



The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2014

by Jeff Greenwald, Christy Hoover and Natalie Lefevre / © 2014 by EthicalTraveler.org

“Do not tell me how educated you are. Tell me how much you have traveled.”

These words, spoken by Muhammad, seem as apt today as they must have 14 centuries ago. As we explore our home planet with greater ease, but at an ever greater remove —on our laptops, tablets and smart phones—let’s not forget the transformative potential of actual, physical travel. No matter what it takes to get there, there’s still nothing like arriving in a strange land, for the first time, and embarking on a personal voyage of discovery. The ability to travel swiftly and safely between countries and cultures is almost as recent a development as social networking, and as important a tool for understanding this planet and its people.

Travel has recently become the world’s largest industry, exceeding a trillion-dollar annual footprint. This means that travelers have real power. Where we choose to put *our* footprints has real economic and political significance. Ethical Traveler believes that mindful travel offers many rewards, both personal and global. By “voting with our wings” — choosing our destinations well and remembering our roles as citizen diplomats — we create international goodwill and help change the world for the better.

Every year, Ethical Traveler reviews the policies and practices of scores of nations in the developing world. We then select the ten that are doing the most impressive job of promoting human rights, preserving their environments, and supporting social welfare - all while creating a lively, community-based tourism industry. By visiting these countries, we use our economic leverage as travelers to support best practices.

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

Though our very best efforts go into creating this list, we must continually remind ourselves: No country is perfect. All nations have genuine 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 2014 list of The World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations. The winners, in alphabetical order (not in order of merit), are:

The Bahamas

Barbados*

Cape Verde*

Chile

Dominica

Latvia *

Lithuania *

Mauritius *

Palau *

Uruguay *

(* = also appeared on our 2013 list)

How the List is Created

To begin, Ethical Traveler conducts a survey 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 nations that are actively improving the state of their people, government and environment.

In this 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, Reporters Without Borders, UNICEF, GLBT resources and the World Bank. After identifying about two dozen "short list" performers, we turn to detailed case research, focusing on actions these governments have taken over the year to improve (or in some cases, weaken) practices and circumstances in the countries. This year, responding to requests from our members, we also added Animal Welfare to our list. Although this issue not as codified in our candidate nations as it is in fully developed countries, we found the research revealing.

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 request¹. 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 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 scored highest in environmental protection among the Ethical Destinations. Latvia in particular should be lauded for its status as one of only ten countries in the world highlighted for being top performers in 22 indicators spanning ten policy categories reflecting areas of both environmental public health and ecosystem vitality. Lithuania and Chile showed improving environmental performance indicators and we hope to see that continue.

A notable environmental protector is Palau, where 28.2% of precious marine and terrestrial area is protected, the highest percentage of this year's countries. Barbados is another island nation leading the way in finding sustainable means of building tourism while protecting its coastline, standing out as a best practice model for the Caribbean. In October, 2013 The World Bank cited Cape Verde and Mauritius as success stories in their efforts to expand tourism while protecting their communities and environment. Both countries also announced impressive renewable energy goals, aiming for 100% and 35% renewable use respectively over the next two decades.

In Dominica, native species and forests are relative unspoiled in comparison to neighboring islands. Impressive efforts are underway to save endemic mountain chickens, which only inhabit two islands in the world. Other notable strides in Dominica include the expansion of solar power across the island, work to preserve native populations of frogs and iguanas, and a stated goal to become energy independent and carbon negative by 2020. Uruguay is another country making a bold push towards sustainable energy with 21 wind farms under development as of August, 2013 and a new goal of 90% renewable electricity by 2015.

¹ 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 for details.

Another Latin American destination on this year's list is Chile, which has many natural wonders worthy of conservation. In November, 2013, as part of the World Responsible Tourism Awards, Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve received a People's Choice Award for its focus on sustainability through programs aimed at forest and endangered species conservation. The Reserve also assists local people in moving away from logging as their primary source of income, instead involving them in tourism.

We're pleased to welcome the Bahamas back to our list this year. Efforts to establish new Marine Protected Areas and the massive expansion of the number of protected acres in Andros West Side National Park are important steps towards conservation and sustainability. We're very concerned, however, about the proposed Blackbeard's Cay dolphin park, which violates animal protection laws and promotes unethical tourism practices at the expense of marine life. The government has halted development pending an investigation, and we hope they move to stop the exploitation of crucial marine life deserving of protection.

Samoa made our 2012 list but could not be included this year. We applauded the country's strong emphasis on greening their economy and implementing sustainable development programs, but implementation of initiatives appears weak and widespread logging and replacement of native forest with teak and mahogany plantations are inhibiting future conservation options.

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, Cape Verde and Barbados scored particularly high. A country the UN designates as having 'very high human development,' Lithuania reached its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for under 5 mortality rate, which has dropped by an impressive 52% in Lithuania since 2000. Dominica also made noteworthy progress toward its MDGs, particularly in the areas of universal primary education, child mortality and maternal health. To gauge issues such as access to safe drinking water, sustainable water management, responsible sanitation practices, and agricultural management, we considered the 2013 Human Development Report, compiled by the UN Development Program (UNDP). Chile and Mauritius were praised by the UN report for having made 'substantial progress' this year. 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, Cape Verde, increase in rank this year, as well.

The Heritage Foundation's Economic Freedom Index 2013 ranked Mauritius highest in the Sub-Saharan African region, with a score well above the world average thanks to improvements in property rights and labor freedom. Mauritius also received the highest ranking by the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which measures countries against 57 criteria using 84 indicators.

According to The World Bank's Gini Index, Chile received the best equality ranking of this year's Ethical Destinations countries, with Uruguay being the second highest on our list. We were pleased to see that Palau received the highest score of this year's countries for press freedom according to Freedom House's 2013

report. And Latvia was the highest ranked of this year's countries according to The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report for 2013, showing Latvia to be a leader in gender equality.

Human trafficking is an issue we monitor closely, and we were pleased to see that the Bahamas achieved results in the proactive identification and assistance of trafficking victims and launched its first prosecution under human trafficking law. Significant progress is needed, but we hope this positive step sets the tone for further efforts. Latvia too, while improving, could make greater efforts to prevent sexual trafficking.

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.

The Bahamas, Barbados, Chile, Dominica, Cape Verde, 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 ratings—even ranking better than those of some developed countries. Mauritius only just fell short of achieving the highest possible marks, which is rare among African nations.

Uruguay continues to be the best scoring ethical destination in the area of human rights. After passing a law allowing marriage equality, this year a law was passed to legalize first-trimester abortion as a step towards ending unsafe abortions. It is the first South-American country to do so. Mauritius has consistently been rated by the Index of African Governance as the best run country in sub-Saharan Africa while Cape Verde remains a model for political and civil rights in Africa, introducing laws prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and organizing its first ever Gay Pride Week, only the second one to take place in an African nation.

However, as mentioned, none of these countries have a perfect human rights record, and some ethical destinations are facing issues we hope will be urgently addressed. This year, the most prevalent bottleneck issues were the treatment of indigenous populations and of gay citizens.

In particular, Chile and Dominica need to increase their efforts to respect the rights of their indigenous citizens. Chile was nearly excluded from the list due to the use of an anti-terrorism law against Mapuche protesters and the violent repression of demonstrations. Costa Rica and Argentina did not make this year's list partly because of their violations of indigenous rights. An international mission reported evidence of persecution, threats and violent repression against indigenous people by Costa Rican authorities. Likewise, Argentina continued evictions of the indigenous from their land and failed to protect indigenous communities from violence by outsiders.

There is an urgent need in Latvia to address institutionalized discrimination against non-Latvians living in the country. Non-citizens have restricted political and civil rights and recent legislation has proposed a revision

of the constitution's preamble that will assert the country as an "Ethnic Latvian Nation" and could push non-Latvians even further to the fringes.

Outdated laws criminalizing homosexuality continue to exist in some of this year's countries, including in Barbados, Dominica and Mauritius. However, anti-homosexual laws are laxly enforced in these countries. In Dominica, rights groups feel encouraged that the country has started a dialogue on this issue and, while homosexuality is still illegal in Mauritius, recent steps point to positive change. When considering these countries for inclusion in the 2015 list, progress on this issue will receive our attention. We mentioned in last year's report that Ghana would be excluded from this year's list if it did not address the ill treatment of homosexuals. Ghana not only failed to make progress; the situation deteriorated further this year with worsening violence against same-sex couples and two women being arrested for "engaging in illegal practice."

Animal Welfare: New for 2014

Though we study many metrics and reports to arrive at our list, this is the first year we have considered Animal Welfare. It was a mixed prospect. While some of our winners (notably Dominica, Palau and Lithuania) scored high marks on this scale, two others, Mauritius and the Bahamas, have challenges. Mauritius is the second largest supplier of wild-caught and captive bred monkeys in the world; these animals are used for laboratory purposes. As so many of us benefit from these experiments, and as the US is one of Mauritius' largest clients, it is rather hypocritical to condemn the breeding out of hand. However, reports of inhumane treatment necessitate a call for action, and better monitoring of the conditions in which these primates are raised and held.

The Bahamas falls short in this category with its plethora of swim-with-dolphin (i.e., "captive dolphin") parks. Three are already operating; a fourth, much derided captive dolphin facility is on the books for Blackbeard Cay. More than 40 international NGOs vehemently object to this project, and have called for The Bahamas to close *all* their captive dolphin parks. Ethical Traveler is in full agreement with this position. We hope that inclusion on our 2014 Best Ethical Destinations list will inspire the Bahamas leadership to enhance other, more laudable aspects of their beautiful ecosystem, and transition away from the cruel and exploitive trade in wild dolphins.

General Trends

Six of this year's selected countries are island nations, continuing the trend of a strong island presence in our Winners' Circle. The Bahamas and Dominica join this year 2013 finalists, along with Barbados, Cape Verde, Mauritius and Palau. Climate change affects islands dramatically, and they are therefore very aware of the importance of effective environmental policies.

All countries, including this year's winners, face serious challenges that must be addressed if they are to continue moving forward. This year, several disconcerting trends were observed. Conflict with indigenous groups; scant resources directed toward women; gay rights; animal welfare; these were often sub-par. Corruption seemed to be on the rise. Several countries failed to treat their minorities

equitably. LGBT persons and indigenous peoples faced discrimination, and sometimes encountered state-endorsed violence.

Once again, no Asian country qualified for our list. The human rights and environmental records of these nations continued to be found wanting. Equally unfortunate is that no continental African country made it onto our 2014 list; Ghana was removed because of its declining human rights record this year.

Addendum: Destinations of Interest

Along with the 10 countries selected for their commitment to social justice and sustainable environmental practices, we suggest five additional “Destinations of Interest for 2014.”

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 **Cuba**. More than 50 years after the Revolution, the Socialist experiment launched by Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Ché” Guevara is being reimagined—thanks in large part to President Raúl Castro. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 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 website². As Cuba evolves internally and in relation to its neighbors, we encourage travelers (especially U.S. citizens) to deepen their understanding of this much-maligned country.

Another Destinations of Interest is **Egypt**. Why go to Egypt now? Tourism contributes to about 6% of Egypt's GDP, and directly employs about 18 million people— one in every seven jobs in the country. Since the 2011 revolution tourist arrivals have plummeted, leaving many educated people in the country's travel industry without jobs and with few options. While security has been the main concern for tourists, many countries—including the UK, Germany, France, Norway, and Japan—have recognized the improving situation in Egypt by lifting government travel bans and easing travel warnings. Egypt needs tourism to continue its road to stability; don't shy away from visiting this country now.

Iran, remarkably, is also a Destination of Interest for 2014. With the negotiations on Iran's nuclear program and the slow but encouraging thaw in relations between the West and Iran, we encourage travelers to be citizen diplomats and learn firsthand about this fascinating region. The Persian civilization is ancient, and there are a wealth of phenomenal UNESCO World Heritage Sites to explore (16 are established and a whopping 52 are on the “tentative” list). This is a wonderful time to engage Iranians, and to experience Persian history, religion and culture first hand.

The **Philippines** is our 4th Destination of Interest for 2014. While democracy was ostensibly restored following the 1986 “People Power” revolution, the country is still beset with corruption and electoral violence.

² <http://www.ethicaltraveler.org/explore/dispatches/>

Following the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan, however, it is also a highly visible victim of climate change. Ethical Traveler advocates visiting the Philippines in 2014, as the country is in great need of our travel dollars. By doing so we not only support the local economy, we connect with local people - whether in the impacted areas or elsewhere - in solidarity and empathy.

We regret that we still cannot include **Namibia** on our main list. Though we laud the country's strides toward sustainable tourism, the annual seal slaughter—which the government refuses to end—makes our endorsement impossible. Though celebrated as an up-and-coming “eco-travel destination” (the Adventure Travel and Trade Association held their summit meeting in Namibia in 2013), we refuse to overlook this shameful practice. An article in the July 24th 2013 *Bloomberg* news stated that “Namibia will struggle to meet its quota of killing 80,000 baby seals this year as import bans in the EU, U.S. and Russia cut demand for fur products.” Ethical Traveler supports these bans, and calls for an immediate end to the massacre.

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

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