

The Unique, the Fabulous and the Endangered

The UNESCO, one of 16 special organizations of the UNO, by its slogan “heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations” has not only raised the awareness about mankind’s obligation for spiritual and moral solidarity as a means against war. As a positive side effect, the special international protection of cultural and natural (or mixed) heritage sites had strongly attributed to the wealth of tourism highlights that are irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration.



Whole Cities as World Heritage

World Heritage cities constitute an incomparable magnet. Most of them are listed in Europe, from Alcalá de Henares in northern Spain to Zamość in eastern Poland. Some of them are the finest, the most inspiring, the culturally wealthiest or the most romantic ones in the world.

The fortified double-harbour town Angra do Heroísmo of the Azores islands (Portugal) e.g. may inspire the fantasy of visitors about Europe’s starting point of intercontinental expansion and emigration to the New World, when the Portuguese had rerouted their gold trade in 15th century from the caravan routes of the Sahara to the Atlantic Ocean. With changed navigation in 19th century, the strategic trading post fell into a state of slumber. The random visitor will discover today two harbour forts and numerous Baroque churches and convents (16th / 17th cent.) which remind of Europe’s earliest overseas adventures to Brazil.

A comparable site is Granada in southern Spain - yet by her mighty Alhambra citadel and palace at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains far more awe inspiring. The last stronghold of Arab rule in Europe has become the heritage of Islamic legacy, while the city herself reveals Spain's Christian superpower at the beginning of the discovery of the world. This remarkably demonstrates the Catholic Renaissance cathedral designed as a symbol of triumph over the conquered Nasrid kingdom of Granada.



If Angra do Heroísmo may be compared with Dubrovnik at the Mediterranean coast of southern Croatia, the probably most intrinsic and alluring ancient Venetian trade port besides Venice, Granada may find an equal in Regensburg on Danube River. Both World Heritage sites have perfectly preserved their medieval townscape, one on a romantic island, the other on the ruins of a Roman stronghold - different meeting points: one for recreation and the other for culture, spirituality and education.

The Peculiarities with Cultural & Natural Sites

Most of the cultural sites on the List of World Heritage Sites are found in Italy, Spain and Germany, and outside Europe in China, India and Mexico, whereas most of the natural sites have been defined in northern America and Australia, such as the cross border Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park (USA / Canada) which has a distinctive physiographic setting and climate with significant scenic values and abundant diversified flora and fauna. Or the world's largest coral reef, the 2,300 km long Great Barrier Reef (10° - 24° s) off Australia's east coast of Queensland mainland known for its abundant fauna of 400 types of coral, 1,500 species of fish and 4,000 types of mollusc.

Yet heritage sites may also include prehistoric cultural sites, such as the dwelling caves in the Vézère valley of southern France with up to 30,000 years old wall paintings, or fossil natural sites.

One of them is the Messel Pit in western Germany near Frankfurt. It is the richest site in the world for understanding the living environment of the Tertiary (Eocene period: 57 ~ 36 million years ago), providing information about the early stages of the evolution of mammals.

Distinctive are also individual properties, such as buildings (prayer sites, defense systems, workshops, ruins etc) or singular sceneries. They now also include modern heritage properties with noteworthy 19th / 20th century architectural design, be it buildings like the Works of Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona, Spain, or townscapes like the watchmaking town La Chaux-de-Fonds / Le Locle of Switzerland.



Another peculiarity is the not self-understanding status of World Heritage revealed in 2007 and 2009 when two sites were removed from the List. In contrast, a whole new region will become a World Heritage site: the geo-cultural region of Pacific islands. The designated island nations and territories range from Papua New Guinea in the west to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the east, from Hawai'i and Micronesia in the north to the sub-Antarctic islands of New Zealand in the south of the 170 million sq km large Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific 2009 Programme aims at promoting underrepresented unique places such as New Zealand governed Tokelau. The tiny island group of three coral atolls is one of the most remote places on earth where money and telephone arrived at last and access is possible only by a two-day boat journey from Samoa.

Endangered Sites

Last but not least, attention has been drawn to heritage sites in danger resulting from wars, natural disasters, environmental destruction or uncontrolled tourism. For some of them help has come too

late. In 2001 the giant Buddha statues of the Bamiyan Valley have been deliberately destroyed. Besides Afghanistan, Iraq is another place with most of endangered cultural sites, while the Democratic Republic of Congo figures the highest number of endangered natural sites. There lies the Virunga National Park, where a mesmerizing World Heritage gets destroyed. This relates to all of us, as we got used to our mobile phones and computers that contain the rare mineral Coltan. The crude ore is found in eastern Congo's extinct volcanoes, the biosphere of endangered mountain gorillas and virgin forests. Both suffer together with the local population for the sake of globalized profits that flow to Europe, China and back to the world. Virunga has become a warning signal just like the lost Bamiyan Buddhas - thanks to the universal care for World Heritage.

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