



Ethical Travel—What it Means, and Where to Go

By Jeff Greenwald & Kiran Auerbach

During the past 20 years, phrases like “ecotravel” and “ethical travel” have entered the globetrotter’s lexicon. It’s a good thing; it shows that travelers are becoming more savvy about the choices they make, and the impact their travels might have on the countries and communities they visit. Ecotravel is the more familiar term; but it’s been so abused and co-opted that it’s practically stripped of meaning. Even huge luxury hotels and cruise ships now tout bottom-line imperatives like “gray water” recycling and towel reuse as evidence of their commitment to ecotourism.

Ethical travel is a more recent concept, and a much more demanding one. It fulfills both individual and collective ideals: a traveler experiences environmental beauty and cultural immersion while actually *contributing* to the ecological preservation and social development of their host country. This brand of travel combines ecotourism with broader environmental and social issues. It can even be used as an economic carrot, to support and reward countries pursuing high standards in these areas. It’s also more demanding of service providers; hotels and carriers can’t simply tweak a few ecopolicies, and award themselves gold stars. For a country to be considered a good ethical travel candidate, the government must demonstrate a strong commitment not just to the environment, but to the well-being of its population as well.

Ethical Traveler (www.ethicaltraveler.org) and Stanford University recently conducted a study to learn where Americans tend to travel in the developing world, and how this compares with the most environmentally and social progressive places to actually spend our tourism dollars. The results were surprising—and instructive.

Our goal was to formulate a list of the “Best Ethical Travel Destinations,” specifically geared to outbound American leisure travelers. The idea was not just

to come up with a list of countries, but to chose places that Americans would actually *want* to visit.

Most Popular Developing World Destinations
Bahamas
Brazil
China
Costa Rica
Dominican Republic
India
Jamaica
Mexico
Philippines
South Korea
Taiwan
Thailand
Trinidad and Tobago

Here, alphabetically, are the most popular developing-country destinations for American tourists:

After compiling this data from the US Department of Commerce, we took a look at the rest of the developing world, including two continents not on the list: Africa and Europe (Europe, *the* most popular destination for American travelers, is not thought of as “developing,” but several of the new Eastern European nations do fit that description).

To determine “ethicalness,” we investigated three categories: ecotourism practices, environmental standards, and social development indicators. Our research was conducted at Stanford, using information from a variety of

national and international sources.

Ecotourism

Over the past 20 years, the meaning of ecotourism has evolved. But even though many organizations have different definitions, key principles remain universal: conservation of the natural environment, low visitor impact, and benefit to the local population.

Since ecotourism is such an attractive policy, many governments loudly profess their commitment towards the industry. As a result, it’s often difficult to separate spin from reality. Still, credible agencies like The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) have singled out countries with strong commitments

to preservation. Belize (for its Mayan sites), Brazil (national parks), Ecuador (Galapagos Islands and Amazonian rainforest), Kenya (wildlife reserves), Nepal (mountain trekking), Peru (bird watching), and South Africa (game and nature reserves) all make the grade.

The best-known ecotourism destinations are probably Costa Rica and Bhutan. With a vibrant tourism industry that centers around its cloud forests, turtles, and volcanoes, Costa Rica has served as an inspiration for other Latin American countries, such as Ecuador, Peru, and Honduras. Bhutan, though, is the “poster child” for ecotourism. Their entire tourism industry is based on sustainability, and an effort to attract “low volume, high quality” visitors willing to pay a handsome fee for the privilege of visiting the pristine Himalayan kingdom.

Because of its direct link between the local environment and population, ecotourism was the single most important factor we used in determining “ethicalness.” But even countries with strong ecotourism values are sometimes careless of broader human rights issues. That’s why it’s also crucial to examine the environmental and social progress of a country.

Environmental Protection

Our environmental evaluation took into account six factors: Carbon dioxide emissions, energy efficiency, percentage of protected land, percentage of mammals under threat, the environmental sustainability index, and the number of major international environmental treaties ratified. This was an attempt to learn how serious, ecotourism industry aside, a country is in protecting its environment.

Seven countries earned very high environmental ratings: Argentina, Bhutan, Brazil, Costa Rica, Peru, Sri Lanka, and Uruguay. All boast low CO2 emissions, steady progress in energy efficiency, and a policy of signing treaties designed to protect the Earth’s ecosphere.

Tourist favorites that came out on the negative side included Kenya, with extremely poor energy efficiency, as well as Trinidad and Tobago. Ironically, the five countries with the highest percentage of threatened wildlife (above 20%) also rank among the most popular US travel destinations: The Dominican Republic, Jamaica, India, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Social Development

While it's true that ecotourism benefits the local population, it's usually a *very* local population. The inhabitants of a tract of rainforest may thrive from the sale of creams made from their plant extracts, but this doesn't do much for people in the urban centers—or even the neighboring tribes. Thus, ethical travel has to include a country's "social intelligence," to determine how committed the government is to its entire citizenry.

Social development was the broadest of our three categories, with seven factors to consider. We put income distribution, health, and education under the microscope, using reports from the UN and the WHO, among others. But we also took into account crime, government corruption, and the status of women. Finally, as a gnomon of ongoing progress, we looked at how many international human rights *and* international labor rights treaties each country had ratified.

The results were sometimes counter-intuitive. We found that Sri Lanka, Nepal, Croatia, and Slovenia all relatively low levels of inequality—while South Africa, Panama, and El Salvador have high disparities.

Healthwise, the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Barbados, Sri Lanka, and Uruguay took highest rankings (though both India and China have made big improvements in this area). Kenya was again a disappointment; its mortality rate for children under five actually *increased* between 1990 and 2003. In education, Barbados, South Korea, Slovenia, and Uruguay excel, as does Argentina. Women's status is strong in Jamaica, Mexico, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Uruguay. It's poorest in Egypt, India, and Nepal.

The worst commitment to human and labor rights was measured in Thailand (which also has the highest government corruption index)—and, unexpectedly,

Bhutan. The Kingdom of Bhutan has failed to ratify five human rights treaties, and has not approved a single international labor rights convention.

Best Ethical Travel Destinations
Argentina
Barbados
Belize
Brazil
Costa Rica
Croatia
Ecuador
Kenya
Peru
Slovenia
Sri Lanka
South Africa
Uruguay

The most provocative results of the social category, in fact are the abysmally low rankings of Bhutan, especially in light of its forward-looking ecotourism practices. On the other hand, high social development was a crowning achievement for Argentina, Barbados, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, and Uruguay.

Conclusion

Our final list of ethical destinations in the developing world was compiled with care, and should serve as a practical guide for American tourists looking for vacations that are both self-rewarding, and supportive of the people and environments we visit.

Our most notable and unexpected result is that Latin America emerges as the leader in ethical travel.

While certain of our recommended destinations are already popular (Brazil, Costa Rica, and Peru), other top countries (Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Ecuador, and Uruguay) also have much to offer American tourists. Argentina has a vast array of natural wonders: from glaciers in the Andes to pre-Columbian villages in the North. Belize hosts Mayan ruins, as well as a lush rainforest. Uruguay, not as well known, contains spectacular beaches as well as trekking in the interior.

Croatia's beautiful beaches make it a viable alternative to Italy, France, or Greece. Slovenia is also a great destination, with impressive underground caves, thermal springs, alpine skiing, and nature trails.

Sri Lanka, recovering from the Indian Ocean tsunami, is outdoing India in both environmental and social development standards. And though South Africa and Kenya lag a bit in both environmental and certain social measures, good ecotourism values are their redemption. We include these countries as a nod to their valiant strides in ecotourism, and in the hope that American travelers will help support a region that the international community habitually neglects.

Ethical travel to developing countries offers a positive, symbiotic exchange between travelers and their destination. By “voting with our wings,” tourists give their economic support to such societies, raise the standard of living for the population, and reinforce programs that protect the environment. The reward we receive is also worthwhile: a memorable vacation, and the realization that, although the world is getting smaller, some parts of it are actually getting better.

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