



## **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2013**

by Jeff Greenwald, Christy Hoover and Natalie Lefevre / © 2012 by EthicalTraveler.org

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All of us are part of a social revolution that is transforming the planet. Environmental and human rights movements in places like Asia, the Middle East and Latin America now hinge on our ability to communicate - in real time - with allies all over the world. But as we navigate the global village on our tablets and smart phones, let's not forget the power of actual, physical travel. The ability to travel swiftly and safely between lands and cultures is almost as recent a development as social networking, and as crucial a tool for positive change.

Travel is one of the world's largest industries. Where we go - where we spend our travel dollars - has real economic and political significance. Ethical Traveler believes that mindful travel can bring many benefits, both personal and global. By choosing our destinations well and remembering our roles 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 hundreds of nations in the developing world. We then select the ten that are doing the most impressive job of promoting human rights, preserving their environment, and upholding civil society - all while creating a sustainable, community-based tourism industry. By visiting these countries, we can use our economic power to support best practices.

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

Though our best efforts go into creating this list, we must continually remind ourselves: No country is perfect. All have their shortcomings. Each of our winners, however, had made a genuine effort to "do the right thing" in the many areas that we take into consideration.

Ethical Traveler is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization, and a project of the Earth Island Institute. No money or donations of any kind are solicited or accepted from any nations, governments, travel bureaus or individuals in the creation of our annual list.

## The Winners

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2013 list of The World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations. The winners, in alphabetical order (not in order of merit), are:

**Barbados**

**Cape Verde**

**Costa Rica \***

**Ghana**

**Latvia \***

**Lithuania \***

**Mauritius \***

**Palau \***

**Samoa**

**Uruguay \***

(\* = also appeared on our 2012 list)

## How the List is Created

Every year Ethical Traveler conducts a study of developing nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, to identify the world's best travel and tourism destinations. 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.

There is more to making our list, of course, than excelling in these categories. Each country 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.

Please note that this report is not an exhaustive explanation of our methodology, but a brief overview of how we conduct and verify our research. An appendix listing our sources will be sent upon request<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are happy to provide general or country-specific lists of our sources, we must charge a modest fee for the researcher time involved. Please contact [info@ethicaltraveler.org](mailto:info@ethicaltraveler.org) for details.

## Environmental Protection

In evaluating each country's level of 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.

Equally weighted was the EPI trend rank, which monitors improving or declining performances in environmental protection. An additional environmental indicator was added to this year's selection process: the percentage of terrestrial and marine areas protected. These parameters allow a more accurate evaluation of a country's environmental record.

Latvia and Lithuania, along with Costa Rica and Uruguay, scored highest in environmental protection among the Ethical Destinations. Latvia in particular should be lauded for its status of "most improving performer" in the EPI trend rank. Ghana also boasts an improving environmental performance, whereas Chile, Serbia and Argentina – three countries from last year's list – showed declining performances that ultimately disqualified them this year.

A notable environmental success is Cape Verde, which is striving to reach 300% renewable energy. The country increased its total installed renewable capacity by 751.14%, indicating a decisive movement towards sustainability and away from fossil fuels. In 2012, President Chinchilla of Costa Rica signed a ban on shark finning, thanks in part to the efforts of Ethical Traveler. We hope that this ban will be strictly enforced. Also in 2012, Ghana announced that it will introduce new taxes to establish appropriate prices for natural and environmental capital in order to provide incentives for reducing environmental degradation.

During the past year, Palau, Samoa and Mauritius have put a strong emphasis on greening their economies and implementing sustainable development programs. They have shown high regard for the environment, and responsible tourism is being promoted. Samoa, for example, is consulting with local communities to designate national parks and improve coastal management.

The Bahamas made our 2012 list, but could not be included this year. We applauded the country's social welfare and human rights record while spurring it to pay more attention to environmental issues. A year later, however, we conclude that The Bahamas lacks genuine environmental will; as one of the highest GDP generating countries in the Caribbean, the Bahamas has the power and capacity to implement innovative environmental awareness policies, but it failed to do so in 2012. We will review The Bahamas in 2014 to see if they have moved forward with their environmental agenda.

## 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.

The scores compiled by UNICEF on child mortality rates are one indicator of social welfare. In this category, Lithuania and Costa Rica 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). Barbados was praised by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights this year for excellence in literacy and education. Mauritius received its highest score to date—placing it far above the regional average, significantly above the world average, and is now in the category of 'high human development'. We were very pleased to see another African country, Ghana, increase in rank this year, as well.

The Heritage Foundation's Economic Freedom Index 2012 ranked Mauritius highest in the Sub-Saharan African region, with a score well above the world average thanks to improvements in property rights, monetary freedom, and management of government spending. With West Africa's highest standard of living, Cape Verde continues to be a model for political rights and civil liberties in Africa, receiving the second highest ranking in governance performance by the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which measures countries against 57 criteria using 84 indicators.

According to The World Bank's Gini Index, Latvia received the best equality ranking of this year's Ethical Destinations countries, with Lithuania following very closely behind. Latvia also was the highest ranked of this year's countries according to The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report for 2012, showing Latvia to be a leader in gender equality.

Costa Rica experienced a dramatic decrease in crime rates thanks to an increased focus on citizen security, and was ranked the Happiest Country out of 151 countries evaluated by the Happy Planet Index, a project of the New Economics Foundation. Samoa continues to see impressive progress, as well, with analysis by the UN Research Institute for Social Development crediting an emphasis on welfare and social cohesion with Samoa's reputation as a role model in the Pacific region.

## 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 those situations and preserving basic rights for all.

Cape Verde, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Palau and Uruguay received the highest possible scores from Freedom House in the categories of Political Rights and Civil Liberties as well as high Press Freedom scores — even better than those of some developed countries. Freedom House also commends the political and civil freedom in the African countries of Mauritius and Ghana. After President Mills died earlier this year, Ghana went through a peaceful transition of power, which is not a given on the African continent. Interim President Mahama is regarded as a champion of the underprivileged, with a keen interest in environmental issues.

Two excellent performers in their regions are Cape Verde and Uruguay. Cape Verde serves as a model for political rights in Africa, while Uruguay has extensive human rights laws, including the most liberal LGBT rights in South America; same-sex civil unions are recognized, gays are allowed to serve openly in the military, same sex adoption is legal and anti-discrimination laws are in place to prevent discrimination for sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Several countries that made our short list were excluded from the Top 10 specifically because of homophobic laws. While Ethical Traveler is not a gay rights organization, we believe in civil liberties for all—regardless of race, religion, gender, age or sexual orientation. Although three of our winners (Barbados, Ghana and Mauritius) do have anti-gay statutes on the books, these laws are laxly enforced. In Ghana, however—a country with an otherwise impressive social and environmental record—active discrimination does take place. We include Ghana on this year's list hoping that this spotlight, along with our vote of confidence, will inspire reform.

A number of otherwise promising African and Latin American destinations actively discriminate against their gay and lesbian citizens. Ethical Traveler hopes that these countries will work to renounce these outdated laws; this would strongly reinforce their reputation for progressive civil liberties. Ghana's progress in particular will be closely followed by the Ethical Destinations team when considering our 2014 list.

Two South American countries that made the 2012 list were disqualified this year because of serious human rights issues. Both Chile and Argentina showed negative trends in civil liberties, including infringements of the right to freedom of the press and freedom of information. Chile fell 47 places in the Reporters Without Borders rating of press freedom, due in large part to violations committed by security forces during student protests. Argentina demonstrated infringements on freedom of the press as well as a lack of respect for the rights of its indigenous peoples.

## General Trends

It's worth noting that island states are again a strong presence in this year's Top 10 list. These include Barbados, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Palau and Samoa. One clear reason for this is marked efforts towards environmental responsibility. These states understand that islands will be severely impacted by climate change, and are therefore taking the vanguard in progressive environmental policies.

We were disappointed to see some Latin American countries drop off of our list, mainly due to diminished respect for human rights, including LGBT rights as well as freedom of press and information. This is a disconcerting trend that Ethical Traveler is watching closely—and one that we hope to see reversed.

It's certainly notable to see three African countries named among the Ten Best Ethical Destinations for 2013! Cape Verde, Ghana and Mauritius serve as positive role models in the region. We commend their efforts, and hope ethical travelers will 'vote with their wings' by enjoying all these nations have to offer.

## Addendum: Destinations of Interest

Along with the 10 countries selected for their commitment to social justice and sustainable environmental practices, we suggest three additional "Destinations of Interest."

Though these countries are not yet considered ethical destinations, open-minded travelers can learn 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.

The first is Burma. After 1988, when a military junta took power in a brutal coup, Burma (controversially renamed Myanmar) was a place ethical travelers tended to avoid. 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 18 months, however, Burma's new leadership has demonstrated a stunning and apparently genuine desire to move forward. Many political prisoners have been released, and economic reforms are being introduced. In December 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Burma and met freely with Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been released from house arrest. This fall, Aung San Suu Kyi traveled around the world as a spokesperson for Burma's future progress, and met with President Obama in Washington, D.C. In November, President Obama reciprocated by visiting Aung San Suu Kyi at her home on Rangoon. Decades of U.S. economic sanctions on Burma have at last been suspended, and diplomatic relations restored.

While significant human rights issues remain for the country, Ethical Traveler now encourages travel to Burma by those seeking to understand and support this welcome tide of change.

Our second Destination of Interest is 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 President Raúl Castro.

In 2011 and 2012 Jeff Greenwald, Ethical Traveler’s Executive Director, visited the country with “person-to-person” delegations. The experiences were transformative; Greenwald’s dispatches about his 2011 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.

Our final Destination of Interest is Namibia, often cited as one of the most environmentally progressive African nations. Ethical Traveler is watching Namibia’s progress with great interest. Unfortunately, ongoing issues involving violence against women and children, as well as the brutal annual cull of some 85,000 cape fur seals, prevents us from welcoming Namibia onto our 2013 list. Ethical Traveler appeals to the Namibian government to address these concerns, so that we may wholeheartedly support their efforts to create a sustainable tourism industry.

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

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