



Zero altitude. How I learned to fly less and travel more

by Helen Coffey, Cheltenham, FLINT, 2022, 288 pp., £15.42 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-7509-9572-6

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BOOK REVIEW

Zero altitude. How I learned to fly less and travel more, by Helen Coffey,
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During the second half of the twentieth century, flying was common for wealthy people. The dissemination of low-cost companies democratised flying. Irrespective of background, more people began to fly. Mobility was a conquest of humanity and should not be denied, of course. But we need to consider flying in the context of the continuous increase of the global population and the disappearance of geographical barriers to work, social relations, and travel. Everyone must confront this situation – and the climate change emergency [1].

Helen Coffey, a travel journalist, was used to fly all over the world. During a journey, she gets faced with *flygskam*, i.e. ‘flight shame’, a Swedish anti-flying movement that aims to alert to the environmental impact of aviation, its contribution to global heating. With *Zero Altitude*, Helen Coffey tells us the story of those who give up their own comfort because it matters to save the planet – ‘It’s about the journey, not the destination’ (p. 18).

Helen’s book is scientifically grounded and presents several findings on the role of aviation in CO₂ emissions. In 2019, 40 million flights were taken worldwide; compared to 2018, there was an increase of 5%; compared to 1990, an increase of 300% was observed (p. 21). Through interviews with non-flyers for tips and recommendations and with experts in sustainable tourism, the author argues that taking one long-haul return flight produces more carbon emissions than the average citizen for one year (p. 22). This argument is supported by several scientific facts presented throughout the whole book. The main argument of the book is on the alternatives to flight. Helen suggests that for long journeys, the train is more efficient than the plane (p. 31). Looking back to the author’s motto ‘It’s about the journey, not the destination’, it is clear that the core issue is the destination; when catching a train, driving a car, or biking, what really matters is the journey. Helen believes that flying can be contrary to exploring.

An interesting discussion can be found in chapter 2 regarding the alternatives to flying, namely using the train. Helen noticed that flying is cheaper than using the train. Why did this happen? And what consequences does it have? If taking a plane is cheaper than catching a train, which alternatives do we have? Well, in fact on a train there is the possibility of enjoying the landscape, the stops, meeting people and their stories, i.e. we have time to feel the journey in all its dimensions. With the train, the journey is what really matters and where we can see to where we go. The train takes us from the city and brings us the opportunity to know the countryside.

The book’s message goes far beyond the need to avoid flying. It is all about alternative sustainable mobilities where train, car, boat, bike, and walk play a decisive role, from Europe to Morocco. But how do we change the mobility paradigm?

The question cannot be hidden under aviation offsetting schemes (p. 134). A carbon offset is a reduction or removal of emissions of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases made to offset emissions made elsewhere – which means that someone is compensating your ecological footprint. This strategy is questionable [2] since it is applied to people who fly once a year and to those who travel daily. The real problem is applying offsetting to the daily traveller.

Helen links the impacts of all these negative facts on tourism (pp. 157–180); well aware that stopping flying could damage the tourism sector, and also communities and services devoted to it. Are people open to shifting the paradigm? But how is this to happen with the continued availability of attractive opportunities that make us rethink our behaviours and how they affect the Planet? Helen points to some alternative solutions based on the experts' tips (pp. 217–220): use more public transport, which should be more economically accessible, and the network expanded to cover the geographical territory and avoid situations of exclusion; fly less and tell others through your social network; get political and make sure that your collective voice and expectations for a better future for all are heard; join a group of volunteers; create a movement that represents your values and beliefs and promote social cohesion of your local community; become a member of a campaign group, and help to lobby for change at local level.

The author reflects on the sustainable tech of the future and how it can be positive and negative simultaneously (pp. 239–254). Human ingenuity has surprisingly adapted to novel situations, e.g. the technology to make all sectors more sustainable. The author argues that this is not enough to deal with the 1.5°C. Humanity really needs to make a true shift in the mobility paradigm. The key issue here, in the author's words (pp. 276–277), is that flight-free travel is more than just a climate commitment. Is a new life paradigm that opens up more possibilities than it reduces.

References

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