

UNESCO: Tourism Treasures of Nature, History and Culture

When the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** established the World Heritage Convention in 1972, there was cause for celebration. This document set in place the most universal international legal instrument ever to exist for the protection of cultural and natural heritage. It created a framework for preservation and conservation of the greatest treasures of nature and humanity scattered across the face of the earth. It also established international funding to help restore and conserve designated sites, particularly important for some of the world's poorer countries to develop and maintain designated sites.



Today there are 890 World Heritage Sites (WHS's) which attest to the wisdom of that collective decision with 689 cultural, 176 natural, and 25 mixed properties in 148 countries. Italy hosts the greatest number of WHS's to date with 44 sites on the list, Spain has 41 sites and China has 38. Germany and France are tied at 33 a piece. Such recognition is a costly responsibility, as any of these countries will tell you. National governments, international organizations and communities that live around designated sites have made a protective covenant to work together in rarely-witnessed harmony, so that future generations should be able to share this precious legacy.

For travelers of all ages who take up the challenge of learning about and visiting World Heritage Sites, UNESCO has done a lot of homework to speed up the research. See UNESCO's website for the current listing by country and for a list of the 31 most endangered sites. Unless there is a war currently going on in the neighborhood, this means vacationers should travel there soon!

Many endangered sites come as no surprise because they are in very unsettled areas or in very poor countries with little infrastructure or dedicated staff to maintain these prize possessions despite the tourism opportunities they represent. A few years ago, I was dismayed to see both Germany's Cologne Cathedral and the United States' Everglades National Park among the most endangered WHS's. Since neither one is on the list now, I can only presume their presence there served as a wake up call for action to be taken. Sadly, Ecuador's Galapagos Islands were declared endangered in 2007 and Belize's Barrier Reef in 2009. Both governments need to take urgent action to protect these natural assets.



Never fear that the WHS Committee is not paying attention. A recent example is Germany's Dresden Elbe Valley which, after several warnings about peril to its WHS status, was delisted in mid-2009 due to the construction of a four-lane bridge through the heart of the designated landscape. Dresden Elbe Valley now has a big black line through its listing with the explanation that the property failed to keep its "outstanding universal value as inscribed." Oman's Arabian Oryx Sanctuary met a similar delisting fate in 2007.

From a touristic viewpoint, such firm decision-making inspires trust among travel planners, tour operators and vacationers who count on including the best of the best in their itineraries. With frequent review of all sites on UNESCO's growing list, no country may rest on its heritage or past performance, presuming that a designation is theirs indefinitely.

UNESCO's diligent committee is not the only watchful resource for WHS's. **National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations** also deserves credit for ongoing efforts to monitor and report on the state of these sites. For example, it assembled 419 experts in sustainable tourism and destination stewardship and asked them to rate the current state of 94 World Heritage destinations. First published in the November/December 2008 issue of National Geographic

Traveler, the resulting ratings and frank comments based on personal experience remain easily accessible on the publication's website as a valuable travel resource with a tourism perspective.



Jonathan Tourtellot, Director of the Center, points out that the original purpose of global recognition was to encourage protection only. "Tourism traffic wasn't even part of the equation in 1972, but it is now. If you look at each destination as a whole - the site plus its neighboring region - tourism management can protect it, or degrade it, often more than any other factor."

By including WHS visits in their itineraries, sometimes with expert scholars as local and international guides, tour operators are also educating their clients. One of the most dedicated cultural and educational tour operators with such a mission is **ElderTreks**. Over more than two decades, it has been particularly bold in searching out less-visited sites around the globe for its enthusiastic, active 50+ aged clientele. Of the 80 or more countries presently explored by ElderTreks' small-group tours, about 135 World Heritage Sites are represented in their itineraries.

As citizens of the world, we must surely celebrate the existence of these unique testimonies to the outstanding universal values of both nature and humanity. As global explorers, we may reward our good intentions and our imaginations by personally sampling and savoring at least a selection of them ourselves. My own count is a mere 93 sites, so I still have plenty of traveling left to do!

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her Travel with a Challenge web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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