



## The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2015

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*"I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world."*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

There was a time, not long ago, when we traveled more or less in a bubble. Long-distance travelers could be gone for weeks or months and have little or no contact with family or friends. Today, we're able to stay connected to our communities as often as we wish. But this can be distracting—because the real connection offered by travel is with the unknown. Every journey is a series of surprises, no matter how carefully we plan our trips. We encounter people who enrich our lives and inspire our dreams, and face the human condition in ways unimaginable to us when we set off. The impact created by our travels ripples outward—expanding not only our own circle, but the lives of the people whose worlds we enter.

Travel is now the world's largest industry, with a trillion-dollar annual footprint. This means that travelers have enormous power. Where we choose to put *our* footprints has economic and political reverberations that reach far beyond our personal experience. Ethical Traveler believes that mindful travel offers many rewards, both personal and global. By "voting with our wings"—choosing our destinations well, and cultivating our roles as citizen diplomats—we promote 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 10 that are doing the most impressive job of promoting human rights, preserving the environment and supporting social welfare—all while creating a lively, community-based tourism industry. By visiting these countries, we can use our economic leverage to reward good works and support best practices.

We urge you to explore these destinations, and to enjoy the wonderful sights, scenic and cultural, that they have to offer.

Though we are diligent in creating this list, we must continually remind ourselves: No country is perfect. All have genuine and often serious shortcomings. Each of our winners, however, is making a genuine effort to "do the right thing" in the many areas we take into consideration. We sincerely hope that inclusion on this list will motivate them to continue and improve upon their good work.

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 2015 list of **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

**Cabo Verde\***  
**Chile\***  
**Dominica\***  
**Lithuania\***  
**Mauritius\***

**Palau\***  
**Samoa**  
**Tonga**  
**Uruguay\***  
**Vanuatu**

(\* = also appeared on our 2014 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. In 2013, responding to requests from our members, we added animal welfare to our investigations. 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, the World Bank and LGBT resources. After identifying about two dozen "short list" performers, we turn to detailed case research, focusing on actions these governments have taken over the past year to improve (or, in some cases, weaken) policies and practices in their countries. We use many strategies to finalize our list—including engagement with civic leaders, discussions with travelers and reviews of local English-language media.

For a country to make our list, of course, it must do more than just excel in metrics. Each place selected as a Best Ethical Destination also offers unspoiled natural beauty, great outdoor activities and the opportunity 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.

## Environmental Protection

In evaluating each country's level of environmental protection, we look at clear indicators of environmental health, preservation of resources and cultivation of beneficial, sustainable practices.

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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.

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 (1) reducing environmental stresses on human health and (2) promoting ecosystem vitality and sound natural-resource management, allowing us to measure these countries against 25 separate indicators of environmental responsibility.

Chile scored highest in environmental protection among the Ethical Destinations, closely followed by Mauritius and Uruguay. Dominica should be applauded for its pilot project to reduce energy consumption in business sectors. This initiative has spurred a clean energy collaboration with the CDB (Caribbean Development Bank) to climate-proof their shorelines and help build a green economy. Lithuania, which set a goal of 23% use of renewable energy by 2020, is currently at 22%—far ahead of schedule. Palau is promoting energy efficiency through an innovative financing scheme that provides subsidies for citizens to build new homes, with choices of energy-saving features. This is moving the country toward its target of 20% renewable energy and 30% energy efficiency by 2020. Cabo Verde is establishing stronger bonds between rural development, poverty alleviation and economic growth, as well as increasing agriculture and fishing.

Uruguay has positioned itself at the forefront of sustainable public transportation in Latin America, with hopes to see electric buses and taxis on its streets by 2015. Another impressive stride in Uruguay is its movement to become carbon neutral. With 80% of its energy now coming from renewable sources, the country is well on its way to meeting its goal of 90% by 2015. Chile approved the first carbon tax in South America, due to take effect in 2018 and designed to cover about 55% of the nation's carbon emissions. It is the latest in a series of measures the government has implemented in its effort to move away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy, with a goal of getting 20% of its electricity in this manner by 2025.

Newcomer Tonga aims for a 50% reduction of diesel importation by 2020 by promoting solar home energy, and has instituted a National Development Plan to address both the economic and ecological environments. In 2015, Ha'aapai will become Tonga's first island to institute organic farming.

In October, Chile's Supreme Court halted development of a gold and copper mine after the indigenous Diaguita community objected that it would pollute the local river. Meanwhile, in southern Chile, Patagonia's government rejected the controversial HidroAysén project to construct five hydroelectric dams on the Futaleufú River. Environmental groups argued it would wreak havoc on the Patagonia wilderness, a diverse wildlife reserve and potential showcase for sustainable development.

Lithuania has recently increased its use of wood as biofuel and is building new water-heating and cogeneration power plants, made partly or fully from fuel peat. Mauritius—which retains a rich, diverse flora of over 670 species of flowering plants, over 300 of which are endemic—embarked on a campaign to plant 200,000 trees by 2014. It has also established fishing reserves and marine parks and has instigated a community-based coral-farming program to combat the loss of reefs. Continuing as an environmental champion, Palau was designated an "Environmental Star" by the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) for its extensive care of marine and terrestrial areas.

We welcome back Samoa which, along with setting goals toward improving environmental sustainability and disaster resilience, this year hosted a conference on sustainable development. In September 2014 the UN praised Samoa for its work and co-signed on a \$1 million project for sustaining and improving the island's biodiversity, and managing the threats of climate change and desertification.

## **Social Welfare**

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

The UN Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI) is a good indicator of social welfare, as it measures three metrics: life expectancy, average time spent in school and standard of living based on the average gross national income. Of all the countries on our list, Lithuania scored highest, ranking 35th out of 187 countries. Chile and Uruguay scored 41st and 50th, respectively. These results are not surprising; all three are considered High Income Countries by the World Bank. Palau was close behind at 60—very impressive, as it has fewer resources.

The Heritage Foundation's Economic Freedom Index found that Mauritius and Cabo Verde had the highest scores in the African region. At position eight on the list, Mauritius is doing especially well—beating out, astonishingly, both the US and the UK. Dominica's 2014 score was its highest to date, with improvements in important metrics such as labor freedom, freedom from corruption and control of government spending. Hopefully, improvements in its economy will soon help reduce its high unemployment rate of 23%.

Vanuatu and Palau had the lowest unemployment rates of the countries on our list, while Vanuatu also had the unique designation of being the "Happiest Country in the World," according to the Happy Planet Index, a composite of "perceived well-being, life expectancy and ecological footprint." Dominica came in a close second, with Samoa not far behind.

As in past years, Lithuania scored very high on the World Bank's Gini Index. This suggests they are continuing to combat economic inequality, with many social safety nets designed to help the poor. Uruguay has also made considerable improvements against poverty, and the capital city of Montevideo has seen a 52% reduction in poverty since 2006. In terms of social services, Mauritius is praised for being the only African country that has comprehensive income security programs for citizens over 60.

As mentioned earlier, no country is perfect, and one issue that plagues nearly every country on our list is a high level of gender-based violence. Chile has the highest rate in Latin America, and in Samoa it is so commonplace that most people simply accept it as a way of life. Samoa, however, does seem to be making headway on this issue. In 2013 the legislature passed an amended Crimes Act that outlawed spousal rape and improved measures against domestic violence.

There are also some bright spots in regard to gender issues. In Palau, a matrilineal society (i.e., property rights and money pass down through the female line), Freedom House reports that incidences of domestic violence and child abuse are very low. Spousal rape, workplace discrimination and sexual harassment are illegal. Uruguay is also a leader in the prosecution of domestic violence and spousal rape charges.

Gender inequality is another concern. Impressive numbers of women hold political positions in Palau and Cabo Verde, while in Chile, where women tend to lag behind, newly elected president Michelle Bachelet has vowed to improve the situation, appointing women to half of the positions in her cabinet.

In Tonga, the legacy of a feudal system still raises concerns about corruption and transparency. Since the 2010 democratic elections, however, the new government has worked to implement suggestions from the international community and make improvements in the areas of social welfare and human rights.

Many countries on our list remain in the Tier 2 designation of the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report for 2014, which means their "governments do not fully comply with the TVPA's (Trafficking Victims Protection Act) minimum standards." We encourage these countries—Cabo Verde, Lithuania, Mauritius, Palau, Tonga and Uruguay—to do whatever is necessary to improve conditions. We are especially concerned with Uruguay, which is in danger of falling to Tier 3 if significant improvements are not seen in 2015.

## Human Rights

Respect for human rights is a keystone for inclusion on our list. We consulted respected resources such as Freedom House, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders to evaluate the human rights record of each country. No country on the list has a perfect record; all have issues. However, each has taken positive steps this year to promote human rights.

In its yearly report on civil and political rights, Freedom House granted perfect scores to Cabo Verde, Chile, Dominica, Lithuania, Palau and Uruguay. Mauritius, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu follow with the second highest score. These countries are beacons that we hope other developing countries will follow. Mauritius, for instance, was ranked first for the eighth consecutive year in the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, while Uruguay has consistently remained one of South America's human rights leaders.

Last year, Chile was nearly excluded from our list for using an anti-terrorism law against Mapuche protesters and for violently repressing demonstrations. Newly elected president Michelle Bachelet expressed her intention to reform the controversial anti-terrorism law and to guarantee the rights of Chile's indigenous people. Next year's list will take into account whether or not these aspirations have become reality. Amnesty International also lauded Chile for its advances in ending impunity for Pinochet-era human rights violators through new legislation which overturned a controversial amnesty law.

Newcomer Vanuatu has made substantial progress by carrying out land reform that supports indigenous rights. Leases of indigenous lands now require prior and informed consent of organizations of traditional landowners. However, as of October 2014, 400 indigenous persons had reportedly been displaced despite these new leasing reforms, suggesting that the reforms are not being properly implemented. Freedom House raised Tonga's political rights rating this year, applauding its progress toward democracy and its new Family Protection Bill, which includes provisions to protect victims of domestic violence.

Great news came this year from Palau, a continual star on our list. In a revision of its penal code, the island nation finally decriminalized homosexuality. Samoa made a major step to improve LGBT rights by making it legal for a man to dress as a woman. This is highly significant, as an important facet of Samoan culture is the Fa'afafine—men who live as women and are generally considered a third sex.

Unfortunately, other countries, such as Ghana and Grenada, failed to make the final cut because of their failure to respect or guarantee LGBT rights. Even some of the countries that *did* make the list—Dominica, Mauritius, Samoa and Tonga—still have antiquated laws that penalize same-sex relations. But because these laws are very rarely (if ever) enforced, the countries were not disqualified. Dominica, however, will be closely monitored on this issue, since Amnesty International notes a recent negative trend regarding LGBT rights. We offer Dominica the benefit of the doubt—for now. To remain on our list, it must resume the dialogue it began last year with LGBT rights groups.

## Animal Welfare

Gandhi famously said, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by how its animals are treated." Ethical Traveler considers animal welfare an important criterion when selecting our Ten Best Ethical Destinations.

Animal Welfare standards are a mixed bag across the globe, with some very progressive developing nations still struggling to afford animals the protections they deserve while balancing the desires of humans. Several of our 2015 winners face this struggle. Still, each is working toward positive change on some level. Interestingly, the treatment of street dogs is emerging as the focus of many of these welfare efforts.

The island nations of Cabo Verde, Mauritius, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu are all facing burgeoning street dog populations, common to parts of the world where pet sterilization services are not readily available. Fortunately, the governments of these countries recognize that old methods of stray-dog population control—that is, poisoning—not only are inhumane, but pose a threat to domestic pets and native species. Their governments are now working with various NGOs—including Humane Society International—to set up mobile spay/neuter clinics. In many cases these clinics also provide vaccinations and emergency vet care, helping to ensure a healthier population of dogs, and in some cases cats, on the islands.

At least one of the countries on our 2015 list is also making improvements in farm-animal welfare. By signing onto the bilateral Chile–EU Free Trade Agreement, Chile has accepted a set of animal-welfare standards that include improved housing and transport of pigs and cattle. In addition, the Universidad Austral de Chile, a major center of education in the country, is planning to add animal-welfare classes to its veterinary school curriculum.

Wildlife protection is also a focus for several of this year's winning countries. Notably, the government of Palau has worked alongside NGOs to complete a census of captive macaques. This has led to the treatment of several sick and injured animals, as well as an educational campaign aimed at deterring citizens from capturing wild animals to raise as pets. Dominica also gets high marks for its concern for wild creatures, thanks to its continued resistance to commercial whaling—despite pressure from powerful countries like Japan.

Special notice must be given to both Lithuania and Uruguay for passing universal animal-welfare legislation in the past two years. Lithuania's animal-protection standards are among the highest in Europe, and a new hunting quota was recently established to help control and protect its wolf population; a Wolf Protection Plan took effect in September. Uruguay's new legislation ensures each of the "Five Freedoms." These Freedoms, coined in 1955 by legislators in the UK, are now considered the core of animal-welfare reform worldwide. They refer to freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, suffering and disease; freedom from fear and distress; and freedom to express normal behavior.

Unfortunately, Mauritius—which has earned a spot on our list two years in a row—has yet to make any real progress in protecting native monkeys from capture and export to animal-testing facilities in the West. Approximately 10,000 monkeys are captured or bred for export each year in Mauritius, and undercover investigations reveal that the monkeys' treatment prior to export is fraught with abuse and neglect. We acknowledge that monkey trafficking is a direct result of the market for laboratory animals, including here in the United States, and could not exist without the complicity of Air France: the one commercial airline still willing to transport captive monkeys. Mauritius is an admirably progressive country—but to remain on our list beyond 2015, it must make dramatic and visible improvements in animal welfare.

## **General Trends**

Three countries from the 2014 list were removed this year: Latvia, Barbados and the Bahamas. Latvia became the second Baltic state to achieve status as a "developed country" and therefore is no longer eligible for our list. In 2014 Latvia changed its national currency to the Euro and has become one of the faster growing economies in the EU.

Although Barbados reaffirmed its commitment to environmental preservation, for which it should be lauded, it did not make it onto this year's list because no evidence was found that the country is addressing some of its most serious problems: human trafficking, police brutality and discrimination against LGBT citizens.

The Bahamas was removed from our list largely because of its ongoing construction of captive dolphin facilities. Although many NGOs and animal rights groups have brought lawsuits to halt the development of a fourth such park at Blackbeard Cay, the government is still pushing the project ahead.

New to the 2015 list are Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga. Seven of this year's 10 countries are island nations, a trend in our winners' circle. Climate change affects islands dramatically, so they tend to be very aware of the importance

of effective environmental policies. Chile, Lithuania and Uruguay are the only mainland winners. Sadly, no developing Asian country qualified this year; all betrayed too many human rights abuses, and showed too little movement toward sustainability.

All countries, including this year's winners, face serious challenges that they must address to continue moving forward. While LGBT rights seem to be progressing globally, many countries still outlaw homosexuality. Harassment and discrimination are widespread. We would also like to see a stronger stand against domestic violence, as this social illness is still common in many countries.

Human trafficking remains endemic globally, made worse by record numbers of refugees and displaced persons. More than 50 million people were displaced as of 2014—half of them children who are extremely vulnerable to traffickers. **We urge all countries to increase their efforts to combat modern-day slavery.**

On the environmental front, disturbingly, many countries have begun to embrace fracking as an alternative to coal. Most scientists agree that this strategy will actually *increase* carbon emissions in the long run by stagnating renewable-energy innovation and adoption.

Lastly, both Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House report a disturbing decline in press freedoms globally, a trend due mainly to continuing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East. Mauritius, for example, dropped eight places on this year's Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.<sup>2</sup>

### **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 2015." Though these countries are not presently 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 ourselves about controversial places through direct contact with local people. Nothing compares to witnessing firsthand the dynamic processes of social and political change.

**Malawi** has demonstrated remarkable progress this year. The 2014 elections were the most free and competitive since multi-party elections began in 1994, according to international observers. In February 2014, the government agreed to a 61% wage increase for the lowest-paid government workers. Furthermore, the climate for civil society and opposition groups has improved notably. Although same-sex relations are still punishable (with up to 14 years in prison), evidence suggests that the government is increasingly supporting LGBT rights. Malawi has also made progress in the areas of press freedom and gender equality. Increased revenue from tourism could encourage further change in this poor African country.

Another strong contender from the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) was **Grenada**. Like most of the SIDS, it offers wonderful travel opportunities. Fifty percent of the island is still forested, it has several marine protected areas, and a partnership with the Netherlands has the ambitious goals of creating a "blue-economy," a "Climate-Smart Agriculture Program" and an Ocean Governance Institute. On the downside, it is suffering from 30% real unemployment. Tourism could help to improve the economic situation. However, Grenada's criminalization of homosexuals—with a conviction in 2012—and documented discrimination against the LGBT community are dark spots on an otherwise fine record.

**Madagascar** has also made notable strides during the past year. For the first time since the 2009 coup, competitive presidential and parliamentary elections were held, deemed free and fair by international and regional observers. The country's new president has asserted his commitment to developing eco-tourism and fighting poverty—goals to which increased tourism will contribute. Assisted by UN agencies, the Ministry of Justice drafted

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<sup>2</sup> The United States dropped 14 places, due to "heightened security measures."

laws against human trafficking, including the exploitation of domestic workers, and ratified conventions against child labor developed by the International Labour Organization. On the environmental front, Madagascar signed a three-year agreement with the WWF to develop programs for the conservation and protection of biodiversity and to address their serious deforestation problem. The success of the Velondriake locally managed marine area (LMMA) and the replenishment of major marine reserves have inspired a wave of similar grassroots projects, with 34 new LMMAs proposed in the past seven years.

We recognize **Ghana**, the first Sub-Saharan African country to meet the Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty, for its steps toward greater environmental, social and political welfare in recent years. In October 2014, Ghana signed the Minamata Convention on Mercury, indicating its commitment to eliminate the widespread use of mercury in the gold-mining sector. In 2013 the nation's leaders responded to a public campaign to reinvest 15% of oil revenues into small-scale agriculture. While many issues prevent us from including Ghana as an Ethical Destination—such as oppression of its LGBT citizens and disabled population—we include it as a Destination of Interest in the hope that our optimism will compel Ghana's leaders to effect positive change. We encourage travelers to visit the numerous castles and forts lining the coast to discover Ghana's past while investing in its future.

Once again, we're including **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. Each year since 2011, Jeff Greenwald, Ethical Traveler's Executive Director, has visited the country with "person-to-person" delegations. The experiences have been transformative; Greenwald's dispatches about his 2011 trip can be read on the Ethical Traveler website.<sup>3</sup> As Cuba evolves internally and in relation to its neighbors, we encourage travelers (especially US citizens) to deepen their understanding of this much-maligned country.

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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**This report includes contributions by our 2014 Ethical Destinations staff and researchers:**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ethicaltraveler.org/explore/dispatches/>