

A large crowd of tourists is seen climbing a massive, wide stone staircase at an ancient ruin. The structure is made of dark, weathered stone blocks. In the background, there are more ruins, including a large building with a prominent archway. The scene is filled with people of various ages and ethnicities, some wearing hats and carrying bags, suggesting a busy tourist destination.

Places Rated

How do 94 World Heritage destinations stack up?

Our panelists grade the condition of places whose star attraction is a site inscribed on the World Heritage List monitored by UNESCO. Some are doing well; others suffer from pollution, poor management, overdevelopment—even, perhaps, from being added to the list.

BY JONATHAN B. TOURTELLOT

Visitors swarm up a shrine at the ancient city of Angkor, a World Heritage site that's become Cambodia's tourism-powered economic engine. At ruins around the world, thousands of visitor foot falls a day now wear down stonework that has survived the ages. As countries hoping for mass tourism seek ever more World Heritage listings, some observers ask whether the coveted status harms a site more than helps it.



Destination Scorecard

Top to Bottom in World Heritage

In 1973, when the U.S. became the first country to sign the World Heritage Convention, the idea was for global recognition to encourage protection of the world's great natural and cultural sites. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) would administer the program, and nations could apply to have a site inscribed on a World Heritage List, if the site was protected and of "outstanding universal value." Tourism traffic wasn't even part of the equation.

It is now. If you look at the destination as a whole—the site plus its neighboring region—tourism management can protect it, or degrade it, often more than any other factor.

World Heritage has been popular. It now totals 830 sites. To see how some of these places are doing, TRAVELER and our National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destina-

tions, with George Washington University, conducted our third Destination Scorecard survey. A panel of 419 experts in sustainable tourism and destination stewardship rated 94 World Heritage destinations (see survey details page 121).

A third of these places appeared in our first scorecard, conducted late in 2003 and published in 2004. Most of their scores have moved only slightly, but a few showed dramatic changes. The Galápagos and the Belizean reef have plunged; St. Petersburg and Guanajuato have surged. In many places, tourist fees help maintain historic sites. But in others, like Angkor, tourism is spiraling out of control. And in the Galápagos, a tradition of deft, sensitive tourism that helped protect the islands for years is now in danger.

The ranked scores that follow, based on a 1-to-100 scale, reflect the experts' opinions, illuminated by representative remarks. To ensure integrity, panelists commented anonymously. No destination rated 90 or more ("unspoiled and likely to remain so"), nor did any fall under 20 ("catastrophic"). All are still worth visiting. Thoughtfully,

ATHEMIOU PANAYIOTIS/GETTY IMAGES; PALANI MOHANARAJU/GETTY IMAGES; (PREVIOUS PAGES)

BEST-RATED DESTINATIONS

Top-notch condition, management, outlook, and local support: a great travel experience.

1. NORWAY: West Fjords (SCORE: 87) Listed only last year, Geirangerfjord and Nærøyfjord earned Norway another top placement on the scorecard. (The "Norwegian fjords" region as a whole scored a first-place 82 in 2004.) Despite some cruise ship crowding at Geiranger in midsummer, panelist enthusiasm is undimmed: "To float into the Geirangerfjord is an astonishing, complete natural experience—steep, lush and rocky canyon walls, endless waterfalls."

2. SPAIN: Alhambra; medieval Granada (SCORE: 81) Once badly overcrowded, the Moorish fortress now rates well for "much improved" handling of its average 7,000 or so visitors a day. Its medieval gateway city, Granada, "retains its historic character with bustle and commerce."

2. FRANCE: Vézelay (SCORE: 81) The monastic church, the hill it sits on, and the picturesque town below evoke 12th-century Burgundy. "Great aesthetic appeal and cultural integrity."

3. NEW ZEALAND: Te Wahipounamu (SCORE: 80) This Maori mouthful is the collective term for the national parks in western South Island (Mount Cook, Fiordland, Westland). "Magnificent wilderness." The locals help keep it so: "There is no issue with local people not protecting it. They are all active protectors."

4. MEXICO: Guanajuato (SCORE: 79) Historic gem of central Mexico, this "charming, peaceful, welcoming city" of colonial architecture and steep, narrow streets has jumped 11 points since 2004, due to care such as "repaving in traditional style." "Culturally and historically interesting, lots of events, good museums." "Not too many gringos."

4. SPAIN: Córdoba (SCORE: 79) The focus of the medieval town is a well-preserved mosque-turned-cathedral that "represents a high point

NORWAY: The attractive port town of Ålesund, a gateway to the Geirangerfjord area, boosts the rating for the region around Norway's newly listed West Fjord's World Heritage site. Ålesund's stunning setting and well-preserved art nouveau buildings add to the fjords' top-rated condition. WORLD HERITAGE NOTE: For any park, reserve, or other World Heritage site, the role played by nearby communities, often called gateways, can help—or hurt—the condition of the protected site, not to mention the quality of your visit.

SEE MANY MORE COMMENTS on each of these destinations at www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

“OLD GRANADA is a wonderful tangle of spice-scented alleys where ancient and modern cultures coexist. As a gateway to the ALHAMBRA, it connects the preserved relic with a living, breathing extension of that era.” —KIMBERLY LISAGOR, TRAVEL JOURNALIST

of Islamic civilization and a period of unusual religious tolerance.” “The beauty of the setting, with the river and rolling hills of olive plantations, enhances the visitor’s experience. Inns and restaurants harmonize with the mosque.”

5. UNITED KINGDOM: City of Bath (SCORE: 78) This “well-kept reserve of Georgian architecture,” named for its Roman baths, gets top marks for preservation, even if overvisited.

5. PORTUGAL: Évora (SCORE: 78) “Everything is fine in Évora.” The medieval and renaissance walled university city presents a model for historic districts anywhere.

DESTINATIONS DOING WELL

A few surmountable problems, but locals and heritage sites together provide sense of place.

6. AUSTRIA: Salzburg historic center (SCORE: 77) Buildings look good, ambience is authentic, tourism “not in your face.” One slight problem: “Overcommercialized Mozart.”

6. FRANCE: Versailles (SCORE: 77) Palace and gardens are still gorgeous, but at peak times the inside can be “a zoo of dueling tours.”

6. CANADA: Old Quebec City (SCORE: 77) “Locals are fully involved, food is amazing, totally safe, historic accommodation, varied in budget, laced with distinctive character.” Others agree, though crowds can detract.

6. ITALY: Siena (SCORE: 77) Despite huge summer crowds, the historic walled city retains both Italian character and Italian residents.

7. BELGIUM: Historic center of Bruges (SCORE: 76) “Architectural and character conservation is excellent,” but “hordes of day visitors.”

7. SWITZERLAND: Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn region (SCORE: 76) Beautiful Alps, well-kept landscapes. Electric trains help keep cars from overwhelming this popular area, but global warming threatens the glaciers.

7. FRANCE: Banks of the Seine, Paris (SCORE: 76) A World Heritage site that embodies the city’s soul. “Outstanding eating, people-watching, and experiences in art and architecture.”

8. FRANCE: Loire Valley (SCORE: 75) Amid the châteaux that are “the pride of the French,” locals still serve authentic food and wine.

8. FRANCE: Historic Avignon (SCORE: 75) “Lively, crowded, and entertaining” complete with a papal palace and an exciting summer festival.

8. ITALY: Assisi (SCORE: 75) Earthquake repairs and restoration are complete. Beautiful, but tourism may overwhelm local character.

8. AUSTRALIA: Uluru (Ayers Rock) (SCORE: 75) Well managed, with good information and an irony: “You feel you understand the culture in a superficial way even after violating the desires of that same culture by climbing the rock.” The gateway resort town is “quite ugly, with inappropriate loud music and fast food.”

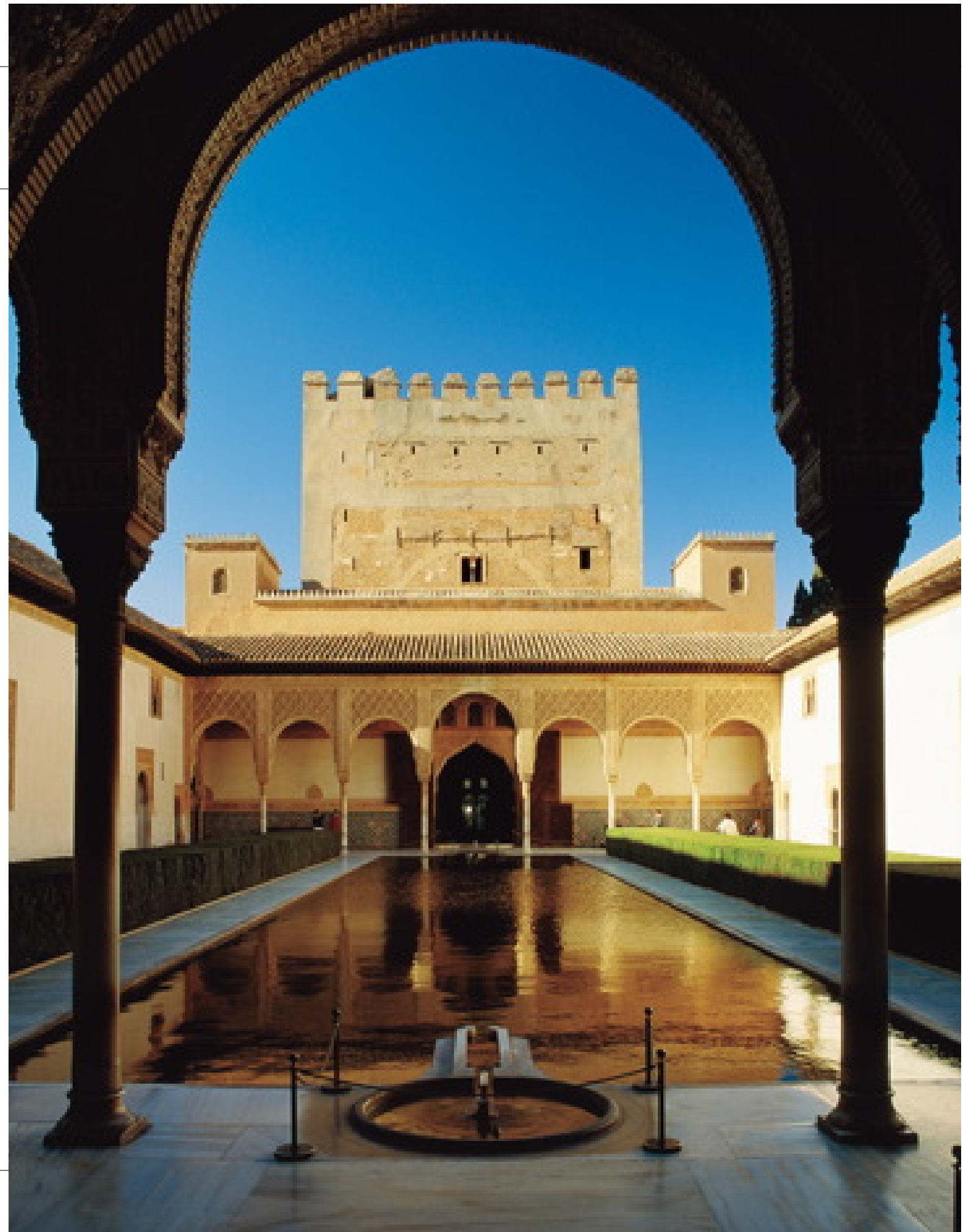
9. JAPAN: Ancient Kyoto (SCORE: 74) A “continuous photo opportunity, pleasing to the eye and spirit.” Shrines vie with modern city buildings.

9. GERMANY: Upper Middle Rhine Valley (SCORE: 74) Historic landscape earns “beautiful” from one panelist, but “a bore” from another.



NEW ZEALAND: A “tramper” admires the Darran Mountains in Fiordland National Park. “Outstanding in every way” said one panelist of the South Island’s western parks. **SPAIN: The Palacio de Comares (right) at the carefully tended Alhambra reflects a respect for the past.** In the 2004 Score card, Spanish coastal destinations rated very badly, but some of the country’s newly surveyed inland historic places earn top honors. **ENGLAND: Sunset tints the Royal Crescent (below), a Georgian contribution to the Anglo-Roman city of Bath’s “beautifully presented” twin heritage.** “The Roman Baths museum is a fascinating highlight.”

OLIVIERO TOSCANI/REUTERS/CONTOUR; GIOVANNI SIMONE/SIPA/RETNA; SUZANNE & NICK GARRAVETTI/IMAGES (LEFT)



MISSING THE POINT

Four myths about World Heritage

Nonsense that keeps great U.S. historic sites off the list.

Innocent-sounding words: "No non-Federal property may be nominated . . . for inclusion on the World Heritage List unless the owner of the property concurs in writing." That provision, enacted by Congress, explains why U.S. World Heritage sites are mainly national parks—no historic districts or cities. For historic Charleston, S.C., or Cape May, N.J., to apply, every single property owner, even that cranky neighbor on the corner, would have to agree. No chance.

Why? Many countries eagerly seek World Heritage inscriptions, for pride and the tourism boost they are assumed to generate. Not the U.S. These myths about World Heritage help explain why.

1. The UN started it. No. The World Heritage Convention is a separate international agreement. Under that agreement the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) administers the program.

2. UNESCO selects the sites. UNESCO has no authority to do that. Countries must

apply to have a site listed. A site has to be under credible protection, as in a park, reserve, or historic district. International councils advise World Heritage Committee members on an application's merit. The members decide yay or nay. It can get political.

3. Sites are under UNESCO rule. A myth perpetuated by some anti-UN groups. UNESCO cannot overrule national sovereignty. The Committee may request to list a site as "In Danger," but even then, the country usually has to agree. The country usually has to agree. The Committee may even delist a site, but has never done so. Critics complain the diplomats are too fearful of the political storm a delisting might trigger.

4. World Heritage was dreamed up by foreigners. Only in part. In fact, World Heritage could be labeled "made in U.S.A." Americans Joseph Fisher and Russell Train first proposed combining cultural with natural sites into a single global program of recognition. The first country to ratify the convention was the U.S.A.

In 1995, boosters in Savannah, Georgia (left), tried to skirt the legal restriction by nominating the city's famed street-and-square system, minus the gracious, privately owned historic houses. The Monuments and Sites council that reviews such applications pointed out that a historic city with no houses wasn't, well, much of a city, was it? No go.—J.B.T.



Fountain in Savannah.

OUR WORLD HERITAGE PARKS

How North America Rated in '05

These U.S. and Canadian national parks also have World Heritage designations. Since they were surveyed only last year, we reprint their ratings from the May/June 2005 Destination Scorecard. As with this year's survey, destinations included both parks and neighboring gateway regions. Over three Scorecard surveys, the thirst-wracked Everglades holds the all-time low rating: 34.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 88 Gwaii Hanaas, B.C. | 63 Mesa Verde, Colo. |
| 78 Gros Morne, Nfld. | 58 Mammoth Cave, Ky. |
| 77 Kootenay/Yoho, B.C. | 56 Yosemite, Calif. |
| 77 Wrangell-St. Elias, Alaska | 55 Banff, Alberta |
| 75 Hawaii Volcanoes, Hawaii | 53 Carlsbad Caverns, N. Mex. |
| 72 Chaco Culture, N. Mex. | 53 Grand Canyon, Ariz. |
| 71 Glacier Bay, Alaska | 51 Yellowstone, Wyo./Mont./Idaho |
| 71 Jasper, Alberta | 40 Great Smoky Mountains, N.C./Tenn. |
| 69 Olympic National Park, Wash. | 34 Everglades, Florida |
| 68 Redwood National Park, Calif. | For Waterton-Glacier, see above right. |

10. NORWAY: Bryggen, Bergen (SCORE: 73) The wharf area's Hanseatic wood buildings make it "one of the world's best-managed urban sites."

10. GREECE: Delphi (SCORE: 73) Well-maintained ancient buildings. "Orchards, mountainsides show little degradation." Town can be tacky.

10. CANADA/U.S.A: Waterton-Glacier parks, Alberta/Montana (SCORE: 73) "Beautiful place, iconic site of the Rockies." Glaciers, though, are succumbing to global warming and the countryside to new settlements: "Ranchettes outside the park disrupt animal movements."

10. POLAND: Krakow (SCORE: 73) The medieval city gets raves, except for tourist overload and "billboards on the main square. Horrid!"

11. AUSTRALIA: Greater Blue Mountains (SCORE: 72) "Gorges, waterfalls, huge eucalypt forests" west of Sydney. Well-managed but menaced by a growing "corridor of settlement."

11. ITALY: Amalfi Coast (SCORE: 72) "Protection and conservation of this beautiful landscape has been a remarkable success." Crowded in summer, with serious traffic congestion.

12. HUNGARY: Budapest (SCORE: 71) Buda Castle quarter, banks of the Danube, and Andrassy Avenue make a "sophisticated urban landscape." The "complex area" needs management and better information for foreign visitors.

12. BRAZIL: Pantanal (SCORE: 71) This great wetland is a rare "blend of cattle ranching with wildlife." *Pantaneiros* must combat siltation.

13. ITALY: Cinque Terre area (SCORE: 70) "Excellent example of Italian landscape protection," the villages on a rugged coast have "spectacular views, harbors, walkways, places to eat."

13. UNITED KINGDOM: Jurassic Coast (SCORE: 70) On the fossiliferous coast of Dorset and east Devon, communities help run "unusually effective visitor centers." Urbanization is a threat.

14. U.S.A: Historic San Juan, Puerto Rico (SCORE: 69) "Great photo ops, food, music, and local color," but some panelists see the "trinket paradise" of a "cruise-ship tourist shopping mall."

14. ISRAEL: Masada (SCORE: 69) The site of the Israelites' last stand against Rome overlooks a shrinking Dead Sea. Well cared for, if touristy.

14. CHILE: Rapa Nui (Easter Island) (SCORE: 69) "The *Moaï*s (statues) are well conserved," the remote location prevents crowding, but would "suffer from proposed casino gambling."

14. MEXICO: Oaxaca and Monte Albán (SCORE: 69) Lively culture, archaeology, and historic sites

"THE ARCHITECTURE OF OAXACA, including Monte Albán, is well preserved and makes this area wonderful for walking. It seems, however, that the growth of tourism is compromising some of the character of the town." —DR. EDWARD JACKIEWICZ, GEOGRAPHER



have been withstanding rising tourist numbers.

15. CROATIA: Dubrovnik (SCORE: 68) While still "a classic success story of restoration," the fortress city has slipped slightly since 2004 due to growing panelist concern about "overvisitation, particularly when multiple cruise ships arrive."

15. LATVIA: Riga (SCORE: 68) Vital downtown amid historic art nouveau facades. Ugly signage is creeping in as tourism booms.

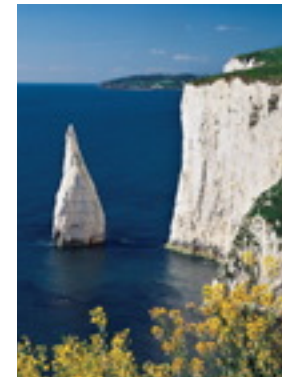
15. SYRIA: Aleppo (SCORE: 68) "The old city, castle, market, and mosque form a fabulous setting." The authentic city, though, comes with "excessive traffic, air pollution, and garbage."

DESTINATIONS RATED SO-SO

Stewardship in each of these places is a mixed bag of successes and worries.

16. INDIA: Ellora and Ajanta Caves (SCORE: 67) Ellora's sculpture and Ajanta's paintings "benefit from recently improved site management," but you don't learn much about their role in religious history and the local rural landscape.

16. SOUTH AFRICA: Cape Floral Region (SCORE: 67) A great natural setting, botanical gardens



FRANCE: Château de Chambord (left) exemplifies the allure of the Loire Valley and its châteaux, where "aesthetic appeal is very high."

ENGLAND: The Pinnacle (above) accents Dorset's steep, fossil-rich Jurassic Coast. Panelists praised community involvement there but found conservation a bit weak.

MEXICO: Oaxaca (below) "focuses on the cultural jewels of the region: fine arts and ancient traditions, indigenous languages, cuisine." Despite high-volume tourism, "Oaxaca's commercial success depends on its continued self-preservation. That will help safeguard its future."



CHICHÉN ITZÁ:
“The archeological site itself is spectacular, even though they are determined to make it Disney Mexico.”

—MARK WILLUHN,
DIRECTOR, MESOAMERICAN
ECOTOURISM ALLIANCE



MEXICO: Night lights bathe the pyramid of Kukulcan, a practice some panelists call garish and touristy. (One wonders what the original owners would have done, had they had electricity.)
TANZANIA: Safari visitors watch wildebeests on the Serengeti (right). In no other ecosystem “is the relationship between predator and prey so well displayed.”
GREECE: A fisherman by the harbor at Rhodes (opposite) enjoys solitude away from the daily dose of summer tourists, “many not oriented to heritage values,” as one panelist mildly states it.
WORLD HERITAGE NOTE: Historic centers like Rhodes, Dubrovnik, Riga, and many others struggle to retain authenticity in the face of tourist crowds, especially where large cruise ships call.

17. CHINA: Qin Emperor Mausoleum, Xian (SCORE: 66) The terra-cotta warriors are now well conserved and heavily visited. “As a mass tourism site, it works very well,” insists one panelist, but many disagree. “A theme park with some archaeology amid a lot of concrete.”

17. SPAIN: Toledo (SCORE: 66) The historic walled city earns praise for restored or reconstructed buildings, but: “overcommercialized and makes the visitor feel as if in a history shopping mall.”

17. ARGENTINA: Valdés Peninsula (SCORE: 66) “This maritime Serengeti” has good ecologies and local support, but its whales and penguins now see 175,000 visitors a year, near capacity.

17. SRI LANKA: Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, and Dambulla (SCORE: 66) The country’s “cultural triangle” of one religious and two archaeological sites is “underdeveloped” for visitors. “A very poor presentation of some very great sites.”

18. CZECH REPUBLIC: Historic Prague (SCORE: 65) Opinion is firmly divided here: “So packed with tourists I’m not sure it’s worth going there” vs. “a magical city, coping very well.”

18. GERMANY: Cologne Cathedral area (SCORE: 65) The issue: “Postwar reconstruction leaves the cathedral isolated in a wilderness of concrete.”

18. ITALY: Florence (SCORE: 65) “Despite being overrun with tourists, it has still managed to maintain its Renaissance charm.” Panelists disagree only on the crowding-to-charm ratio.

18. TURKEY: Cappadocia (SCORE: 65) Panelists call the habitations and churches carved into the soft volcanic tuff of the Göreme Valley “well preserved” and liked the way the hotels and restaurants lodged in them blend into the landscape. Worries: extensive tourism and the fast-eroding, “rapidly deteriorating tuff.”



19. ZAMBIA: Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls (SCORE: 64) The Zambian side has benefited from troubles in Zimbabwe. The town of Livingstone is “pleasant” but “under-managed, given its cultural importance” with “little information about local history and traditions.”

19. AUSTRALIA: Great Barrier Reef (SCORE: 64) “Strong environmental management” bolstered by new no-fishing zones. Global warming and “pollution from the mainland” remain threats.

20. MOROCCO: Marrakech medina (SCORE: 63) “Storytellers and teeth pullers” still work there. But: “Morocco is really trying to boost mass tourism. They could go too far.”

20. GREECE: Medieval city of Rhodes (SCORE: 63) Good marks for conserving buildings; bad for overwhelming summer tourism. “An attractive place to find oneself only in off-season.”

20. U.S.A.: Pueblo de Taos, N. Mex. (SCORE: 63) Panelists liked Native American control of the pueblo, but not necessarily its execution: “Feels somewhat like a museum, not a community.” In the Taos region generally, “A new ‘quaintness’ typified by commercial retail bundled in adobe now dominates the landscape.”

20. CROATIA: Diocletian’s Palace, Split (SCORE: 63) The Roman emperor’s palace “where people live, work, and get married” hosts concerts and cafés. Tourist overcrowding threatens.

21. FRANCE: Mont-St-Michel (SCORE: 62) As in 2004, the abbey isle awaits removal of causeway parking and reduced silt flow into the bay.

21. UGANDA: Bwindi Impenetrable Forest (SCORE: 62) “Outstanding management of the national park and the gorilla safari operations” as well as good local involvement, contend with “political threats and insecurity on the border.”

DALLAS AND JOHN HEWITT/CORBIS (TOP LEFT); JONATHAN & ANDBEA SCOTT/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); VICTOR SPINELZ/ONIA PRESS (BOTTOM)



22. TANZANIA: Serengeti Plain (SCORE: 61) Still “one of the world’s last great wilderness areas,” with mixed reviews on safari practices, and some concern for Maasai impacts and benefits.

22. HONDURAS: Copán (SCORE: 61) Good reviews but criticism of presentation of the archaeological Maya site. Next door, “Copán Ruinas has become quite a nice low-key tourist town.”

22. ARGENTINA/BRAZIL: Iguazú area (SCORE: 61) National parks at the “most impressive waterfall in the world” form “an island of nature in a sea of agriculture.” Chopper flights draw barbs.

22. PORTUGAL: Sintra (SCORE: 61) “Struggling to accommodate the number of day visitors,” yet palaces, gardens, and forests get good reviews.

22. TUNISIA: Carthage (SCORE: 61) The archaeological site near Tunis is getting “more proactively developed for tourists.” Without better presentation, it seems just “a pile of old rocks.”

22. BRAZIL: Salvador historic center (SCORE: 61) The Pelourinho district “still retains enormous

charm.” Mixed marks for good historic buildings, live music, “interesting cultural demonstrations,” but fears of getting “Disneyesque.”

23. CHINA: Suzhou gardens and town (SCORE: 60) “Gardens themselves are well protected, but packed in high season.” They vie with “inappropriate urban development” that razed old canals, towpaths, and charming back streets.

23. SAINT LUCIA: The Pitons (SCORE: 60) Better environmental controls despite “poorly concocted tourism ventures.” Poverty an issue.

23. JORDAN: Petra (SCORE: 60) “No management plan,” “too many touts,” “poor information.” “Wadi Musa remains a sprawling mess.” Even so, Petra is “still awe-inspiring.” You get “opportunities to interact with nomadic Bedouin.”

24. TANZANIA: Kilimanjaro (SCORE: 59) Its snows are melting, but the park is in good shape, save for “huge trash heaps” on at least one route.

24. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: Old Bridge area of Mostar (SCORE: 59) Celebrated icon of a

THE PANELISTS’ TASK
About this Survey

Evaluating an entire destination—both site and gateway—requires weighing such subtle issues as aesthetics and cultural integrity as well as balancing good points against bad. Since simple numerical measures cannot do justice to the task, we turn to informed human judgment: a panel of 419 well-traveled experts in a variety of fields—ecology, sustainable tourism, geography, site management, travel writing and photography, historic preservation, indigenous cultures, archaeology.

We asked panelists to evaluate just the places with which they were familiar, using six criteria weighted according to importance: 1) environmental and ecological quality; 2) social and cultural integrity; 3) condition of historic buildings and archaeological sites; 4) aesthetic appeal; 5) quality of tourism management; and 6) overall outlook for the future.

Experts first aired points of view on each destination (anonymously, to ensure objectivity). After reading one another’s remarks—a variation on a research tool called the Delphi technique—panelists submitted their final stewardship scores. For a list of panelists, see www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

The resulting Stewardship Index rating is an average of informed judgments about each place as a whole—all its many faces. Like the cards that Olympic judges hold up, our experts’ scores reflect both measurable factors and the intangibles of style, aesthetics, and culture. And like an athlete, each destination has a chance to improve.

To help, TRAVELER is working on a pilot project with the UN Foundation to inform Cancún tourists about the Yucatán’s World Heritage sites and visiting them in ways that promote better care.—J.B.T.

“From a distance, as you come along the coast, MONT-ST-MICHEL appears to float on the horizon. It is magical. As you approach it the magic gives way to clutter.”

—BRENDA BARRETT, U.S. NATIONAL PARK HERITAGE AREAS

FRANCE: The atmospheric abbey of Mont-St-Michel (right) rises from the tidal flats of the English Channel anchored by a not-so-atmospheric causeway of macadam. Plans call for moving the parking to the mainland and stemming excessive siltation in the bay. **CAMBODIA:** A girl peddles a soline by the bottle in booming Siem Reap (opposite), the gateway town for Angkor. “The single-minded pursuit of high-volume tourism at Angkor has destroyed the social integrity of Siem Reap, which is now overrun with karaoke bars and sex tourism.” **WORLD HERITAGE NOTE:** If a country asks or allows UNESCO to place a World Heritage site on the “In Danger” list, it is then eligible for international assistance programs to mitigate the threat. Among the 31 sites currently on the list: Kathmandu Valley, Iraq’s ancient city of Ashur, and the Everglades—but not money-making Angkor.



new peace, the reconstructed bridge stands amid residual tensions between Croat and Bosnian. “Tourism here is a cure, not a threat.”

DESTINATIONS IN TROUBLE

World Heritage locales with serious problems, often outside the sites themselves.

25. EGYPT: Thebes; Luxor (SCORE: 58) “The ancient structures are spectacular. Hawking junk for sale diminishes the experience.” Crowding, too.

25. MEXICO: Sian Ka’an and environs (SCORE: 58) Of this rain forest and wetland on the edge of

the Caribbean Sea: “Great heritage site, but the Mexican Riviera is a mess.” Overbuilt, that is.

25. INDONESIA: Borobudur (SCORE: 58) It survived the May 2006 quake, but the Buddhist monument “seems divorced from its surroundings.” Touts and shopping-mall plans draw criticism.

26. CUBA: Old Havana and fortifications (SCORE: 57) “High quality” restoration is slowly helping the run-down Spanish colonial district. “Streets alive with people and music” but “becoming quite touristy”; “prostitution and begging.”

26. TANZANIA: Stone Town, Zanzibar (SCORE: 57) Charming narrow streets and “historic coral structures” are “in danger of inappropriate development.” Cultural stresses cloud future.

THEBES: PAUL TORMBIS (LEFT); PALANI MOHANADEVI; IMAGES: (RIGHT)

27. INDIA: Agra sights—Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri (SCORE: 56) “Wonderful sites surrounded by poverty.” Unlike the three well-tended monuments, the city of Agra “seems dirty and chaotic.” Ominously, “the local community resents India’s most valued heritage.”

27. UNITED KINGDOM: Stonehenge (SCORE: 56) “What a mess!” Tightly managed for sky-high visitor numbers, “hemmed in by two major roads,” and disconnected from surroundings.

27. CHINA: The Great Wall (SCORE: 56) Varies depending on which segment. “Generally good condition,” but “more crowd control needed.” Annoying vendors sell “mass-produced junk.”

28. PERU: Cuzco, Machu Picchu, and the Sacred Valley (SCORE: 54) Cuzco: Hotels in suitable historic buildings. Machu Picchu is “stunningly beautiful when there are no large swaths of tourists.” Sacred Valley is underappreciated. “Strong local culture hanging in there despite all. Environmental degradation of valleys.”

28. JERUSALEM: Old city and walls (SCORE: 54) “Guides highly politicized.” “Full of tension, mystique, intrigue, both historic and current.”

29. GREECE: Acropolis area (SCORE: 53) Corrosive acid rain is a “bigger threat than tourism.” Still seen as crowded and chaotic. But “substantial improvements in the past few years.”

29. MEXICO: Chichén Itzá (SCORE: 53) “Threatened by overvisiting, climbing, lack of maintenance.” “Could better use expertise of local people.”

29. EGYPT: Islamic Cairo district (SCORE: 53) “Muddle, heat, dust, and chaos.” Opinions vary from “authentic” and “vibrant” to “deplorable.”

30. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Colonial Santo Domingo (SCORE: 52) Historic district with “considerable potential” needs more street life.

30. PERU: Nazca lines are a (SCORE: 52) People have damaged the lines, “riding in their cars and 4WDs through these deserts full of mystery.” Area has untapped potential.

30. CHINA: Lijiang and Three Parallel Rivers, Yunnan (SCORE: 52) Busloads of Chinese tourists are corrupting Lijiang, historic town of the Naxi people and gateway to the lush Yangtze, Mekong, and Salween valleys. In well-restored buildings “falconers have given way to boutique shops.” Dams are planned for the rivers.

31. EGYPT: Pyramids, Giza (SCORE: 50) Transcendent monuments compete with urban sprawl and “enormous visitation pressure. Souvenir vendors are a constant distraction.”

31. VIETNAM: Ha Long Bay (SCORE: 50) The bay of dreamy karst-type limestone isles is at risk from reckless tourism development.

“ANGKOR is being swamped by tourists, and numbers will get even larger. The arrivals are driven by the incredible overdevelopment of hotels in SIEM REAP.”

—DR. THOMAS BAUER, TOURISM PROFESSOR



GALÁPAGOS: “It’s ecotourism no longer. Unbridled visitor flows, and their effluent from cruise and other ships, are degrading the very ‘eco’ they have come to tour.” —LELEI LEALU, DIRECTOR, COUNTERPART INTERNATIONAL

ECUADOR: Feral goats in the Galápagos (*right*) number among invasive species that now compete with giant tortoises and other creatures found only here. The islands’ stewardship score has plummeted in just three years. Panelists also question decisions to permit large cruise ships and beach hotels.

NEPAL: A passerby covers her nose (*below*) against “atrocious” air pollution of the shrine-studded Kathmandu Valley. “Urban encroachment and political turmoil” help put the place at the bottom of this year’s scorecard.

WORST-RATED DESTINATIONS

At great risk from a variety of pressures, often including excessive tourism.

- 32. CAMBODIA: Angkor** (SCORE: 48) Mass tourism in the ruins and unbridled development in nearby Siem Reap have dropped Angkor’s low 2004 score another 4 points. Also lower is the water table, so depleted by hotel wells that it is destabilizing the foundations of the ruins.
- 32. ETHIOPIA: Rock-hewn churches, Lalibela** (SCORE: 48) Marks off for the ugly new roofs protecting these unique churches, carved from bedrock. “Can better solutions be found?”



- 33. BELIZE: Barrier Reef** (SCORE: 47) Coral bleaching and skyrocketing cruise-ship activity have dropped this score by 11 points from 2004. “The northern area is seriously impacted. Recent cruise-ship levels are ridiculous, San Pedro development unsustainable.” The southern reef is less visited, if hurricane damaged.

- 34. CHINA: Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet** (SCORE: 46) The Potala, “one of the true architectural wonders of this world” retains no “spirit of place because of the increasingly successful attempt to eradicate Tibetan culture. No pilgrims around the Jokhang. Souvenir shops are replacing the religious articles market.”

- 34. ITALY: Venice and lagoon** (SCORE: 46) Venice battles sinking buildings, rising seas, pollution, and depopulation. “Beautiful, but it feels like a museum. No one lives there except tourists.”

- 35. ECUADOR: Galápagos Islands** (SCORE: 44) This score has crashed from 67 less than three years ago. “One of the best-managed natural destinations in the world. Guiding is world class,” says one panelist. But others cite a list of threats: “invasive species, a ballooning illegal population, mass tourism, sea poaching, ineffective park directors, a corrupt political climate.” It’s not too late: “Conservation efforts hold promise. Evolution’s heritage hangs in the balance.”

- 36. PANAMA: Portobelo-San Lorenzo** (SCORE: 41) “Magnificent” Spanish forts are poorly tended, with little local pride or interest.

- 37. NEPAL: Kathmandu Valley** (SCORE: 39) “In a state of decline.” Rampant urbanization, political troubles, and air and water pollution have taken their toll. New concrete buildings surround many of the ancient temples.

Geotourism editor **JONATHAN B. TOURTELLOT** wrote this story “with 419 collaborators.” *Andrea Gough, Theresa Minogue, John Patten Wood, Hilary Noon, and others helped with the survey.*



SISE BRAMBEN & COTTON COULSON/REUTERS (LEFT), TUI DE ROY/MINDEN PICTURES (TOP)