

Summer breaks and plastic waste: The quest for plastic-free tourism

Much of our daily consumption features the use of plastics. However, single-use plastics (SUPs) have come to play a [significant part](#) in the environmental crisis and have contributed to unsustainable ways of living.

As a team of nine interdisciplinary researchers at Lancaster University, we are working on a three-year UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)-funded [research project](#) looking at how plastic packaging is integrated, in often complex and less obvious ways, across peoples' everyday lives. At this time of year, when holidays and tourism (home and abroad) are on everyone's minds, it can be a particularly challenging time for people to follow their best intentions to keep their plastic waste down.

Plastic at every turn of the tourism experience

Plastic-free travel can appear prohibitively difficult for many tourists as greener alternatives for many everyday products, including toiletries, are perceptibly harder or more expensive to source in general, let alone at airport terminal or ferry port shops and at holiday locations. Tourists' reliance on plastic-packaging is exacerbated by the normalcy of 'plastic-heavy' services and experiences in the tourism industry, like air travel and hotel stay. The hotel industry's reliance on single-use plastics is recognised as a contributor to waste flows, and typical examples include bottled water and toiletries in hotel rooms, plastic cups in cellophane, bin liners, and so on. Single-use plastics have remained popular in hospitality because they offer cost-effectiveness and convenience for visitors and employees while maintaining compliance with health and hygiene requirements. The reliance on [SUPs during tourism experiences](#) has only increased in the COVID-19 context, and the even greater emphasis by the industry on health and safety. The widespread reliance on single-use plastics, coupled with holidaymakers' unfamiliarity with differing waste systems in tourist locations, can result in improper waste disposal. Even before tourists have come off their plane, the average passenger generates [1.4 kilograms of waste per flight](#). Although airlines have recently started to experiment with [sustainable alternatives to plastics](#), they also face the challenge of coming up with lightweight solutions with no additional weight which would result in higher fuel consumption. For those choosing to holiday in their home country (that is, staying at home), there are still plenty of challenges, whether that be when camping in the countryside, picnics on the beach or more eating out – holidaymakers are often more reliant on the convenience of single-use plastics and this can be hard to navigate.

SUPs and destination tourism

Besides reliance on plastics amongst the travel and hospitality sector, there are important behavioural considerations also. Holiday destination practices often come with high amounts of plastic packaging waste. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) highlights that there are [five frequently used SUPs](#) when people travel away from their home base for holiday purposes (e.g., water bottles, straws, toiletries,

bags, and cutlery and lunch boxes) which are often utilised out of habit in such destinations. But why does this happen?

In fact, trips away, or any kind of special summer events, present a break from day-to-day life including the typical rules and habits we follow in our consumption since tourism experiences are often associated with escapist tendencies and a detachment from the routine of the everyday. We are familiar with the so-called “holiday mode” we fall into when we take time off. There is something about the escape from the rhythms of our regular workday patterns, coupled with the summer heat, and living in an unfamiliar place that means holidaying can become the perfect storm for SUPs. For some, holidays are a time when they have a temporary release from the pressures of their commitment to reducing plastic use – but this is a hurdle for those trying to encourage sustained commitment to plastic free lifestyles.

In the UK, popular tourist destinations are subjected every summer to [littering and anti-social behaviour](#) with [items](#) such as styrofoam cups, plastic bottles and bags, and utensils found on the beaches which [increase internal temperatures](#) and threaten marine life. In addition, this year, with a rise in staycations in the UK due to COVID-19, local communities have committed to [volunteer](#) for keeping British beaches clear from plastic waste.



[Plastic waste in Bournemouth beach](#)

Similarly, Mediterranean beaches are said to be responsible [for up to 80 per cent of the marine litter](#) while reports suggest that, by 2050, there might be [more plastic than fish](#) in the oceans worldwide. [A report from the WWF](#) has underscored that plastic waste in the water and on the beaches of the Mediterranean increases by up to 30% during the summer months, suggesting the impact of tourism seasonality. Covid SUP

adds further complexity as [masks, gloves and hand sanitizer bottles are already visible in seabeds](#) and washing up on beaches.

Besides coastal destinations, festival tourism also generates significant amount of plastic waste. Most UK festivals take place during the summer period and produce [23,500 tonnes of waste](#) annually. Plastic [festival tents](#) left behind by attendees create approximately [900 tonnes of waste](#) while [audiences consume 10 million plastic bottles per year](#). There are fewer festivals going ahead in 2021, but for those going ahead, demand for tickets is high. Coupled with this, we are still in the mode of increased usage of SUPs associated with covid. People are hungry for a post-COVID release, as we've seen from footage of people at clubs and gigs in England as rules have relaxed. The need for release and escape is high. In this setting, it's feasible to expect even greater levels of waste linked to plastics, with the heightened need for release from the rules/norms around plastics.



[Plastic waste and festival tourism](#)

Towards a 'plastic-free' tourism ecosystem

If we are to seriously contend with sustainability challenges and problems, we must appreciate the impact and complexity of seasonalised behaviours. Unsustainable tourism practices are often located within a complex institutional environment which includes [taken-for-granted perceptions and well-established meanings](#) in relation to plastic packaging.

Each stakeholder in the tourism supply chain ecosystem should aim to take meaningful action in tackling plastic pollution and reducing the use of SUPs. In light of recent [initiatives](#), the industry has the potential to make the transition towards more sustainable alternatives which can shape existing perceptions about single-use plastics in tourism and travel. Inspiring steps are being taken in this regard, albeit slowly. Dubai International Airport and Dubai World Central Airport announced a phased ban of all single-use plastics. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have recently collaborated on [a report](#) that explores how stakeholders in the travel and tourism sector can address

waste from single use plastics. In the realm of lived experience however, more needs to be done to better educate and inform tourists about the impact of their unsustainable behaviours upon the environment. For instance, at a campaign level, such efforts should specifically target the rethinking of seasonalised behaviours (e.g., taking responsibility for your own litter, making use of reusable containers, [disposing of SUPs associated with covid](#))

In order for us to realise a plastic-free tourism future, we need to rethink existing perceptions and meanings attached to SUP plastic that legitimise unsustainable behaviours and lifestyles.