



Centre for
Alternative
Technology

THE PLANE TRUTH

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Air travel is the fastest growing contributor to climate change, responsible for at least 13% of our greenhouse gas emissions. In the last few decades, we've become addicted to air travel. What was once a luxury for the rich has become the cheapest way to get around, and we're moving around more than ever before.

The British Government predicts that the 216 million passengers passing through UK airports annually will grow to around half a billion passengers by 2030. Many critics say that this is a conservative estimate – airline passenger growth has been consistently underestimated. This would cancel out Britain's target of cutting carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 60% of 1990 levels by 2050. In fact, experts predict that if air travel continues to grow at current rates, greenhouse gas emissions will exceed the target alone, before any other emissions are even counted. For each passenger on an average flight, the plane churns out more CO₂ than if every passenger drove individually.

According to government figures, modern electric trains (excluding high speed lines) are eight times less damaging than the average plane. However, this is an inaccurate comparison. At high altitudes aircraft can stimulate the production of ozone and cirrus clouds, which are very damaging to the climate. Different estimates say that CO₂ emitted at high altitudes is between 2 and 3.5 times more damaging than that released at ground level. According to a report by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, if this is taken into account we will exceed the Government's target

for lowering emissions with aviation alone.

One return flight to Miami releases 4.8 tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere per passenger – that's more than the UK average year of driving in emissions. Experts say that to stop climate change, each person on Earth should cause a maximum of 2.5 tonnes to be emitted as a total of every aspect of their lives. If you can avoid flying short distances, and cut down on the long haul trips, this will have a positive effect on combating climate change.

What are the alternatives?

Trains

In many cases, catching a train can be quicker than flying if you are going to Paris or Brussels. The Eurostar has a check-in time of 30 minutes (compared to two hours), and is often quicker because it goes from central London to central Paris. In spite of incredibly cheap airline tickets, this train is becoming more popular. In 2004, 71% of passengers took the train from Waterloo to Paris instead of flying, and 64% of passengers going to Brussels went by train. According to Eurostar, the train is also more reliable – 87% of their trains ran on time, compared to around 70% of flights on the same routes.

Travelling can be part of the holiday – why fly a thousand miles to lie on a beach, when there is so much culture and landscape in between? A trip to Lisbon by train passes through London, Paris and Madrid, giving the option of a night in each city, or sightseeing between trains.

Rail passes

The widely recognised InterRail scheme splits Europe into seven zones. Passes are available for 16 days in one zone, 22 days in two zones, while holders of the one month pass can travel in any zone. Prices are split into three bands – children, people aged from 12 to 25 and over 26s. While the pass will not work in your home country, it is worth remembering that it will get you a third off train fares in the UK and a discount ferry ticket when crossing to the Continent. Some other ferry operators within Europe give significant discounts for pass holders (from Barcelona to Ibiza, or from Stockholm to Helsinki, for example). InterRail passes are only available for people who have been residents of the EU for at least six months. Eurail passes are for non-European visitors to Europe. They are usually valid in 17 countries across the continent – for details check the official website.

Ferries

There are a lot of ferries from the UK to the rest of Europe – regular services run from British ports to Ireland, France, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Trips to Scandinavia by boat can be particularly stunning.

Long-distance freighter travel

But what about going west to North America? There are several agents who can book cabins on cargo ships going across the Atlantic. They are usually more expensive, but they are definitely more exciting than nine hours watching films on a tiny screen! The journey can take several weeks, so while not really an option for business trips, if you are looking for the trip of a lifetime it could be perfect.

Resources

The Train Line, for train times and tickets within the UK.
www.thetrainline.co.uk

The Man in Seat 61 offers information on trains and boats for journeys all over the world.
www.seat61.co.uk

The following companies can arrange long distance sea travel, including on cargo ships:

The Cruise People
Tel: 020 7723 2450 or 0800 526 313
Web: www.cruisepeople.co.uk

Strand Voyage
Tel: 020 7921 4340
Web: www.strandtraveltd.co.uk

US Companies:
www.travltips.com
www.freighterworld.com

Further information

You can contact **CAT's Information Service** with any further questions:
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