

The Code

for Travelers Who Don't Buy
Their Own Good Intentions

Good intentions built the orphanage.
Good questions close it.

Don't trust your heart. Brief it.

The cruelest things in travel are bought by the kindest people—that is not an accident, it is a business model. This isn't an essay about meaning well. It's the working code for it: the questions that expose a trip before you pay for it, and the rules that hold when the brochure doesn't. **Three questions, four tests, one email, one code.** Read it once. Travel by it forever.

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It can pass two gates and still be wrong.

The industry uses **sustainable**, **responsible**, and **ethical** as if they were synonyms. They are three different questions—and a trip must be walked through all three, because passing one gate says nothing about the next. Below, the industry’s favorite example runs the lane: the elephant ride.



The elephant ride, gate by gate

- 1 Sustainable asks: “Can this last?”**
The camp is profitable and bookings return every season—the operation can last. Passes.
- 2 Responsible asks: “What are we doing about it?”**
Group sizes capped, local mahouts, a monthly vet—the impacts are managed. Partly.
- 3 Ethical asks: “Is this right?”**
To accept a saddle at all, the animal was broken as a calf. However well the camp is run, the practice is wrong at its core. No.

The counter-example

Send a village olive harvest, hosted by the growers, through the same lane and all three gates swing open: the grove has outlived every empire that taxed it, the fee goes to the family, and nothing and no one was bent out of shape to produce your visit.

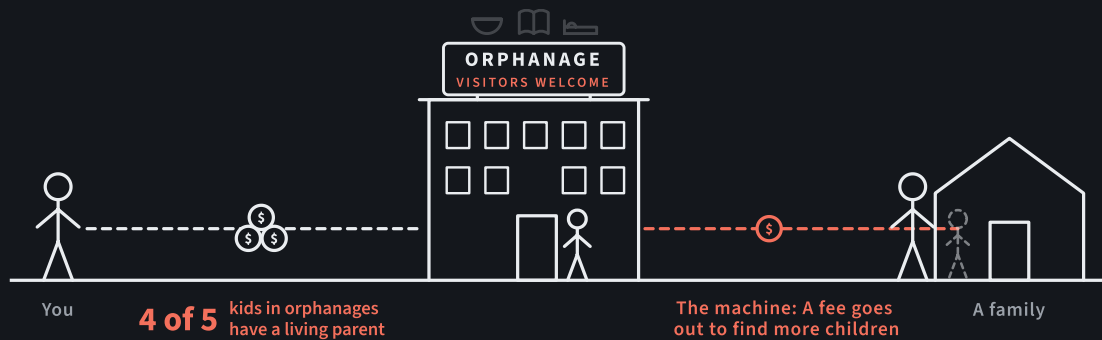
The test is not there to spoil travel. It is there to find travel like this—the trip that comes back yes, three times.

A practice can be sustainable and responsible—and still be wrong. Sustainability and responsibility are system tests; ethics is the conscience test, the one the industry runs last, if at all.

Verdicts are illustrative composites of widely documented practices (the crush/World Animal Protection; leakage/UNEP-UNCTAD; commodification/UNESCO ICH ethics). The interactive lane—send four real trips through the gates—lives at ethicaltourism.com.

It feels like help. It isn't.

You have two weeks, a plane ticket, and the best of motives. An orphanage nearby welcomes volunteers—and nothing you will be told is exactly false. **Follow the money anyway:** this system is built so the kindest people in travel never see how it works.



The demand doesn't help the orphans. It creates them.

The three tests, before any trip

- **The itinerary test:** any stop whose draw is children—orphans, school, “children’s home”—comes off the itinerary.
- **The camera test:** a child in your photo needs a parent’s yes, freely given, with the power to say no.
- **The money test:** help flows to systems that keep families together—never to the display of children.

What helps instead

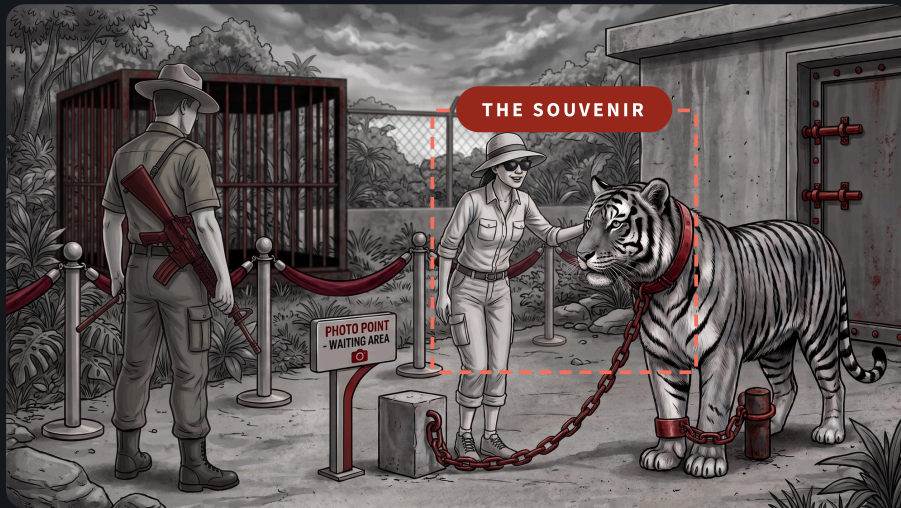
- **Redirect the help.** The money an orphanage would have taken does more good with organizations that reunite families—start with ReThink Orphanages and the Better Care Network.
- **Say why you’re declining.** Visitor demand is a documented driver of family separation—name it.

An estimated 5.4 million children live in institutions worldwide—about 80% with a living parent. Six decades of research is unambiguous about the harm—and in 2019 the UN General Assembly called on states to prevent it, “including in the context of tourism.”

Sources: Lumos (5.4 million; ~80% with a living parent); UNICEF Cambodia; The Lancet Group Commission, 2020; UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/74/133 (2019), quoted verbatim; Australia’s Modern Slavery Act (2018). The interactive system lives at ethicaltourism.com.

The harm is one inch outside the frame.

Every unethical wildlife attraction sells the same product: a photo. The harm is hidden not by distance but by framing—the souvenir is marked in red, inside its full scene.



“Once in a lifetime.”—that was the caption. The whole frame tells a different story.

THE TIGER SELFIE

137

living tigers removed in the 2016 Tiger Temple raid—with 40 dead cubs in a freezer. The photo prop and the trafficking inventory were the same animal.

THE ELEPHANT RIDE

77%

of 2,923 elephants surveyed were in severely inadequate conditions—each broken as a calf by the crush. The ride lasts thirty minutes; the training, a childhood.

THE DOLPHIN SHOW

444 m²

the average tank for two-thirds of 3,000+ dolphins in 336 venues—swimmers of tens of kilometers a day. The “smile” is fixed anatomy—the same shape in suffering.

The photo is the product. The suffering is the manufacturing process. In the largest study of wildlife attractions, only 7.8% of visitors raised any welfare concern—the frame is doing its job. The rule that survives every brochure: **if you can ride it, hug it, or pose with it, walk away.**

Sources: Tiger Temple raid, Thailand DNP, 2016; World Animal Protection, *Taken for a Ride* (2017) and *Behind the Smile* (2019); Moorhouse et al. (2015). The interactive version lives at ethicaltourism.com.

Anyone can paint “sanctuary” on a gate.

The word “sanctuary” is legally meaningless—no law anywhere decides who may use it. What cannot be faked is behavior. Run any venue through these four tests, from home, before any money moves. **One scam signal is enough to walk away.**

1. Does it breed its animals?

True sanctuaries do not intentionally breed—a rescue mission has no use for new captives. Breeding means the “sanctuary” needs a supply of babies: for petting, photos, and ticket sales.

- ✔ No—rescues only. **Sanctuary behavior.**
- ✘ Yes, or it’s unclear. **Scam signal.**

2. Can you touch or hold animals?

Genuine sanctuaries do not allow public contact—it stresses the animals and requires exactly the “manageability” that cruelty produces. If you can hug it, it is inventory.

- ✔ No contact allowed. **Sanctuary behavior.**
- ✘ Yes—photos included. **Scam signal.**

3. Are the animals’ origins documented and public?

A real rescue can tell you where every animal came from—the confiscation, the closed circus, the injury. Vagueness usually means the origin is the problem.

- ✔ Yes—each animal’s story. **Sanctuary behavior.**
- ✘ Vague or unclear. **Scam signal.**

4. Is it independently accredited?

Accreditation by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (or an equivalent body) means an outside auditor verified the standards. “Self-certified” means the sign certified the sign.

- ✔ Yes—verifiable. **Sanctuary behavior.**
- ✘ No, or “self-certified”. **Scam signal.**

However the sign reads—one scam signal, walk away. Your ticket funds the behavior. All four behaviors together are what a true sanctuary looks like: no breeding, no contact, documented origins, independent accreditation. And beyond the gates, the wild on the animal’s terms—a distance it controls, small groups, no feeding, baiting, or chasing. The reliable sign you have found the real thing is **inconvenience**: the early start, the long quiet wait, the sighting nobody can promise.

The four tests follow the standards and position statements of the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS); viewing rules pattern on NOAA’s marine wildlife guidelines. The interactive diagnostic—answer all four, watch the verdict—lives at ethicaltourism.com.

Your holiday is someone's workplace.

The entire product is designed around one illusion: that the welcome is effortless. It isn't. It is carried—by housekeepers, guides, porters, drivers—in a sector the ILO characterizes by low wages, informality, and weak protection. **Every booking chooses which employer wins.**

THE WORKFORCE

357M

jobs supported by travel & tourism in 2024—one in every ten on Earth. A trip is a payroll.



THE WOMEN

54%

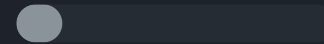
of that workforce is women—concentrated in the lowest-paid, least secure roles behind the welcome.



THE GAP

-14.7%

is what those women earn compared to the men working beside them—the discount nobody advertises.



Ask before you book

- Who **employs** the people I will meet—you directly, or a chain of subcontractors?
- Are guides and drivers paid a **living wage**—and can I see that commitment **in writing**?
- Did any worker pay a **recruitment fee**? The ILO is plain: recruitment costs belong to the employer—never the worker.
- Is the work **year-round**, or does the town's income vanish with the season?

The right to be asked

- The village photographed from the bus **was not asked**. The principle—free, prior, and informed consent—scales down to every encounter.
- A photo of a person needs a **yes that could have been no**; a child needs a parent's yes. When in doubt, the camera stays down.
- The neighborhood rebranded as a “slum experience” was asked, at best, **by proxy**—by whoever sold the tour.

Operators with fair answers give them quickly; those without them change the subject. Both responses tell you where your money should go—and travelers cannot audit a payroll, but they can move demand.

Sources: WTTC Economic Impact Research 2025 (357 million jobs in 2024; one in ten); UN Tourism Global Report on Women in Tourism, 2nd ed. (54%; 14.7% less); ILO sector characterization and Fair Recruitment Guidelines; UNDRIP.

Three questions. One email.

Two minutes to send, before any money moves. You are not auditing anyone—you are asking three things any fair operator answers proudly, and any unfair one cannot answer at all. The reply, or the absence of one, is the most honest review you will ever read.

SUBJECT: THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE I BOOK

Hello—I'm planning to book [the tour / a stay] with you for [dates]. Before I confirm, could you help me with three things:

- (1) Who **employs** the guides, drivers, and staff I'll meet—you directly, or subcontractors?*
- (2) Are they paid a **living wage**—and is that something you can confirm **in writing**?*
- (3) Does the itinerary include any **orphanage or "children's home" visit**, or any venue where I can **ride, hold, or pose with a wild animal**?*

Thank you!

What each line does

- 1** “...you directly, or subcontractors?”
The employment chain is where fair pay quietly dies. Naming it tells the operator you know that.
- 2** “...in writing”
turns hospitality into a commitment. A written wage stance outweighs any number of smiling-staff photos.
- 3** **The itinerary line**
strikes both red lines—children and captive wildlife—in one sentence, without a debate. A good operator answers it with pride.
- 4** **No question asks for a promise.**
Each asks for a fact—and facts are either supplied or dodged. The dodge is data too.

This template is yours—copy it, adapt it, translate it; no attribution needed. Keep the reply.

If the reply comes back specific and proud, you have found your operator. If it comes back vague—or changes the subject—you have learned something more important than any brochure could tell you, while there is still time to book elsewhere.

The three questions distill the ILO's fair-recruitment principles, the ECPAT-developed industry code on child protection, and the animal-contact rule documented across World Animal Protection's venue studies. The full method lives at ethicaltourism.com.

The whole code. One page.

Every rule here, distilled to a checklist. **Check off each box at every stage of the journey.**

Before you book

- Run the trip through the three questions—can it last, is it managed, is it right?
- Strike any stop whose draw is children— orphanage, “children’s home”, school visit
- Refuse anything you can ride, hug, or pose with— if you can touch it, it’s inventory
- Run the four sanctuary tests: breeding, contact, origins, accreditation
- Ask who employs, what they pay, and who paid the recruitment fee—in writing
- Prefer operators signed to the child-protection industry code (ECPAT)
- Send the email; judge the reply by its specifics

While you’re there

- The rule: no photo of a person—especially a child —without a yes that could have been no
- Keep the distance the animal controls; never feed, bait, or chase
- Buy direct from makers; don’t haggle a livelihood down to nothing
- Go where the culture happens on its own calendar—not on demand
- Leave wildlife souvenirs on the shelf—coral, shells, skins (CITES-listed)

When you find harm

- Walk away—and tell the operator, in writing, why the booking went elsewhere
- Review with specifics: the review that names the chains saves the next animal
- Redirect the money—reunification over orphanages, true sanctuaries over shows

The three questions

- 1 Can this last?**
The system test—what the practice depletes.
- 2 What are we doing about it?**
The management test—who owns the impact.
- 3 Is this right?**
The conscience test—the gate with the final say.

The five pillars

Human dignity · animal welfare · cultural integrity · economic justice · transparency.

Each rests on a real international instrument, not sentiment—and where a claim cannot be verified, the tiebreaker is precaution: the burden of proof belongs to the practice, not to its victims.

In their words

“Despite the best of intentions, the sad truth is that visiting and volunteering in orphanages drives an industry that separates children from their families.”—J. K. Rowling

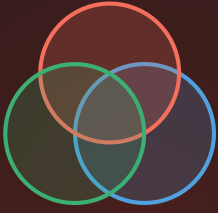
Would it survive being seen from the inside—by the worker, the community, the animal? If the answer needs the word “but”, it is a no.

Don't take our word. Take theirs.

A code that tells you to distrust labels had better not ask for trust itself. No claim here rests on our authority—every figure and rule traces to a primary source.

- › **Global Code of Ethics for Tourism** — UN Tourism (1999; UN recognition 2001)
- › **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** — United Nations (1948)
- › **Resolution A/RES/74/133 on the Rights of the Child** — UN General Assembly (2019)
- › **Children in institutions: the global numbers** — Lumos
- › **Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children** — The Lancet Group Commission (2020)
- › **With the Best Intentions: Residential Care in Cambodia** — UNICEF (2011)
- › **Modern Slavery Act & the orphanage-trafficking inquiry** — Parliament of Australia (2017–2018)
- › **Taken for a Ride** — World Animal Protection (2017)
- › **Behind the Smile** — World Animal Protection (2019)
- › **The Customer Isn't Always Right** (wildlife attractions study) — Moorhouse et al. (2015)
- › **Standards & accreditation** — Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries
- › **Hotels, catering and tourism sector profile; Fair Recruitment Guidelines** — International Labour Organization
- › **The Code: the industry code of conduct for child protection** — ECPAT
- › **Global Report on Women in Tourism, 2nd ed.** — UN Tourism (2019)
- › **Economic Impact Research** — World Travel & Tourism Council (2025)
- › **CITES: the convention on trade in endangered species** (1973)

This code is the ethical arm of a larger resource—ethicaltourism.com holds the paradox, the photo, the four tests, and the interactive gates, with every citation linked. Two companion sites carry the responsible and the inclusive lenses: responsibletourism.com and inclusivetourism.com.



Once a month, a letter from Crete

*“Ethical travel isn’t a feeling of kindness.
It’s the decision to look.”*

The code ends here. The looking doesn’t.

Once a month, I write a letter from my tiny mountain village on Crete—the field notes, the raw research, the case I’m still following, and the questions I haven’t answered yet. Everything that doesn’t fit in a code. Written for travelers who don’t buy their own good intentions. No noise. Free.

ethicaltourism.com/letter →

Share freely.

Steven spent more than a decade making documentaries in the places tourism forgets—filming alongside child laborers, fieldwork that is now held in the archives of the UN’s International Labour Organization. The child-protection pages behind this code were written by someone who has sat with the children that well-meaning money failed; the discipline on every page—walk the money backward, believe the evidence over the brochure—was learned there. He is completing an MSc in Responsible Tourism Management, holds GSTC certification, and earned his ICRT credentials under Professor Harold Goodwin, who pioneered the responsible tourism movement. On the harms this code documents he is a witness and a researcher, not a victim: it centers the affected, quotes them rather than speaking over them, and treats evidence—not intention—as its product. It is an approach he is actively building into practice with **CRETAN**®.