



The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2020 © 2020 by Ethical Traveler
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“As you move through this life and this world you change things slightly, you leave marks behind, however small. And in return, life — and travel — leaves marks on you.”

- Anthony Bourdain

Once again, we open our annual report with the words of Anthony Bourdain. In just a few sentences, the late travel journalist—who inspired so many of us to explore with open minds and unflagging curiosity—summarizes our credo here at Ethical Traveler. Bourdain felt, as do we, that the only authentic way to experience the world is with boots (or flip-flops) on the ground. Although dazzling documentaries and social media might give us a taste of exotic lands and unfamiliar cultures, there is no substitute for travel.

It is true that we live in difficult times. The rise of autocracies and oligarchies concerns all freedom-loving people. Advocates for justice around the globe—from Hong Kong to Chile to India—are struggling to uphold human rights and protect democracy. On top of that, humanity faces another, closely related peril: climate change. Wildfires, droughts, and sea level rise are already impacting millions of people. Our own United States, once on board to address these issues, now trumpets regressive policies that ignore or deny the unambiguous findings of the scientific community.

Yet it's in times like these that we benefit the most from engaging with people beyond our borders, and affirming the values we share. To establish common ground with our fellow humans is to promote hope and foster optimism. Because when we leave our comfort zone and explore “parts unknown,” we are at our most receptive — counting on the kindness, generosity, and humanity of our fellow humans. At such moments we forge heart-to-heart connections and remember the obvious: All of us who cohabit this extraordinary blue planet are utterly interdependent.

As the decade closes and 2020 begins, we must cultivate this sense of global citizenry. The bonds we share are stronger than the divisions between us. Whether we are visiting Cuba or Iceland, Tasmania or Benin, we have the opportunity—and responsibility—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, and 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, waterways, and forests. Travel is in fact the world's largest industry— about 10% of the world's people now depend on travel-related jobs for their livelihoods.

This means that travelers, as a community, have a potentially enormous influence. Where we put our footprints, and our dollars, has ripples that reach far beyond our personal experience. By “voting with our wings”—i.e., 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 in terms of promoting human rights, preserving the environment, and supporting social welfare—all while creating a lively, community-based tourism industry. By visiting the countries on this list, 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: Everything is relative. 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 2020 list of **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

Armenia	Mongolia*
Cabo Verde	Palau*
Costa Rica*	The Gambia*
Dominica	Trinidad and Tobago
Jamaica	Uruguay*

(* = also appeared on our 2019 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 four general categories: environmental protection, social welfare, human rights, and animal welfare.

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 to select nations that are actively improving the state of their people, government, and environment. Our goal is to encourage behaviors that help create a safer and more sustainable world. The winners are those that have shown the greatest improvement over the past year. While some of these countries still have a long way to go, we believe 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. Our information is supplied by 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. This focuses on actions these governments have taken over the past year to improve (or, in some cases, weaken) progressive 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.

But for a country to make our list, 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.

ARMENIA

Armenia is a newcomer to the Ethical Destinations list, thanks in large part to its promising new government and commitment to green energy. Following the peaceful Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenia's acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan—who spearheaded the protests—won a major victory in the parliamentary election, leaving him with a majority. This will help him implement his ambitious programs for tackling corruption and reforming the economy. In June 2019, Pashinyan unveiled his plan to create a unified anti-corruption court.

Armenia has pledged to generate 30% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2025. It aims to expand and diversify power generation and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In November 2019, the country's largest commercial solar power station was inaugurated, and more solar power projects are on their way. In addition, a bill was introduced to the Armenian Parliament seeking to criminalize animal abuse, proposing fines or imprisonment for cruelty leading to the death or disfigurement of animals.

However, Armenia still has critical issues that we will be monitoring. Gender equality and women's empowerment remain grave concerns, as does domestic violence; at least 10 women were reportedly killed by family members or partners during the first six months of 2019. Nevertheless, Armenia has made some progress in adopting legislative and policy reforms to foster gender equality and combat violence against women.

CABO VERDE

Cabo Verde returns to the Ethical Destinations list after a two-year absence, having shown progress in gender equality, LGBT rights, environmental issues, and journalistic freedom. In March, Cabo Verde joined the Equal Rights Coalition, an intergovernmental group dedicated to protecting LGBT rights. In October, the National Assembly passed a resolution supporting gender parity and authorizing the establishment of a commission to encourage gender equality in public policy. In addition, Cabo Verde increased its Press Freedom ranking by Reporters without Borders, moving four positions higher than in 2018.

In November, the 2019 UNESCO-Greece Melina Mercouri International Prize for the Safeguarding and Management of Cultural Landscapes was awarded to Instituto do Património Cultural in Cabo Verde for its outstanding contribution to the management and sustainable development of the Cova-Paul-Ribeira da Torre Natural Park. International SOS, the world's largest medical and travel security services firm, has awarded Cabo Verde the highest ranking for travel safety; it is the only African country to attain this position. In addition, Cabo Verde is well on its way to successfully eradicating malaria by 2020.

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica makes the list again this year for its continued progress on LGBT rights and its commitment to environmental conservation and social services. In October, the Marine Conservation Institute awarded Costa Rica's Parque Nacional Isla del Coco its Blue Park Award, indicating that they meet the highest science-based standards for marine life protection and management. In December, Costa Rica's Environment Ministry halted a pineapple farm that threatened the Térraba-Sierpe National Wetlands with dangerous agrochemical runoff and jeopardized four archaeological sites.

On the health and human services side, Costa Rica hopes to eliminate malaria nationwide by 2022, according to a report from the Ministry of Health. The trauma hospital in San Jose, meanwhile, is now connected to three rural health centers in Costa Rica through Telemedicine.

Last year, the country launched a new campaign to raise awareness and identification of people who are at risk for suicide.

Additionally, Costa Rica continues to welcome many Nicaraguan, Venezuelan, and other refugees—even though doing so has caused protests, and strains the country's ability to provide services to them.

But Costa Rica is not without its enduring issues; there are mixed reports on illegal shark finning. While a bill that would return wildlife status to sharks was signed by the Congress' Environment Commission in December 2019, some environmentalists and animal rights activists insist adamantly that the problem remains. In addition, a new bill allowing the resumption of shrimp trawling has gained support in the government. We include CR on 2020's winners list with mixed feelings. Unless strict measures to protect sharks and other wildlife are implemented in 2021, we will be unable in good conscience to keep CR on the winner's list.

DOMINICA

Dominica has received the highest ranking for civil and political rights from Freedom House for a few years now, making it one of the best-scoring Caribbean islands. Though it suffered greatly during Hurricane Maria, Dominica is now working towards becoming the world's first climate resilient nation. The banning of single-use containers is one step; a larger one is the promotion and expansion of ecotourism. Compared with other islands in the region, Dominica remains unspoiled—with clear blue waters and lush mountain ranges. With a deep sense of value for its unique identity, the country is striving to protect local communities and habitats by instilling an ethos of responsible tourism. There are almost no international hotel chains in evidence on the island, and Dominica's indigenous population is actively involved in welcoming visitors.

Unfortunately, Dominica still has arcane “anti-buggery” laws. Though they are no longer being enforced, their very existence is problematic. But following Trinidad and Tobago's overturning of a similar law, a gay Dominica man filed a court case in 2019—raising hopes that Dominica will follow the example of its fellow Caribbean nation.

JAMAICA

Jamaica is a newcomer to our list, and—although it still faces a widespread problem with violent crime—its significant progress on the economic and environmental fronts will hopefully lead to increased social welfare in the coming years. Unemployment is at the lowest in history, there has been marked progress in taming debt, and inflation is at a record low. On January 1, 2019, a ban on single-use plastic bags and straws, as well as on Styrofoam, went into effect. A new solar energy park came online in October, which the country hopes will produce five gigawatts of green energy by 2021. In addition, the government is set to operate on 50% renewable energy by 2030, up from a previous target of 30%. In March, Jamaica announced it

would be spending \$20 million to protect its waters from illegal fishing and encourage sustainable fisheries management.

While homosexuality is still illegal, and violence against the LGBT community persists, the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-Flag) and other activist groups are making modest progress towards tolerance—though a September 2019 Pride event scheduled to occur in Montego Bay was canceled due to security concerns. Likewise, there is some evidence of growing gender-based violence in Jamaica. These areas of concern place Jamaica in a somewhat precarious position on this list, but we hope this optimistic report provides an incentive for their steady improvement in the near future.

MONGOLIA

Mongolia maintains its well-deserved place as an Ethical Destination for the fifth consecutive year, with steady progress in addressing concerns around pollution, mining, migration, and economic development. According to the country's National Statistics Office, the air quality in the capital of Ulaanbaatar has improved, due largely to a government ban on domestic use of raw coal. Since then, households have been supplied with processed fuel instead of raw coal. Additionally, the municipal government of Ulaanbaatar announced a three-year ban on extracting black earth beginning January 2020.

The International Organization for Migration launched a four-year project to strengthen the government's capacity to improve conditions for migrants and to promote growth, economic opportunities, and social protection for vulnerable groups—key aspirations in Mongolia's Sustainable Development Vision 2030. As the country's economy upscales, the government wants to educate tent dwellers and nomads about how to benefit from recent developments in technology. Plans are underway to set up support facilities in the countryside to help rural areas with this transition.

Gay and transgender persons continue to be the target of harassment and violence, although some progress has been made. The Mongolian police force now has guidelines for dealing with transgender people, and officers are trained to treat them according to the gender they identify as, regardless of their state-issued identification.

PALAU

The tiny nation of Palau, a group of Pacific islands with a total population of just 20,000, returns to the Ethical Destinations list for the fourth consecutive year, with an impressive display of concern for, and advancements in, environmental protection. Thanks to a new National Marine Sanctuary Act, Palau will continue promoting reef conservation and move towards local open-water and coastal fishing, including healthy traditional food sources such as tuna. This will reduce demand for reef fish and protect other species from over-fishing. In January 2020, Palau will close 80% of its ocean waters to fishing, creating an immense marine protected area, twice the size of Mexico. The sanctuary will demonstrate important practices to other island

communities that rely on oceans for economic growth and food security amid mounting climate impacts. Home to more than 1,300 species of fish and 700 species of coral, The Palau National Marine Sanctuary will be the sixth largest fully protected ocean area in the world. In another environmental move, a new study released by researchers at the Palau International Coral Reef Center identified Ngeruangel Marine Reserve as an effective conservation area with high fish abundance and biomass.

Additionally, in October, the European Union said Palau authorities had pledged to implement certain reforms which, consequently, will remove the country from its list of tax havens.

THE GAMBIA

The Gambia, or “The Smiling Coast,” maintains its place on our list in light of its continued push towards democracy following the 20-year dictatorship of Yahya Jammeh. In November 2019 the nation issued its first draft of a new constitution, which designates in its preamble that “The Gambia is a multi-party democratic state founded on the rule of law.” Although The Gambia is a majority Muslim country, lawmakers assert that “no faith should feel threatened” by the new constitution. In addition, the country is seeing a boom in media and journalism freedom that was unimaginable under Jammeh. Additionally, The Gambia has led the charge against the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar by filing the case with the UN’s International Court of Justice. On the environmental front, The Gambia’s government is enforcing fishing regulations and has arrested individuals for violations. The nation is actively seeking partners to help establish renewable energy programs, with the aim of creating an economy based on sustainable natural resources. The Gambia is also doing much to promote itself as an attractive tourism destination by improving amenities for visitors while maintaining its ecotourism advantages.

While The Gambia still has many challenges to overcome—there is some concern that the new president intends to overstay his welcome, LGBT rights have yet to be addressed, and the country has not been spared from the global scourge of gender-based violence and sex trafficking—we encourage travelers to support this fledgling democracy.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

After a high-court ruling, Trinidad and Tobago overturned its long-standing “anti-buggery” law, which criminalized sexual relations between consenting same-sex partners. While the fight for full equality in Trinidad and Tobago is far from over, Ethical Traveler wants to encourage Trinidad and Tobago to continue on the path of strengthening LGBT anti-discrimination protections by including it on this year’s list. The importance of this progress goes beyond Trinidad and Tobago, setting a legal precedent for removing similar laws in countries across the Caribbean region. A similar court case is already on its way in Dominica.

We are very aware that, each year, there are developing countries on our Ethical Destinations list that still have anti-LGBT laws—even if they are not enforced. Progress towards removing

these discriminatory laws is very slow, or non-existent. Some countries, like Poland, are even creating new homophobic policies. That is why it is so important to applaud countries that take positive steps, even if they do so only after they are so compelled by court order.

With regards to environmental protection, Trinidad and Tobago still has a long way to go. Along with other Caribbean islands, it is one of the countries that produces the most plastic debris per capita. However, some recent developments seem to indicate that positive change is coming. The island nation has joined the Clean Seas Campaign, launched its first recycling program, and is focusing on waste management. When visiting these islands, therefore, it is of great importance to choose eco-friendly options for accommodation and food in order to not exacerbate their waste problems. Travelers, as always, should encourage sustainable tourism and respect the country's natural wonders and environment. The island of Tobago, in particular, is now considered a top eco-destination, mainly due to the Main Ridge Forest Reserve: the oldest legally protected forest reserve in the Western Hemisphere.

URUGUAY

Uruguay is a regular on our list, due in part to its continued high ranking on many of the core indices we use to compare developing countries. Uruguay's Freedom in the World ranking is 98 out of 100, with perfect scores for Civil Liberties and Political Rights. Additionally, Uruguay is positioned among the first in its region in relation to various well-being indices, such as the Human Development Index (0.80 out of 1.0), the Human Opportunity Index, and the Economic Freedom Index (40th freest country). Institutional stability and low levels of corruption are reflected in the high level of public trust in government. In 2019, Uruguay updated its anti-human trafficking law and action plan and formed a new national committee to address the issue. In June 2019, Uruguay was the first country to ratify the International Labour Organization's Convention on Violence and Harassment, a landmark development that could change sexual harassment laws and practice on a global scale. Historically, abortion in Uruguay is legal on request, same-sex marriage is allowed, and Uruguay was a pioneer in the legalization of marijuana.

Even though Uruguay has been one of our top performers on the list, there are still many improvements to be made. Gender-based violence, for example, remains a serious issue, with almost 30 femicides in 2019. There is still no comprehensive law against gender-based violence. We urge Uruguay to continue their progress and provide a positive example on these important issues to other countries in their region.

Afterword: Flying and Climate Change

We understand that travel – particularly by air – has an environmental cost. As with so many industrial endeavors on our increasingly harried planet, flying has become a cost/benefit equation. And though air travel (according to a recent article in *The New York Times*) “accounts

for about 2.5 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions — a far smaller share than emissions from passenger cars or power plants,” its carbon footprint may soar by 2050, as demand outstrips advances in efficiency.

The *Times* also found that “a small group of frequent fliers, 12% of Americans who make more than six round trips by air a year, are responsible for two-thirds of ... aviation emissions.” As the US accounts for one-quarter of all flight emissions, this figure is substantial.

It is certainly true that much luxury travel, and business travel that could be conducted remotely, should end. But occasional travel to increase one's understanding of the world, and connect directly with other countries and cultures, remains vital—if not essential. So while we do encourage travelers to take trains, ferries, and buses whenever possible, we reject the idea of “flight shame” for those who wish to experience first-hand the beauty and variety of our shared world.

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We hope you will help us continue our work, and we invite you to listen to the Ethical Traveler Podcast: <https://ethicaltraveler.org/ethical-traveler-podcast/>



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