

**Climate Action Almanac**

# Flights of Fancy

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My nephew leans back in his chair, pushes his spoon around an empty ice cream bowl and lines up the next of his questions, which I'm beginning to think are explicitly aimed at exposing me as a fraud. I have just told him that, as a geography lecturer who teaches about the climate crisis, I don't think flying for holidays is okay.

"But if tourists stop flying to Corfu, what will all the people who rely on tourist jobs do?"

This is an after-dinner conversation that I hadn't had the courage to initiate myself. A twisted olive tree, its fruits scattered hard and wrinkled about the table, leans over us out of the inky-blue night sky, standing witness. I take a deep breath, trying to concoct a way of congratulating his lateral thinking, while also confidently expressing my disdain for frequent flights and the carbon-budget-blowing habits of affluent holiday-makers.

Like us. My position would've been more tenable had we—two branches of a Lithuanian-British family normally separated by a large chunk of Eastern Europe and two seas—not been holidaying together in Corfu, a small, mountainous island off the coast of western Greece. We had converged here via two budget-airline flights, ours originating in London and theirs in Vilnius, both arriving in Ioannis Kapodistrias Corfu International airport. That's 3,756 kilometres crossed in the time it takes to eke out two in-flight packs of nuts, a Snickers bar, and a warm can of Heineken, while trying to entertain my writhing twenty-month-old daughter, who isn't remotely interested in napping. I later work out that the return flights will have emitted approximately 0.8 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person, which is huge considering a 2050 global average target of just 0.7 tonnes per person for a chance of keeping climate warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.<sup>1</sup>



After touchdown, our air-conditioned Fiat Panda hire car takes us jerkily through unfamiliar streets in the dark while my daughter sleeps and my partner T and I fight to stay awake. I stroke my daughter's hand and try to summon a sense of excitement about the sights rushing by outside—an excitement, I recall, that once accompanied travel but which now eludes me. T is hunched and tense over the steering wheel, peering at his phone's navigation as the roads climb and wind. After forty minutes, we slow down and turn sharply left up a steep concrete drive, overhung by low branches lit from below by yellow lamps, with a two-story apartment beyond. We park and open the car doors to the sweet scent of oleander, and a rhythmic *hoot* carried on the warm air from somewhere over the treetops. The sound reminds me of winged worlds quite apart from airports and aeroplanes; it soothes me instantly. Familiar faces emerge, smiling. We embrace—it's been a year.

At first I was so bewildered by this profusion of life on our very doorstep that I could only move about the garden in a daze, watching now this creature, now that, constantly having my attention distracted by the flights of brilliant butterflies that drifted over the hedge.<sup>2</sup>

I should've been thrilled to visit Corfu. When I was about the same age as my nephew—nearly a teenager, navigating my way between embarrassment and curiosity—I read the British naturalist Gerald Durrell's account of his childhood in Corfu in the 1930s, a slim volume called *My Family and Other Animals*.<sup>3</sup> I was comforted and captivated by his descriptions of quirky family members and a romantic island thrumming with animal life. I envied how he would spend his days accompanied only by his dog, Roger, grubbing about in the undergrowth for hours observing the habits of earwigs and lizards, or lazing in shady groves watching tortoises sunbathe after emerging from their winter hibernation. I grew up in a grey-green English suburb, and the closest I usually got to wildlife was when it was nearly dead: in spring, I would scoop up crumpled fledglings from under the laurel bushes by the curbside and tuck them into shoeboxes with water and food, so that I might revive them, but also so that I could bask in the thrill of proximity to such fascinatingly nonhuman life. Durrell's description of Corfu as a land vibrating with the buzzing, humming, flitting, jumping, ambling, scratching, and pecking of life in so many forms was dazzling and seductive. I was scarcely aware then that over the fifty years between Durrell's childhood and mine, Corfu, and its wildlife, was already changing.



A month before we booked our flights, I'd spent a difficult week nursing my own feverish body and my daughter's, languishing on the sofa feeling as overcast as the autumnal weather outside. I cradled her with one arm and scrolled Twitter for the latest live updates from COP26 in Glasgow,<sup>4</sup> veering between angry retweets and emailing myself articles that might satiate my desperate desire to believe that I—and she, my snotty, dozing girl—existed in a world that might yet thrive, rather than die. I wrote in my diary that I was ill and that COP26 “really affected me,” having neither a free hand nor the energy to write more. But I can recall now the feeling of rising panic; I cried over a video call with my mother when I tried to explain that I was terrified about the world my daughter would grow up in, while the thought of the lives and life already lost settled like a stone in my chest.

The letdowns of COP26, and the release of three unequivocal Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports in the months immediately before and after, felt to me like a line in the sand. It was a “fuck this” moment in which I decided that I'd had enough. Enough of my own half measures: staying silent about the climate crisis with colleagues and friends and family in order to save face, deferring insulating our house,

finding reasons not to venture out for protests—again. Enough of kidding myself that using our diesel camper van is still kind of okay.

In the glare of these horrifying planetary prognoses—which were, unusually, momentarily unobscured by media fuzz—my usual excuses had nowhere to hide. I felt a frisson of excitement, too: that rare jolt of inspiration and clarity of vision to do bold things—quit my job, join a movement, give up the car—which needs to be grasped and acted on immediately, before the feeling subsides.



“They have suggested meeting in Corfu.”

It’s a couple of weeks after COP26, and T is reporting back after a morning phone call with his brother. Their Lithuanian sentences had danced back and forth too fast for my half-trained ears to catch. I’m tired, swamped by work and near-permanently overwhelmed by the enormities of becoming a parent. He knows what my reaction will be, and feels the same.

“Can’t we meet somewhere we can get to by train?”

“I suggested northern Spain—but it’s too expensive and everyone is craving some warmth.”

We usually travel to Lithuania every year, but this year it is agreed that trying to juggle a visit from us with work and school schedules is suboptimal, and so a joint holiday it is. I’m dismayed at my own tepid attempts at protest, especially so soon after COP26, but my exhaustion and desire not to be seen as the recalcitrant in-law manifests itself in passivity, and I am swept along in the currents of other people’s desires and decisions.

My most fervent arguments take place in my head. I tell myself that “care miles” are justified for meeting up with loved ones, that these infrequent flights pale in significance when compared to the habits of frequent flyers who ricochet across the planet with abandon. And the quality time we spend together will be worth it. Aviation only accounts for about four percent of global heating—surely there are bigger fish to fry! I lash back at myself almost immediately, calling bullshit and rattling through some inconvenient truths that, through my line of work, I know only too well: even taking one international flight puts me amongst the two to four percent of people who do so in any given year.<sup>5</sup> Aviation is one of the few industries that is very difficult to decarbonise (and carbon is only part of the problem, as nitrogen oxide and contrails from jet engines also produce warming). What’s more, because flying trends show no sign of abating,<sup>6</sup> this elite group of us are therefore on course to squander up to one-sixth of the world’s remaining heat budget (for staying below 1.5-2 degrees Celsius) over the next three decades.<sup>7</sup> Andreas Malm and Rikard Warlenius refer to this as

“colonisation of the atmosphere,” a situation in which a tiny minority continue to indulge in “luxury emissions,” dealing the world’s poorest a double whammy of climate impacts and diminished atmospheric space for “survival emissions”—those associated with meeting their most immediate and basic human needs.<sup>8</sup>

And still, despite knowing all of this, I put my internal feuds on mute and substitute my angst with a more straightforward feeling of guilt—until T buys the tickets and I feel worse, but at least can’t torment myself with the option of taking a stand any more.



Up on the hills, among the dark cypress and the heather, shoals of butterflies danced and twisted like wind-blown confetti, pausing now and then on a leaf to lay a salvo of eggs. The grasshoppers and locusts whirred like clockwork under my feet, and flew drunkenly across the heather, their wings shining in the sun.<sup>9</sup>

Once we arrive in Corfu, the late-June heat further suppresses my spirits. The pocket guidebook I purchased before we left (my last-ditch attempt to treat this like a normal holiday and not a criminal offence) has just a single sentence on climate change, on page one hundred and sixteen: “At any time outside mid-June to August it might rain, but global climate change has disrupted long-established weather patterns.” A small chart shows average June air temperatures to be twenty-two degrees Celsius, but for most of our days on the island the mercury rises above thirty. We don’t adapt well to the heat, traipsing down to the beach only in the mornings and evenings, and spending most of the day in the apartment with the aircon whirring. The locals tell us this is unusually hot weather. A chatty woman from the rental-car place says the summers are getting hotter, earlier, and so Corfiots are having to endure high temperatures for longer than ever. “I guess we just have to get used to it,” she says. I don’t ask what she thinks of the tourists flying in and out of Corfu all summer, no doubt providing her with income while simultaneously trashing the climate. She observes me struggling with my daughter and the car seat, and I joke about motherhood instead.

When I do venture out in the midday heat, I think about Gerald Durrell on this island almost one hundred years ago, and wonder how all the wildlife that he took such joy in—the rose beetles and tortoises and otters and sea cucumbers—are faring. I’m particularly fond of the swallows that chatter from the electricity cables and swoop and glide over the sea. In tavernas, owners wedge cardboard platforms under their little earthen cocoons in the rafters so that bird excrement doesn’t trouble the diners tucking into their tzatziki. I remember an article in *The Guardian*, just before we left, about baby swifts in Spain being cooked alive in their nests on the sides of buildings, because they were heating up like clay ovens in the unprecedented summer heat before their

inhabitants were old enough to fly out. I long for the innocence with which I imagine Durrell explored Corfu, without this constant climatological shadow of untimely and unjust death.

Most evenings, I find respite by sliding into the coastal waters and floating face-down with a snorkel. The sea is almost unreal in its blue-green, beautiful clarity. I enjoy a feeling of humility that I always get in the sea, out of my comfort zone, senses muffled. My heart beats faster as I pass a submerged boulder and fronds of seaweed lick at my skin. A shoal of slender silver fish bunches and expands, flashing this way and that. Larger fish eye me indifferently as they peck morsels off the sea bed through little puffs of sand. One day, I spot a large, brown octopus nestled amongst the rocks not far offshore, and report back to my family with childlike enthusiasm. Durrell must have felt like this every day here, each encounter gradually introducing him to the Corfiot animal world. I allow my octopus sighting to momentarily relieve my climate distress, convincing myself that marine life here is somehow miraculously escaping harm.

There's not much data on how wildlife on Corfu has changed since Durrell spent his days here, roaming the hillsides surrounded by clouds of crane flies and swimming with porpoises in sheltered moonlit bays. On one sweltering trip to the ruins of an inland village that has become a tourist attraction, I pick up a leaflet from the Corfu Butterfly Conservation project. It refers to a scientific review of insect life worldwide, which found that "more than 40% of insect species are declining and a third are endangered." The fate of Corfu's own insect populations is as yet unknown, something that the Butterfly Project aims to rectify through surveys and citizen science. What is clear, though, is that the pressures of tourism, habitat loss, and climate change—forces that wouldn't have been in Durrell's vocabulary back then—are expected to have taken their toll.

Before his death, Durrell was dismayed by Corfu's burgeoning tourist industry,<sup>10</sup> a feeling no doubt made worse because it was propelled, in part, by his own books. In June 2022 alone, despite the impacts of COVID-19, 4,240 flights landed in Corfu's main airport, predominantly from the UK and Germany.<sup>11</sup> Turning once more to my clunky arithmetic, assuming that each flight emits on average about six tonnes of carbon dioxide, that equates to roughly 25,000 tonnes emitted by inbound flights in one month alone. This is less than what the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich's superyachts emit each year (or did, before they were sanctioned),<sup>12</sup> but it's still greenhouse gas that our atmosphere cannot afford.

Over the next two decades, it's possible that prolonged summer temperatures will extend the tourist season in Corfu, with late spring and early autumn absorbing travellers repelled by unbearably hot temperatures (over 35 degrees Celsius) in July and August. But I find it difficult to imagine what Corfu will look like in twenty years if emissions continue unabated. At 2 degrees Celsius of warming by mid-century, the combined devastations of sea-level rise, freshwater droughts and flooding, wildfires, and loss of plant and animal life (not to mention the associated social degradation and unrest) makes the notion of tourism sound fanciful at best. Perhaps if greenhouse gases weren't invisible and odourless, their mismanagement would be met with the same outrage as Corfu's famously overflowing bins, whose stench simmers over the boiling tarmac on almost every street corner. These sad heaps are a result of the island's existing landfill being full to the brink (and understandable

local opposition to a new one), and tourists each summer buying and throwing away holiday paraphernalia (from sun lotion to inflatable crocodiles) that isn't compatible with their carry-on luggage.



The owls appeared now, drifting from tree to tree as silently as flakes of soot, hooting in astonishment as the moon rose higher and higher, turning to pink, then gold, and finally riding in a nest of stars, like a silver bubble.<sup>13</sup>

Google informs me that the plaintive calls emanating from the treetops each night are made by the Eurasian Scops Owl, a small bird with large amber eyes that feeds on insects and has plumage that is well-camouflaged amongst tree trunks. Durrell (in one of his more unethical moves) once took a young one from its nest and called it Ulysses. In Ancient Greek mythology, owls were associated with wisdom and protection. I prefer this to Roman mythology, which associated their cries with imminent death.<sup>14</sup> On the evening that my nephew is quizzing me about climate change under the olive tree, the owls haven't yet started their nightly communication, but the mosquitoes—undeterred by the coil of toxic chemicals smouldering under the table—whine periodically around our ears.

“So, natural disasters, good or bad?”

My confusion visible, he continues: “I mean, obviously they are bad, but wouldn't a smaller population at least be good for the planet?”

He's only twelve, and repeating tropes he must have heard elsewhere; I mustn't lose my temper and shout like I do when similarly Malthusian views are aired on the radio back home. I grope at some facts and figures about consumption inequality—like the owners of superyachts,<sup>15</sup> or that close to 90 percent of the world's population never fly<sup>16</sup>—that I hope will dispatch his disturbing proposition, but the enormity of the gulf between my understanding of the problem and his overwhelms me like a fog. As I rack my brain for a calm and considered response about how population size is not the problem, I hear other family members chime in about electric cars and Elon Musk saving the world. Please little owls, send me wisdom.



First of all there were just two or three green specks, sliding smoothly through the trees, winking regularly. But gradually more and more appeared, until parts of the olive-grove were lit with a weird green glow. Never had we seen so many fireflies congregated in one spot...<sup>17</sup>

We're back at the airport, heading home. My daughter is removing her clothes in an act of rebellion against the heat, while we do everything we can to persuade her to keep at least some of them on. She compromises with a nappy and her red Crocs, and I scrape together our remaining euros to buy a bottle of water because there is nowhere to refill our own. The departures hall is thronging with travellers: teenagers zoning out through their earbuds; families coaxing infants and buggies round cordoned lanes to the check-in; sun hats swinging redundantly from people's carry-ons while inflatable pillows and iPads for the flight emerge to take their place.

It amazes me how willing people seem to be to put themselves through the hellfire of air travel and airports. Perhaps, like me, they're not willing at all, just swept up in tide of social expectations, or impossible price comparisons and alluring advertisements. But flying is an unpleasant experience that is certainly even more unpleasant for everyone on the ground. The small global minority of us that fly use a mode of transport that "free-rides" at the expense of the well-being of most people, nature, and communities. The Sweden-born social movement *flygskam* (flight shame) is aptly named. On Corfu, my shame was a constant companion. I couldn't escape the feeling that my fleeting presence, which left emissions and rubbish and slicks of sun cream in emerald waters in its wake, was a careless blunder into the lives of people, plants, and animals for whom the island is home. The insatiable pursuit of destinations that tourist industries stoke is an obstacle to ensuring that our ultimate destination, the shared planet we call home, remains liveable.<sup>18</sup> It occurs to me, not for the first time, that my loved ones aren't a good reason to fly—they ought to be a motivation to avoid it.

What enchanted me most about Durrell's portrayal of life in Corfu was not only the wonderful array of creatures, but his relationships with them. His patient observations and interactions with beguiling animals led to greater understanding, and chance meetings with colourful human characters would inevitably result in the raucous sharing of food, laughter, and language. Air travel often robs us of these intimate experiences with places and people because it prioritises speed over relationships; our feet barely touch the hot sand before it's time to take off again. But if we're to resist the pull of an industry that propels ever more of us into the skies, and extract ourselves from what Stephanie LeMenager calls "petrocultures"<sup>19</sup>—lifestyles so saturated in fossil fuels that we would be wading in the stuff if it wasn't contained in pipes and power stations—we need better imaginations, policies, and infrastructures to help us stay grounded.

That could mean travel that takes longer and is less frequent, but is more enriching and enjoyable: trips during which we slow our bodies down, making time for the kinds of encounters that only arise by travelling through rather than over, by lingering when we arrive. I imagine myself travelling like Durrell, who meandered lazily through the olive groves and cypress stands, delighting in whatever crossed his path. But to entertain such thoughts is also a symptom of my own privilege, of having even occasional access to the time and financial security needed to travel slowly. Seen like this, globe-trotting—even slowly—seems extravagant. A future of



slow travel would depend upon people enjoying a certain level of social security and well-being (think flexible work and increased leisure time), but perhaps if our societies provided that, we might feel a reduced need to take holidays at all. What if we were able to delight in the places and people closer to home instead, taking notice rather than taking flight?



As we file through to our gate, my daughter gears up for a tantrum and I feel a headache setting in. Bright light streams in through the large windows. Beyond the runway and the refuelling planes glinting in the sun, I can make out hazy hills and an estuary. I'm gloomy about my reluctant pilgrimage to Durrell's wonderland, but want to believe that some vestiges of what he described remain, or may yet be helped back to life. I try to imagine a Corfu in a twenty years' time whose residents no longer have to rely on the dubious gifts of tourism because they have been assisted, by the Greek government, to diversify into other areas: agroecological farming, renewable energy, habitat restoration, and remote working, for example.

Perhaps manageable numbers of tourists arrive by boat from the Greek, Albanian, and Italian mainland ports (which are well-connected by the "Euro Night Sprinter" sleeper train network that was completed in 2030),<sup>20</sup> and they stay for longer. Visitors pay a modest fee which helps fund a network of free electric buses and taxis around the island. E-bikes have replaced the noisy scooters, and Fiat Pandas no longer hurtle along the winding roads. With single-use plastics and beach regalia banned or available only to hire, the bins aren't overflowing. The island's remaining flora and fauna have a chance to catch their breath and recover or adapt, now that their habitats are protected by international law, and global warming has been halted at 1.7 degrees Celsius by herculean efforts over the past two decades. Looking up, a traveller on a rare, long vacation with her family discovers that butterflies and birds, not planes, criss-cross the skies.



## Footnotes

1. Calculations based "Carbon Calculator," Carbon Footprint Ltd., <https://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx>. ↵
2. Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, 1956), 36. ↵

3. Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, 1956). ↵
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9. Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*, 141. ↵
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16. Gössling and Humpe, “The Global Scale, Distribution and Growth of Aviation.” ↵

17. Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*, 155. ↵
18. With thanks to this resource for some of these ideas about ways to reframe aviation: “Chapter 3: Tracks Toward a Fairer Planet,” Common Destination, Stay Grounded, <https://reframeaviation.stay-grounded.org/chapter-3>. ↵
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