



## The World's Ten<sup>1</sup> Best Ethical Destinations 2019

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*"It seems that the more places I see and experience, the bigger I realize the world to be. The more I become aware of, the more I realize how relatively little I know of it, how many places I have still to go, how much more there is to learn."*

- Anthony Bourdain

The words of the late Anthony Bourdain—whose open-minded, politically engaged, and intensely curious adventures made him one of history's greatest travel journalists—are familiar to many of us. While ever more advanced technologies and apps shrink the distance between us and make travel more convenient and accessible, the world itself is an ever-changing place filled with infinite possibilities.

Still, the new year finds the Earth's inhabitants in a worrisome place. Nationalism is on the rise, and freedom-loving people everywhere are engaged in a struggle to preserve human rights and democracy. Issues that once seemed abstract—like climate change, desertification, and sea-level rise—are impacting millions around the world. The United States, once dedicated to addressing these critical issues, has in recent years lost its moral compass, and embraced regressive policies that isolate us from our allies and endanger the global environment.

In the mind of the traveler, though, the glass is still half full. To venture outside of our borders, meet people whose lives differ dramatically from our own, and find common ground with them, is to experience both hope and optimism. Regardless of what one reads in the headlines, the inhabitants of planet Earth all crave similar things: basic human needs, community, and a safe home where their families can thrive. When we travel, we make heart-to-heart connections that illuminate and reinforce this shared human condition. And we learn, with every encounter, that all of us who cohabit this tiny blue planet are inextricably linked, and utterly interdependent. Every other story is a self-serving fiction.

This bond is never more clear than when we leave our comfort zone and explore, to borrow a phrase, "parts unknown." This is when we are at our most vulnerable, compelled to depend on the kindness, generosity, and humanity of our fellow Earthlings.

During difficult times like these, when those in power seem intent on exploiting our differences, we must actively cultivate our solidarity. To travel with open minds and hearts is to be reminded of what Mr. Bourdain so wonderfully demonstrated: The bonds we share are stronger than the

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<sup>1</sup> As this report was being finalized, Chile was removed from the list of winning countries. See page 4.

forces that work to isolate us. Whether we are visiting Costa Rica or Nepal, Mongolia or Benin, we have the opportunity to confirm the view of medical anthropologist Paul Farmer: “The only real nation is humanity.”

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We at Ethical Traveler believe that travel can be thrilling, inspiring, even transformational. But travel/tourism is also one of the world's most powerful economic engines, and can drive the way countries treat their citizens, indigenous people, oceans, wildlife, rivers, and forests. Travel is in fact the world's largest industry— about 10% of the world's people depend on travel-related jobs for their livelihoods.

This means that travelers, as a community, have enormous power. Where we put our footprints, and our dollars, has reverberations that reach far beyond our personal experience. By “voting with our wings”—choosing our destinations well and cultivating our roles as citizen diplomats—we can change the world for the better.

Every year, Ethical Traveler reviews the policies and practices of nearly 200 nations in the developing world. We then select the ten that have improved the most by 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 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 2019 list of **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

<b>Benin*</b>	<b>Mongolia*</b>
<b>Chile*<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Nepal</b>
<b>Costa Rica*</b>	<b>The Gambia</b>
<b>Ecuador</b>	<b>Palau*</b>
<b>Fiji</b>	<b>Uruguay*</b>

(\* = also appeared on our 2018 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 also how it has changed over time. This process 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, and the winners are those that have shown the greatest improvement over the past year. Some of these countries still have a long way to go—but they are going in the right direction.

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 that include Freedom House, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Reporters Without Borders, UNICEF, the World Bank, and LGBTI 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 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Chile was abruptly disqualified from the list. See page 4.

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.

## **Benin**

Benin returns to the list this year for several reasons. It has worked to protect conservation, particularly in the Pendjari National Park, hiring scores of extra park rangers, bringing in conservation scientists, and partnering with NGO African Parks for a 10-year park project. Benin has instigated efforts to reduce poaching, which continues to be a serious problem, as well as to increase human-wildlife safety and address its serious deforestation issue. While Benin remains a transshipment point for cocaine traffickers, it has cracked down on drug running and animal smuggling. Opposition MP Atao Hinnouho was sentenced to more than six years in prison for a scandal involving fake drugs, and authorities seized 23 bags of pangolin scales, arresting three people on their way to Vietnam to sell them. Additionally, Benin launched the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa and, in its continued commitment to abolish the death penalty, commuted the sentences of 14 death row prisoners. On the economic side, however, the picture is less bright. Benin remains severely underdeveloped, and corruption is rife. While the country has experienced economic growth over the past few years and is one of Africa's largest cotton producers, it still ranks among the world's poorest countries.

## **Chile**

Since the creating of our 2019 list, Chile has backed out of its pledge to sign the UN Migration Pact. Police shot and killed 24-year-old Camilo Catrillanca, a Mapuche farmer and activist, setting off a wave of protests meant to underscore Chile's ongoing struggles over ancestral lands and indigenous rights. Due to these late-breaking developments, we were forced to remove Chile from this year's list, leaving us with just nine countries.

Chile frequently appears on our annual list because the country does trend in a positive direction from year to year. They score very well overall on the Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Chile was the first South American country to enact a carbon tax, and over the last year they've banned plastic bags, added a 10 million-acre protected park in Patagonia, and significantly reduced the use of hydrofluorocarbons. They also receive the highest possible ranking for political rights and civil liberties from Freedom House, indicating that they have "free and fair" elections and an "established and generally fair legal system that ensures the rule of law." This year, for instance, transgender people won an important legislative battle that will allow people over the age of 14 to change their name and gender in official records.

## **Costa Rica**

Costa Rica returns to the list largely because it has addressed shark finning, an issue that Ethical Traveler has been monitoring. The country imposed its first-ever criminal sentence,

imprisoning a Taiwanese businessman for a haul of shark fins destined for sale abroad. In October, police rescued two live sea turtles being transported in a vehicle and arrested the driver; they also seized 834 turtle eggs. Agents also arrested four fishermen on charges of international cocaine trafficking.

In April, Costa Rica elected a new president who pledged to implement a court ruling allowing same-sex marriage, and to fight for women's access to abortions, sex education in schools, and gender ideology. He also vowed to slash corruption, government costs, poverty, and unemployment. He supports decarbonization and green energy, including plans to add five new marine protected areas. In September, Costa Rica was one of a dozen countries to sign the historic Escazú Agreement, guaranteeing rights to a clean and healthy environment, and was one of 10 pilot sites to implement Land Degradation Neutrality by 2030. In addition, the country's Cahuita National Park will establish ramps to facilitate access for the disabled, using recyclable material—making Costa Rica the first Central American country with accessible beaches. Costa Rica continues to be a beacon for desperate immigrants from Nicaragua. In August, hundreds participated in a march in solidarity with Nicaraguan migrants.

## **Ecuador**

Ecuador is a newcomer on the list— especially because of the progress it has made on civil rights, resulting in an improved civil liberties rating (and upward trend arrow) by Freedom House. President Moreno reined in the country's aggressive media regulators and pardoned a number of activists who had been accused of crimes related to their peaceful protest activities. He also initiated dialogue with the opposition, the media, and civil society actors upon taking office in 2017, breaking with policies of the previous Correa administration. Ecuador has also made progress in anti-corruption efforts, approving a proposal to stop officials convicted of corruption from seeking office. They now limit presidents to two terms, challenging the trend in other Latin-American countries. Ecuador banned mining entirely in protected areas, indigenous territories, and cities, and is working on moving towards a sustainable bioeconomy as a response to extractivism. However, the government remains inconsistent in its focus towards sustainability and away from extractivist activities. In February, for instance, it handed out new mining concessions and announced a new oil auction. Ethical Traveler will monitor Ecuador's progress in this area, which will definitely be a deciding factor when considering the country for next year's Top Ten list.

## **Fiji**

Fiji's improved political stability and advancement in human rights, together with its strong environmental efforts, were deciding factors for including it on this year's list. It advanced 10 places, to 57<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, on the World Press Freedom Index. Another area of improvement was Fiji's Freedom House score for civil liberties due to greater state tolerance of political gatherings compared with the previous year. Unfortunately, this progress is offset somewhat by its score for political rights, which declined due to increased politicization of the military.

As a small island nation, Fiji is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and has been commended for its efforts in combating the issue. In February, Prime Minister Bainimarama nominated large parts of Fiji's Great Sea Reef in an attempt to protect it from polluted urban and chemical wastewater runoff, plastic pollution, and rising temperatures from climate change. In October, the country announced that it had raised \$50 million to support climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Still, there is much progress to be made. The draconian Media Industry Development Decree is still in effect, allowing the government to (among other things) levy heavy fines on journalists who report negatively on the regime.

Though it is still dangerous to be a LGBTI individual in Fiji, the island nation is one of only five countries in the world that explicitly bans discrimination on the grounds of both sexual orientation *and* gender identity. In May, Fiji became the first country in the Pacific to host a LGBTI Pride Parade.

## **The Gambia**

The Gambia is another newcomer to our list, bolstered by the ousting of authoritarian president Yahya Jemeh in the first free parliamentary election in 22 years. Incoming president Adama Barrow has promised to end corruption and the mismanagement of resources and oversee a new era of freedom and prosperity. He has upheld his campaign promise to create a Constitutional Review Commission to draft a new constitution, and its members are currently hard at work hammering out the ground rules for a new democracy. The establishment of the first Human Rights Commission, meant to promote and protect the rights of the citizens of The Gambia, is also underway. Since Barrow's election, The Gambia has advanced 21 points in the World Free Press Freedom Index. According to Reporters Without Borders, the media is now "blossoming in an unprecedented manner. Private broadcast media have been launched, and the print media are no longer afraid to criticize the government." In October 2018, President Barrow launched the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), which will investigate human rights abuses of the Jammeh dictatorship and will have authority to grant reparations to victims. That being said, The Gambia has an uphill battle in many areas of concern. Gender-based violence is still widespread, and extremely harsh laws against homosexuality remain on the books—though the new government has indicated it will not pursue prosecution under these laws.

As in many developing countries, animal welfare in The Gambia has been largely overlooked. In 2017, however, university students and partners launched awareness campaigns to draw attention to the value of animal welfare. In 2018 they began touring the country and speaking with farmers about the importance of providing clean water, shelter, and adequate sustenance for their animals.

We will be keeping a keen eye on The Gambia in hopes it will strengthen its environmental protections, adhere to ethical animal welfare laws, and ramp up its efforts to protect their most vulnerable citizens, including women, children, and the LGBTI community.

## **Mongolia**

Mongolia returns to our list for a fourth consecutive year, thanks largely to its progress in limiting mining—a controversial issue that Ethical Traveler has been tracking. In a landmark agreement with one of the world's largest copper mines, operators agreed to help camel herders' families, animals, and the environment—a victory described by activists as historic. The agreements include commitments to construct new wells, develop a pasture management plan, and better monitor environmental impacts. It also pledges initiatives to boost the economic sustainability of the herders' traditional livelihoods, and improve their health care services.

Additionally, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is helping the Mongolian government make infrastructure development more sustainable and offset the impacts of new mining and oil plants. As a result, by 2030, a national mining system should fund the protection and sustainable management of critical lands.

Pollution continues to be a serious problem, especially in urban areas where rural migrants have collected, so the government is looking for ways to lure people back to the countryside. The government recently extended a ban on migration to Ulan Bator until 2020, but is also working on a program to encourage citizens to migrate from the capital to the provinces. In an effort to address the growing pollution, the Asian Development Bank and Mongolian government signed loan and grant agreements that will help Mongolia develop a renewable energy grid using solar and wind power.

Efforts are also underway to protect the grasslands. Herders are showing how proper management of grasslands can stop degradation, serving as a model for legislation that could see grasslands begin to recover and allow the herders' nomadic way of life to continue.

In human rights progress, Mongolia's government has taken actions to tackle human trafficking, and a new "Coalition for Equality" aims to unite civil, private, and government agencies to promote LGBTI rights. In addition, the new Criminal Code outlaws discrimination and hate crimes, and abolishes the death penalty. Impunity for torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and human rights defenders continues, however, and will be monitored when considering Mongolia for next year's list.

## **Nepal**

Nepal is a newcomer to the list, due mainly to the first national, regional, and local elections held under a new constitution. This confirms Nepal's transition into a full-fledged constitutional federal republic, in search of much-needed political stability. Pressure on journalists has decreased, and authorities have been more tolerant of peaceful assembly. However, there is

still much room for improvement. Political protests are still sometimes marred by violence, and corruption remains endemic. But Nepal has improved its Freedom House ranking on civil and political rights, and received an “upward trend” arrow.

On the human rights front, Nepal's LGBTI community—once derided as “social pollutants”—now enjoys social and political rights, including recognition of a third gender. This puts the country far ahead of others worldwide (though Nepal has yet to legalize same-sex marriage). Nepal is also heralded as a model for the successful implementation and rapid scale-up of safe abortion services, with women's reproductive rights recognized and abortion now protected as fundamental human rights. In efforts to protect children and stem high rates of sexual assault, the new 2018 Children's Act criminalizes corporal punishment of children, making Nepal the first country in South Asia to enact such protections. Still, Nepal still has a long way to go toward the elimination of human trafficking, including of children. But it is making significant efforts to do so, by increasing the number of trafficking investigations and increasing victim care services.

The Gadhimai festival banned animal sacrifice, putting an end to a horrific massacre that had been taking place over the past 250 years—a long overdue victory for animals. Additionally, tiger poaching has dwindled in recent years, while rhino numbers are fast increasing. Nepal could become the first country to double its national tiger population since the ambitious TX2 goal, and the country's success gained ground with another year of zero rhino poaching. Kathmandu has made dramatic strides in reducing the population of street dogs and their mistreatment, while the Supreme Court of Nepal banned the culling of street dogs as well as the use of poison to control dog populations.

## **Palau**

Palau continues its well-won place as an Ethical Destination. Last year Palau proved itself determined to make drastic changes in order to promote sustainable tourism. They opted for high-value growth, limiting the number of tourists but increasing their mandatory spending. All visitors must also sign a pledge to act responsibly towards the island's natural and cultural heritage. Palau is 100% committed to sustainable tourism, with new laws that improve environmental protections and crack down on non-compliant tour operators. One of the world's best diving destinations, Palau will ban certain sunscreens from 2020 to stop chemical pollution from harming its famed corals. Because Palau maintains diplomatic ties with Taiwan, China has enacted a ban on visits to Palau by Chinese tourists. Ethical travelers who do visit will be actively helping to maintain Palau's impressively sustainable tourism industry.

## **Uruguay**

Uruguay has been a mainstay on our list since 2011, seeming only to improve from year to year. It has an outstanding human rights and human development record: it was the second country in Latin America to allow gay marriage; LGBTI individuals 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. In October 2018, continuing in its role as a pioneer for human rights in Latin America, Uruguayan lawmakers approved a bill that allows transgender people to obtain government-funded hormone therapy and sex-reassignment surgery and requires at least 1% of government jobs go to transgender people.

Uruguay continues to receive the highest possible scores from Freedom House in the categories of political rights and civil liberties, as well as high press freedom ratings—ranking even higher than some developed countries. Oxfam's 2018 Commitment to Reducing Poverty Index points to Uruguay as one of few developing countries to make significant strides in combating income inequality. On the environmental front, Uruguay continues its resolve to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, bolstering non-conventional clean energy sources through public-private partnerships and new investments. Nearly 95% of electric power already comes from renewables—mostly hydroelectric facilities and wind parks. There are, however, some newly rising concerns, stemming from the government's low approval ratings and an increase in violent crimes. Rural workers have been protesting high taxes and electricity costs, and homicides were up 66% during the first half of 2018—a 66% increase from the same period in 2017. These issues will be monitored and taken into account for next year's list.

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