



ETHICAL TRAVELER

The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2021: Special COVID-19 Edition

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“Travel far enough to meet yourself.”

- David Mitchell

There's a sad but wonderful irony in these words from author David Mitchell, whose books, such as *Cloud Atlas*, have transported us through time and across the globe. During the past year, many of us have not been able to travel at all—yet somehow, in the midst of our isolation, we have come to meet ourselves, and know ourselves, in ways that we never anticipated. While in the Introduction to last year's report, we suggested that “the only authentic way to experience the world is with boots (or flip-flops) on the ground,” the wing-clipping pandemic has reminded us that there are many legitimate ways to explore our planet.

Despite the devastation wrought by COVID-19—and all of 2020's madness, from the Australian wildfires to home-brewed attacks on American democracy—we enter 2021 seeing rays of hope. Vaccines against the virus have been developed in miraculous time, and though their distribution has been a huge challenge, there's reason to believe they will save millions of lives. A desperately needed change in U.S. leadership may signal a renewed commitment to fighting climate change, supporting human rights, and combatting institutional sexism and racism. And as we prepare this report in early 2021, we see a new awareness of how fragile democratic institutions are, and how imperative it is to defend them.

But things won't recover overnight. This is especially true for the international travel industry—which employs one out of 10 people worldwide. The free fall in travel and tourism has inspired a rethinking of the ways that we travel. Two important, if paradoxical, discoveries were made during the pandemic. First, when carbon emissions and the human impact on the environment are reduced, the results are almost immediate. We saw this in Beijing, where many people saw the stars for the first time; and in Nepal, where the Himalaya were once again visible from the Kathmandu Valley. But the flip side of this reduction in travel is that millions of people in scores of countries, from taxi drivers to safari guides—have no safety net.

During the past year, industry leaders have made strong statements about “sustainable” and “regenerative” travel. It's absolutely true that we need new models of travel—models that empower local people and help them steward and grow their environs. Our 2021 Ethical

Destinations is an attempt to inspire this process. Though the suggestions in this report may seem wishful, they are actually aspirational, because this much is certain: Travel *will* return. And as it does, we hope our international community will support the initiatives in the countries listed here. Though all our winners have suffered badly during the pandemic, they have managed to keep their priorities straight and offer a smarter, more sustainable path forward. By “voting with your wings” (once you are vaccinated, of course!), you can reward these nations for their efforts and motivate others to do the same.

It's all part of the Big Picture. As the pandemic is defeated and 2021 begins, we must cultivate our sense of global citizenry—an obligation to the whole of humanity. If COVID-19 taught us one thing, it's that our borders are imaginary. We are the inhabitants of a small planet, stunning in both its beauty and fragility. We can move forward, and survive as a species, only by taking care of each other. This begins with knowing each other. Travel and exploration—whether to the reefs of Belize, the steppes of Mongolia, or the volcanoes of Cabo Verde—brings more than a new awareness of ourselves. It shows us what it means to be human.

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The Winners

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2021 list of **The Ten Best Post-Pandemic Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

Belize	Jamaica
Benin	Mongolia
Cabo Verde	Nepal
Costa Rica	The Gambia
Ecuador	Uruguay

Please note that Ethical Traveler is an all-volunteer non-profit organization, and a project of the Earth Island Institute. No money or donations of any kind are solicited or accepted from any nations, governments, travel bureaus, or individuals in the creation of our annual list.

How the List Is Created

I think we can all agree that this year is different. In “normal” years, Ethical Traveler surveys the world's developing nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, 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 practices and mind sets that help create a safer and more sustainable world. Our Ethical Destinations Awards are given to the 10 that have shown the greatest improvement

over the past year. They must also offer unspoiled natural beauty, great outdoor activities, and the opportunity to interact with local people in a meaningful, mutually enriching way.

This year, due to COVID-19's withering effect on international travel, we realized we had to do something different. Instead of starting with a shortlist based on our go-to metrics and databases, we decided to have a closer look at some of the countries that have appeared on our winners' list over the last five years. We investigated how they handled the pandemic and how this disease has impacted their travel and tourism industries. We also researched whether there were any positive initiatives and opportunities emerging from this crisis—strategies, for example, for making tourism more sustainable. Diverse sources were consulted, including reports by international institutions and other NGOs, in-country governmental resources, and both local and international media.

Even though this year's Ethical Destinations report is different, our goal is the same: to encourage behaviors that help create a safer and more sustainable world through travel. We have added some guidelines for each country that will help travelers understand how best to “vote with their wings,” and help these countries recover from the current crisis in a safe and ethical way.

Please note that this 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.

BELIZE

Belize's natural beauty is staggering for a country of such tiny proportions, with exotic birds, ancient Mayan ruins, underwater caves, rainforest-drenched mountains, and Belize Barrier Reef, the second largest in the world. Belize was an Ethical Destinations winner in 2017 and 2018.

While Belize was able to contain the spread of the COVID-19 disease relatively well, the economic impact is devastating for the most tourism-dependent economy in continental Latin America. The travel and tourism sector directly and indirectly represented over one third of Belize's GDP in 2019. By October 2020, there was already a 20% decline in GDP, and tax revenues were no longer able to sustain the government's regular expenditures.

Tens of thousands in the tourism sector lost their employment. Over 80,000 Belizeans—more than one third from the tourism sector—applied for financial assistance. The government had to close applications within a month because it was unable to accommodate the growing number of applicants.

Belize should be commended for putting the health of its citizens above economic factors. It closed its international airport back in late March and only reopened to tourists on October 1st

after developing extensive COVID-19 safety protocols, for which Belize was recognized as an Industry Leader.

Belize has also taken the pandemic as an opportunity to reflect on the future of tourism. The country has launched an ambitious plan to make its tourism sector more sustainable. This includes investment in infrastructure to new and existing destinations, ensuring more equity in the industry (along with more Belizean investment and ownership), and maximizing linkages between tourism and other industries. Another important part of this plan is Belize's focus on investing in its ecosystems and creating a resilient economy that values and protects the natural resources that sustain it.

What can we do?

Belize and its citizens need the return of tourism to recover from this crisis. By visiting Belize in an ethical way, travelers can support both the Belizean economy and its ambitious sustainable tourism plan. By the “ethical way” we mean following responsible travel guidelines, such as seeking out locally-owned lodges and providers, and respecting Belize's strict safety protocols.

BENIN

The birthplace of voodoo and a pivotal platform of the slave trade for nearly three centuries, Benin is steeped in a rich and complex history. It features rugged scenery and Pendjari National Park, considered one of the best in West Africa: a refuge where lions, cheetahs, leopards, elephants, and hundreds of other species thrive. Benin won an Ethical Destinations Award in 2018.

Previous to the pandemic, half of Benin's population already lived below the poverty line. Many rely on informal jobs that have dried up amid the COVID-19 crisis. Children are further at risk because of the closure of schools and the lack of school lunches. While residents of Benin haven't been ordered to stay home as in neighboring countries, the pandemic has nevertheless forced them to slow down, putting many more at risk of food insecurity.

While tourism is still a small industry in Benin, the country has a high concentration of tourist attractions: mainly national parks. For Benin, as for many other African nations, the absence of tourists has had a mixed impact on wildlife and the environment. Wildlife returned to places they used to live, feed, or nest. However, the lack of visitors and a reduced number of rangers have led to an increase in wildlife and environmental crimes. Many of the environmental services—such as anti-poaching and park security—were paid for largely by tourism operators, who saw a very steep decline in business this year. Unfortunately, the smaller, African-owned tour operators and modest, locally run lodges and guides have been dealt the worst blow; many were forced to close down because their profit margins were too thin.

The crisis has demonstrated, however, what an important role ecotourism plays in conservation in Africa. Wildlife ecotourism, when done right, benefits both conservation and the communities that depend on it. In addition, there are increasingly louder calls for Africans to

take greater control of their assets, “de-colonize” the safari experience, and attract middle-class Africans. The pandemic has also led to the realization that conservation efforts must become less dependent on tourism.

What can we do?

Visit Benin once the pandemic is over and a vaccine assures safe travel for both host and traveler. The last thing a responsible traveler wants to do is to bring the virus into a country with a very fragile health system and put the local population at risk. Once it's safe to travel, make sure you support small locally-owned operators and lodges that give back to conservation efforts as well as local communities.

CABO VERDE

This stunning island chain has a captivating blend of mountains, beaches, peaceful seaside villages, piercing green valleys of flowers and sugar cane, and surreal volcanic landscapes. Cabo Verde has been recognized by Ethical Destinations three times (2014, 2015, 2017), returning again in 2020 thanks to its progress in many areas, including environmental issues. The archipelago has earned the UNESCO-Greece Melina Mercouri International Prize for the Safeguarding and Management of Cultural Landscapes, as well as the SOS award for the highest travel safety ranking—the only African country to attain this position.

Like other small island developing states, Cabo Verde has been severely impacted by COVID-19. Although the government acted swiftly to contain the virus and protect its people from the worst of the health crisis, the economic blow of the pandemic was very high.

Tourism is the mainstay of Cabo Verde's economy, accounting for about 25% of its GDP and 39% of total job creation. International tourist arrivals decreased by 20–30% in 2020 compared with 2019 figures. Tourism receipts alone are expected to decline by 70% compared to 2019. From January to October 2020, tourist taxes generated revenues of about \$3,312 million compared to about \$990 million during the same period in 2019—a drop of over 63%.

Nevertheless, Cabo Verde's government worked with hotels and other tourism-related companies to ensure workers were still paid. Employees who were laid off between April and December received 70% of their income—half paid by the government, and half by businesses.

In October, Cabo Verde started to slowly open back up to tourism and is moving forward with plans to diversify both its tourism sector and its trade more generally. Francisco Martins, National Director for Tourism, noted that the country now has “a health program on sanitation” and is preparing all tourism-related operators and businesses—from airports to restaurants to travel agencies—to adopt safety protocols. “We are also working on the new operational plan for tourism for the next five years from 2021-2026,” he added.

Still, authorities concede that the country won't reach 2019-level tourist numbers for another two years, and the lack of recovery will generate massive economic and social problems. One step toward addressing this problem is a collaboration between the Cabo Verde Tourism Institute

and the U.N. Development Program Accelerator Lab to develop a “Tourism Recovery” program, aimed at promoting the nation as a safe tourist destination and disseminating the main measures, protocols, and procedures to minimize health conditions, administrative, and legislative requirements for a safe tourism environment.

What can we do?

Visitors can help Cabo Verde to reach its much-needed goals and support the nation's ongoing efforts to create an efficient, safe, and sustainable sector as well as to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. When you visit, make sure you support local businesses—not just the international resorts—and explore the natural wonders beyond the island's beaches.

COSTA RICA

Known for its pristine beaches, storied volcanoes, lush forests, and abundant biodiversity, Costa Rica has long been a destination for travelers worldwide. Its continued commitment to environmental conservation and social services has earned this small Central American country Ethical Destinations Awards since 2017. Additionally, Costa Rica received the 2019 Champions of the Earth award, the U.N.'s highest environmental honor, for its role in the protection of nature and its commitment to ambitious policies to combat climate change.

A pioneering Payments for Environmental Services program has successfully promoted forest and biodiversity conservation, making Costa Rica the only tropical country in the world that has reversed deforestation. Also, the country's strong indicators of human development have moved it up the global ranks, higher than other countries in the region.

Costa Rica proved to be a leader in the COVID-19 response due to its swift action through social distancing, immediate lockdowns, a complete closure of its borders, and a quick ban on mass gatherings. The government declared a state of emergency, closing schools and all non-essential businesses. This successful response was buoyed by huge public adherence to the government's guidance and stipulations. The U.N. applauded this treatment for several reasons, including the country's quick establishment of a specialized center for patients and its constant reminders to avoid complacency, noting, “The battle is far from over, but the results so far show that the example of Costa Rica must be studied, and taken into consideration, as an example of how to face down and tackle this unprecedented global health crisis.”

In fact, Costa Rica anticipated the COVID-19 disease before it even arrived. By late February, the Health Ministry had established a contact-tracing protocol and was requiring businesses to adopt specific disinfection measures. As a result of these pre-emptive measures, Costa Rica maintained one of the lowest COVID-19 fatality rates in Latin America. Since November 1, 2020, Costa Rica has allowed visitors from all countries to enter by air, providing they meet the visa and COVID-19 entry requirements.

Still, Costa Rica's tourism industry has been devastated by the pandemic. As a major economic driver, tourism accounts for nearly 10% of the country's GDP—and at sites like Monteverde, whose rainforests attract thousands of visitors, it's the *only* economic engine.

But the government is looking beyond the virus-induced disease, announcing an infrastructure spending program aimed at revitalizing the economy and employment through the construction of new roads and rail, and increased social security payments to those affected by job losses. The tourism sector as a whole has implemented strong protocols to secure safe travels, including cleaning and hygiene etiquette and use of masks or face shields. These practices have been successful; since re-opening, there have as yet been zero cases of infected travelers.

Additionally, the Ministry of Tourism developed a series of courses for entrepreneurs, employees, and other tourism industry participants, on issues of pandemic care, protocols, sanitation, business management, financial issues, marketing, and commercialization. A total of 33 online courses has allowed the training of more than 3,000 people. The Tourism Board has also launched *Pura Vida Pledge*—a promise to educate visitors to the real meaning of responsible tourism and the actions that they can take to make a true difference to the local communities in the post COVID-19 world. The commitment to five pillars of sustainable and responsible travel include certification for sustainable tourism, carbon offsetting, volunteering, respecting the environment, and quality assurance.

What can we do?

Because of its great COVID-19 response as well as its implementation of strong protocols to secure the safety of both visitors and locals, Costa Rica seems well prepared to start receiving vaccinated visitors. As a global leader in environmental policies and accomplishments, Costa Rica is a worthy destination for all ethical travelers.

ECUADOR

Well known for its Galapagos Islands (a UNESCO World Heritage site), Ecuador also offers colorful colonial centers like Quito, white-sand beaches, Kichwa villages, 17th century churches and monasteries, the Amazon rainforest, and the breathtaking Andes. Ecuador received an Ethical Destinations Award in 2019.

Ecuador was the first country in South America struck by COVID-19, and one of the worst impacted regions in terms of infections and deaths. Images of full hospitals and corpses on the streets of Guayaquil were shared widely around the world. Ecuador's most vulnerable groups, such as its indigenous population, fell victim to the disease, mainly because of structural discrimination in healthcare. Economically, Ecuador's GDP is expected to drop 11%. The lost jobs and income are expected to increase the number of families living in poverty.

As everywhere, Ecuador's tourism industry is suffering. But the particular area of Ecuador that depends most strongly on tourism is the Galapagos, whose economy depends on tourism for 90% of its revenue. The islands' isolation—an aspect that attracts many visitors—only increased its hardship. Throughout the archipelago, for instance, there was not a single ventilator to treat COVID-19 patients. Prices of goods increased 40%, while the economic crisis has left many of the islanders unemployed. The lack of tourists affects not only local businesses, but conservation

efforts as well. Tourist fees pay for the preservation, conservation, upkeep, and enforcement of the protected areas, and the presence of rangers keeps poachers away.

On the other hand, the lack of tourists brought back the remote and wild beauty of the islands, with wildlife returning to areas it had not been seen for decades. As with our other highlighted countries, Galapagos actors have started to consider what the future of tourism should look like—specifically, how it can become more sustainable both economically and environmentally.

What can we do?

When visiting mainland Ecuador, choose one of the community-based programs that benefit groups that have been weakened by the crisis and that focus on environmental and conservation issues—for along with the peril of COVID-19, Ecuador's natural areas have long been at risk for oil exploitation.

You can support conservation and research efforts on the Galapagos Islands by donating to one of the many NGOs and foundations—for example, the Charles Darwin Foundation or the Galapagos Future Fund. When you visit the islands, make sure you leave a positive footprint and follow closely the regulations to protect the environment and wildlife.

THE GAMBIA

This smallest country on the African continent features golden beaches backed by swaying palms, scenic lagoons, sleepy fishing villages, and teeming wildlife—including manatees, hippos, crocodiles, and nearly 600 bird species. The Gambia also hosts the Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Center, Africa's longest-running chimp project. Ethical Destinations honored The Gambia with our Ethical Destinations Award in both 2019 and 2020.

As in the majority of Sub-Saharan countries, COVID-19 has not caused a major health crisis on the level of the Americas and Europe. However, The Gambia could not avoid the devastating economical impact, mainly because it depends heavily on tourism, which accounts for 20% of The Gambia's GDP and provides a living to nearly a fifth of Gambians. The pandemic is also damaging hotels and tour operators, while affecting thousands of small businesses in the tourism supply chain—such as providers of food, transport, and souvenirs.

The Gambia re-opened its borders to tourists in October, after having developed safety measures for hotels. But the crisis is also seen as an opportunity to change tourism in The Gambia for the better. The country has been over-dependent on a few tour operators and charter flights—resulting in a single yearly season focused on winter-sun, especially for Europeans. Even before COVID-19, The Gambia was already developing alternatives to all-inclusive beach holidays such as the Ninki Nanka Trail, allowing visitors to discover The Gambia's rich natural and cultural heritage. The country hopes to create a more sustainable tourism economy, reducing poverty in rural areas through community-based tourism and extending the tourist season both geographically and seasonally. The current crisis seems to support the need and strengthen the calls for these kinds of changes.

What can we do?

When the time is right, support the positive change in Gambian tourism and discover its natural and cultural heritage. The Gambia's health system is fragile; it might take a while before the locals receive vaccines. So wait until the pandemic is over, and you're no longer a risk to the locals. As a poor country. As personal interactions with local cultures are intrinsic to the new sustainable tourism products, be patient—and visit when you can have a full experience.

JAMAICA

Fringed with white-sand beaches, this island has year-round sunshine, misty mountains, a verdant rainforest and rushing waterfalls, gardens of coral and lush banana groves, superb coffee, and its world-renowned reggae music. Jamaica won its first Ethical Destinations Award in 2020.

As the most tourism-dependent region in the world, the Caribbean is globally the most affected economically by this pandemic. This area includes Jamaica, which besides its reduced inflows from tourism (20% of the GDP) also saw remittances (15% of GDP) decrease significantly. The UNCTAD (UN Conference on Trade and Development) projects Jamaica as the most pandemic-affected country worldwide, with an estimated 11% loss of its GDP as well as increased unemployment of both skilled and unskilled workers due to the massive fall in tourist arrivals.

The country has been recognized by some observers for its management of COVID-19, even though there have been ups and downs. To minimize the economic impact, Jamaica was among the earliest Caribbean nations to re-open its borders to tourists, on June 15, 2020. In a difficult balancing act of protecting both lives and livelihoods of Jamaicans, the government developed strict safety protocols. It installed a tourist corridor to the resort areas to minimize contact with the local population. Jamaica's government has also implemented a social and economic support program that provides assistance to unemployed individuals—including those working informally—and to small businesses.

Even though there are many sustainable tourism options in Jamaica, they are still dominated by resort tourism and cruise ships. However, there are several current efforts to rethink Jamaica's relationship with tourism and tackle the downsides of overtourism. Many industries hope to attract a different kind of tourist—not necessarily wealthier, but more culturally and environmentally conscious. The COVID-19 crisis might help Jamaica make this a reality, as it may herald a drastic reduction in cheap tourism and mega cruise ship visits. Experts recommend that many Caribbean governments renegotiate their relationships with major cruise lines, which are keen to improve their tarnished reputations.

What can we do?

Visit Jamaica as the kind of tourist the country is hoping to attract: a conscious traveler who goes beyond the resort walls or cruise ship all-inclusives and is willing to explore local food and

culture. Find a small, locally-run hotel off the beaten path, and spend your money at local businesses. Do some research, and support the businesses that are trying to make Jamaica's tourism sector more sustainable. If you do choose to go on a cruise, pick a small-scale, environmentally conscious one that contributes to local economies.

MONGOLIA

Landlocked between Russia and China, rugged Mongolia is an adventure destination where travelers can experience vast, untouched landscapes. This sprawling land of camels, horses, and nomads, shrouded behind legends of Genghis Khan, offers breathtaking natural wonders as well as the comfort of modern amenities. Mongolia's attention to human rights, environmental progress, and uncorrupted democracy has been recognized by Ethical Destinations since 2016.

Mongolia has been hailed for its COVID-19 response, with fewer than 1,000 cases and no fatalities to date. The World Health Organization produced a documentary touting the country's response efforts, and global experts praised Mongolia's successful handling of the virus, even as more developed countries suffered repeated waves of infections.

One important factor in making Mongolia's response so successful has been the diligence of citizens in complying with governmental directives and requirements, including wearing masks and ensuring good hygiene through frequent hand-washing and physical distancing. Even during the Mongolian Lunar New Year in February, citizens broke with the tradition of visiting extended families and elders.

But while Mongolia contained the disease, its economy and population suffered. Thousands of its citizens are still stranded abroad, despite repatriation efforts. Following about a decade of positive economic growth, Mongolia's GDP this year is set to fall by a devastating 9.7%. And with foreign travel restricted, hospitality and tourism revenues plummeted. To bolster the economy, the government approved economic stimulus packages worth over 10% of the GDP. These included measures to support vulnerable groups, including cash benefits. Additionally, mortgages, consumer, and business loan repayments were deferred, with the mortgage rate reduced. Still, the increased borrowing amid an economy facing reduced exports means it will be difficult to recover from the socio-economic impacts of the crisis.

The Mongolian Red Cross, together with the International Federation of Red Cross, has been providing food and hygiene parcels to the most affected families, as well as distributing face masks, conducting hygiene training and information sessions, and providing psychosocial support. In April, The World Bank approved \$26.9 million for the Mongolia COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health System Preparedness Project. This will help the country meet emergency needs in the face of the pandemic and prepare for future health crises.

What can we do?

When travel is again safe and vaccinations are shown to stop the spread of the virus, visitors can help to revive Mongolia's economy and its tourism industry. Hire local drivers to traverse

the wild landscape. Stay in *ger* camps, share meals with nomadic families, and listen to throat singing, Buddhist prayer chants, and howling wolves. Such enriching experiences will help Mongolia and its people emerge from an admirably well-controlled pandemic.

NEPAL

A trekkers' paradise, Nepal combines golden temples, charming hill villages, and jungle wildlife—including tigers—to make it a great travel destination. Home to the majestic Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest), this breathtaking country covers diverse landscapes from the Himalaya in the north to the expansive plains and forests of the south. Nepal won an Ethical Destinations Award in 2019, but with caution. We remain concerned by its attempted suppression of media, treatment of Tibetan refugees, and episodes of corruption. However, Ethical Destinations wishes to encourage Nepal's efforts to address these problems and move forward with its positive efforts.

Nepal began a serious lockdown in March, and long remained an outlier in South Asia with a slow rise of confirmed COVID-19 cases. In June, however, as thousands of migrant workers returned home and Nepal eased internal travel restrictions while beginning a phased reopening, cases increased more than tenfold. In November, health workers said the nation was facing a “catastrophic” situation. At one point the number of daily infections in Nepal was higher than anywhere in South Asia, except India. The government was ill-prepared to handle the situation and was criticized for being more preoccupied with political in-fighting than the pandemic.

Tourism has suffered greatly. Nepal's alpine industry was becoming a lifeline for the country. Last year, tourism brought in more than \$2 billion, and employed a million people. The country's economy has taken a blow from a lack of climbers and trekkers, and a plunge in remittances. Although the government lifted the months-old travel ban in November, with hopes of restarting the economy, fewer than 150 climbers arrived—down from thousands in 2019. Countless Sherpas and experienced mountain guides have been out of work. Tourism officials expect that at least 800,000 people will lose their jobs, and many Nepalis fear that the combined effect of the coronavirus and its impact on the economy could set this nation back for years.

However, there might be an environmental silver lining. After the shocking images of summit overcrowding in 2019—which led to the death of 11 hikers—2020 might give Sagarmatha time to regenerate and recover from excessive foot traffic, rubbish, and human waste. It may also give the country the opportunity to think about changes it wants to make in its mountain tourism industry. Such changes are already made; expedition organizers have to be approved by the government, for instance, and only Nepalese citizens can be leaders, guides, and high-altitude workers. But even stronger moves towards sustainability would benefit the environment, local communities, and tourists.

What can we do?

Although Nepal opened for limited mountain tourism with strict safety protocols, its fragile medical system and vulnerable population require us to wait until the virus is gone and it is very

safe to visit. When that day arrives, the return of climbers will be a major boost to resurrecting Nepal's economy. But Nepal has much more to offer. Visitors can discover lesser known sites and destinations, including the scores of monasteries, shrines, and temples of the Kathmandu Valley. And visits to Nepal's national parks will help conserve wildlife, as well. If you do decide to climb, choose a local expedition company: one that explicitly commits to social and environmental responsibility.

URUGUAY

Tucked like a glove between Brazil and Argentina, Uruguay offers mile-long beaches, a flourishing wine industry, hot springs, and endless meadows, as well as a cosmopolitan capital and wild, majestic interior. It has earned Ethical Destinations Awards since 2014, thanks to its social, environmental, and human rights progress and awareness.

Uruguay's swift response to the COVID-19 pandemic (due partly to its relatively small population) made it a positive outlier in a region ravaged by the virus. Less than two weeks after his inauguration, President Luis Lacalle Pou acted promptly when Uruguay's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed. He cancelled all public events and closed bars, churches, shopping centers, schools, even the border with Brazil—the pandemic's regional epicenter. This swift action slowed the spread of the virus and bought vital time to prepare hospitals and testing systems.

Where Uruguay succeeded, while other nations did not, was in testing. Uruguay developed its own diagnostic tests and contagion-tracking technologies, ramping up its diagnostic capacity and shielding the country from market shortages. Preventative measures were also implemented much earlier than elsewhere in the region, supplemented by a high level of social cohesion, public trust in government, and stringent public awareness campaigns. Having one of Latin America's most comprehensive social protection systems helped Uruguay protect both the health and the finances of its most vulnerable populations.

Nonetheless, in October, Uruguay began to see a worrying rise in cases, sparking concerns that the country might reverse course after a long period of containing the pandemic. President Lacalle Pou announced that Uruguay's borders would be closed again. The closure hit especially hard, as Uruguay's tourism depends heavily on the summer season (December through February), which accounted for 7% of the GDP in 2019. Some three million tourists visit Uruguay annually, with a turnover of \$1.8 billion. To offset this loss, Lacalle Pou said the government would promote domestic tourism. This included eliminating VAT (value-added tax) on hotel and accommodation services and reducing the VAT on catering services to 9%. A promotion called the "Summer Plan" will help keep tourism-based businesses employed and encourage Uruguay's citizens to take "stay-cations" within the country.

What can we do?

Uruguay's long history of ethical awareness in all areas is reason enough for visitors to visit after the pandemic. Its quick and responsible efforts to protect its citizens from COVID-19, along

with its precautions to keep the country closed (despite the loss of income), should further encourage travelers to support the country when its borders open again.

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We hope you will help us continue our work, and we invite you to listen to the [Ethical Traveler Podcast](#).



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