving their young children in the care of the elderly in the villages while they migrated to cities for work. When we chanced upon stunning Mount Genie -- a blend of Yellowstone, Swiss Alps and Hokkaido flower fields -- in Tibetan Sichuan, we quickly realized that our simple plan was not so simple. Now we are raising funds for a five-year community education and economic development program.

When I sat down in Singapore with H.E. Jose Ramos-Horta, President of East Timor and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, for chat about balancing the needs of a developing economy and creating sustainable tourism, he good-naturedly chided me for being an idealist. He has little patience for Western NGOs that come into his country lecturing them on what they should and should not do.

"When people say they cut the forest because they need firewood for cooking. Well, you cannot argue with them unless you can provide them with suitable alternatives. And some alternatives are very costly. It's great for Western NGOs to come and lecture local governments about clean energy, we don't need that because we're all smart people. We know what clean energy is, we know what the consequences of not using clean energy are, we don't need studies or reports," President Ramos-Horta said. What matters in the end is, at the end of the day is how to pay for sustainable solutions.

President Ramos-Horta explained why he's no longer attending international conferences on climate change. (The last one he attended was Copenhagen in 2009.) "Sometimes one gets tired of international conferences. What is the point of decades of international conferences. We have to live up to our own responsibilities on our own little island. If we do that, we contribute a little bit to saving the world. We don't need to lecture each other, we don't need to point the finger, which is what happens a lot at international conferences."

Taking President Ramos-Horta's advice, I've rounded up five ideas to help travelers "live up to our own responsibilities." In addition to following Kristin Davis' example of finding a local organization to support, here are more ways to support locals when traveling.

1. [Unreasonable Adventures](#) or [Tour by Locals](#): Support local guides by making sure your guide fees go directly to locals.
2. [The Chain Reaction Project](#): Every year, four women from Singapore organize adventure trips that test participants' endurance and ability to raise funds for a local organization in some of the world's least developed destinations. For 2012, they are planning a hike up Mount Apo in Davao, Philippines to raise money for [Visayan Forum Foundation Inc.](#) which combats human trafficking.
3. [Roadmonkey](#): For those who prefer a more hands-on approach to giving back, Roadmonkey combines adventure travel with a volunteer projects. Upcoming expeditions include Patagonia, Vietnam and Tanzania.
4. [One Seed Expeditions](#): Organizes tours to Nepal by working directly with local communities to ensure revenue goes directly to local entrepreneurs -- and then invests 10 percent into microfinance initiatives for women entrepreneurs.
5. Get a [Masters of Applied Community Change and Conservation](#) from the Future Generations Graduate School: This two-year online program includes four, month-long community residencies with local communities in Appalachia, Peru, India and Nepal.

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