

The Developing World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations: 2012

by Jeff Greenwald, Christy Hoover and Natalie Lefevre / © 2011 by EthicalTraveler.org

Looking back from a few decades in the future, 2011 may seem like a turning point in social history. This was the year when “people power” became a global phenomenon: from the Arab Spring to the reforms in Burma; from the Occupy movements in North America to the grassroots fight against female circumcision in Africa. In China, thousands of citizens tweeted their solidarity with activist artist Ai Weiwei, while bloggers from Havana to Moscow shared their belief in freedom of expression and social justice.

There are many ways to deliver a message and take a stand for human rights and the health of our planet. Social networks are critical – but travel is also a powerful communicating tool. Travel and tourism are among the planet's driving economic forces, and every journey we take makes a statement about our priorities and commitment to change. (Even the choice to fly must be weighed carefully, as jet aircraft release an astonishing amount of carbon dioxide).

Ethical Traveler believes that mindful travel is a net positive for the planet. By choosing our destinations well and remembering our role as citizen diplomats, we can create international goodwill and help change the world for the better.

Every year, Ethical Traveler reviews the policies and practices of all the nations in the developing world. We then select the ten that are doing the best job of promoting human rights, preserving their environment, and creating a sustainable, community-based tourism industry. By visiting these destinations, we use our economic power – our travel dollars – to support these countries.

We urge you to explore these ethical destinations, and enjoy the wonderful sights, cultures and activities they offer.

Our best efforts go into creating this list, but remember: No country is perfect. All have their shortcomings. These ten, however, have made a determined effort to “do the right thing” in the many areas we take into consideration.

Please note that Ethical Traveler is an all-volunteer non-profit organization, and a project of the Earth Island Institute. No money or donations of any kind were solicited from any countries, governments or individuals in the creation of this list.

The Winners

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2012 list of *The Developing World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations*. The winners (**in alphabetical order, not in order of merit**) are:

- **Argentina ***
- **The Bahamas**
- **Chile ***
- **Costa Rica ***
- **Dominica ***
- **Latvia ***
- **Mauritius**
- **Palau ***
- **Serbia**
- **Uruguay ***

* also appeared on our 2011 list.

How the List is Created

Every year Ethical Traveler conducts a study of developing nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, to identify the best tourism destinations among them. 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 understand not only the current state of a country, but how it has

changed over time. This helps us select countries that are actively improving the state of their people, government, and environment.

In the first phase of our process, we consider country scores from a variety of databases related to one of the three categories, using information from sources like Freedom House, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the World Bank. After identifying the top performers, we turn to detailed case research, focusing on actions governments have taken over the year to improve (or in some cases, weaken) practices and circumstances in the countries.

Please note that 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. We also understand that no country, particularly those facing significant economic limitations, is faultless; our goal is to encourage the behaviors we see as creating a safer and more sustainable world.

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 (EPI), 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.

Latin America countries continue to be top scorers in environmental protection. Costa Rica scored exceedingly high in the Environmental Policy Index (EPI), the only developing country—and indeed one of only three countries in the world—to make it into the top “100-85” scorer category. Chile also scored high, particularly in sustainable fishery and forestry. Dominica is working on an impressive renewable energy policy, with plans to be carbon-negative by 2020.

Another notable environmental success is Serbia, which is developing five new hydropower plants, signed a historic declaration to establish a trans-boundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to protect nature and wildlife along the Mura, Drava and Danube rivers, and signed the Protocol on Sustainable Forest Management - protecting Europe's largest areas of old growth forests outside of Russia. The European Commission has awarded five sites throughout Latvia the EDEN Award for sustainable tourism. In September, the World Health Organization reported that Mauritius has the second best air quality in the world. Also in 2011, the Bahamas made the important step of banning shark fishing - protecting one of the most rich and diverse shark populations in the world. We also applaud Argentina for hosting Argentina y Ambiente 2012 – an international congress aimed at addressing some of the world's most challenging environmental issues. Palau exhibits such enthusiasm for conservation efforts, it was chosen as a pilot for The Nature Conservancy's Transforming Coral Reef Conservation program. Uruguay offers its citizens excellent water quality and forestry protection.

The Republic of Namibia is often cited as the most environmentally progressive of all African countries. However, the continued annual slaughter of fur seals is unacceptable, and prevents us from including Namibia on the list. Ethical Traveler appeals to the Namibian government to end this massacre, which traumatizes local families engaged in the slaughter and profits only a few individuals.

Barbados was included in last year's list, when we applauded its efforts to organize the Caribbean Green Economic Conference. A year later, however, we conclude that Barbados lacks genuine environmental will; the government has failed to implement its own ambitious laws. We will review Barbados again next year to see if they have moved forward with its environmental agenda.

The Pacific island of Tuvalu deserves a special mention. Tuvalu is a strong campaigner against climate change, and plans the world's first zero carbon output by 2020. It also respects the social and human rights of its citizens. This good record, in combination with its natural beauty, would make Tuvalu a good candidate for our list. However, Tuvalu's acute shortage of drinking water—which must be imported from abroad—makes tourism to this beautiful island difficult to endorse.

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 research.

UNICEF scores on child mortality rates are one indicator of social welfare. In this category, Serbia and Latvia scored particularly high. To gauge issues such as access to safe drinking water, sustainable water management, responsible sanitation practices, and agricultural management, we considered the 2011 Human Development Report, compiled by the UN Development Program (UNDP). The Bahamas were the highest ranked Ethical Destination country on the index this year, followed by Chile. Mauritius received its highest score to date - placing it far above the regional average, significantly above the world average, and nearly in the category of 'high human development'. Argentina received the rating of 'very high human development' and continues to rise in rank annually. Costa Rica adopted a groundbreaking gender equality policy, allowing women more social protection, economic autonomy and political participation. Dominica signed an important UN statement defending LGBTQ rights this year – the only Eastern Caribbean country to do so. In Palau, education is free and mandatory through grade twelve, with support services available for those who do not graduate.

Uruguay has made notable strides in the areas of infant mortality, malnutrition and vaccination in children under 5 and also announced it will invest US \$150M to re-settle thousands of people currently living in Montevideo's hazardous shanty towns.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation also offers information on such aspects of social welfare as immunization rates, girls' access to primary education and health expenditure. That none of the MCC partner countries—typically some of the poorest in the world—actually made it on to the Ethical Destinations list this year points to a deep connection between economic and social health.

Human Rights

To evaluate countries' 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. Every country has human rights issues, but it was important for us to see efforts made towards improving known situations and the preservation of basic human rights for all.

We were thrilled by the news of Argentina's senate passing a law legalizing same-sex marriage – the first Latin American country to do so, and an important development in human rights. The Bahamas, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominica, Palau and Uruguay received the highest possible scores from Freedom House in the categories of Political Rights and Civil Liberties and received the highest Press Freedom score of all Ethical Destinations countries. Freedom House also notes high levels of academic freedom and freedom of assembly in Latvia. Serbia arrested two notorious war criminals this year – Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic - a laudable development in human rights.

Mauritius is the only country on the Ethical Destinations list to reach Tier 1 of the 2011 U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons report. All other countries were listed as Tier 2 (a source, transit or destination country making significant efforts to improve) or Tier 2 Watch List (a source, transit or destination country that has not shown significant improvement).

Several countries that made our short list of 20 countries were excluded from the Top 10 specifically because of their homophobic laws.

Although some of our top countries still have anti-gay statutes on the books, these laws are not enforced. In Ghana, Belize and Guyana, however—three countries with enormous travel appeal and impressive environmental records—stringent enforcement does take place. In Ghana, for example, president John Atta Mills refused to legalize homosexuality in November 2011—even after the United Kingdom threatened to cut foreign aid to the country. The same month, police arrested three men near Accra for allegedly engaging in homosexual acts. Both Belize and Guyana actively criminalize homosexuality as well. This is a particular shame for Guyana, which is doing so much to protect its rainforest and provide ecotourism opportunities to its indigenous Amerindian tribes. Grenada rarely enforces its anti-gay laws; this year, unfortunately, there was a widely publicized arrest.

We hope to welcome some of these countries onto our Best Ethical Destinations list once they have decriminalized homosexuality, and provided legal protections for citizens of all sexual orientations.

Micronesia and Hungary were disqualified this year because of human rights issues. Micronesia, to its shame, refuses to take action against its growing problem with human trafficking. Hungary was ruled out in light of the current administration's severely repressive policies—such as the new media law that is threatening the freedom of speech and of peaceful assembly, taking the country backwards despite the wishes of the people of Hungary.

Please note that Poland and Lithuania have also disappeared from our list. This is because of a positive development: Both are now considered developed countries. For the same reason, Latvia and Serbia (which are only listed as 'developing' by the IMF) may no longer be eligible for our list in 2013.

There is more to making our list, of course, than excelling in categories. Each of the countries selected as a Best Ethical Destination also offers the opportunity to experience unspoiled natural beauty, and to interact with local people and cultures in a meaningful, mutually enriching way.

Islands: A General Trend

It's worth noting that island states are again a strong presence in this year's Top 10 list. These include the Bahamas, Dominica, Mauritius and Palau. One reason for this is their strong environmental efforts. These states understand that islands will be very severely impacted by climate change, and are therefore taking the vanguard in progressive environmental policies.

Addendum: Destinations of Interest

This year, we're introducing a new element into our Ethical Destinations report. Along with the 10 countries selected for their commitment to social justice and sustainable environmental practices, we'd like to suggest two other "Destinations of Interest."

Though these two countries are not yet considered ethical destinations, open-minded travelers can gain much by visiting them. We believe it's sometimes essential to step behind the "media curtain" and inform oneself about controversial places through direct contact with local people. Nothing compares to witnessing firsthand the dynamic processes of social and political change.

Since 1962, when a military junta took power in a brutal coup, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Burma) has been a place that ethical travelers visited with great ambivalence. Human rights violations were rampant, and the long house imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's democratically elected leader and a Nobel laureate, made the act of supporting the regime with our travel dollars unconscionable.

During the past year, however, Burma's new leadership has demonstrated a stunning and apparently genuine desire to move forward. Some of the many political prisoners have been released, restrictions on the press have been loosened, and economic reforms are being introduced. In December 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Burma and met with Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been released and is speaking and campaigning freely. Once cynical Burmese are calling the change "a miracle," and dare to hope their once self-sufficient country can again become the "Golden Land" of South Asia. Ethical Traveler now encourages mindful, open-eyed travel to Burma by those seeking to understand and support this welcome tide of change.

Our other Destination of Interest is the Republic of Cuba. More than 50 years after the Revolution, the extraordinary Socialist experiment launched by Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Ché" Guevara is facing major forces of change—many of these instigated by Raúl Castro, the country's recently installed President.

In June of 2011 Jeff Greenwald, Ethical Traveler's Executive Director, visited the country for the first time with a "person-to-person" delegation. The experience was transformative; Greenwald's dispatches about his trip can be read on the Ethical Traveler website. As Cuba evolves internally and in relation to its neighbors we encourage ethical travelers to deepen their understanding of what has enabled this much-maligned country to endure—and to witness personally the struggles, successes and aspirations of the Cuban people.

Again, the foundation of ethical travel is mindful travel. We offer these recommendations in the hope that your journeys are both enlightening and inspiring—for yourself, and for the people you visit.

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