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WORLD'S ICONIC DESTINATIONS RATED
Norway's Fjords on Top

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WASHINGTON—In conjunction with National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations, National Geographic Traveler has devoted its sixth annual "Places Rated" Destination Stewardship survey to the world's most celebrated and iconic travel destinations and how well they have weathered the pressures of mass tourism and other threats.

Like the first Destination Rated survey in 2004, Norway's Fjords region has again taken top honors, with a score of 85 points. Judges noted the gorgeous scenery and well-preserved rural life that are vigorously protected. Others making the top "Best Rated Places" category range from Japan's ancient Kyoto (#4, 79 points) for honoring the "serenity and charm of ancient Japan" to Slovenia, formerly part of communist Yugoslavia, tied at #5 (78 points) for being among the most sustainable and authentic places to visit in Europe.

The United Kingdom is the country with the most winners in this year's top category: England's Yorkshire Dales, Scotland's Highlands, and Wales.

A total of 133 destinations were surveyed by a panel of 437 well-traveled experts in a variety of fields related to sustainable tourism. The survey is the cover story of the November-December 2009 issue of National Geographic Traveler magazine, on newsstands Nov. 3.

"We hope the survey will bring attention to the places faring well, as well as to those in trouble, often due to reckless development and commercialism," said Jonathan Tourtellot, director of the Center for Sustainable Destinations, which conducted the survey. "If there is a blessing to the global downturn, it is the respite from such rampant, quick-buck degradation of Earth's remaining beautiful places."

The best U.S. ranking was the state of Vermont at #5 (78 points), scoring well not only for its scenic countryside but for environmental and social sustainability practices. Two other U.S. destinations made the top category: Oregon and Washington's Columbia Gorge region (#6, 77 points) and Massachusetts' Berkshires (#7, 76 points). Canada impressively took places #2 (81 points) and #3 (80 points), for British Columbia's Kootenay and Yoho national parks on the western slope of the Canadian Rockies and for Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula that juts into the Gulf of St. Lawrence with oceanfront, islands and mountains.

(OVER)

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Examples of other successes:

- **Tanzania's Serengeti Plain** went up 10 points (to 71 points, #12) since it was first surveyed in 2006, compared to Kenya's Masai Mara score, which went down three points (now 53 points, #29), reflecting the countries' varying efforts in conservation even though they share the same ecosystem.
- **Mid-coast California, from Santa Barbara to Monterey**, is up eight points (71 points, #12) since the first 2004 survey, largely due to solid, good stewardship — not to mention the mix of wild coasts, mountains and wineries.
- **Hue, Vietnam**, considered by many to be the most beautiful city in that country, is up 11 points (64 points, #19) — the highest upward leap from previous rankings — largely because of the restoration of its spectacular citadel.
- **Rajasthan, India**, referred to as “India's Tuscany” by one panelist, experienced an eight-point jump (64 points, #19) in five years, sparked particularly by improved tourist facilities. It also boasts a strong sense of cultural identity and remarkable appeal and mystique, panelists noted.
- **Copán, the famed Maya ruins in Honduras**, had a seven-point jump (68 points, #15) since it was first surveyed in 2006, due to excellent local guides and dedicated management, and other attractions, from coffee farms to local hot springs.

There were surprises. The Grenadine Islands in the Caribbean experienced a sharp dip of 15 points (now 62 points, #21) since it was first surveyed in 2007; this string of several hundred islands once ranked near the top of the Destination Scorecard but has dropped due to commercialization and damaging real estate deals. The Inside Passage in Alaska and British Columbia dropped markedly in the rankings since the first Destinations Rated survey in 2004 (64 points, #19), though still making the “Places Doing Well” category; panelists said the destination leaves one with a sense of awe, but the culture of the coastal towns is being overwhelmed by tourists and cruise ships.

A number of destinations were rated for the first time, including Arizona's Sonora Desert (63 points, #20), the Bahamas' Eleuthera Island (71 points, #12), Brazil's Rio de Janeiro beach districts (54 points, #28), the Chesapeake Bay region (42 points, #40), Florida's Sanibel and Captiva islands (53 points, #29) and New York's Long Island: Hamptons to Montauk (51 points, #31).

The panelists, all experts in various travel-related fields, were asked to evaluate the qualities that make a destination unique, measuring the “integrity of a place” and assessing its authenticity and stewardship. The ratings were based on six criteria: environmental and ecological quality; social and cultural integrity; condition of historic buildings and archaeological sites; aesthetic appeal; quality of tourism management; and outlook for the future.

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The destinations are divided into five categories, listed below with examples:

- **Best-Rated Places (in excellent shape, relatively unspoiled and likely to remain so: 85- to 74-point range)** New Zealand's South Island, Australia's Kakadu National Park, Spain's Medieval Granada and the Alhambra, Chile's Torres del Paine, Portugal's Douro Valley.
- **Places Doing Well (retaining sense of place, with a few surmountable problems: 73- to 64-point range)** Brazil's Pantanal wetlands, Maine's coast, Italy's Tuscany, Austria's Salzburg historic center, Ireland's Ring of Kerry, Yellowstone/Grand Teton region.
- **Places in the Balance (a mixed bag of successes and worries, with the future at risk: 63- to 53-point range)** Michigan's Traverse City and lakeshore, Arizona's Sonora Desert region, Hawaii's Maui and Island of Hawaii (Big Island), Jordan's Petra, Texas Hill Country, Bali, Cape Cod, Greece's Santorini island, Turkey's Azure Coast.
- **Places with Troubles (under severe pressures; many places working to recover: 52- to 42-point range)** Honduras' North Coast, New York's Long Island Shore, Tahiti, Ecuador's Galápagos Islands, Great Smoky Mountains, Florida's Everglades and Big Cypress, Beijing's historic districts, Italy's Venice and lagoon, Egypt's Luxor archaeological area, pollution-plagued Chesapeake Bay.
- **Worst-rated (severe problems; some destinations fighting back, some not: 41- to 31-point range)** West Bank's Bethlehem, Dominican Republic's north coast, Egypt's Northern Red Sea coast, Spain's Costa del Sol.

National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations is dedicated to protecting the world's distinctive places through wisely managed geotourism and enlightened destination stewardship.

See more details on the 133 iconic destinations ranked for wisely managed tourism at www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

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