

The truth about...

Eco-holidays

Want to go 'green'? It's not as simple as just re-using your towels, says **Jill Starley-Grainger**

What is eco-travel?

There's no legal definition, which makes 'green' a pretty grey area. But generally speaking, a hotel, mode of transport or tour operator should be 'greener' than its comparable competitors. For example, to legitimately call itself 'eco', a hotel should use significantly less energy and water, more environmentally friendly cleaning products, and more sustainable building materials than another hotel in a similar environment. However, these key 'green' hallmarks are not always obvious — you are unlikely to be taken on a tour of a hotel's bio-fuel facilities or water-tank storage system, for instance.

So book a hotel that has 're-use your towel signs', right?

The place you choose to stay has a huge impact on your holiday's eco-footprint — and as about 15 per cent of the water a hotel uses is for washing towels and

sheets, yes, these signs help. But if that's all a hotel is doing, it's not a lot.

Instead, look on the hotel's website for a 'sustainability policy' — this should spell out exactly what the hotel does to address its impact on the environment. If you don't see one, email or phone and ask for one before you book. Toiletries should come in large, refillable bottles, rather than tiny takeaways, and be made by a local company using natural ingredients. Green roofs, dual-flush loos, low-flow showers and a keycard system that turns off lights and air-con when you leave a room are good signs.

That said, 'eco' doesn't have to mean roughing it — the technologies that bolster a hotel's environmental credibility mostly happen behind the scenes, and if done well will have little effect on the guest experience. The five-star Lefay Resort and Spa (lefyayresorts.com; doubles from £261, room only) on Lake Garda in Italy, for

2.84

tonnes. That's the amount of CO2 that a return Economy trip from London to Sydney generates, according to carbonfootprint.com. Check its online emissions calculator before you travel to find out the greenest way for you to go.

example, has its own vast rainwater-collection tanks and generates at least 60 per cent of its energy through green technologies on site. But guests relaxing in the spa or lounging on the soft, unbleached cotton sheets in their room might not even realise they're in an eco-hotel at all.

Similarly, the Crosby Street Hotel (firmdalehotels.com; doubles from £530, room only), a stylish boutique in New York, achieved an exceptionally high environmental rating (LEED Gold) for its construction, and has technologies that allow it to use less water (about 20 per cent), and energy (about 10 per cent), than similar nearby hotels. To find more options, check out sites such as greenglobe.com, greenhotelier.org and greenleafecostandard.net. Many countries have schemes, too, including green-tourism.com in the UK and ecotourism.org.au in Australia, so simply googling the country name plus 'green hotel certification scheme' can bring up the local choices.

Do I have to give up flying?

According to the European Commission, transport represents nearly a quarter of Europe's greenhouse-gas emissions — and on a per-passenger, per-trip basis, aviation is the worst offender. Unfortunately, despite claims, carbon-offsetting isn't a magic bullet — according to research by the likes of Friends of the Earth, it's ineffective. Instead, you're best off choosing more efficient modes of transport — ideally train (try loco2.com for European travel routes). When you must fly, opt for an airline that uses newer, more fuel-efficient planes, such as Boeing 787s: Finnair (finnair.com), Thomson Airways (thomson.co.uk) and Norwegian (norwegian.com) are all good calls.

Are there any 'green' travel agents or tour operators?

Hearteningly, the UK's biggest travel company — TUI, with brands including Thomson, Exodus, First Choice and Crystal Ski — has made notable strides in sustainability. It won the 2015 World Responsible Tourism Award for Best Innovation for Carbon Reduction. Other companies with solid eco-credentials include kuoni.com, greentraveller.co.uk, tribes.co.uk, responsibletravel.com, wildernessscotland.com, ganeandmarshall.com, steppestravel.co.uk and intrepidtravel.com. Ecotourism.org lists more green travel agents. ■



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY