



The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2017

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"Act the way you'd like to be and soon you'll be the way you act."

- Leonard Cohen

The year 2016 brought many challenges, and a sense of loss to many people. Many of us will begin the new year wondering if the world—already girdled by too many borders and conflicts—will become a less welcoming place for some of us to travel.

Paradoxically, though, it's times like these when travel is critically important. Nothing, as Mark Twain pointed out, shatters our prejudices and preconceptions more effectively than visiting foreign countries—or parts of our own country that seem foreign to us. Few activities are more useful than visiting these places with an open mind, and remembering that the humanity we share is stronger than any attempt at wall-building.

Today, more than ever, the people on this small and singular planet recognize how interconnected and interdependent we are. This becomes strikingly clear when we travel. We become both courageous and vulnerable; an unusual combination that makes us open to (and dependent on) random acts of generosity, sudden friendships, and the spontaneous invitations that Kurt Vonnegut Jr. called "dancing lessons from God".

Every journey, if we wish it so, is a series of surprises. A life-changing encounter could be waiting in any museum, café or train car. It's during times like these—when those in power seem most intent on accentuating our differences—that we instinctively express our solidarity. Whether we are traveling to Chile or China, to Mongolia or Mexico, we recognize the opportunity to unravel the knot that Pink Floyd's Roger Waters defined in three words: *Us* and *Them*.

But travel is more than an opening for good will. It is one of the world's most powerful economic engines, and can drive the way countries treat their citizens, indigenous peoples, wildlife and the environment. Travel is the world's largest industry, with a trillion-dollar annual footprint. This means that travelers have enormous power. Where we put *our* footprints has reverberations reaching far beyond our personal experience. By "voting with our wings"—choosing our destinations well and cultivating our roles as citizen diplomats—we can help to change the world for the better.

Every year, Ethical Traveler reviews the policies and practices of over one hundred developing nations. We then select the ten 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, both scenic and cultural, that they have to offer.

Though we are diligent in creating this list, we must continually remind ourselves of something Einstein knew well: everything is relative. In other words, 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 areas we take into consideration. If they appear on the list *more* than one year in a row, it means they are actively improving their already excellent record. We sincerely hope that inclusion on this list will motivate the people and leaders of these nations to keep up their admirable work.

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The Winners

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2017 list of **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

Belize	Mongolia*
Cabo Verde*	Palau
Chile	Tonga*
Costa Rica	Uruguay*
Dominica*	Vanuatu

(* = also appeared on our 2016 list)

How the List Is Created

In the late summer of each year, Ethical Traveler surveys 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. In 2013, responding to requests from our members, we added animal welfare to our investigations.

For each category, we look at information past and present to understand not only the current state of a country, but how it has changed over time. This helps us to select nations that are actively improving the state of their people, government and environment. Our goal is to encourage the behaviors we see as creating a safer and more sustainable world.

In this first phase of our process, we consider country scores from a variety of databases related to our 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 25 “short list” performers, we turn to detailed case study 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 excel in more than metrics. Each 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 an overview of how we conduct our research. An appendix listing our sources will be sent upon request.¹

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 for a more accurate evaluation of a country's environmental record.

Costa Rica scored highest in environmental protection among the Ethical Destinations, a significant improvement from last year, followed closely by Chile and Dominica. The countries of Barbados, Palau are to be commended for their perfect ratings in air quality, as are Chile and Uruguay, which also scored 100 per cent in forests. Additionally, Uruguay ranks 3rd of 146 countries for environmental sustainability.

So far, Dominica is the leader in renewable energy usage in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), with its current renewable usage at 28 per cent; its goal is to become fully energy self-sufficient by 2020. Cabo Verde has committed to being completely free from oil-based energy by 2020, and is striving to be at the forefront of developing renewable energy technologies. Mongolia has established goals to reduce its carbon footprint by having 30 per cent of all energy output be from renewables by 2030, a significant increase from its current 7 per cent.

In 2016, Palau was the 2nd country in the world (after Fiji) to adopt The Paris Agreement; Uruguay continues to be at the forefront of the energy field, having slashed its carbon footprint in less than 10 years without government subsidies or higher consumer costs. Its head of climate change policy, Ramón Méndez, says that renewables now provide 94.5 per cent of the country's electricity, with prices lower than in the past relative to inflation. The World Wildlife Fund last year named Uruguay among its "Green Energy Leaders", proclaiming that: "The country is defining global trends in renewable energy investment." Still, Chile's solar

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.

industry has expanded so quickly that it's giving electricity away for free. The country has set a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent by 2030, and it is the first South American country to enact a carbon tax, designed to force power producers to gradually move to cleaner methods. Costa Rica plans to go carbon neutral by 2021, and officials claim it has reached 81 per cent of its goal. According to a report by Costa Rica's National Centre for Energy Control, Costa Rica ran on 100 per cent renewable energy for 76 straight days between July and August of 2016.

Mongolia's Minister of Environment and Tourism has made clear that the government intends to have reviews and oversight of mining explorations to increase the transparency of those operations.

Palau's President Thomas Remengesau, Jr., known as a champion for the environment, established the first no-take zone, setting aside 80 per cent of Palau's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as a national marine sanctuary. He also created the Marine Sanctuary Act to protect the oceans and marine life, encouraging other countries to follow suit. Praising Palau, the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition stated, "If all nations that purport to support urgent action to protect the biodiversity of the international waters of the world's oceans from bottom trawl fishing were as consistent and persistent as the Republic of Palau, the deep sea habitats of the high seas would undoubtedly already be safe from high seas bottom trawling." Belize's government recently endorsed the National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan 2012–2030 (NSTMP), a strategic framework for sustainable tourism development.

Belize has several world-leading examples of sustainable tourism, and the organizations involved should be highly commended for their efforts, put forth as a true example of environmentally conscientious and sustainable tourism. Belize has also committed to the 10-Island Challenge, which challenges nations in the Caribbean to become 100 per cent reliant on renewable energy rather than utilizing fossil fuels. Dominica also has many assets to develop sustainable tourism, including energy policy focused on hydropower production, traditional agriculture without chemicals, and qualitative care facilities integrated into the landscape.

Social Welfare

Another critical point we consider is the social welfare of each country's citizens. Social welfare includes quality of life issues such as unemployment numbers, social mobility and inequality, as well as government programs, like social security, healthcare and public education that provide a safety net in times of need. 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 United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI) is a good indicator of social welfare, as it measures three metrics: life expectancy, average time spent in school and the standard of living based on the average gross national income. Of all the countries on our list, Chile scored highest, ranking 42nd out of the 187 countries. Uruguay was not far behind at 52nd.

Chile also enjoys modern medical care on par with that of the USA, is 28th in world rankings for life expectancy and has a very impressive literacy rate of 98 per cent. With a new president, Uruguay has renewed its dedication to positive progress and tops *Americas Quarterly's* 2016 Social Inclusion Index for Latin American countries due to continued economic growth, job creation, improvements in women's rights and protections for the LGBTQ community.

This year, we welcome Costa Rica back to our list. The nation recorded the lowest poverty figures in nearly a decade. They have also entered into an agreement with the USA and the UN to better protect Central Americans with “legitimate refugee claims” who are trying to make it to the United States.

Mongolia impressed us again this year with a huge investment in education projects for 457 schools, benefitting half a million students and teachers. In an effort to increase interest in the sciences, the Ministry of Education created 200 new physics labs in secondary schools across the nation. Education is also a priority in Tonga and Dominica, with impressive literacy rates of 99 per cent and 94 per cent, respectively—well above the global average of 84 per cent—and Vanuatu has announced it is extending free education through to the age of ten.

Although they suffered destruction from tropical storm Erika in 2015, the government of Dominica’s response to the event has been admirable: rebuilding schools, sheltering displaced citizens and creating jobs through road and infrastructure repair. Dominica also boasts a very high number of centenarians (people living over 100 years) and consistently self-reports as one of the happiest nations in the world.

Cabo Verde continues its progress towards gender equality and women now hold nine out of 17 national cabinet positions, and three out of seven seats on the Supreme Court. History was made this year in the tiny country of Palau with the highest number of women ever to run for national election. At the end of November this year, a number of NGOs in Palau promoted “16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence” in an effort to shine a light on the plague of domestic violence there.

Human Rights

Respect for human rights is a keystone for inclusion on our list. We consult 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, we look for countries that have made concerted efforts to improve policies and protections over the last year.

In the Freedom House yearly report on civil and political rights, Belize, Cabo Verde, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominica, Palau, Uruguay, and Mongolia earned the highest possible score while Tonga, and Vanuatu follow with the second highest scores. These countries are beacons that we hope other developing countries will follow. We’re especially hopeful to see Mongolia move up in the Freedom House rankings, as they made human rights and political freedom a cornerstone of 2016’s parliamentary elections.

Cabo Verde improved its rankings in both press freedom and transparency since 2015, and Dominica is looking to be a leader in the area of gender equality by launching its first Gender Equality Indicators report this year. In Palau, the inheritance of property rank is matrilineal and women continue to receive equal pay for equal work.

Tonga is working to combat domestic violence and, in August 2016, they launched the Talitha Project, which aims to reduce domestic violence by providing a safe space for women to discuss challenges and possible solutions. In Vanuatu, nearly 100 chiefs and church ministers have committed to ending domestic violence.

Belize did not make the 2016 list, largely due to its failure to respect or guarantee LGBTQ rights. However, after a three-year legal challenge to the law criminalizing homosexuality, the law was overturned in 2016. Uruguay is also committed to protecting the LGBTQ community and in *Americas Quarterly's* 2016 Social Inclusion Index for Latin American countries, Uruguay came out on top for LGBTQ rights. In 2015, Chile ratified a bill that granted rights to same-sex couples through civil union.

Unfortunately, the global refugee crisis continued in full force this year. In response, Costa Rica, along with eight other North and Central American countries, made a formal commitment to shelter and improve protections for refugees. They are also one of the few countries that are actively and sincerely trying to combat the human trafficking epidemic by arresting and breaking up the criminal groups responsible.

Animal Welfare

Compassionate travelers increasingly consider animal welfare when determining which countries to visit. Animal welfare (a broad term referring to the level of well-being with which an animal lives) varies greatly from country to country, and even within individual countries, depending on whether the animal in question is domestic, wild or working. The good news is that all of the countries on this year's Top 10 list are making strides toward improving animal welfare in general and, with the exception of Cabo Verde, Mongolia and Palau, all of this year's Top 10 have enacted animal welfare legislation that offers formal protection to at least some animals.

Animal welfare laws are often focused on domestic animals, especially dogs and cats. Yet, throughout the developing world, large numbers of stray dogs and cats face numerous threats including hunger, disease and injury due to traffic accidents or abuse, and, in some cases, are themselves a threat to native wildlife. Fortunately, nine of the countries on this year's list have partnerships with local or international organizations to conduct spay/neuter campaigns aimed at reducing the overpopulation of dogs and cats humanely, rather than "culling" stray animals. Mongolia is the exception as some reports indicate that sharpshooters may still be employed to cull street dog populations in the nation's capital city. We've also not found any evidence of public spay/neuter campaigns working to reduce the stray animal population in Mongolia, but there is some indication that private veterinary clinics are trying to advance domestic animal welfare there. This will definitely be followed closely when researching next year's list.

Mongolia is, however, making progress when it comes to protecting wildlife, even despite a recent decline in central governance and a related reduction in hunting and trade enforcement. Several native Mongolian species face rapid population decline due in part to Chinese demand for traditional medicine ingredients and fur. The government of Mongolia is working with multiple national agencies and NGOs to monitor wildlife trade and increase enforcement of existing laws protecting threatened species.

Wildlife is a big tourist draw in many parts of the world and all of the nations on this year's list are making efforts to protect native species, particularly marine life. Several of this year's Top 10 countries are either island nations or have large coastal areas, and those countries have all established marine sanctuaries or marine animal protection laws. Of special note is Dominica's ongoing stand against the whaling industry – which includes a nation-wide compulsory primary school curriculum aimed at teaching students to respect and care for whales and other marine animals.

Costa Rica did not make it to the Top 10 last year largely because no progress was made on preventing turtle egg poaching, and Costa Rica's President had expressed his intent to weaken endangered shark protections. While there are still indications of ongoing sales of sea turtle eggs in some markets and the nation is under scrutiny for inconsistent support of international conventions on shark protection, there has been some progress. Costa Rican delegates lead international shark conservation measures at the February 2016 meeting of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks, and Costa Rica has reached an agreement with Ecuador and Colombia to increase the protection of the migratory routes used by sharks and sea turtles. Current Costa Rican President Solis committed to nearly quadrupling the Cocos Island National Park, where fishing is restricted to protect sharks. We will closely monitor these issues when we're considering Costa Rica for the 2018 Top 10.

Working and farm animal welfare is often given little consideration, both in developed and developing nations, and we have not been able to find many indications of progress on that front in this year's Top 10 list. The one exception is Chile, where a new Certified Humane company, Ecoterra, is trying to change the paradigm for egg-laying hens. It should be noted that Chile has received an A rating for protection of farm animals and B rating overall on World Animal Protection's animal protection index. In contrast, the USA receives a D rating for both farm animal protection and overall animal welfare on that index.

We are encouraged by the progress that the nations on this year's Top 10 list are making to protect domestic animals and wildlife. We suggest visitors consider volunteering for, or in other ways supporting, the many excellent organizations working on behalf of animals in these countries. We also hope that, in the coming years, farm animal welfare gains greater importance in these nations and around the world.

Addendum: Destinations of Interest

One of West Africa's most stable countries, **Senegal** is a vibrant, welcoming destination that even has its own word to demonstrate its heartfelt hospitality: *teranga*. Rich in culture and history, it offers an intoxicating blend of elegance, music, spirited dancing, ancient monuments, tranquility, and exquisite beaches. Long considered one of Africa's model democracies, Senegal has a tradition of stable governments and civilian rule and it has been a symbol of democracy as well as ethnic and religious tolerance. In the 2016 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), Senegal was one of only six to achieve progress in the four key components of the Index (Participation and Human Rights, Human Development, Safety and Rule of Law, and Sustainable Economic Opportunity). However, there are two clear deal breakers that keep this promising country off the 2017 Top 10. Homosexuality continues to be criminalized in Senegal and prosecutions of LGBTQ people are frequently reported. In addition, despite previous promises to end female genital mutilation (FGM), there is no evidence that progress has been made. In the south of Senegal, up to 85 per cent of women and girls have undergone FGM.

While **Ecuador** definitely does not qualify as a top ethical destination because of serious environmental and human rights issues, we are including it as a Destination of Interest because of the important role of tourism in the recovery of the country after a destructive earthquake in April 2016. Before the earthquake, Ecuador attracted 1.5 million visitors and tourism brought in \$1 billion in 2015, making it the fourth biggest source of income for the nation. Because of the high costs of rebuilding the affected areas, Ecuador might otherwise turn to other short-term income generating projects, such as the oil drilling under Yasuní National Park, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, which was initiated in September 2016. Ecuador has much to offer

responsible travelers: the majestic Andean mountains, the Amazon rainforest, indigenous and colonial towns, beautiful beaches and the fascinating wildlife of the Galapagos Islands. Ecuador won the World Travel Award for South America's leading green destination and Tren Ecuador won Best Responsible Tourism Project in the World and Best for Poverty Reduction and Inclusion at the 2016 World Responsible Tourism Awards.

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