



The World's Best Ethical Travel Destinations
© 2010 by Jeff Greenwald & Christy Hoover / EthicalTraveler.org

During the past decade, “Ethical Travel” has become an increasingly important value. It’s an easy term to define. Ethical travel is mindful travel: an awareness of our impact and responsibilities as we explore the world. Travel has become one of the planet’s biggest industries – on par with oil – and our economic power as travelers is enormous. Which countries should we visit? Where should we spend our money when we get there? How do our interactions with our hosts promote international goodwill and cross-cultural understanding? The way we travel has a measurable impact on the environment, human rights, and the way our home country is viewed by people in other lands.

While Ethical Traveler views all travel as a potentially positive act, we like to see people step off the beaten path. The places on our annual list may not be as popular as Thailand or Italy, but they abound in natural wonders and fascinating culture. And they’re serious about preserving their natural assets, promoting mindful travel, and building an economy in which local communities reap the benefits of tourist revenue. Travel to these countries encourages such efforts, and inspires neighboring countries to support these values as well.

Clearly, the idea of naming 10 “best” countries has its perils. No country on Earth is perfect. Some are strong in some areas, and weaker in others. Some do many things well, but fall dramatically short in one critical area. As the list gets shorter, the final choices get harder. It’s as difficult as recommending dishes in a great restaurant. Everything is delicious; but these are the specials.

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2009/2010 list of “The World's Best Ethical Travel Destinations.” The winners, in

alphabetical order, are: **Argentina, Belize, Chile, Ghana, Lithuania, Namibia, Poland, Seychelles, South Africa and Suriname.**

How the List is Created

Every year Ethical Traveler conducts a study of the world's developing nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. We begin our research by focusing on three general categories: Environmental Protection, Social Welfare, and Human Rights.

For each of these categories, we look at information past and present so that we may understand not only the current state of a country, but its forward path. This helps us select countries that are actively improving the state of their people and environment. Please note – this report is not an exhaustive explanation of our methodology, but a brief and general view of how we conduct and verify our research. An appendix listing our sources will be sent upon request.

Environmental Protection: In evaluating each country's level of responsible environmental protection, we looked at clear indicators of environmental health, preservation of resources, and cultivation of beneficial, sustainable practices. Our main resource is the Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (SEDAC) Environmental Performance Index, a joint initiative between the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy and Columbia University's Center for International Earth Science Information Network. The index uses indicators focused on (i) reducing environmental stresses on human health and (ii) promoting ecosystem vitality and sound natural resource management, allowing us to measure these countries against 25 separate indicators of environmental responsibility. Lithuania scored particularly well, with a very high level of overall environmental health, air and water quality, and sustainable forestry practices. Also noteworthy was

Chile, with outstanding air quality, conservation practices and sustainable land management.

Notable environmental protection measures can also be seen in Argentina, where a commitment was recently made towards zero net deforestation, including responsible land management plans and conservation efforts for more than a million hectares of the Atlantic Forest. The country is also a world leader in setting voluntary greenhouse gas targets.

Other impressive efforts are being demonstrated in the Seychelles, now considered a world leader in sustainable tourism. The country holds a record for the highest percentage of land under natural conservation—nearly 50% of the total land area of the Republic of Seychelles.

Social Welfare: Another critical point we consider is the social welfare of each country's citizens and visitors. Quantifying this is not a straightforward task. In order to gain the clearest picture of the situation, we combine well-respected resources with our own country-by-country research.

One strong indicator of social welfare is the mortality rate of young children. To understand mortality rates past and present, we researched statistics provided by UNICEF. Lithuania and Poland had the lowest rates of infant mortality of our Top 10 countries. To measure the civil liberties enjoyed by citizens of each country, we used the Freedom in the World 2009 Report from Freedom House. Chile and Lithuania stood out in this ranking, with Poland also receiving the highest possible score.

To gauge other important issues such as access to safe drinking water, sustainable water management, responsible sanitation practices, and agricultural management, we referred to the 2009 Human Development Report, compiled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Poland was the highest ranked Ethical Destinations country on this index.

This year, we also factored in research by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which evaluates countries using 17 indicators. In the area of ‘Ruling Justly’, Namibia and Ghana were very highly rated.

Human Rights: A number of sources were used to evaluate each country’s human rights record. Respected sources like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and Freedom House were consulted to understand the challenges each nation has to address. Freedom House gave Belize, Chile, Ghana, Lithuania, and Poland the highest possible rating in political rights. Reporters Without Borders found Lithuania to have a very high level of Freedom of the Press, with South Africa close behind. Every country has human rights issues—but it was important for us to see efforts being made towards improving known situations and the preservation of basic human rights for all.

There is more to making our list, of course, than excelling in categories. Each of the countries selected as a Best Ethical Destination also boasts wonderful opportunities for the traveler – opportunities to experience nature at its most pristine, and to interact with local people and cultures in a meaningful, mutually enlightening way.

General Trends

The global economic downturn has inevitably hindered efforts towards sustainability, responsible tourism, and environmental stewardship, even in highly developed countries. Progress in these very important areas tends to decline in times of economic hardship. Given that developing countries with a strong reliance on the tourism sector have been particularly hard hit, we have seen a slowing of progress almost across the board.

Notably, not a single Asian country made it to the Top 10. Irresponsible development, human rights abuses, and a lack of strong environmental policy kept them all off the list again this year. Perhaps surprisingly,

though, four African countries — three on the mainland, and one island republic -- made the final list. We believe this bodes well for the future of these nations and, perhaps, for the African continent.

Ghana joins our 2010 list due to an impressive commitment to genuine democracy, as well as a growing culture of sustainability, environmental consciousness and grassroots efforts towards responsibly improving Ghana for Ghanaians and tourists alike.

We're also excited to have an additional South American country, Suriname, appear on the list due to its unspoiled rainforest biodiversity and sincere efforts towards ecotourism and environmental preservation.

Certain countries that made our previous *Ethical Destinations* list were omitted this time around. In 2008, we strongly encouraged travelers to bring their commerce to Costa Rica – a country top rated by many important indicators. Unfortunately, World Vision now considers Costa Rica among the world's most notorious destinations for sexual predators, with an unusually large number of sex tourism venues in operation. According to Casa Alianza, more than 3,000 girls and young women work in San Jose's 300 brothels. Now rivaling Thailand and the Philippines as the world's leading sex tourism destination, Costa Rica is credited with having the region's largest child prostitution problem and has thus been flagged by INTERPOL, as the country is fast becoming the hemispheric capital of sex tourism. It is for this reason that we were unable to recommend Costa Rica as an Ethical Destination.

Bolivia and Bulgaria were on our 2008 list, but were also removed from this year's list due to unusually high levels of child trafficking and/or corruption. According to the 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report, the governments of Bolivia and Bulgaria do not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, and the United Nations lists Bulgaria among the 11 worst countries in the world for sourcing children for sex trafficking.

Nicaragua was removed from our list because of the country's 2008 municipal elections, which were widely denounced as fraudulent. The once admirable government also has a worsening record on human rights, and recently curtailed freedoms of speech and the press. We remove Nicaragua with regret, as the country has created many initiatives to help local communities benefit from tourism, and is taking strong steps to protect and restore its tropical forests.

Two of last year's recommendations – Croatia and Estonia – are no longer considered developing nations, as both are now classified as 'High Income Economies' by the World Bank, and as such were not under consideration for this year's list.

Travelers are often surprised that Bhutan is not one of our Top Ethical Destinations. Despite its sublime natural beauty and extraordinary commitment to preserving the environment, the highly nationalistic kingdom is still plagued by human rights issues. These concerns include the fate of more than 100,000 Bhutanese of Nepalese descent, who were expelled from country in the early 1990s and still live in refugee camps along the Bhutan/West Bengal/Nepal border.

Conclusions

None of the countries on this year's Ethical Destinations list is perfect, and four countries must include special caveats. In Belize, Namibia and Seychelles, homosexuality remains criminalized. Normally this is a deal-breaker for us, but the laws do not appear to be zealously enforced. We sincerely hope that our vote of confidence will persuade these country's leaders to repeal these backward laws. South Africa received high marks for supporting eco-friendly, community-based tourism ventures, as well as for sustainable coastal development and environmental management. The country, however, has a huge rich/poor gap, and a high crime rate persists.

Travelers should be mindful of the dangers, and stay informed about which areas to avoid.

We sincerely hope that travelers will refer to this list when planning their 2010 journeys. By visiting the countries mentioned here, we “vote with our wings”—sending a signal that travelers are aware of where their money is going, and willing to support nations that care about the environment, human rights, and the global community.

To learn more about Ethical Traveler—and to join our alliance of members from more than 60 countries—please visit our website at www.ethicaltraveler.org