



## **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2018**

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**“So much of who we are is where we have been.”**

*- William Langewiesche*

In recent years the world seemed to be expanding, and with that expansive feeling came a sense of possibility and hope. The year 2017, on the other hand, was challenging on many levels. Projects and programs designed to preserve and protect national treasures and create an inclusive global mindset have come under threat. The planet itself, tragically, seems to be in danger. Our vision of a global village, with myriad cultures and traditions sharing technology and resources, has become far more difficult to cultivate.

Still, the words of pilot and journalist William Langewiesche hold true. At a time when our nation is estranging longtime allies, and parts of our own country seem foreign to us, travel is one of the only ways we have to reinvent ourselves—to rise above the folly around us and show the world who we really are. “To travel,” as Aldous Huxley wrote, “is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.” It is also a way to show people in other countries that they may be wrong about us.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that all of us on this small and singular planet are interdependent. This becomes poignantly clear when we travel. We become both courageous and vulnerable, leaving our comfort zones and depending on the kindness, generosity, and camaraderie of our fellow Earthlings. These unplanned encounters and invitations are the gifts of travel 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. And it's during times like these—when those in power seem most intent on accentuating our differences—that we instinctively express our solidarity. To travel with open minds and hearts is to be reminded that the humanity we share is stronger than the forces that would isolate us. Whether we are traveling to Colombia or Benin, to Mongolia or Vanuatu, we have the opportunity to unravel the knot that Pink Floyd's Roger Waters defined in three words: *Us and Them*.

Travel is thrilling, inspiring, even life-changing. It's also one of the world's most powerful economic engines and can drive the way whole countries treat their citizens, indigenous people, oceans, wildlife, rivers, and forests. Travel is in fact the world's largest industry—about ten per cent of the world's people depend on travel-related jobs for their livelihoods.

This means that travelers 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 hundreds of nations in the developing world. 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, 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 2018 list of **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

**Belize\***  
**Benin**  
**Chile\***  
**Colombia**  
**Costa Rica\***

**Mongolia\***  
**Palau**  
**St. Kitts & Nevis**  
**Uruguay\***  
**Vanuatu\***

(\* = also appeared on our 2017 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 process helps us select nations that are actively improving the state of their people, government, and environment. Our goal is to encourage the behaviors that help create a safer and more sustainable world.

In the first phase of our process, we consider country scores from a variety of databases related to our three categories, using information from sources including 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.

## **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.

The three newcomers to our list—Benin, Colombia, and St. Kitts and Nevis—are no different. They appear with substantial caveats, but we have also seen important progress in all three and are excited to watch their continued advancements in the coming years.

Freedom House considers Benin to be the most stable democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa, giving it their highest score (1) on the Political Rights Index. The year 2017 saw the abolishment of the death penalty as well as a significant campaign to end child marriages with prosecution of perpetrators, and Benin ranked 14 out of 54 countries on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance.

Colombia saw LGBTQ rights continue to improve since its 2016 passage of a same-sex marriage law. A measure to ban same-sex couples from adopting children was defeated in the House, pension rights have been awarded to gay couples, and individuals are now able to request gender changes to identification documents. An openly-gay congresswoman has announced her run for the presidency, and two lesbians were appointed to cabinet positions. Additionally, with the FARC Peace Accord and increasing transparency with regard to corruption, Colombia seems to be moving in a positive direction.

St. Kitts and Nevis saw its Freedom House Political Rights score improve and now enjoys the highest ranking, along with Belize, Chile, Costa Rica, Mongolia, Palau, and Uruguay. Its government has also taken numerous steps to empower women, and we are seeing many more women elected or appointed to government.

In November, Costa Rica's president opened the door to take in 10 million "stateless" people — those who are no longer considered a national in any country. This group includes many political refugees and migrants. It is part of Costa Rica's ongoing commitment to the global compact on misplaced persons. On this same front, it joined Belize and several other countries in the region in signing the San Pedro Sula Declaration. These countries have agreed to work together to address the regional refugee and displacement crisis.

In South America, Uruguay continues to rank first in Latin America in democracy, peace, and lack of corruption, and first in South America for press freedom and prosperity. However, it does still have some areas of concern, including violence against women. On March 8, International Women's Day, thousands of women in Latin America flocked to the streets calling for an end to sexual harassment and violence.

In Chile, victims of "disappearances" under Pinochet finally found some justice as 19 former Pinochet agents were convicted and sentenced to 5 to 20-year prison sentences for torture, kidnapping, and, in one case, murder. Lawmakers also began talks on legalization of same-sex marriage and upheld a law allowing abortion if the mother's life is in danger, the pregnancy was a result of rape, or the fetus will not survive.

Mongolia makes our list for a third consecutive year, and is our only Asian representative. We continue to see progress there in the areas of gender equality, with new programs aimed at gender-sensitive policies, planning, and programs to prevent school-based gender biases. Also, the abolition of the death penalty went into force this year.

In two of our island countries—Palau and Vanuatu—sustainability is at the forefront of their political agenda. Still, we would like to see improvements in LGBTQ policy, violence against women, and human trafficking.

## **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. Quantifying this point 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* 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.

Human development improvement in St. Kitts and Nevis, Benin, and Mongolia resulted in each of these countries moving up one place in the rankings, while Palau made significant gains in Gross National Income, Sustainable Development, and Gender Equality and rose from 62<sup>nd</sup> to 60<sup>th</sup>. Of all the countries on our list, Chile scored highest again this year, ranking 38<sup>th</sup> out of the 188 countries. Chile also scored highest on the *Good Country Index*, which is "a measure of what each country on Earth contributes to the common good of humanity," coming in 35<sup>th</sup> out of 163 countries.

Uruguay continues to get high marks for human development and, in October, was praised by the UN for sustained progress on discrimination, poverty reduction, and the rights of women and the LGBTQ community. Uruguay's economy grew 2.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2017, which most economists say is ideal and will lead to further declines in poverty and unemployment numbers.

In Costa Rica, the government is launching a 2018 initiative to aid elderly citizens in finding work; currently, only about 25 per cent of people over 60 are gainfully employed. This can be a hardship on families and communities, as many pensions are too low to cover costs of living.

In 2017, Benin, a newcomer to our list, announced they were planning on investing about \$850 million on 277 new socio-economic projects. The plan includes creating 500,000 new jobs and 20,000 housing units, as well as investments in key tourism, infrastructure, and urban development ventures that will help poor and underserved areas.

Another newcomer, Colombia, has cut poverty in half since 2002. Today, more Colombians are considered middle-class than living in poverty. Its Human Development Index has increased by nearly 23 per cent since 1990 and continues to rise in areas like life expectancy, years of schooling, and Gross National Income.

In our last addition to this year's list, St. Kitts and Nevis became one of only eight countries in the world validated by the World Health Organization in 2017 for eliminating mother-to-child transmission of both HIV and Syphilis.

### **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 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. In addition to our returning countries, this year's list welcomes three newcomers: Benin, Colombia, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

The government of St. Kitts and Nevis is moving to develop a National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy to study the impacts of climate change and build resilience, while Benin is partnering with the Millennium Challenge Corporation through a \$375 million compact designed to modernize the West African country's power sector. Although Colombia also faces enormous challenges, including a dramatic 44 per cent rise in deforestation last year, President Juan Santos's efforts to expand and protect the country's diversity has led to a doubling of the number of hectares under environmental protection. Benin also faces a tragic 2.5 per cent annual deforestation rate, one of the highest in the world. They are trying hard to tackle this problem by establishing a timber traceability system that is used in all the state's Teak plantations, making Benin a traceability leader in West Africa.

To protect marine life, the Palau government has set aside about 80 per cent of its maritime territory as a sanctuary and has encouraged locals to turn to aquaculture, such as crab and milkfish farming. Over-tourism and its resulting environmental damage is a growing problem worldwide, and Palau is tackling it with some far-reaching changes. The government aims to promote high-value growth instead of high-volume growth, curbing the number of tourists but increasing the amount they spend during their stay. In addition, visitors must sign the "Palau Pledge" to act responsibly and help protect the island nation's natural and cultural heritage.

Mongolia stands as a beacon for nations wishing to pursue green growth. The country has made significant progress in aligning national policies and targets with inclusive green economy principles, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement. The government committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 14 per cent by 2030. It has instituted a Green Credit Fund, aimed at developing green investment methods and boosting environmentally friendly economic development. Mining, however, continues to be the major environmental threat for Mongolia. In 2017 the government moved to open 21 per cent of the country to exploration. It is our hope that the grassroots and international efforts to reverse this course take hold in the coming year.

Uruguay continues its resolve to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, bolstering non-conventional clean energy sources through public-private partnerships and new investments. Already, nearly 95 per cent of its electric power comes from renewables—mostly hydroelectric facilities and wind parks.

Vanuatu advanced its goal of becoming 100 per cent reliable on renewable energy by 2030 when The World Bank announced a \$4 million project to promote access to renewable energy. Costa Rica has set a goal of carbon neutrality by 2021, and for the first half of 2017 nearly 100 per cent of its electricity came from renewable sources such as hydropower, wind, solar, and geothermal. Also in Costa Rica, plans for a new El Diquís dam—which, though it would increase the country's renewable energy capacity, would have a devastating impact on the lands of indigenous communities—were blocked in court. Chile is actively increasing its solar power capacity and also relies on geothermal power. Additionally, the Chilean government rejected plans for a billion-dollar mining project because of its potential environmental impact.

In June, the Belize government made major voluntary commitments at the UN Oceans Conference to secure Belize's fisheries as an engine for sustainable development; in October, the government established the first-ever nationwide ray sanctuary, and introduced legislation for a moratorium on offshore drilling. However, Belize has not yet delivered on protections for the Belize Barrier Reef promised by legislation and commitments made to better protect the environment, leaving the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere exposed to threats from offshore oil drilling and damaging coastal construction. Fulfilling this promise of protection may be crucial to keeping Belize on next year's list.

Though biodiversity in Vanuatu is declining due to inappropriate land use, overuse of natural resources, pollution, and climate change, the government recently adopted a comprehensive policy to ensure conservation and sustainable management of their ecosystems, address risks posed by natural and man-made disasters, and foster and maintain their diverse human cultures. Additionally, the prime minister has called for a ban on the use and import of single-use plastic bags and bottles. If implemented, Vanuatu would become the first country in the Pacific region to impose such a ban.

## **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. Once again, animal welfare has played an important role in determining which nations are added to this year's Ethical Traveler's Top Ten Ethical Destinations list.

The significance of sharks has received a fair amount of attention. The Belize Fisheries Department discovered a new shark species in the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve, the longest barrier reef in the Northern Hemisphere and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This finding is a positive indicator of the state of Belize's waters, as sharks require healthy habitats for nursery areas. In 2017, Palau stepped up its efforts to save sharks from extinction, and enhanced its position as a major marine sanctuary and shark preservation area in the Pacific and the world. The Palauan government is working to control and drastically reduce shark finning in all of Palau's surrounding waters.

Costa Rica's presence in the Top Ten has depended largely on its shark finning issues over the last few years. The country earned its place on our 2018 list by imposing the first-ever criminal charges for the illegal trade of shark fins, marking a historic ruling. Costa Rica is one of the world's few countries to ban the export of hammerhead shark fins. Nevertheless, conservationists remain alarmed: The administration of President Luis Solís has worked tirelessly to lift the ban, imposed in 2015, to allow the export of eight tons of fins amassed since the ban took effect. This would be detrimental to the species' survival. We will follow this issue closely when considering Costa Rica for next year's list. Also, in a very positive step regarding animal rights in 2017, Costa Rica made killing, mistreating, or even abandoning pets a crime.

Continued preservation of marine and wildlife areas is also featured in the accomplishments of this year's winners. The tiny nation of Benin has partnered with NGO African Parks for a 10-year project centered on Pendjari National Park, which contains several thousand elephants and is thought to house most of the few hundred remaining West African lions, as well as some cheetahs and hippos. As with other parks in Africa, however, Benin's wildlife faces grave threats from poachers and encroachment by a surging human population. In Chile, efforts have been made to prevent the removal of endangered Andean deer from Patagonia after the government granted permission for relocation. Chile's government also blocked an iron mining project to protect penguins and other endangered species, and The Humane Society International recently won agreement from one of Chile's large food companies to switch to cage-free eggs and crate-free pigs by 2025.

Practically alone in the world, Uruguay has allowed truly meaningful steps to be taken to protect whales, populations of which frequent the mouth of the Rio de la Plata and the Atlantic coast.



Uruguay, along with four other nations, put forward a proposal for a South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary at the International Whaling Commission. Unfortunately it failed once again due to opposition from pro-whaling nations.

The Mongolian government developed policies to promote the importance of animal health and to educate herders on better livestock care, which will also help the country fulfill goals such as preserving nomadic culture as a national brand and entering the competitive international market to diversify its economy.

Inevitably, perhaps, some news in the area of animal rights is dismal. Colombia has done little to address the issue: Cockfighting and bullfighting remain legal, and both are considered cultural and community events. In St. Kitts and Nevis, donkeys are being killed and the carcasses dumped in the open. A two-year investigation showed that welfare conditions of slaughter horses in Uruguay have not improved since an initial investigation conducted in 2012. Uruguay also sends thousands of live cattle to the Middle East where there are no laws protecting them from extreme cruelty. In addition, the animals suffer terribly during long trips by sea. We hope Uruguay will work on improving its record on animal rights in order to continue its great run on the Ethical Destinations list.

Despite the darker occurrences, we are encouraged by the progress that the nations on this year's list are making to protect domestic animals as well as wildlife and marine habitats. 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, animal welfare gains greater importance in these nations and around the world.

### **Destinations of Interest**

**Zimbabwe** once seemed to be the success story of Southern Africa when it transitioned to democracy. Travelers could enjoy some of the best tourist attractions of Africa, including natural adventure, national parks with abundant wildlife, the impressive Victoria Falls, and some amazing cultural heritage sites, such as the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, this hope was dashed under the dictatorial rule and corrupt regime of Robert Mugabe. Travelers stayed away, and Zimbabwe's young tourist industry plummeted. Even though the future is still uncertain and the tourism infrastructure still leaves much to be desired, Mugabe's resignation suggests a new era for Zimbabwe. Tourism can play an important role, with visitors bringing in cash and creating jobs.

Tunisia has continued to perform well in a region where any kind of progress is extremely rare. In particular, progress has been made with respect to human rights legislation, most notably regarding women's rights with a groundbreaking law on violence against women, including domestic violence. However, the strong security measures taken by the government in the aftermath of the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks—which include limiting freedom of expression—remain in place. The state of

emergency proclaimed in 2015 is still in force, causing a human rights situation that prevents Tunisia from qualifying as one of our Ethical Destinations.

Several popular tourist destinations in the Caribbean were devastated by hurricanes at the end of the 2017 summer. In particular **Dominica**, one of our 2016 Ethical Destinations, was hit hard by Hurricane Maria. At least 15 people died, and the damage is extensive. Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit said that their tourism infrastructure is about 95 per cent destroyed. This Caribbean island of 73,000 residents is—or was—a place of lush greenery, punctuated by waterfalls and rain forests. The island was developing a tourism sector based on those rain forests. But the rain forests appear to have vanished. Waterfalls stand out from a brown and stark backdrop instead of green and towering trees. It might still be too early to return to Dominica now, but the island will really need our help as travelers once its infrastructure has sufficiently recovered to receive visitors again. Its tourism sector had been growing for years, and tourism can help Dominica get back on its feet.

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