

EXPAT

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Going Green in Europe

by Lucas Laursen

I don't move around enough when I pee. Or so the motion sensors that power bathroom lights in Cortina, Italy, seemed to think. Plunged into darkness at the urinal, I had to wave my free hand around towards a non-existent switch before the light returned and I recovered my aim.

I wasn't entirely surprised by the motion sensors, because my last couple of dormitories had them, too, but the timers were set a little more generously. In fact, I'm all in favor of green innovations. My problem isn't with the goal, it's the execution.

Europe seems awash with environmentally friendly slogans, campaigns, and innovations. Amen. The UK proclaims its compliance with Kyoto protocols, pointedly remarking that this puts them ahead of the US of A. True, I nod.

But what about cases of overkill, like the too-thrifty Italian sensor? Is there a chance that more than soiled trousers are at stake?

I had lunch with **Dr. Robert Macfarlane**, a fellow mountain enthusiast, and the author of *Mountains of the Mind*. It is not uncommon for mountaineers to grow settled as family life overtakes them and to let the ice axe yield to the pen. So I wasn't surprised to hear that he no longer frequents the Alps or the Tien Shan. But he shocked me when he said he doesn't go because he has ethical issues with short-haul plane flights for leisure trips. Instead, he and his growing family had endured the daylong drive from Cambridge to Scotland for a holiday. I felt guilty just for being in England.

In fact, much discussion surrounds **"green travel"** in the era of the **Stern Report**. Environmental activists argue that government policy should discourage, rather than subsidize, expansion of the aviation industry. Members of the aviation and tourism industry retort that tourism is an important form of economic aid in many developing countries.

The argument that the tight margins of the current crop of low-cost airlines forces investment in



the most fuel-efficient aircraft seems reasonable. As John Hanlon **points out**, these airlines also have dense seating configurations, reducing the per-passenger carbon footprints. And as anyone who's missed a Ryan Air flight knows, no empty seat goes unpaid for. But the truly hardcore are experimenting with bypassing aviation for long-haul travel, like say, to **Thailand**.

Both sides appear interested in carbon offsets, too. This is starting to hit the States in the form of **state-level** versions of the larger European agreement. I don't propose to decide whether Europe is leading the way towards a greener future or needlessly panicking, since it's probably a combination of both. But next time I need to relieve myself, I'll consider aiming for a tree instead of flushing all that electricity and water down the drain.