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Wanderlust Chronicles:

Real Stories from the Road

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My first trip experience

by Milisa Lekbir

Have you ever landed somewhere and felt like the world had suddenly flipped upside down—in the best possible way? That was me, stepping off the plane in Turkey for the very first time. I was only 22, a veterinary student from Algeria, and full of excitement (and a little fear) because I was about to start a two-month volunteering project in an animal shelter for cats and dogs.

So there I was—alone, tired, with my suitcase by my side, facing a 12-hour wait in a noisy station. It wasn't the magical start I had pictured when I dreamed about traveling abroad. But in that moment, I learned something that would stay with me for the whole trip: travel isn't about everything going perfectly—it's about how you handle the unexpected.

But my adventure didn't exactly begin smoothly. On my very first day, I missed the bus that was supposed to take me from Istanbul to Sinop. The problem? I was waiting in the wrong place. Instead of going to the main Istanbul bus station, I sat at the airport bus station, completely sure I was in the right spot. Hours passed before I realized the mistake. I tried asking people around me, but most didn't speak English, so I kept getting lost in translation. By the time I finally understood, my bus had already left.



My ESC experience in Turkey

One of the most unforgettable parts of my ESC journey in Sinop was working in the animal shelter and later in the veterinary clinic. Every morning, I would arrive at the shelter and be welcomed by the barking of dogs and the meowing of cats waiting for food and care. My daily tasks were about feeding the animals, cleaning their spaces, and giving them love and attention. But my role quickly became much more than that.

But my learning didn't stop at the shelter. After working hours, I often went to the private clinic owned by one of the veterinarians. There, I discovered even more: assisting in sterilizations, giving antiparasitic treatments, and seeing how a professional clinic is managed on a daily basis. Every moment felt like a lesson, and I absorbed everything with passion.



I had the chance to assist the veterinarians during treatments and even in operations. Step by step, they taught me how to prepare the animals, give medications, and handle post-surgery care. And then came the moment I will never forget: under the supervision of the doctors, I performed surgeries on cats and dogs. As a veterinary student, this was a dream come true — the kind of experience that gives you confidence and makes you realize how important your future career will be.



Time passed so fast because I was doing what I love. The shelter became my classroom, and the clinic became my training ground. I didn't just improve my veterinary skills — I also learned about teamwork, responsibility, and compassion.



Photo by Milisa Lekbir, Sinop 2024.

Eid Celebration abroad

Celebrating Eid in Sinop

Just a few days after I arrived in Sinop, it was time for Eid al-Fitr, the celebration that comes after a month of fasting during Ramadan. Back home in Algeria, Eid is always a very special day — we celebrate with family and friends, we dress nicely, smile, prepare sweets, and share them with our loved ones. I told the other volunteers in my house about this tradition, and they were curious and excited.

I decided I didn't want to miss celebrating, so I came up with an idea: why not recreate Eid here, together?

The day before, I started preparing sweets, and soon my housemates joined me. They even prepared sweets from their own countries — Italy, Spain, Lebanon, Bosnia... it was like the whole world coming together in our little kitchen. We decided to make a big dinner and invite all our friends.

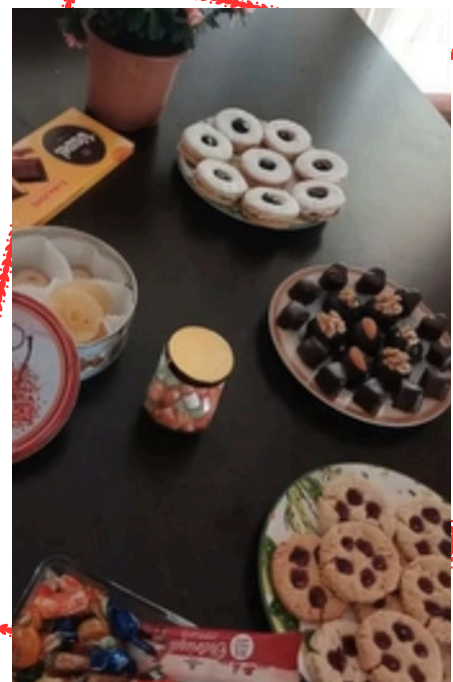


Photo by Milisa Lekbir, Sinop 2024.

By 8 p.m., the house was full of people, delicious smells, laughter, and funny stories being shared. For the first time, I cooked couscous, the most famous Algerian dish that we always make for special occasions. Honestly, I was a little nervous because it was my first time cooking it — but it turned out amazing, and everyone loved it! In return, I got to taste my friends' dishes, each one carrying the flavor of their homeland.

After dinner, we served the sweets and shared tea and other drinks. The atmosphere was magical. I didn't feel far away from my family — I felt like I was celebrating with my second family, created through the ESC experience.



Photo by Milisa Lekbir, Sinop
2024.



Chasing Adventure with KasoEst

by Milisa Lekbir

The influencers who inspire me the most are not the ones showing luxury resorts, five-star restaurants, or business-class flights. The ones who truly capture my attention are KasoEst — Belkacem, an Algerian, and Ester, an Italian — a traveling couple whose journey has become a source of inspiration for thousands of young people, including myself.

When he finally reached Barcelona, Spain, he opened his eyes to a completely new world — new language, new culture, and only a small amount of money in his pocket.

He didn't even own a camera phone at the time, so his first selfie in Spain was taken with a friend's phone. It was in Barcelona that fate brought him together with Ester, who would become both his life partner and adventure companion.

Belkacem's personal journey makes their story even more inspiring. Coming from a small town in Algeria, he dreamed of studying abroad, but in those days, study visas for Algerians were rare and complicated. He traveled far to Algiers, often with no money to even stay in a hotel, and at times he had to sleep outside while handling paperwork.



Instagram post by KasoEst

Their story is not about having endless money or living a glamorous life. It is about courage, sacrifice, and the belief that passion can overcome limitations. When I first discovered KasoEst, I was struck by how real they are. Belkacem once said in an interview: “We didn’t have money.” At the very beginning of their journey, Ester even sold her gold — worth

about 1000 euros — just so they could buy a camera and start documenting their travels. She kept using her old iPhone 6 until 2022, proof that you don’t need the latest gadgets to create meaningful content. With these simple tools, they began sharing their adventures, showing both the beauty and the struggles of travel life.



Instagram post by
KasoEst

KasoEst in Croatia

Kasoest joined forces with Kristijan Ilić — the first Croatian to visit every single country in the world (197/197 🌍!) — and TravelTomTom, the Dutch explorer who's been on the road continuously since 2012. Together with other creators, they didn't just see Croatia. They lived it. And we got to live it with them.

🌿 Osijek & Slavonia: Croatia's Hidden Heart

The trip kicked off far from the beaches and islands, in Osijek, right in the middle of Slavonia and Baranja. This region is usually skipped by tourists, but that's exactly what made it special. Wide open fields stretched to the horizon, quiet rivers drifted by, and the locals welcomed everyone like family. It felt slower, calmer — almost like Croatia was showing us her softest side first.

Standing there, you don't think about rushing to the coast. You just breathe it in: the smell of homemade food, the sound of tambourines at a village gathering, the laughter of people who open their doors as if you've known them forever. Slavonia has a soul — and being there, you can feel it.

Instagram post by KasoEst



Osijek, Croatia

🌴 **Hvar Island:** The View That Stops You

From the quiet plains, the journey jumped straight into the Adriatic dream. On Hvar Island, the group climbed up to Fortica Fortress, and suddenly the view just hits you. Below, the town of Hvar sparkles in the sun, red roofs scattered along the coast, the sea stretching endlessly blue.

It's the kind of view where everyone stops talking for a moment. You pull out your phone for a photo, but no camera can really capture it. You just stand there, smiling, thinking: "Wow, so this is Croatia."

🌊 **Plitvice Lakes:** Walking in a Fairytale

Next stop: Plitvice Lakes National Park, where nature goes full fairytale mode. Wooden paths lead you past waterfalls that tumble into turquoise lakes, the kind of scenery that makes you wonder if you're dreaming.

But Plitvice isn't just peaceful walks and postcard views. The group went all out — trekking through wild trails, flying down zip lines, and even splashing through muddy roads on quad bikes. One minute you're listening to birdsong over calm water, the next you're covered in dust and grinning from ear to ear. That's the magic of Croatia — it gives you both.



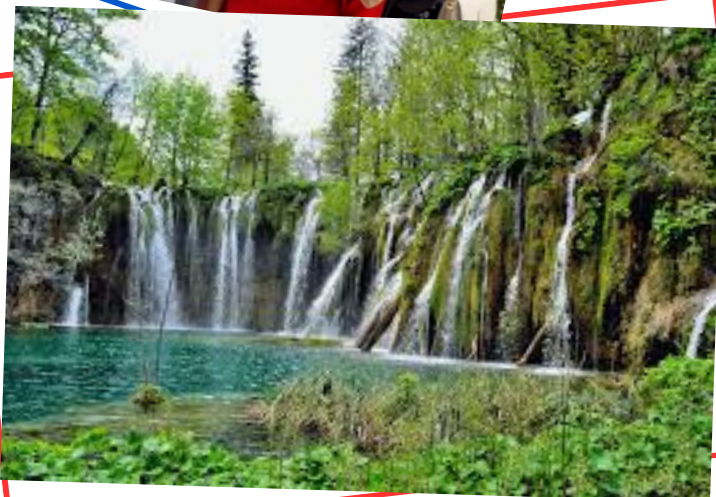
Instagram post by KosoEst



Hvar Island, Croatia



Instagram post by KosoEst



Plitvice Lakes, Croatia

Zagreb: The Grand Finale

The adventure wrapped up in Zagreb, and it was the perfect ending. After rivers, islands, and waterfalls, the capital added a final layer:

buzzing streets, cozy cafés, colorful markets, and that mix of history and modern life. Walking through Tkalčičeva Street, hearing music drift from a café, you realize — this is Croatia too. Not just nature, but culture, energy, and a vibe that makes you want to stay longer.



Instagram post by
KasoEst in Zagreb

Problems in the Paradise

by Pavla Faltová

Tourism is often celebrated as a force for good. It fuels economies, creates jobs, and fosters cultural exchange. But in many of the world's most iconic destinations, the sheer volume of visitors has tipped from blessing to burden. This phenomenon, known as overtourism, occurs when the number of tourists overwhelms the environment, infrastructure, or local communities.

The impacts are wide-ranging. Natural ecosystems buckle under pressure: coral reefs erode, wildlife retreats, and waste systems collapse. Cities and towns face skyrocketing housing costs, traffic congestion, and cultural dilution as short-term rentals and visitor services push out local life. For residents, daily existence can feel like living in a theme park designed for outsiders.



Dubrovnik, Croatia



Rome, Italy

Examples abound across the globe, from Venice's strained canals to Bali's overdrawn water supplies. Governments and communities are responding in varied ways: limiting visitor numbers, introducing tourist taxes, banning short-term rentals, or even temporarily closing sites to allow recovery.

At its core, overtourism raises a fundamental question: how can destinations welcome visitors without losing the very qualities that attract them? Finding this balance is essential. Without it, today's dream destinations risk becoming tomorrow's cautionary tales.

Overtourism in the Asia-Pacific

Lessons from Boracay, Maya Bay, and Bali

by Pavla Faltová

The Asia-Pacific region has long been marketed as paradise with its emerald waters, lush jungles, coral reefs, and cultural richness. Yet in recent years, these destinations have become ground zero for one of the travel industry's biggest challenges: overtourism. Unchecked visitor numbers, unsustainable infrastructure, and profit-driven development have pushed ecosystems and communities to breaking points. The cases of Boracay in the Philippines, Maya Bay in Thailand, and Bali in Indonesia illustrate both the scale of the problem and the attempts, sometimes successful, sometimes fragile, to reverse the damage.

Boracay: From “Cesspool” to Controlled Comeback



Getty Images, 2018

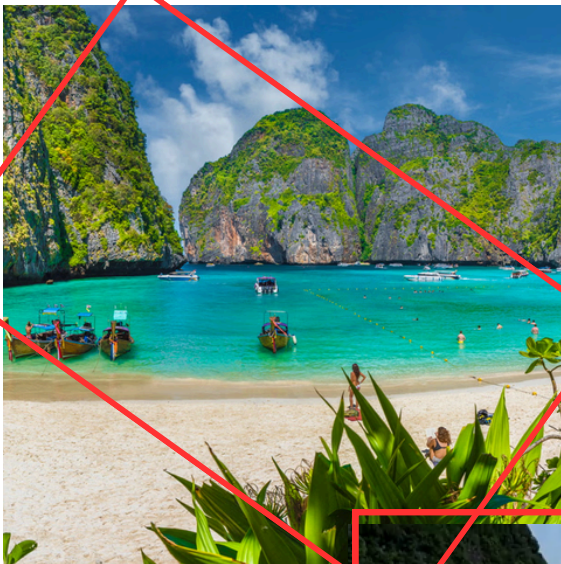
In 2018, Boracay, once hailed as one of the world's best beaches, was unceremoniously shut down by the Philippine government. Years of poorly managed mass tourism had turned it into what then President Duterte bluntly called a “cesspool.”

Studies show that between 1988 and 2011, coral cover declined by over 70%, driven by rapid coastal development and soaring tourist arrivals. Algal blooms proliferated, and coliform bacteria levels reached dangerous levels for public health and marine ecosystems.

The six-month closure was drastic. Tourism, which accounted for the bulk of the island's economy, came to an abrupt halt. Roughly 30,000 workers were displaced, and local livelihoods were severely hit. Yet the hiatus enabled significant rehabilitation. Illegal structures within a 30-meter shoreline buffer were demolished, around 400 businesses were shut down, and sewage infrastructure was expanded. Authorities introduced a tourist cap of 19,000 per day (plus 15,000 workers), banned single-use plastics and alcohol-fueled beach parties, and mandated stricter hotel accreditation.

By the time Boracay reopened in late 2018, water quality had improved dramatically, with coliform counts dropping, and coral cover showed signs of early recovery. Visitor numbers have since rebounded, reaching 1.75 million in 2022 and over 2 million in 2023, but under tighter environmental rules. While Boracay is now often cited as a model for sustainable tourism in the Philippines, the long-term challenge is ensuring that benefits flow to local communities, not just investors.

Maya Bay: Paradise Paused



Getty Images, 2023

Thailand's Maya Bay, immortalized by Leonardo DiCaprio's film *The Beach*, became a cautionary tale of fame-fueled overtourism. By 2018, up to 5,000 visitors and hundreds of boats arrived daily, crushing coral reefs and scaring away wildlife. Surveys showed that only 8% of the original coral cover remained, while reef structures were scarred by anchors and pollution.



Authorities closed the bay indefinitely that year. During its closure, more than 20,000 coral fragments were replanted, while blacktip reef sharks, turtles, and other marine life gradually returned. To prevent future collapse, strict regulations were introduced before reopening in 2022: no swimming allowed, all boats banned from entering the bay, and a cap of 375 visitors at a time. Access is monitored through an e-ticket system, and seasonal closures are enforced to allow continued ecological recovery.

Bali: A Slow-Burning Crisis

Unlike Boracay's forced reset or Maya Bay's ecological pause, Bali continues to wrestle with overtourism largely in real time. The island receives more than 6 million tourists annually, dwarfing its local population. Tourism accounts for around 80% of Bali's economy, but at a steep cost: it is estimated that 65% of Bali's freshwater is consumed by the tourism industry, leaving some villages facing chronic shortages. Coral reefs are threatened by coastal construction, while the island generates up to 3,800 tons of solid waste daily, much of it plastic that ends up in rivers and on beaches.

Early signs are encouraging, reef sharks are breeding again, water clarity has improved, and coral regrowth is underway.

Yet Maya Bay remains a fragile ecosystem, and its future depends on whether regulations can withstand pressure from mass tourism operators eager to cash in on its global fame.



Bali Discovery, 2024



South China Morning Post, 2019

The cultural toll is equally significant. Sacred temples such as Tanah Lot and Besakih are crowded daily, while local communities report loss of traditional spaces and rising resentment toward visitors. Although the government has announced a new tourist tax and supported periodic beach cleanups, critics argue that these are piecemeal solutions to a structural problem: the island's dependence on mass tourism.



Jakarta Post, 2019



Boracay, Maya Bay, and Bali represent three contrasting approaches to overtourism: a shock closure and infrastructure reset, a long-term ecological pause with tightly controlled reopening, and an ongoing struggle with unchecked growth. The data underscores a clear message: ecosystems are finite, water tables are measurable, and coral reefs have thresholds that once crossed can take decades to recover.

For Asia-Pacific destinations, the future hinges on stricter regulation, community inclusion in decision-making, and ecological vigilance backed by data monitoring. Tourism can still thrive, but only if destinations stop treating natural and cultural assets as limitless commodities. Otherwise, paradise risks becoming nothing more than a cautionary statistic.

So what...? I just really love to travel

Future of growth without limits

by Pavla Faltová

Tourism has long been celebrated as an engine of economic growth and global mobility. But if current patterns persist, the world may be heading toward an era where its very success undermines the foundations it depends on. The current trajectory offers a sobering glimpse into what unchecked growth in tourism could mean for people, places, and the planet.

The environmental toll is the most glaring. Tourism already accounts for an estimated 8–9% of global greenhouse gas emissions, a share that has been growing at a rate of around 3.5% annually. Unlike many sectors, tourism's reliance on aviation and shipping makes it uniquely difficult to decarbonize. Air travel alone is projected to make up 25% of global CO₂ emissions by 2050 if left unchecked, while international aviation and shipping combined could represent as much as 40% of total emissions by 2030. These are not abstract figures, they directly link mass tourism to the worsening climate crisis.

International arrivals have already rebounded to near-record levels in the aftermath of the pandemic. According to UNWTO projections, global tourist arrivals could reach 1.8 billion by 2030 and up to 2.9 billion by 2050 under high-growth scenarios. This surge may bring short-term revenue gains for popular destinations, but the long-term consequences point toward intensifying overtourism crises.



Science Photo Library, 2013

Say goodbye to eroding Machu Picchu. Or is Petra in Jordan closer to your heart?



SOPA Images, 2024

The ecological fallout extends well beyond carbon. Popular coastal destinations, from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia, face coral bleaching, rising sea levels, and marine pollution, much of it exacerbated by tourism activity. Overextraction of water to meet the demands of hotels, resorts, and golf courses in arid regions creates competition with local communities. The growing mountains of plastic waste, often imported with tourists and left behind, overwhelm fragile waste management systems.

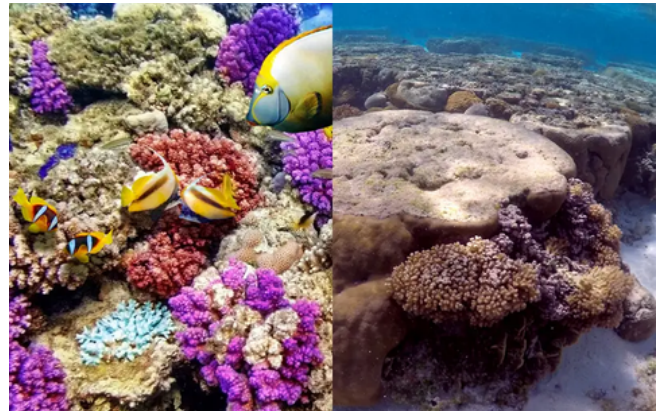


ifalltheicemelted.wordpress.com, 2022

Your beach destination could soon be much closer

In this “growth without limits” future, the likely response from governments and destinations will not be proactive reform but reactive shutdowns. The current situation is at its core, unsustainable. It promises a cycle of short-term economic booms followed by environmental collapse, community resistance, and eventual closures.

Communities themselves bear the brunt of this model. Overtourism drives up housing costs, transforms cultural districts into commercialized zones, and pushes residents out of their neighborhoods. Resistance is already visible: protests in Barcelona, Venice, Dubrovnik, and Bali show how locals are increasingly unwilling to absorb the hidden costs of mass visitation. Left unaddressed, such tensions risk escalating into a deeper backlash against the industry as a whole.



Shutterstock and Reuters, 2017

Remember when the Great Barrier Reef was great?

The future of tourism, therefore, is not simply a matter of whether numbers will rise, they will. The real question is whether the world chooses to steer that growth responsibly or allows the industry to spiral into self-destruction. Business as usual is not just a path forward. It is a warning of what happens when paradise is treated as an infinite resource in a finite world.

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Discover More: Follow Their Adventures

KasoEst – Ester & Belkacem

A globe-trotting couple blending Italian and Algerian roots, KasoEst are renowned for their immersive storytelling and conscious travel style. They've traveled over 70 countries and share vibrant video diaries and travel insights.

Instagram: @kasoest (1.2M followers)

YouTube: @kasoest1 (830K subscribers)

TravelTomTom – Tom Grond

Dutchie traveling known for his endlessly curious nature, Tom has been traveling full-time since 2012. With over 160 countries visited, his blog and socials are packed with practical tips, cultural stories, and the reality of long-term travel.

Blog: traveltomtom.net — packed with guides, e-SIM reviews, and itineraries

Instagram/TikTok: @traveltomtom (2.5M+ followers combined)

Kristijan Ilicic

The first Croatian to travel to every country in the world, Kristijan is a true pioneer of adventure. His journeys are more than just ticking places off a list—he shares powerful stories about culture, people, and the lessons he's learned along the way.

Instagram: @kristijanilicic

YouTube: Kristijan Ilicic



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