



# Urban Vacation Destination

While ecotourism conserves the ecology of an area, a new wave of *urban* ecotourism restores natural ecology for the enjoyment of locals and visitors.

BY ASHLEY CORINN WALDORF

“Isn’t it far more ecological to take a walk in the urban jungle of your city on a Sunday morning and meet friends than to drive alone in your SUV through a national park some 200 km away to be isolated in the ‘wilderness?’” asked Antonis Petropoulos of ECOCLUB.com at the Urban Ecotourism Conference.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” Petropoulos’ question presents the logic of the new urbanized twist on the ecotourism trend; while the overall goal of ecotourism is to conserve the ecology of an area, urban ecotourism restores natural ecology for the enjoyment of locals and visitors alike.

So whether someone lives in a city or plans to visit one, green options in the urban jungle abound. And participating in such activities simultaneously supports the city ecologically, economically and culturally.

The concept of urban ecotourism has been around long before the term. A horse-drawn carriage ride around Central Park and a jog around the Freedom Trail in Boston are both environmentally supportive, green recreation options that have been available for years. The urban ecotourism movement is about creating and advertising more of these green opportunities and inspiring city folk to take advantage of them.

Movement supporters hope that people will

## Seven ways to go green on the go

Ecotourism and urban ecotourism are on the rise, but for more traditional vacationers who simply want to relax in the most environmentally friendly ways possible, here are some tips and tricks to traveling green:

- 1.) If you have to rent a car, **RENT A HYBRID**. According to major car rental companies, their rates are the same or cheaper than that of a regular gasoline-using vehicle, more fuel-efficient, and don’t emit the toxic gases and fumes that researchers have found to be harmful to the environment.
- 2.) Rely on **PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION**. You’ll save a bundle on cab fares, and you’ll enjoy the view more. Obtain a subway/metro map and ask a local for directions or clarification. If there’s a public bus or trolley system, learn where the stops closest to where you’re staying are located. If you’re flying, it’s possible that there’s public transit at or near the airport.
- 3.) **CAMP**. Since when has good old fashioned fun gone out of style? Cancel your reservations at the Hilton and experience your vacation destination the way nature intended. Even cities like Chicago, New York and Miami have excellent camping facilities, which cost, on average, only \$10-\$25 per night to pitch a tent. Be sure to pack extra marshmallows and hot dogs — most facilities provide fire pits at



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no cost.

4.) If you're staying somewhere for long periods of time, find out about **RECYCLING POLICIES**. Most cities have recycling spots that are open at least a few days a week. You can visit city hall or look at the city's Web site for recycling spots and times.

5.) Get a **GREEN MAP**. Before you leave home, visit [greenmap.com](http://greenmap.com). Green Maps are locally created maps that chart the natural environment. They show all walking/hiking/biking trails, wildlife centers and zoos, city parks, areas for dog walking, organic produce and whole food markets, green businesses, scientific research facilities and places for unique outdoor activities such as kayaking, rock climbing and mountain biking. The maps are free, easy to download and available for hundreds of places worldwide.

6.) While enjoying the outdoors, be sure to **NEVER DISTURB A HABITAT**. This applies everywhere. Wild animals are not pets and should not be touched. This includes lakes or oceans, where you shouldn't touch any animal or plant you encounter. Some 500-year-old coral reefs in the Mexican Gulf can be destroyed simply by a tourist snorkler setting foot on them.

7.) Be smart and considerate. **DON'T LITTER**. Use good judgment, and encourage fellow vacationers to do the same. Leave your surroundings looking better than they did before you were there.

—Michelle Martin

not only take advantage of the green options in their cities, but also realize the associated city benefits. Many who do participate are doing so subconsciously, as their city has intricately woven the green option, camouflaging it into its landscape. London is a perfect example of this.

In that city, a system of 2,500 street and 1,600 directional signs direct citizens and visitors to more than 250 places; but the system is not promoted as urban ecotourism. The system points out areas of interest and features safe, navigable sidewalks that are regulated by building codes. The ease of getting around the city by foot has led to reduced traffic and air pollution. While Englishers use this system regularly, they aren't necessarily aware they are urban ecotourists.

Englander and Nottingham University student Emma Williams is oblivious to the connection. She is, however, familiar with the signs.

"Whenever anyone travels into central London by car they're charged 5 quid ... when I travel to London, I usually get the underground and then walk to wherever I'm going — most visitors do," Williams said in an e-mail. She finds it easy to navigate the city: "Theatres, museums, castles and other places of tourism are really well sign posted. In some instances, there are underground walkways that have exits at major tourist centers."

Toronto, on the other hand, which coined the term "urban ecotourism," has used it as a marketing tool, according to Rachel Dodds, director of OCIS Ltd. and a sustainable / eco-tourism consultant. Toronto features the Rouge Park (the largest natural and cultural park in



Photo by Ashley Waldorf

Solar-powered public compactor in Boston, Ma., substantially reduce trash pickup. Such efforts are included in green maps depicting a city's urban ecotourism benefits.

urban North America), 3 million trees on public land, more than a hundred bird species near and around the city and about 20,000 acres of municipal parks and conservation lands — that's more than 12 percent of the city's area, according to Dodds.

Green living and green visiting in Toronto include options for entertainment, recreation, exercise, relaxation, sleeping, eating, ice skating, hiking, biking, yoga, retreat facilities, organic markets and vegetarian restaurants. ▶



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“Ecotourism often uses the tourist to raise money for conservation or awareness to locals about the value of the area and usually to preserve it,” Dodds said. “Urban ecotourism often raises awareness about the importance of the environment and culture and often works to re-create it as well as preserve what exists.”

“For example, a roof top garden tour in Toronto is a way to raise awareness about the value of the environment, yet creating roof top gardens is a way to increase green space as well.”

But while ecotourism’s environmental and cultural benefits may be obvious, its economic success depends on how well cities can market their urban eco value. Toronto did that by creating one of the first green maps to focus on both tourism and the environment and promoting it through strategic map distribution.

The green map is the key to purposeful urban ecotouring; it depicts the city like a regular map, but features icons that show the locations of green options. According to the Green Map System (GMS), which sponsors and tracks all green maps, the system’s purpose is to “illuminate the connections between natural and human environments by mapping the local urban or rural community” with a shared icon system. The organization’s Web site

(www.greenmap.org) corresponds with the maps by providing a key to understanding the icons. The icons direct users to green recreation options, organic food locations and transportation options. The icons also warn users of toxic hot spots.

Jason Alger, assistant professor of graphic design at Kendall College of Art + Design and partner of Tiny Yam design firm, is heading a green map project for Grand Rapids, Mich. After reading about the GMS, he recognized its benefits and initiated a project for his own city.

“As a member of the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and Sustainable Business Forum, and seeing first-hand the active participation in sustainable causes, becoming involved in GMS was the perfect opportunity,” Alger said in an e-mail. Green maps are typically created when locals volunteer to create a green map for their community.

Currently, 232 official green maps have been published, and many more are under way. 🌍

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'X' marks the spot — the spot where a tree will be planted in Boston, Ma. Adding more green to the gray of traditional urban areas makes them more attractive urban ecotourism hot spots and potential 'green map' sites.

Photo by Ashley Waldorf