



**ETHICAL TRAVELER**

## **The World's Ten Best Ethical Destinations 2023**

*by Natalie Lefevre, Karen Blansfield, and Jeff Greenwald*

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*“Nobody can discover the world for somebody else. Only when we discover it for ourselves does it become common ground and a common bond.”*

— Wendell Berry

For those of us who love to travel, the first few months of 2023 are bringing cause for optimism. The scourge of Covid is gradually being tamed, and people are once again setting out—by train, plane, and ship—on personal voyages of discovery.

But there remain reasons to be cautious. A sense of ease and possibility around global travel won't revive overnight. And as we move forward, it's important to consider what the pandemic taught us. First, we saw that when people travel less both domestically and internationally, and the carbon impact on the environment is reduced, the results are positive and immediate: The air clears, animal poaching is reduced, and stress on the oceans is lessened. But the flip side of this reduction is the realization that millions of people in scores of countries—including those who rely on the travel economy—have no safety net.

These lessons have inspired a rethinking of how we might better interact with the countries and communities we visit. We've heard many strong statements about “sustainable” and “regenerative” travel. Though some of this is little more than branding, it's inarguably true that we must cultivate new models of travel—models that empower local people and ensure that they remain safe and secure even when travel hits a bump.

It's true that we must discover the world for ourselves, as writer and activist Wendell Berry points out. The challenge is to do this in a way that honors the common bond and basic needs that all people share.

Supporting these values has been Ethical Traveler's mission for 20 years, since our founding in 2003. Our "Best Ethical Destinations" report, along with our news stories and role in global forums on travel, all help drive this process. Even during the height of the pandemic, we did what we could: In early 2021, we published a list of developing nations that had handled Covid well, instituted best practices, and would benefit from an increase in mindful visitors.

Here then is our 15th annual report. Once again, we recommend to the discerning traveler the 10 most beautiful, welcoming, environmentally aware, and socially progressive ports of call in the developing world. A place on our respected list is both a gift to the winning countries and an incentive for them—and their neighbors—to continue their good work, and do even better.

At long last, travel is returning. And as it does, we hope our international community will rise to the occasion. As 2023 unfolds, all of us can play an active role in redefining what travel is, and how it might enhance the lives of people around the world.

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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 10 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.

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.

## **The Winners**

Ethical Traveler congratulates the countries on our 2023 list of **The World’s Ten Best Ethical Destinations**. The winners, in alphabetical order (**not** in order of merit), are:

<b>Barbados</b>	<b>Costa Rica *</b>
<b>Belize *</b>	<b>Mongolia *</b>
<b>Botswana</b>	<b>Palau *</b>
<b>Cabo Verde *</b>	<b>Seychelles</b>
<b>Chile</b>	<b>Timor-Leste</b>

*\* Appeared on our 2020 and/or 2021 lists*

## **How the List Is Created**

In the autumn 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 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 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 LGBTQ 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 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 a full explanation of our methodology, but an overview of how we conduct our research. An appendix listing our sources is available upon request.

## **BARBADOS**

Famed for its white sand beaches, brilliant turquoise bays, and lush landscapes, Barbados is a Caribbean dream for snorkeling, surfing, spelunking, and hiking.

In November 2021, Barbados officially declared its independence from the United Kingdom, establishing a republican constitutional system. Governor General Dame Sandra Mason was elected president by a nearly unanimous vote in the lower and upper

houses of the parliament. But even before independence, Barbados was a democracy that regularly held competitive elections and upheld civil liberties; Freedom House ranks it 95 out of 100 for overall freedom and gives it high ratings in political rights and civil liberties. Transparency International's corruption perception index ranks the country at 29 out of 180. In October 2021, the government passed the Prevention of Corruption Act, which provides for the investigation and prosecution of corruption in both public and private sectors.

Environmentally, the government announced it will pump \$210 million into a one-of-a-kind, large-scale water reclaim and reuse project, becoming the first Caribbean country to implement a project of this magnitude. Barbados is focusing on modernizing its water supply and wastewater treatment infrastructure as well as on building its resilience against climate change.

Barbados was upgraded to Tier 2 in the US Secretary of State's Annual Trafficking in Persons Report thanks to the government's efforts to address the problem. It significantly increased investigations, initiated two prosecutions (for the first time since 2013), improved victim screening, and addressed complicity among police officers. Barbados is also slowly progressing on the LGBTQ front. In a landmark judgment in 2022, its High Court issued a ruling decriminalizing same-sex relations. The first female prime minister, Mia Mottley, is pro-LGBTQ, and Barbados hosted its first Pride march in 2018.

## **BELIZE**

Belize's natural beauty is staggering for a country of such tiny proportions, with exotic birds, underwater caves, rainforest-drenched mountains, and Belize Barrier Reef, the second largest in the world.

Belize has a strong legacy of conservation emphasis, and recent developments seem to confirm its continuance. New fishing restrictions have been implemented, in cooperation with the fishing community, around several reef atolls, aiming to protect the endangered Caribbean reef sharks. Belize also agreed to spend about \$4 million a year on marine conservation until 2041. This financial pledge will double its marine-protection parks—including coral reefs, mangroves, and the sea grasses where fish spawn—from 15.9% of its oceans to 30% by 2026. But the focus is not only on the sea; there is also hope for Belize's terrestrial animals, in particular its jaguars. A wide wildlife corridor is in

development, connecting the massive Belize Maya Forest with the Maya Mountains Massif network of protected areas.

The Belize government opposes several projects that threaten its conservation legacy. It has rejected a Port of Belize expansion proposal because of environmental concerns, and it opposes the proposal that surface mining be permitted near Gales Point Manatee on the Caribbean coast. Ethical Traveler hopes that Belize will continue to contest projects and activities that may have a detrimental impact on its environment.

There is also positive socio-economic and human rights news. Belize was upgraded to Tier 2 in the US Secretary of State's Annual Trafficking in Persons Report, thanks to its increasing anti-trafficking efforts and achievements. In addition, the national minimum wage was increased considerably at the start of 2023. Sadly, though, Belize remains among the countries with the highest per capita murder rates in the world. Violence is localized around the south side of Belize City, where, in August and September 2021, a state of emergency was declared due to a spike in gang-related shootings. (In a rare incident in January 2023, a US tourist was killed outside a nightclub.)

## **BOTSWANA**

Botswana is one of the best safari destinations in Africa. The Okavango Delta is one of the world's last great wildernesses, teeming with astoundingly prolific wildlife—including lions, hippos, elephants, and leopards. The mysterious beauty and immensity of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in the Kalahari desert—the largest unbroken stretch of sand on the planet—is awe-inspiring.

Botswana is one of the few continental African countries that consistently receives the “Free” status on Freedom House's annual report. It is one of the most stable democracies in Africa, even though it has been dominated by a single party since it gained independence in 1966. Transparency International's corruption perception index ranks Botswana as the least corrupt country in Africa, standing just below Portugal and South Korea. In 2022, the long-awaited constitutional review process was started; this may include electoral reforms that the opposition claims would make the elections more fair.

There have been several human rights wins in Botswana during the last few years. In 2019, same-sex relations were decriminalized through a High Court ruling, and upheld by the Court of Appeal in late 2021. The mandate and the powers of the Ombudsman were

expanded to include the protection and promotion of human rights, and Botswana ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. On the other hand, there is still room for improvement for media freedom.

Botswana has taken many steps to protect its rhinos, including the deployment of the army to poaching hotspots, dehorning the rhinos, and moving the animals away from vulnerable areas. Their national anti-poaching structure brings together all law enforcement agencies and includes coordinating mechanisms with neighboring countries. Unfortunately, the lack of tourism because of the Covid pandemic had a detrimental impact on these endangered animals, as poachers killed more rhinos—an indication that sustainable tourism has a positive impact on endangered animals conservation efforts. Botswana aims to diversify its economy—which now relies on diamonds—by promoting the sustainable development of the tourism sector while safeguarding the responsible use of natural and cultural resources. This focus on sustainable tourism gained Botswana president Dr. Mokgweetsi E. K. Masisi the Special Recognition Award for Thought-Leadership in Sustainable Tourism Development in Africa in late 2022.

Botswana faces a difficult challenge: finding a good balance between tourism development, conservation efforts, and indigenous land rights. Bridging conservation with indigenous rights remains an issue for the San Bushmen ancestral land in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Ethical Traveler joins the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in urging the Botswana government to enable all ancestral inhabitants of the Kalahari Desert to live there in accordance with their hunting and gathering traditions, while respecting wildlife and providing the San Bushmen with essential services.

## **CABO VERDE**

This spectacular island chain boasts a captivating mix of mountains, beaches, peaceful seaside villages, green valleys filled with flowers and sugar cane, and surreal volcanic landscapes.

Cabo Verde is a regular on our Ethical Destinations list. It is the best-scoring African country on Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World report, and scores better than several developed countries—including the United States, Spain, and France. It is a stable democracy with competitive elections and periodic transfers of power between rival

parties. Civil liberties are generally protected, and recent human rights progress includes policies against, and a decrease in, child labor.

Like many of their fellow island states, Cabo Verde is a frontrunner in environmental issues (though the pandemic affected its goals of reaching 100% renewable energy). Still, Cabo Verde is estimated to reach 50% renewable energy by 2030, placing it among the top 20 countries to sustainably mitigate climate change.

One of Cabo Verde's greatest challenges is marine life protection. Less than 1% of Cabo Verde's marine life is effectively protected. As a result, over 20% of Cabo Verde marine life currently listed on the IUCN Red List is at greater risk of extinction. But progress has been made. In 2018, Cabo Verde criminalized the killing, trade, and consumption of sea turtles. These laws, along with conservation efforts from local residents and international organizations, have led to a dramatic rise in nesting female turtles. Cabo Verde's environment ministry reported that nest numbers of the loggerhead turtles increased dramatically—from 25,394 in 2016 to 288,506 in 2021. Furthermore environmental and conservation initiatives have started along the islands, educating and targeting tourists, tourist agencies, the labor force, and local stakeholders. One of these is by the Maio Biodiversity Foundation, which organized a group of community members as “Guardians of the Sea.” Members voluntarily take on the responsibility of patrolling the coastline and reporting any infractions (such as poaching or overfishing) during their fishing activities.

## **CHILE**

From the driest desert in the world to the eternal ice and inverted waterfalls of its glacial fields, Chile is a land of dramatic contrasts. It offers some of the most pristine and diverse natural landscapes on our planet.

Chile has been a stable democracy since the return of civilian rule in 1990, and has long been among the highest scoring countries on Freedom House's Freedom in the World rankings. In 2022, it scored even higher than in 2021. But Chile has experienced several waves of social unrest in the past decade, which is one of the reasons it has not made it onto our Best Ethical Destinations list since 2017. After the nationwide protests against inequality and poor government services that began in 2019, a constitutional referendum and presidential elections were held in 2020 and 2021. A majority of Chileans voted in favor of replacing the dictatorship-era Constitution, electing a very progressive president. Gabriel Boric was a leader in the student protests of 2011-2013 and is one of the politicians who negotiated the agreement that paved the way for a referendum to change



the Constitution during the period of social unrest. His Cabinet is the first in the Americas where more than half of its members are women, and includes the first openly LGBTQ ministers in Chile's history. Boric has proved eager to enact positive changes, but a growing opposition considers him too left-leaning and has made it hard for him to get things done. The proposal for a progressive new Constitution was voted down as too radical by a majority of Chileans in September 2022. In January 2023, a bill was approved to launch a new constituent process.

On the environmental front, Chile has made considerable progress. In 2022, the Chilean government approved a new framework law on climate change that includes various long-term adaptation and mitigation strategies. The most recent Climatescope report placed Chile first among emerging markets, and ninth in the general ranking for investment in clean energy. The current government, as Chile's energy minister Diego Pardow claims, seems set "to continue leading the way in the development of renewable energies; our technical renewable potential is among the best in the world." Recent conservation efforts seem to be paying off; the Mapoche River, which cuts through the capital of Santiago, is being transformed from a wastewater dump to an urban refuge for birds, fish, and flowers.

One challenge remaining for Chile is with the Indigenous Mapuche in the Araucanía region. Grievances regarding land rights have resulted in intermittent violence for many years. A state of emergency had to be extended despite President Boric's promise to deal with this problem; critics claim he underestimated the complexity of the situation. Ethical Traveler hopes a sustainable solution can be found and included in the new Constitution, allowing Chile to move forward in the right direction.

## **COSTA RICA**

Widely considered the loveliest country in Central America, Costa Rica offers a verdant landscape rich with wildlife and diverse ecosystems. Immaculate beaches, misty volcanic peaks, bat-filled caves, and lush national parks lure travelers from around the world. Costa Rica has a long history of democratic stability, with a multiparty political system and regular rotations of power through credible elections. Civil and political rights are generally respected, though presidents have at times been implicated in corruption scandals. Transparency International, however, reports that Costa Rica's corruption perception score has improved since 2020. Among remaining concerns, indigenous people still face discrimination, and land disputes involving their communities persist.

Costa Rica's ongoing commitment to environmental conservation has earned it international recognition. In 2022, more than 900 coral colonies were restored in an initiative to protect marine biodiversity. As part of the National Tourism Plan for 2022-2027, the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo aims to promote sustainable tourism and the fight against climate change. The Tourism Institute also developed a certification to help tourists identify businesses that have installed sustainable practices to positively impact the environment and community. In November 2021, the president signed into law new protections for Cocos Island National Park. This means that Costa Rica now protects 30% of its oceans—a major leap that puts it nine years ahead of a global deadline to protect nearly a third of the world's land and sea.

In the past, Costa Rica came under fire for alleged violation of international fishing laws, threatening the populations of endangered sharks. In November 2022, Costa Rica signed a binding Joint Actions Agreement to promote the sustainable management of ecosystems and shark species, demonstrating that the country is complying with local and international regulations. Joint activities will be promoted for the period 2022-2025 to stimulate research and information to conserve and improve the management of these species and their habitats. Organizations such as Misión Tiburón are increasing shark protection, including scalloped hammerhead sharks, and preliminary evidence shows that shark numbers in the area are recovering.

Animal rights are supported by hidden cameras in wildlife refuges to help preserve endangered species, and the *Stop Animal Selfies* campaign, promoted by the government and other organizations, raises awareness among tourists about the cruelty involved in staging photos with wild animals.

Several advances in human rights have occurred during the past few years. Costa Rica was the first Central American country to allow same-sex marriage. In 2021, the president signed a bill expanding the definition of femicide and increasing the penalties for those convicted of the crime. In November 2022, a UN expert welcomed Costa Rica's steps to eliminate contemporary forms of slavery, but urged the government and businesses to do more to ensure that marginalized groups are not exploited. A Migratory Traceability System and Code of Conduct to prevent commercial sexual exploitation also demonstrate Costa Rica's commitment to curtail these practices. In 2020, the government made significant advancements in eliminating child labor by ratifying the Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention of 1930.

## **MONGOLIA**

From the windswept Gobi Desert to the majestic Altai Mountains, Mongolia is a land of extremes. Its abundant wildlife includes double-humped camels, snow leopards, and white-patch gazelles. Scattered with nomad tents and remote temples, it has been described as a place where “you can lose yourself in quietude.”

Mongolia has been a democracy since the early 1990s, and Freedom House ranks it high in political rights and civil liberties. In November 2019, its Parliament enacted constitutional amendments to reduce interference in executive functions and cut the president’s term from eight years to six. In 2021, President Khürelsükh announced he would relinquish the authority to appoint judges so as to allow for greater judicial independence. In December 2022, protestors stormed the capital to denounce corruption in the country’s coal trade; in response, the government vowed to cease years of shady business deals, promising to auction coal rather than sell directly to buyers.

Mining continues to be an issue. The country cannot yet afford to move away from it, as it accounts for 23% of Mongolia’s GDP. Additionally, climate change is hurting agriculture and livestock herding, the traditional bedrocks of the economy. But progress is being made. The Gobi has excellent conditions for renewable energy and is poised to be a site for significant investment. Solar and wind farms are popping up in some provinces, reflecting Mongolia’s commitment to reduce its reliance on coal power under the State Policy on Energy 2015-2030. Recommendations from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) were incorporated into the environmental impact assessment law, and TNC developed a national Mitigation Design Tool to determine how to offset the impacts of mining and oil development. By 2030, Mongolia will create a national mining mitigation system while funding the protection and sustainable management of critical lands.

Air pollution still plagues the capital of Ulaanbaatar, sometimes exceeding the WHO standard by 30 to 40 times. But in April 2020, with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank, funding was approved to install the world’s largest Battery Energy Storage System, set to be completed in 2024. The project would supply clean power charged by renewable electricity, and integrate additional renewable energy strategies.

In March 2021, Mongolia accepted Amnesty’s recommendations to establish an independent mechanism to prevent or investigate any cases of torture or ill-treatment

against individuals, and to ensure the independence of the judiciary, legal protection for human rights defenders, and economic, social, and cultural rights.

Ethical Traveler hopes that Mongolia will support a proposed law protecting animal rights, on behalf of the thousands of stray animals that roam the steppes and face the constant threat of culling.

## **PALAU**

Palau is renowned for its emerald forests and turquoise lagoons, epic scuba diving sites, surreal Jellyfish Lake, and Thousand Man Cave—all of which (and more) have earned Palau status as a UNESCO destination. The honor is taken seriously; upon entry, visitors must sign a passport pledge to act in an ecologically and culturally responsible way.

Palau's republic holds democratic elections, and the government determines and implements policy without undue interference. The judiciary and media are independent, with civil liberties generally upheld. High-ranking public officials have faced corruption charges, several have been convicted, and lawmakers continue to deliberate on strategies to deal with corruption more effectively. The 2021 U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report noted government efforts to combat human trafficking, including charging a government official with labor trafficking; however, the report also noted that the government lacked standard operating procedures for identifying trafficking victims and did not investigate potential violations faced by foreign workers.

Palau continues to be a leader in promoting environmental health. Its National Marine Sanctuary, home to more than 1,300 species of fish and 700 species of coral, is one of the world's largest and most ambitious marine protected areas, safeguarding nearly all of the island nation's waters. In September 2020, the Palau National Marine Sanctuary and the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa became Sister Sanctuaries, aiming to strengthen the partnerships between small island states seeking to protect large areas of their oceans and facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources. Palau's tourism laws crack down on non-compliant tour operators, and in 2020, banned reef-toxic sunscreens to stop chemical pollution from harming its famed corals. Still, further efforts are needed to address issues such as overfishing, sedimentation, and pollution.

While homosexuality is legal in Palau, same-sex marriage is not, even though the country's president wants to rescind this constitutional ban. Protections in employment

and housing discrimination are also weak. Similarly, more needs to be done to achieve gender equality, with women underrepresented in congressional and leadership positions. To counter this trend, in October 2022, the U.S. Department of State and Taiwan partnered with the Grameen Foundation to launch a three-year effort intended to increase women entrepreneurs in Palau and other island nations.

## **SEYCHELLES**

An ecological wonderland of coral and granite islands scattered across the Indian Ocean, Seychelles is famed for its pristine beaches, majestic cliffs, palm-fringed jungles, and azure waters. Many of the islands host populations of endemic plants, birds, and mammals.

Seychelles has seen an increase in political pluralism in recent years. In October 2020, in a hallmark of the nation's democracy, Wavel Ramkalawan won the presidency in the first peaceful transfer of presidential power since independence in 1976. Freedom House categorizes Seychelles as free, and the Human Freedom Index ranks it as 44 out of 165. In 2022, Transparency International listed Seychelles as Sub-Saharan Africa's least corrupt country for the fifth consecutive year.

Seychelles continues to strive for environmental protection. In December 2022, the leadership inaugurated its second clean energy project, a solar PV plant with battery storage. This system is estimated to save approximately two million liters of fuel annually and offset 6,000 tons of carbon dioxide. Seychelles also created new Marine Protection Areas, in order to reach its goal of protecting 30% of its ocean: An area larger than Germany will be safeguarded to develop sustainably and adapt to climate change. Seychelles also finances progressive fisheries projects, making it the world's first country to utilize capital markets for funding the sustainable use of marine resources.

In social welfare, Seychelles has the second-highest human development ranking in the African region. All citizens have access to electricity and free medical services. Still, the lack of investigation into and accountability for gender-based violence and violence against children, as well as child labor, remain troublesome issues. Despite laws ensuring fundamental rights and living standards, children are vulnerable to serious risks that these laws fail to carefully assess. However, Seychelles is actively working on strengthening its social protection systems.

While homosexuality is legal in Seychelles, gay marriage is not. There is no protection against housing discrimination and limited protection in employment. But as LGBTQ rights have advanced within the U.N. system, Seychelles—unlike the U.N. African group—has actively supported the mandate for an independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity. Further evidence of progress came during a July 2022 meeting between President Ramkalawan and the advocacy organization LGBT I Sey. That group also launched its first film festival to mark Pride Month and continues to lobby for hate crime legislation.

## **TIMOR-LESTE**

Timor-Leste is a new travel destination, still very much off the beaten path. It offers great natural beauty, a rich history, and unique cultural experiences. Visitors can explore ancient ruins, hike through lush forests or rugged mountains, relax on pristine beaches, or discover the country's colorful and abundant marine life.

In the 20 years since independence, Timor-Leste has made impressive strides in economic development and institution building. Life expectancy has increased by more than 10 years. Yet it is still a fragile, low-income country with a large fraction of its population facing chronic food insecurity. There is a pressing need to diversify its economy, as the main income source—its active oil industry—is nearly depleted.

Timor-Leste could benefit immensely from sustainable tourism. With expansive healthy reefs, beautiful forests, and fascinating animals, Timor-Leste holds great potential for a travel and tourism economy that would create much-needed jobs and income. Sustainable tourism could also contribute to the protection and management of the environment, as most of the country's resources are now directed to other imperatives such as health, education, and infrastructure. Conservation International is already working directly with communities, as well as with local and national governments, to create the building blocks for a national protected area system.

One hopeful example is the island of Atauro, where communities are reviving traditional Timorese land management laws (known as *Tara Bandu*) while developing community-based tourism initiatives to preserve the Coral Triangle: the most biodiverse and biologically complex marine ecosystem on the planet, spanning parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste.

While tourism is still in its infancy, homestay initiatives and tourism activities are already providing additional income to some local fishermen, and 12 Marine Protected Areas have been established to protect the reef's extraordinary biodiversity. For now, the government strongly focuses on promoting community-based marine tourism; it recently rejected an offer from a US company to build a casino resort on Atauro. But as its oil reserves dry up, the pressure to allow lucrative resorts will become harder to resist.

While Timor-Leste's democratic institutions remain vulnerable, it has held competitive elections and undergone peaceful transfers of power. A new anti-corruption law, including new rules on wealth and asset declarations and protections for whistleblowers, came into force in 2021. According to Reporters Without Borders, Timor-Leste's media are among the freest in the region—but while journalists are usually free to report the news, they are still vulnerable to political pressure. In July 2022, the government accepted the Human Rights Council recommendations to revise its media law and ensure a safe, secure, and enabling environment for journalists.

Lastly, female representation in Timor-Leste's Parliament and government is one of the highest among developing countries. The education of women has also taken a huge leap, demonstrated by the higher number of women than men currently studying medicine.

### **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 2019 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 reported 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 can and should be conducted remotely. But occasional air travel to increase one's understanding of the

world, and connect directly with other 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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For invaluable assistance with research and writing, we thank Professor Heather Duplaisir and her students in the Sustainable Hospitality Management Program at California State University Monterey Bay and in the Public Health and Recreation Department at San Jose State University: Karen Aguirre, Tatum Bachmeier, Danae Bravo, Kristina Burk, Kalanna Eldridge, Maureen Grzan-Pieracci, Sydney Hammett, Evan Huang, Matt Kwong, Julian Lopez, Michael Meyer, Samuel Nieves, Jack Oliver, Joanne Rivera Arce, Kimberly Romero-Gomez, and Maria Talania.

Our gratitude to the Earth Island Institute, Kuumba Associates, Nancy Lindborg, AltruVistas, Steve Brock, Leah Sirkin, and Book Passage. Special thanks to longtime supporters Don George, Robert Lanquar, Kathryn Petrocelli, Kelly O’Brien and Martha Watson, Barbara and Gary Haber, Jim Kelly, Pat & Marty Butensky, and Kathryn Hall.



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