

Chac-Mool statue and Kukulcan pyramid at the pre-Hispanic city of Chichen-Itza, one of 29 World Heritage sites in Mexico.



# WORLD HERITAGE SITES

UNESCO designation helps preserve the world's natural and cultural treasures By Eric Lucas

ON THIS SPRING DAY, the breeze rises off the river high enough to reach the Grand Canyon's north rim, turning nearby pine boughs into gentle green banners. The visual palette otherwise is a banquet of earth colors—mauve and russet, bronze and lavender, indigo and sienna. Far below, the Colorado River glints like a platinum belt.

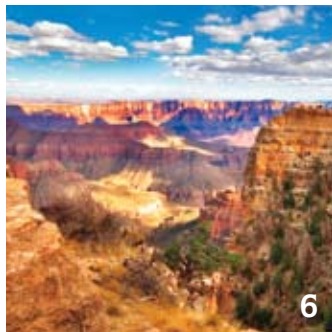
This is one of the world's most famous vistas. It's also much in demand, so after a few minutes I step aside for a family of five: two parents, and three kids wriggling with wonder. "Dad! How far down is that? Five miles?" Not quite—one mile is closer—but hyperbole is justifiably endemic here.

Two months later, 1,500 miles away, I am all by myself in a flat universe of green, watching a massive bison bull scratch himself against a picnic table. We're in a lush grass clearing within a birch forest beside a quiet lake, just the bull and I. He's nearly as big as a bread truck, the color of barley and

heedless of interference from any other living thing.

His scratching post was going to be my lunch venue, but wise visitors at Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park give way to the park's namesake citizens, which have inhabited the area for millennia. I'm sure the presence of such modern artifacts as picnic tables is just a handy, anomalous convenience for bison. Wood Buffalo National Park is very, very remote—two days' drive from the nearest major airport in Edmonton, Alberta. Human passersby are oddities rather than annoyances.

Three months after that, my wife and I are having dinner in a bustling city center in Morelia, about 190 miles west of Mexico City and the capital of Michoacán state. At an outdoor patio table by the city's cathedral square, we savor the signature local dish, *sopa tarasca* (tomato-and-bean tortilla soup), and fried mountain-lake whitefish. After dinner,



strolling across the town square in mild evening air, we hear familiar strains of music from within the gorgeous 18th century Baroque Morelia Cathedral, built of pink volcanic stone. Wandering inside, we find a huge crowd listening to an organist performing Bach’s *Concerto in A Minor*, whose majestic crescendos ring within the towering heights of the church.

These three sites—Grand Canyon, Wood Buffalo and Morelia—are about as disparate as one can imagine in North America. Morelia is a bustling city of about 600,000. Wood Buffalo National Park is an immense wilderness preserve in northern Alberta, with just one road in 17,000 square miles. During my visit to the heart of the park, I saw more lynx (one) than I did people. By contrast, the Grand Canyon may be the most famous natural attraction on Earth, drawing about 5 million visitors a year. Teddy Roosevelt called the Grand Canyon “a natural wonder which is in kind absolutely unparalleled throughout the rest of the world.”

Yet all three places do have one key element in common: Each is a World Heritage site, having been declared by international consensus to be among the most unique and precious places on Earth. I first

became aware of the program early in this decade; today, I make a practice of seeking, learning about and visiting World Heritage sites wherever I travel.

**THE WORLD HERITAGE PROGRAM** is a key enterprise of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Now embracing close to 900 sites of natural or cultural significance in 145 countries around the world, “World Heritage” is a designation avidly sought for destinations that range from tiny parks to urban centers, from rarely visited remote landscapes to famed attractions favored by the world’s tourists. The list includes cities, churches, mountains, lakes, canyons, islands, towns, factories, mines, caverns, valleys, reefs, palaces, wildlife preserves, petroglyphs, castles, historic buildings and volcanoes (visit <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>). Across much of the globe, World Heritage designation is a great honor, a valuable asset and a marketable tourism advantage.

Canada (with 15 sites), the United States (20) and Mexico (29) all have World Heritage sites that are quintessential examples of the program’s basic idea: to preserve the world’s treasures that are of “outstanding universal value,” as the governing

convention puts it. The Grand Canyon is an obvious illustration. Here is a stunning natural feature not only known to most humans, but also widely considered unrivaled in the world. Wood Buffalo Park, though remote, is also exceptional: It’s home to the largest free-roaming, indigenous bison herd in the world. And Morelia’s city center is a colorful, well-kept historic preserve that harks back to the height of Spanish colonialism in Mexico.

Many of Mexico’s Aztec, Mayan and other pre-Columbian cities are on the list, such as Teotihuacan, Uxmal, Chichen-Itza and Palenque. Canada’s famed Rocky Mountain parks—Banff, Jasper and Kootenay—are also heritage sites. Emblematic U.S. parks, such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, Redwood and Olympic, made the list. So did icons of democracy such as the Statue of Liberty and Independence Hall.

In fact, the United States was one of the creators of the World Heritage program. America was the first signatory in 1973, and the list’s natural-features criteria are largely based on the national-parks model that originated here in the late 19th century. But U.S. participation in the program declined in the 1990s as concerns rose in Congress over UNESCO operations world-

[1] Glacier Bay, Alaska, part of the Wrangell–St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Kluane/Tatshenshini-Alesek site. [2] Everglades National Park, Florida. [3] Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada. [4] Statue of Liberty, New Jersey/New York. [5] Constitution Square and the Metropolitan Cathedral in the Historic Centre of Mexico City. [6] Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona. [7] Baroque Morelia Cathedral in the Historic Centre of Morelia, Mexico. [8] Monticello, Virginia.

wide, and citizen groups questioned the United Nations' role in managing World Heritage sites on U.S. soil. Congress' own rules regarding nomination of private property further complicated the process.

Times changed, however, and the United States re-embarked on full participation in the program when the U.S. Department of the Interior, the principal technical agency for U.S. participation, began accepting applications for new World Heritage designations in 2006. As a result, in January 2008 a new U.S. "Tentative List" of 14 sites was created as the basis for preparing and submitting World Heritage nominations over the next 10 years. These sites range from Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona to a variety of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in multiple states.

For the first time in 15 years, two U.S. sites have been formally proposed for designation. The UNESCO World Heritage

{9} The home of George Washington, at Mount Vernon, Virginia (nominated for designation in 2010). {10} Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, Alberta (on Canada's Tentative List).

Committee, a group comprising representatives from 21 countries, will decide whether to approve the designations in 2010: George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, in Virginia; and Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which encompasses the extraordinary northwest Hawaiian Islands and waters surrounding them. It would be the country's first site designated as a mix of natural and cultural criteria.

"Our own world heritage is something all Americans should be proud of," says Stephen Morris, chief of the National Parks



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Service's Office of International Affairs. "We definitely need to increase the visibility and understanding of this program in our country. Despite what some people call a relatively small list, the United States is still among the top 10 countries worldwide in terms of the number of sites listed."

By comparison, Italy has 43 World Heritage sites and China has 37.

The need for education and visibility was demonstrated in 2005 by research conducted by Helen Hazen, a visiting pro-

## World Heritage Sites of the United States, Canada and Mexico

### UNITED STATES

- Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 1978
- Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming/Montana/Idaho, 1978
- Everglades National Park, Florida, 1979
- Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona, 1979
- Independence Hall, Pennsylvania, 1979
- Wrangell–St. Elias and Glacier Bay National Parks, Alaska, with Kluane and Tatshenshini-Alsek National Parks in Canada, 1979 and extended in 1992 and 1994
- Redwood National and State Parks, California, 1980
- Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky, 1981
- Olympic National Park, Washington, 1981
- Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, Illinois, 1982
- La Fortaleza and San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, 1983
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina/Tennessee, 1983
- Statue of Liberty, New Jersey/New York, 1984
- Yosemite National Park, California, 1984
- Chaco Culture, New Mexico, 1987
- Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, Hawai'i, 1987

- Monticello and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, 1987
- Pueblo de Taos, New Mexico, 1992
- Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico, 1995
- Waterton Glacier International Peace Park, Montana, jointly with Canada, 1995

### MEXICO

- Historic Centre of Mexico City and Xochimilco, Federal District, 1987
- Historic Centre of Oaxaca and Archaeological Site of Monte Albán, Oaxaca, 1987
- Historic Centre of Puebla, Puebla, 1987
- Pre-Hispanic City and National Park of Palenque, Chiapas, 1987
- Pre-Hispanic City of Teotihuacan, México, 1987
- Sian Ka'an, Quintana Roo, 1987
- Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines, Guanajuato, 1988
- Pre-Hispanic City of Chichen-Itza, Yucatan, 1988
- Historic Centre of Morelia, Michoacán, 1991
- El Tajin, Pre-Hispanic City, Veracruz, 1992
- Historic Centre of Zacatecas, Zacatecas, 1993
- Rock Paintings of the Sierra de San Francisco, Baja California Sur, 1993

- Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino, Baja California Sur, 1993
- Earliest 16th-Century Monasteries on the Slopes of Popocatepetl, Morelos/Puebla, 1994
- Historic Monuments Zone of Querétaro, Querétaro, 1996
- Pre-Hispanic Town of Uxmal, Yucatan, 1996
- Hospicio Cabañas, Guadalajara, Jalisco, 1997
- Archaeological Zone of Paquimé, Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, 1998
- Historic Monuments Zone of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, 1998
- Archaeological Monuments Zone of Xochicalco, Morelos, 1999
- Historic Fortified Town of Campeche, Campeche, 1999
- Ancient Maya City of Calakmul, Campeche, Campeche, 2002
- Franciscan Missions in the Sierra Gorda of Querétaro, Querétaro, 2003
- Luis Barragán House and Studio, Federal District, 2004
- Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California, Baja California/Baja California Sur/Sonora/Sinaloa/Nayarit, 2005
- Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila, Jalisco, 2006
- Central University City Campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Federal District, 2007

- Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, Michoacán, 2008
- Protective Town of San Miguel and the Sanctuary of Jesús Nazareno de Atotonilco, Guanajuato, 2008

### CANADA

- L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, Newfoundland and Labrador, 1978
- Nahanni National Park, Northwest Territories, 1978
- Dinosaur Provincial Park, Alberta, 1979
- Kluane and Tatshenshini-Alsek National Parks, Yukon/British Columbia, with Wrangell–St. Elias and Glacier Bay National Parks in U.S., 1979 and extended in 1992 and 1994
- Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, Alberta, 1981
- SGang Gwaay, British Columbia, 1981
- Wood Buffalo National Park, Northwest Territories/Alberta, 1983
- Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks, British Columbia/Alberta, 1984
- Historic District of Old Québec, Quebec, 1985
- Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland and Labrador, 1987
- Old Town Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, 1995
- Waterton Glacier International Peace Park, Alberta, jointly with U.S., 1995
- Miguasha National Park, Quebec, 1999
- Rideau Canal, Ontario, 2007
- Joggins Fossil Cliffs, Nova Scotia, 2008

fessor of geography at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Hazen interviewed visitors and park officials at Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Hawai'i Volcanoes and Great Smoky Mountains national parks about World Heritage and found that few park visitors were familiar with the program. More than half of the U.S. citizens visiting these parks were unaware that each was a World Heritage site; awareness was greater among international visitors to the parks, but far from universal.

"Considering that the United States was one of the original architects of the program, this is astounding," Hazen says. "But I was heartened by the fact that, once it was explained to them, the vast majority of visitors were very supportive of World Heritage designation."

When she encountered animosity toward UNESCO designation, it was largely based on misinformation, she reported. The U.N. does not share in visitor fees at World Heritage sites. In fact, sites in poorer countries such as Peru are some-

times granted U.N. funds for development or preservation. Management and control of a designated site remain firmly in the hands of national authorities.

While the U.S. has tended to nominate World Heritage sites based on the traditional national-park paradigm, other countries are more apt to designate places of cultural significance.

"So many World Heritage sites in Europe are cultural rather than natural—cities, historic districts—and active communities rather than stone artifacts," observes Arthur Chen, a professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota and director of the university's Center for World Heritage Studies curriculum, a new graduate-degree program that will matriculate its first dozen or so students in the next year. "They are not just places we look at, but places we live in."

There are none such World Heritage sites in the United States, but the Tentative List includes some intriguing departures from the U.S. norm, such as Alabama's

nomination of important locales from the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Mexico, by contrast, has mostly cultural sites among its roster of 29: for example, the Historic Centre of Morelia, the Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines, and the Historic Centre of Mexico City.

"We see this as a great honor for our country, and it has involved a lot of local, regional and national work to achieve," says Jorge Gamboa, director of the Mexico Board of Tourism's U.S. office in Los Angeles. "Not only are we proud of our 29 sites, we welcome the support we receive from UNESCO to preserve and study our archaeological wealth."

Mexico, Gamboa adds, has 37,000 known archaeological sites, with 174 open to the public, so the country will surely never lack candidate sites.

Neither will the United States. I can come up with dozens in the time it takes for a morning cup of coffee. Why not the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pacific symbol of America? How about New York's Ellis

Island, which welcomed millions of immigrants and refugees to the U.S.? Sequoia National Park, home of the world's biggest (by volume) tree? Or Disneyland, the world's best-known theme park and a pathbreaking icon of human culture?

These are all obvious suggestions. There are innumerable lesser-known locales around the world that hold huge cultural value. One of the entries on Canada's Tentative List is a small, inconspicuous site in Alberta, Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park (Áísínai'pi). Here, just north of Montana's Sweet Grass Hills, is one of our continent's most important collections of petroglyphs, 97 separate sites identified containing nearly 300 panels of rock art.

"Not only are these fabulous examples of native art," explains park manager Julie MacDougall, "they are sacred to the Blackfoot people who still live here. So this is one of the few places in the world where visitors can take guided tours of petroglyphs led by descendants of the artists."

This quest for recognition of something unique in the world is a hallmark of the World Heritage nominating process, and one of its most appealing facets. The desire to have one's country honored for its special places and people appears to be a worldwide aspiration.

It's also true that many countries seek UNESCO designation because, around the world, World Heritage sites attract tourists.

At Writing-on-Stone, sheer remoteness limits the number of travelers making the trip each year, but the underlying goal is to offer experience and understanding to outsiders. "The Blackfoot tribe overwhelmingly supports this," MacDougall reports, "because they want to share their culture with the people of the world."

That sort of philosophy is what led Expedia, Inc., the Bellevue, Washington-based travel company, to lend its corporate weight to supporting the World Heritage program. Expedia Chairman Barry Diller and United Nations Foundation Chairman Ted Turner launched the World Heritage Alliance for Sustainable Tourism initiative in 2005 to promote education about and preservation of World Heritage sites. Expedia's support takes the form of cash—more

than \$1 million so far—and gentle guidance on its Website. It includes links to World Heritage information and travel offers for tourist draws that are near World Heritage sites, such as Las Vegas, a major gateway to the Grand Canyon.

“We’ve probably been a bit circumspect, maybe even too much so, because we don’t want it to seem like we’re trying to cash in on something as worthwhile as World Heritage sites,” says Expedia Senior Vice President Sean Kell.

“It’s a terrific partnership for us, particularly as the international-travel segment of our business has grown. One of our most significant corporate missions is to promote and engender sustainable tourism, especially in and around World Heritage sites. Like many Americans, I used to be a bit vague on the program. Today, at Expedia, we know about World Heritage sites, we talk about them, and we celebrate them.”

Kell’s favorite World Heritage sites are

### What Is World Heritage?

The governing convention for the World Heritage program, first signed in 1973 by the United States, seeks to protect sites of “outstanding universal value”—that is, natural landscapes and landmarks of peerless ecological or geographical importance, and human landmarks of historical and cultural significance.

“Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration,” explains the World Heritage Website (<http://whc.unesco.org>).

Ten criteria govern the selection process—to be considered, a site must meet at least one criterion—and designated sites range from wilderness landscapes to industrial facilities to historic cities. Sites are nominated by governing units the convention calls “states parties,” and nominations are reviewed and sites selected once a year by the World Heritage Committee, a group comprising 21 states parties, currently including the United States and Canada.

There are currently 878 sites worldwide. The committee typically adds 25 to 30 new sites a year; once designated, sites are to be monitored to make sure the preservation goal of the convention is met. —E.L.

the Grand Canyon and Olympic National Park in Northwestern Washington, where his family made many trips as he was growing up in Portland, Oregon.

**AND MY FAVORITE?** Many have been not only memorable but life-changing. Anyone who wants to understand recent human history, for instance, ought to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Poland. Yes, that’s a World Heritage site—not all such places are shiny and gorgeous.

But they are all meaningful in very human terms. Consider the Statue of Liberty, the antithesis of Auschwitz: For more than a century, it has stood tall at the entrance to New York Harbor, welcoming visitors to the United States.

To me, the significance of World Heritage sites is what they have in common spiritually and emotionally. I’ve been to 38 sites in a dozen countries, and my goal is to surpass 50. Had I time and resources sufficient to the task, I’d visit them all. The landscape we humans share, the artifacts and structures that we have made, are all part of a vast network of human experience that is far bigger than the sum of its parts.

Breathtaking scenery, matchless ecological value, incomparable architecture and peerless history mark humanity’s world heritage, and UNESCO designation formalizes what is already intrinsic. These places are our legacy and our story—there for us to see, hear, touch and help protect.

The first time, as a boy, I climbed the steep steps at Uxmal’s Pyramid of the Soothsayer, on Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, the majesty and wonder of the experience soaked into my bones and marked a turning point in my life’s course. So did that first view of the Grand Canyon, and the first time I heard the roiling rhythm of a caldron at Yellowstone, spied the glow of lava at Hawai’i’s Kīlauea Volcano, and watched a flock of flamingos shimmer in the distance in Florida’s Everglades.

To name such spots is simply cataloging our wealth. To visit them is to touch the treasures the world shares. ▲

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