

See the country, save the planet

Five trips that will leave you well travelled and deserving of a pat on the back

BY Peter Trainor

Photography by Valerie Loiseleux



Travel planning can be a headache, but if you're trying to take a trip that's easy on the planet, you'll quickly find yourself in migraine territory. Even the first step—getting there—suddenly becomes a guilt-inducing hassle. Airplanes are out altogether: just one round trip across the Atlantic creates between 1.5 and 2 tonnes of greenhouse gas per passenger. That's about a third of what the average Canadian produces annually, and we are already the world's second-highest producers of greenhouse gasses per capita, according to the Sierra Club.

Cruise ships are out, too. According to the Surfrider Foundation, a California-based environmental advocacy organization, a one-week cruise produces an average of 795,000 litres of sewage, 95,000 litres of oily bilge water, 375 litres of hazardous wastes and 50 tonnes of solid waste. And major cruise lines are notorious for violating dumping laws.

We all know that driving's no good (how it pains me to abandon thee, sweet minibus!), so where does this leave someone who wants to travel light, environmentally speaking? Well, probably pretty close to home. Luckily, we live in a country of remarkable variety, with a coast-to-coast rail system and bus network, which, in combination, can get us pretty much anywhere in the country with minimal environmental impact. Here are five alternatives to your usual trip that, with a little effort, will leave you feeling both well travelled and well deserving of a pat on the back.

1. Bike touring with the Otesha Project

The distances may seem daunting in this massive country, but biking can be one of the most intimate ways to experience a place. If you really want to feel like you're making a contribution to the environmental cause (and you're between 18 and 35), consider signing up for one of the seven group tours being run by the Otesha Project in 2008. Otesha takes groups of 15 to 20 volunteers on two-month bike tours across different parts of the country as part of its environmental education program. Participants stop at schools, camps and communities along the route to teach audiences about environmentally responsible everyday living through theatre-based presentations and workshops.

"My own experience on an Otesha bike tour was transformational," explains Jessica Lax, Otesha's executive director. No previous experience is necessary, on stage or on a bike, and participants are accepted on a first-come, first-considered basis. Host communities provide accommodation, so you can expect to find yourself in church basements, backyards and at campsites. Says Lax, "There is something about living with a supportive sustainable community, speaking your values on stages across the country and seeing how you've made a difference that leaves every tour member fundamentally changed."

Otesha asks participants to fundraise \$1,900 to cover operation costs and provides support to help you reach that goal. Some scholarships are also available. (otesha.ca)

2. The Trans-Canada Trail and Newfoundland's T'railway

Once completed, Trans-Canada Trail will be the longest of its kind in the world—an 18,000-kilometre-long network of local paths and abandoned railway lines running through every province and territory—perfect for hiking/camping trips of any length or duration. The trail will be “substantially complete” by 2010, but many sections are usable now because they run on pre-existing routes. A detailed interactive map on the website makes finding a part of the trail near your home or travel destination very easy. (tctrail.ca)

One of the most interesting completed sections is Newfoundland's T'Railway, which makes biking or hiking from Port-aux-Basques to St. John's (a distance of 883 kilometres) possible along an old rail bed. “It's a challenging undertaking, definitely not for the faint of heart and requiring a sturdy bike or a darn good pair of legs,” says T'Railway program officer Tony Collins, who estimates that the full trail takes about 30 days to complete on foot. Of course, it's also possible to do shorter sections. Camping is always a possibility, but the route also passes through approximately 40 communities, some of which offer accommodation. If you do take on the T'Railway, watch out for the ghost of Joey Smallwood. Rumour has it he haunts the trail and eats the brains of passing anti-confederates.

3. WWOOFing

If you're a believer in the soul-healing powers of good old-fashioned hoeing, working on organic farms (WWOOFing) might be for you. WWOOFing operates according to a simple equation: in return for your hard work, farmers and their families provide you with room and board. No farming know-how is required. Though it's possible to WWOOF all over the world, we're lucky to have a well-organized network here in Canada. “It's an opportunity to have a real rural experience, and to learn about how the food on our tables is actually produced,” says John Vanden Heuvel, coordinator of World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF.ca), which serves as the networking point for WWOOF-involved farms across the country. “We generally say that WWOOFing is for anybody between 17 and 70.”

He also points out that, besides the rejuvenating physical workout and amazing food, you'll also have the chance to get an intimate look at the lives of people in rural Canada, as well as the satisfaction of learning about and supporting sustainable agriculture.

There are over 600 WWOOF-affiliated farms throughout every province and territory except Nunavut. For a \$40 fee, WWOOF will send you a list of their member-farms, which you can then contact directly. You can either stay on one farm or farm-hop around the country, stopping for a few days or weeks here and a few there. WWOOFing is best done between spring and autumn, but many farms accept people year-round.

4. World Wildlife Fund Canada eco-tours with Horizon and Co.

If you're looking for a program that's a little easier on your body and a little more luxurious, but you're still interested in travelling responsibly and learning something about the environment along the way, check out Horizon and Co.'s World Wildlife Fund Canada-sponsored eco-tours (horizon-co.com). Within Canada in 2008, six-day tours will be offered with a focus on marine wildlife in Newfoundland or arctic wildlife in northern Manitoba. A three-day tour will also be available with a focus on whales of the St. Lawrence. Both Horizon and Co. tour guides and WWF staff lead the trips.

"People have a very visceral reaction to environmental issues when they actually get a chance to get in the field," says Lisa DePieri, senior manager of conservation advancement with WWF-Canada "We try to help people understand that there is no line running between humans and the environment. It's all interconnected."

Horizon and Co. operates according to both the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and the Sustainable Tourism Operator Principles. "We ensure that everything is sized appropriately to fit the group so that there is no waste," says Norman Howe, Horizon and Co.'s owner and creative director. "We vet our partners carefully to ensure they reflect and adhere to our conservation sensibilities."

Prices vary, but range from around \$1,000 for three-day tours to between \$3,000 and \$5,000 for six-day tours. Expect fine dining and luxurious accommodation. Getting to the trip launch points (in an environmentally responsible way) is up to you.

5. The Canadian train adventure

Dust off your overalls and bust out your Gordon Lightfoot! In this age of high-flying and highway driving, the wonderful hypnotic state that only the gentle sway of a train car can induce is too often forgotten. It's a pricey way to travel, but VIA Rail offers Canada's most famous routes, such as the Canadian, which runs from Toronto to Vancouver, and the Ocean, which runs from Montreal to Halifax—but there are several lesser-known lines that will take you to some of the country's most remote areas.

If you're interested in seeing boreal and arctic landscapes but are unable to travel to the northern territories, check out VIA's Hudson Bay route from Winnipeg to Churchill, Manitoba. Once in Churchill, you'll have easy access to Wapusk (meaning "white bear" in Cree) National Park, famed for its polar bears. Another option is the Ontario Northland Railway's Polar Bear Express, which will take you from Cochran, Ontario, to Moosonee/Moose Factory, just south of James Bay (ontc.on.ca). The twin towns offer a glimpse into the history of contact between the local Cree and early European colonists; a Hudson Bay Company trading post was established in Moose Factory in 1673.

If it's mountains you love, VIA offers the Skeena, which snakes through the Rockies from Jasper National Park to Prince Rupert, B.C. Once in Prince Rupert you'll have access to ferries that will take you anywhere up or down the Pacific coast. (Take comfort: this article is 100 percent PR firm-free!)

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