

## Eco-Tourism: Green, But Not Always Clean

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Le tourisme d'aventure : vers la maturité ?

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## ***Eco-Tourism : Green, But Not Always Clean***

Richard Bangs\*



New World, River Expeditions/ Nouveau Monde, Expéditions en rivière.

Day 15. Life so far had been lazy, uneventful rolling down the river. Then, ever so gently, the water broke near shore, and two beady, turreted eyes stitched a current that sped towards the raft. George swung his Super-8 camera around just in time to fill the view-finder with the yellow teeth of a crocodile ice-picking the back tube of the boat. The raft thrummed like an axe struck to a tree, and George jumped to the oars and began rowing downstream as fast he could to prevent the 15' meat-eater from climbing on board. Meanwhile, his wife, Diane, leapt to the back of the boat and started beating the beast on the head with a metal bailing bucket. After ten long minutes, in which George rowed fourteen miles, setting a new world rowing speed record, the crocodile disappeared back into the depths of the brown river.

No extra charge for the added thrills for those clients on Sobek's first commercial expedition, a raft run down the Omo River in Ethiopia in the Spring of 1973.

It was a woolly time at the dawn of the eco-travel biz. It was a bastard child, unrecognized by the travel industry; no travel agent in right mind would book such a trip, no slick brochures existed; no toll-free numbers could be speed-dialed. The popular perception was eco-travel was a well-planned trip gone wrong. A curve taken at high speed with two wheels hanging over the abyss. Or, it was something preserved for those larger-than-life, almost mythic creatures, such as Ed Hillary or Thor Hyerdahl. We set out to change that, handing out fliers in bars, cold calling Sierra Club members. The hard part was persuading the cynics there was merit in the ancestral inconveniences of the wilds, in sweating in your off-time, sleeping on rigid ground, pushing personal envelopes, being a participant in your own vacation, an active player in creating the experience, rather than just collapsing on a beach or a cruise deck. Eventually we recruited a few like-minded souls who travelled with us, liked what they found, returned in good health, and spread the word. My God, now look what we created.

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My company committed virtually every outfitting sin as it launched its first boats, but we survived, as did our clients, and today we can boast we're the most experienced around. Those few who did travel with us in the infancy of eco-travel didn't think too much about our financial solvency, our track record, or liability insurance. Now, however, the activity has gone mainstream, and a heightened professionalism is expected. Nonetheless, things can still get woolly, and an unsavvy shopper is vulnerable in more than financial ways. The competition for tour dollars is sometimes ruthless, and some outfitters, frankly, are fly-by-nighters. They'll take your money and run the river without Coast Guard approved lifejackets, for instance. It continues to amaze me that this industry alone requires so much from the customer up front, money and faith most conspicuously. You don't like your sole Florentine at the bistro, you don't pay. Your printer bleeds your brochure, you don't pay. But in the rare habitat of eco-travel, you send in, well in advance of departure, a considerable amount of money to people you've never met and blindly commit to an experience in a distant locale guided by and travelling with strangers. That's eco-adventure.

So, here are nine tips, to help a client wade through the jungle of outfitters promising the experience of a lifetime, and to insure the looked for adventure is a safe and satisfying one.

#### **If the waves are big as hospital bills, one should make sure the outfitter has insurance**

I got the wake-up call at 3:00 am at my home in California. Our guide in New Guinea was on the phone telling me he feared a client had drowned, that hours earlier a raft capsized on the Waghi One-day tour, and a 72-year-old passenger was missing. «Hire a helicopter; go look some more» I ordered. Almost a day later another call came in, this one of relief. The man had been found in a nearby village. He had spent the night in the jungle, and was being treated for exposure and shock, but otherwise seemed okay.

That wasn't the end of the story, however. A couple of weeks later the man who had been rafting with us, and who was now on tour in Australia, had a stroke. While in the

hospital, he was visited by his travelling companion, a never-married woman in her mid-sixties who had also been on the turned raft. She decided to take the moment to make some physical advances, yet was spurned by her potential *amant*. He wasn't quite feeling up to it. She then returned to her hotel, swallowed a few too many pills, and ended up in her own hospital room with a hefty psychiatrist bill.

And so they did the *sui generis* American thing. They sued. He for the capsized that led, his attorney argued, to his stroke; she for post-traumatic-stress-disorder that steered her to some irrational actions. I actually sat through a ten-day jury trial as a cortege of *experts* compared our one-day float trip to the horrors of Vietnam. Finally, the plaintiffs were awarded several hundred thousand dollars between them. Luckily, we had liability insurance, otherwise we would have gone bankrupt, and the victims could not have collected. So, it is important to check to make sure the outfitter is properly insured. We're talking liability insurance, which will pay out if negligence can be proven. The waivers most outfitters have a client sign, alert him to the risks of taking an eco-adventure. In theory, the outfitter cannot be held liable if such a risk realizes, e.g. a crocodile, always looking for a hand-out, bites his arm which he was trailing in the river. But, if the outfitter promised a full medical kit in the literature and, when it is pulled out to repair the client's bite, it's empty, then there is negligence. Most small outfitters don't carry any liability insurance, and many larger ones have inadequate coverage. The great majority of foreign-based outfitters do not carry insurance, and good luck if a tourist tries to sue a company in Ecuador or Pakistan. For its own peace of mind, a tourist should consider personal trip-cancellation insurance.

#### **If the relish is piled on thick in the brochure, there's usually more than a soupçon of vinegar in the mix**

There is no *Truth in Advertising* watchdog in the advtravbiz, so outfitters often pull out the purple shovel when describing a trip. Listen to this: «Deep gorges and heavy jungle are expected during the 200 mile trip... the native peoples, many of whom are naked and scarred and wear lip plates, are friendly and peaceful». That's

from the first Sobek brochure in 1973, which I wrote, describing a trip down the Baro River in Ethiopia. Reality didn't quite match the copy. We'd never been down this river, and had no idea what we would find. We capsized 200 yards downstream from the put-in, and the trip was over an hour after it began. No deep gorges, no lip plates, just a bumpy bus ride back to Addis Ababa. Needless to say we've adjusted the truth meter, checked in with reality, but many others haven't. As in any sales brochure, atomist should be wary of superlatives, and of lists that may have no relation to the experience. Jungle-trip literature often catalogues all the critters along the route, e.g. «while trekking through Sumatra you'll share the rainforest with tigers, rhinos, leopards, elephants, orangutans, and on». But what are the odds of seeing, yet alone photographing, any of these animals? Chances are better you'll run over an escaped zoo animal on the Santa Monica Freeway. How to determine the accuracy of an itinerary? Talk to someone who's taken your target trip with the potential host. Any outfitter worth his salt will give references, and although they'll likely be loyalists, at least they can verify the itinerary, and the fact that the outfitter has been there, done that.

#### **Check the attitude of the latitude**

Some outfitters try to squeeze a few extra dollars by offering off-season trips, often at a discount. But, unless you ask, you may not discover why the trip is 25 % cheaper in August rather than October. One friend couldn't resist the less expensive departure to Annapurna in mid-summer offered by a rival outfitter. He spent the entire two-weeks looking at postcards of the spectacular scenery supposedly out his tent door, as this was the height of the monsoon. At least it wasn't crowded. Right place, wrong time is a pretty common map mishap. Some outfitters will be only too glad to dump tourists without divulging seasonality of the attractions. New Zealand in July? It's dark and cold. The Zambezi in March? It's in flood.

#### **Be sure the rope is long enough, if the plan is to hang around**

Any gear, new or old, should be tried and tested at home before schleping it half-way around the world. This holds as true for

flashlights as footwear, and especially for the high-risk impedimenta, such as climbing harnesses and crampons. It never ceases to bewilder how clients show up at base camp, or Timbuckthree, only to unwrap a piece of essential gear from its factory box like it's a Christmas present; or how often a tent will be unrolled to discover a pole is back on the garage floor. Or worse: realizing the entire tent was left behind. Little is more annoying than the client who appears without having read a word of the pre-departure literature, and expects the guides to accommodate his lack of proper gear. And how many guides have had to sacrifice a personal poncho or sleeping bag because some dude never got around to reading the equipment list? Remember, there are no stores in the wilderness.

### **If he wouldn't carpool with him (or her), would he share a tent for three weeks?**

We got a call from a once well-known actor who had lost his leg and an arm in a car accident. He wanted to join a safari, but admitted he had trouble getting around. We agreed to let him join if he brought along a companion to look after him, so as not to burden the other clients. He agreed, and a few days later he sent in the money for two seats. But, when the group met at the hotel lobby he fell into a public spat with his woman escort, and she stomped out, back to the airport and home. The group agreed to let him join regardless, but in short order it was evident this was a mistake. The actor was more than demanding. He insisted the other clients set up his tent, unroll and fluff his bag, bring him his meals and drinks, and attend to his every whim. It was too much, and by the end of the third day the clients had a meeting and demanded the trip leader boot the actor from the trip. As graciously as he could, the leader asked the actor to leave, and arranged for a private safari. That didn't please the actor, who returned to the U.S. and promptly sued us... for an arm and a leg. He wanted \$50,000; our attorney countered with \$500, and he took it.

There are countless tales of participants thrown in with the wrong crowd: a spiritual seeker paddling with a pack of party animals, a John Denver fan club sailing with a Gangsta rap group, or a twenty-something single trekking with a bridge club of coupled septuagenarians.

### **Even a blind pig finds an acorn once in a while, but would a tourist trust him as his maitre de?**

There was a woman from San Diego who signed for a trek through the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. She asked for a multi-lingual guide, and got one. He spoke fluent French, German, Arabic, and Berber, but not a word of English, so they spent ten days drawing pictures to communicate. And what about Joe-Bob, the laid-back, slow-lane driver who started his day at the crack of noon? He signed for photographic seminar-trek led by a famous photographer figuring photographers move slower than normal trekkers, stopping every few minutes to set up a shot, thus allowing the pace he preferred. What a shock when he found the famous photographer moved in hyper-time, and expected his students to be up before the sun, and run the equivalent of a marathon every day to capture as many images as possible.

Many US outfitters don't send their own American guides overseas, rather they subcontract to a local company, so there is little quality supervision or control over the choice of guides. The guide sets the tone, is the linchpin to the success of the trip, and if he knows his stuff, and the chemistry clicks, as is usually the case, the experience can be transcendental.

### **Every journey begins with a single step, but it ends with multiple muscle spasms if one is not in shape**

Often some harried executive works deskside right up until departure time, figuring he'll memo those muscles to shape up and the pounds to shed as he treks up Kilimanjaro. Ten to one he won't make the Horombo hut.

At the end of the day, however, the distinctions between conventional travel and eco-travel is that in the former the standard of excellence is a predicable, uniform experience - *the best surprise is no surprise* epistemology promoted by the chain hotels and cruise lines. The first principle of the science of eco-travel is that uniformity in any system is unstable, unhealthy, and not nearly as much fun. No one can sign up for an eco-tour, ask the overarching questions, read the lines and then between them, but then once you're out there, in the

middle of the cool embrace of a wave, or on a mountainside perpendicular to gravity and companioned by time, go with the flow, and have a grand eco-adventure.

### **If the deal is so good no one can afford not to go, one shouldn't go**

Somehow we managed to scrape together the \$120,000 the Chinese demanded up front for our expedition down the Yangtze. And, we knew that the fee generously included two hotel nights and transportation to and from the river. But, what we didn't know, until we had surrendered our passports to the Chinese authorities, were the added costs. They noticed our home video camera and wanted another \$10,000 for the film permit; we had to stay an extra night because of an itinerary snafu: \$10,000. We needed another tent: \$5,000. We asked for a guide who spoke English: \$15,000. It was hard enough getting *in* country; but getting out without giving up all bank assets and first-borns was tougher than Tiger' Leap Gorge.

The moral here: it is important the tourist knows *exactly* what's included in the price of the trip. Many Eco-tours look like a bargain by comparison, but then you find out too late the park fees are extra; the internal flights are extra; city meals aren't covered; alcohol is extra; Departure taxes are extra; the expenses for *day at leisure* aren't included. At the end of the day you've paid a heap more than if you'd signed with the more expensive looking, comprehensive tour. Some discount firms expect the client to share in the cooking, to set up one tent, to help change the tires and clean the toilet. Fine, just as long as it is known up front.

### **«The Eastern World, it is exploding; violence flaring, and bullets loading». So, is this the spot for a holiday?**

«Afghanistan in May is a delightful destination, the air redolent with wildflowers, the people bursting with the goodwill of spring.» So read our tour description of an overland tour that passed through Afghanistan in 1979, just as Russian tanks were rolling in. Everything worked out fine, but other *situations* have not, and some Eco-travellers have found adventures not in the itinerary, such as jail or worse. The outfitter is not always forthcoming when it

comes to the political truth of a destination, as he has an economic incentive to make the trip happen. To be fair, most outfitters are acutely sensitive to local circumstances, and have guides or shops on the spot who can sometimes better assess the *reality* than any foreign intelligence organization.

### The kind of client not to be

Guides, too, are human. And though they are trained to put on the best diplomatic face in almost any circumstance, when the clients have turned-in and the embers are dim, they talk about the *pax*. Here are some of the client-types that get the embers stoked:

- 1- The Stud Muffin (or Muffininess). There's always someone who shows up not wanting to climb the mountain, but to conquer it; not running the river, but taming it. He'd rather shoot the wildlife with a gun than a camera. He calls the native guide *boy*, and yells louder and louder if the locals don't understand his English, believing volume will make the difference. He quotes Hemingway and Teddy Roosevelt. He wears Doc Martens and fatigues. He smokes, and throws his butts on the ground. Hey, buddy, get with the program. There are places a swaggering, macho attitude work (I'm sure if I think hard enough I can name one), but not on an Eco-travel trip in the 90s. These trips are about travelling lightly, with responsibility and sensitivity; about being mutually deferential to the people, cultures and environments met along the way. The moral imperative of Eco-guides today is thus: Take only pictures, leave only footprints, kill only time.
- 2- The Retentive Inflex. It seems there is always someone who studied the itinerary to the punctuation, but somehow ignored the disclaimer, *subject to change*. Then, when a landslide, high water, or a wildlife rescue requires a detour, he has conniptions. Hey, this is *Eco-adventure* travel, where we expect the unexpected.
- 3- The Patagucci. Eco-travel is often about stripping away the skin of society, and exploring the world and relationships from a fresh and level field.

BMW's, or a closet of Hermes silk, mean nothing in the wilderness. Except for the guy who has to constantly remind the tribe that at least back home he's a thick wallet. Everyday he brings out the latest, costliest outerwear, his synecdoche for assets that can't be shown, and parades around in his candy-colored fleece.

- 4- The Food Snipe. Food does become a currency of sorts on many Eco-travel trips, and very often there is some client who decides he's worth more than the rest, and goes rooting around in the dark into the group food bin, collecting his private stash of peanut butter and cookies. In the guide's eye this character is on the plankton level of the food chain.
- 5- The Grunge. In the cloistered world of a mobile Eco-travel group, cleanliness equals health and a completed itinerary. Yet, there is often some client who ignores the basics, cavalierly drinking from other's water bottles, forgoing hand and utensil washing, and swaggering down local fruits and veges without peeling. Sure, he get the Revenge, but it spreads to the others as well, and it ain't pretty.

### The Bangs' Bag

What don't I leave home without? Here are a few items I've found make a world of difference, and they don't include colored balloons or Polaroids:

- 1- Business cards. In many places around the world you're a non-person without a business card. Go ahead and print a version that says *director* or *president* to get even more respect.
- 2- Ear plugs. To block out the snorer in the next tent, or the passionate couple in the refuge bunk below yours, or that boring woman in the plane seat next who wants to reveal all about what *The Bridges of Madison County* meant to her.
- 3- A portable Atlas. Not only to know where you are (remember the German tourist who wanted to visit San Jose, California, yet awoke in Costa Rica?), but so you can win those inevitable geographical bets... is

Kilimanjaro south or north of the equator? What is the southern-most state in the U.S.? What is the antipode to San Francisco? (Fort Dauphin in Madagascar).

- 4- Letters with lavish seals. If you've ever been stuck at a border crossing, or accosted by some snarly type for photographing a bridge, you know the worth of an official looking letter with a gold seal. It doesn't matter what it says. Produce it, wave your arms, point to the signature, and maybe you'll be waived past.
- 5- Eye mask. Jet lag, many believe, is influenced by light, and you can fool your body a bit and catch a few ZZZs no matter the sun if you've got a good, plush, tightly-sealing eye mask.
- 6- Extra passport photos and an International Driver's License. You never know when they will come in handy, and they usually do.
- 7- Address book with key names, numbers and faxes, such as your doctor, your insurance agent, your bank, your broker, Suzie, Mom, etc.
- 8- Lots of reading material for the hours of downtime in airports, bus stations, lobbies, etc. All those back issues of *Outside*, plus the latest books by Tim Cahill and David Roberts.
- 9- Coat and tie and shiny shoes. Even if I'm on an extended trek or river expedition, there always seems to be some official who requires personal homage with a visit, and he doesn't shine to Vibram or Polarguard.
- 10- My ammo box. The best purse a guy can have. It holds camera, lenses, notebook, paperbacks, pens, toiletries, and it's waterproof. The only problem is the airport metal detector, but it's worth the shakedown. †