

Top 10 Ecotourist Hotspots

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In an age when an earth-friendly lifestyle is gaining momentum, it's no surprise that ecotourism is also on the rise. These 10 hotspots will help you choose which corner of the globe to visit.

By ShermansTravel Editorial Staff

Ecotourism has seen a tremendous surge in popularity in recent years and, in honor of Earth Day (April 22, this year), our editors have rounded up our top ecotourist hotspots to get you thinking green. Two on our list pack substantial environmental pedigree (the [Amazon](#) and [Galapagos](#)), but you'll also find some up-and-comers here you may not have heard of, like the Caribbean island of [Dominica](#), which is doing good work of turning itself into the region's primo environmental destination; Australia's [Blue Mountains](#), recently designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site; and [Botswana](#), a model of ecotourism in Africa.

Since hiking (and staying at eco-friendly lodges in the midst of the rainforest) are quite possibly the finest aspects of an ecotourist holiday, you'll be able to do just that at several of our favorites, including [Borneo](#) and [Costa Rica](#). Of course, being able to get up close to penguins and glaciers is also an extremely popular eco-activity—[Alaska](#) and [Antarctica](#) offer intrepid travelers the chance experience both from the deck of a ship or an inflatable zodiac. Finally, if sleeping in the great outdoors and trekking to some of the world's highest plateaus are your recipe for ecotourist nirvana, plan a camping trek in the Himalayas—and be sure to take your trash back to base camp with you. For a list of environmentally friendly tour operators, hotels, and more, visit the International Ecotourism Society website (www.ecotourism.org).

1. Alaska

Referred to as "The Great Land," [Alaska](#) is home to soaring snow-capped mountains, sprawling tundra, and a remote Arctic north—all of which shelter a wide range of wildlife that is otherwise threatened or endangered in the continental United States. Humpback whales, brown bears, lynx, sea otters, sea lions, bald eagles, and blue whales are just some of the vulnerable species protected here; in many parts, caribou and moose outnumber people and the echo of a grizzly's roar can be heard in the distance. With over 100 state parks to explore, Alaska's vast, pristine wilderness beckons naturalists who can rejoice in all its splendors, whether it's cruising through majestic [Kenai Fjords National Park](#), sailing past colossal glaciers in [Glacier Bay National Park](#), glimpsing whale flukes slapping the water, or rafting down the Copper River while bald eagles soar overhead. The government's proposal to drill for oil in the state's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has recently brought even more attention to this beautiful natural resource; visit yourself to see first-hand why environmentalists would prefer to leave it untapped—you're sure to share their protectionist convictions.

2. The Amazon

Often described as the "Lungs of our Planet"—as it alone produces 20% of the earth's oxygen—the remarkable [Amazon](#) rainforest surrounds the world's largest river system and supports thousands of plant, bird, mammal, and aquatic species in the 1.2 billion acres it occupies. While it stretches across several South American countries, the Amazon's densest section (60%) is found in [Brazil](#), where eco-lovers can explore a terrific mosaic of ecosystems: You can literally walk among the treetops in [Bahia's](#) Atlantic forest, along a 66-foot-high suspension bridge surrounded by scores of

wildlife, sights and sounds; it's the ultimate canopy tour for those who want to really understand how the rainforest works. Back down below, you can rent a canoe and paddle down the eponymous river, past local *ribereños* (shore dwellers); fish for piranha (which is apparently quite tasty); hike along the Medicine Trail that showcases the plants favored by shamans and modern medicine; or venture out on a bird-watching excursion. Come nightfall, the forest speaks for itself, emitting a symphony of sounds beneath a starlit sky—no doubt, one of nature's finest spectacles.

3. Antarctica

An Antarctic winter may not readily conjure up images of vacation paradise, and rightly so—imagine a continent surrounded by densely packed ice, near-perpetual darkness, unpredictable blizzards, and temperatures that dip as low as -90° F. With the seasons flipped, wintertime in the Northern Hemisphere is as close to summer as it will ever be on the White Continent, and also the only time of year when voyaging to this last great frontier is possible, as the warmer weather melts the ice barriers that otherwise block access to [Antarctica's](#) savage landscapes and exotic wildlife. More than 20,000 tourists now head to the South Pole each year to witness its monumental glaciers and icebergs, comical penguins and majestic whales. Cruising is the most popular way to get there, on lines like Holland America and Princess, which operate sailings from [Argentina](#) or [New Zealand](#). Both lines are also members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, a voluntary organization created in 1991 that aims to limit the impact of tourism on the continent by adhering to strict environmental guidelines.

4. Blue Mountains

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000, Australia's [Greater Blue Mountains Area](#) is a particularly popular destination for Sydneysiders seeking to trade in the buzz of the city for the calm of the great outdoors. A mere 90-minute car ride from [Sydney](#), the Blue Mountains, named for the blue hue cast by the eucalyptus oil produced by the region's native trees, cover some 550 square miles of valleys, swamps, rocky outcroppings and narrow canyons—topped off by stellar vantage points from which to ogle [Australia's](#) superlative beauty. A handful of national parks and reserves comprise the area, hosting dozens of trails through breathtaking terrain loaded with unique flora (don't miss the ancient Wollemi pine, one of the world's rarest species) and fauna (some 400 species, including koalas, call the Blue Mountains home). Rock climbing, mountain biking, rappelling, canoeing and horseback riding are just a few of the activities—aside from bushwalking—to enjoy here in the wild, though the prospect of relaxing and breathing in the fresh mountain air at one of the area's many eco-friendly lodges and cabins can be equally enticing.

5. Borneo

You may remember this eco hotspot from the first ever Survivor series, when it hosted winner Richard Hatch, host Jeff Probst, and crew. More recently, this Malaysian island made headlines after a mysterious never-before-seen catlike animal was discovered here in late 2005. Whichever accolade piques your interest, [Borneo](#) has plenty to captivate you when you're not searching for the world's newest carnivore or playing at your own tribal council. The slopes of Mount Kinabalu (South East Asia's tallest mountain) and the dense forest trails of the Bario Loop offer prime hiking terrain; mangroves and wetlands provide lush aquatic vistas; and the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre will make anyone go ape. For an all-out eco-friendly getaway, it's hard to beat a stay at the award-winning Sukau Rainforest Lodge, a completely self-sufficient hotel

subsisting on rainwater and solar energy; fishing platforms, bird- and wildlife-viewing decks, electric-motor boats, and a 1500-foot-long Hornbill Boardwalk—that affords stellar viewings of the resident elephants that routinely stroll around the back of the lodge—are just some of the natural bounty you can expect.

6. Botswana

Take a walk on the wild side, eco-style, with a trip to Africa's backcountry. With the wide open Savannah plains stretching to the horizon, sprawling deserts, riverine forests, transient lakes, salt pans and a captivating display of wildlife, [Botswana](#) offers timeless natural beauty and rightly deserves its reputation as the "Jewel of Africa." Safaris take you into the northern region, where unspoiled wilderness protects the land's spectacular range of wildlife: Elephant herds, leopards, lions, zebras, hippos, white rhinos and chacma baboons are just some of the glorious creatures you will encounter here. A plethora of environment-friendly resorts have sprouted up along the Savannah, making it easy for travelers (albeit well-heeled ones) to revel in eco-fantasy stays; more affordable options are found in the Mokolodi Nature Reserve.

7. Costa Rica

[Costa Rica](#)'s renowned back-to-nature ethos has helped make the country virtually synonymous with the concept of ecotourism. Adroitly leveraging the extraordinary natural and cultural wealth it packs into its small swath of Central American territory, it's more than held true to the moniker Christopher Columbus gave it—Costa Rica meaning "Rich Coast." Said riches include four active (but not dangerous) volcanoes; an abundance of fecund rainforests (with some so high up they're actually wreathed in clouds); thermal hot springs; more than 750 miles of fetching and often-uncrowded beaches, especially along the Pacific coast; the Amazon-like [Tortuguero](#) preserve complete with jungle lodges; and abundant wildlife from monkeys to sea tortoises. Plenty of adventure outfitters will take you birding, whitewater rafting, hiking, biking, horseback riding, fishing, scuba diving, rock-climbing, sky diving, and lots more—with choices like these, you'll need to harness your natural energies, too.

8. Dominica

Set between Martinique and Guadeloupe, the lush island of [Dominica](#) aka "The Nature Island of the Caribbean" is easily our top Caribbean eco pick. The island's ecotourism efforts kicked off in 1997, when it participated in Green Globe (the first country in the Caribbean to do so), and its recent title of "Whale Watching Capital of the Caribbean" only adds heft to its vaunted eco status. Indeed, the island is often visited by 40-ton whales, who like to socialize, mate, and play off its shores—and visitors are promised a 90% chance of spotting one up close. Major draws such as this, combined with some of the Caribbean's best diving, and some of its most pristine rainforests—where superb hiking trails lead to a eerie boiling lake, gorgeous waterfalls, and more—are what make the island such an ecotourist haven. It's especially easy being green here since, at the end of the day, you can ease your tired muscles in the island's natural hot springs and stay in secluded rainforest lodges, suffused by the sounds of the jungle.

9. Galapagos Islands

Visiting the Galapagos is the eco-traveler equivalent of making a pilgrimage to Mecca. When Darwin visited these unspoiled islands 620 miles off the coast of Ecuador in 1835, he was so struck by the variation in life-forms he saw here that he went on to posit his theory of evolution. Even two centuries later, this incredible archipelago remains home to some of the planet's most unique creatures—no wonder, then, that the chain was declared the world's first Natural World Heritage Site in 1978 (it went on to become a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1984). Environmentalists and eco-conscious travelers alike have dedicated themselves to preserving the delicate and precious ecosystems found on the 13 major islands here (as well as those on the chain's 8 smaller isles and 40 atolls); as a result some 97% of the Galapagos is in fact protected by the Galapagos National Park Service. You might be surprised to learn that you can actually swim with sea lions and penguins here—but don't expect to jet-ski or use flash photography.

10. Himalayas

The spectacular Himalayas comprise the highest mountains on earth and boast a surreal terrain of snow-covered peaks shadowed by a myriad of rich cultural and natural landscapes sure to leave a powerful impression. The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, situated between India and China, offers some of the best access to these sublime mountain peaks, where landscapes vary from subtropical valleys (complete with banana trees) to alpine forests (home to grazing yaks). Rustic trail lodges give independent trekkers the option to hike and rest at their own pace; for a truly enriched experience, join one of the popular 5- to 25-day camping treks modeled after the first Nepalese mountaineering expeditions—you'll share your mountain time with an entourage of guides, cooks, and porters. Mt. Everest (in Sagarmatha National Park) and Annapurna (the most popular due to accessibility) are two treks not to