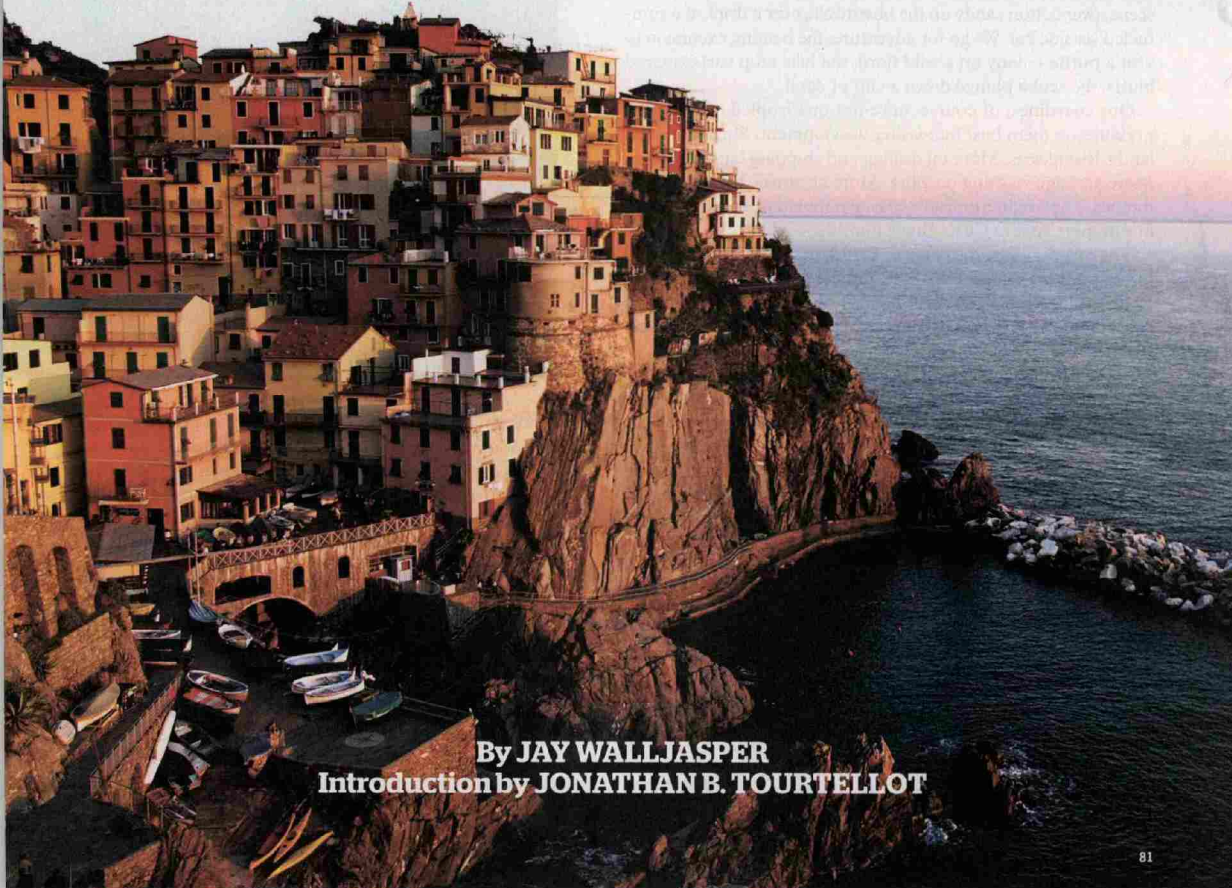


A DESTINATION SCORECARD

99 PLACES RATED

The world's coasts feature some of our most beloved vacation spots. But are we loving them to death? Our panel of 340 experts rates a wide selection of coastal destinations—including seven profiled here that have interesting stories to tell.



By JAY WALLJASPER
Introduction by JONATHAN B. TOURTELLOT

Summer beach vacations were an annual ritual of my New England childhood. We would rent cottages usually, first in Connecticut, on Long Island Sound, then on Cape Cod. ¶ Youthful memories keep those trips vivid—shell collecting, the scent of salt air, the slap of the cottage screen door, the scary height of a big breaker, and sand everywhere, on the porch, in my picnic, in my bathing suit. A sunny, gritty delight. ¶ Decades have since passed; today the screen door swings shut behind a friend's grandchild. But the seaside abides, representing the eternal escape. ¶ Or not.

Something has happened over those decades. The human population has doubled; the affluent part of it has more than quadrupled. And so, by most estimates, has coastal tourism. We are flocking to the world's seacoasts by the millions. There probably is no more popular type of destination.

I suspect some atavistic instinct lies embedded in our brains: Seek the ocean! The reasons that compel us to return vary as much as the coasts in this year's survey. We go for rest and relaxation: To stroll the walk-till-you-drop beach of a barrier island, build sandcastles with the kids, gaze over a hazy Adriatic from the holiday villa with the arbor of scented jasmine. We go to watch the beach scene, over cotton candy on the boardwalk, over a drink at a rum-fueled seaside bar. We go for adventure: the boating excursion to visit a puffin colony on a wild fjord, the hike atop surf-battered bluffs, the scuba plunge down a cliff of coral.

Our coastlines, of course, have not quadrupled, even as the pressure on them has. Increasing development. Shrinking wetlands. Rising seas. More oil drilling and shipping lanes offshore. More garbage washing onshore. More air travel, bringing more tourists. The Mediterranean's coastal population already doubles in summer; Spain's Costa Brava jumps sevenfold.

The magnitude of the changes first struck me when I returned to Crete after a ten-year absence. On the northern coast, the old stone-walled harbor towns still rested under the Mediterranean sun, but flavorless resorts had sprouted between them, and cheaply built villas spattered the countryside, without plan or style.

There is only so much coast to go around. Along the Chesapeake Bay's shoreline, which measures thousands of miles, locals have complained that whenever shorefront property becomes available, "rich people snap it up." From Costa Rica to Nova Scotia, native residents are getting priced out of their own oceanfronts. Some places cope with these changes. Others teeter at a tipping point.

This year, the seventh for this annual survey, our panel of 340 experts in sustainable tourism and destination stewardship rated 99 coastal destinations, a geographically and culturally representative sampler of the world's waterside locales. In the following pages we present seven of our panel-rated destinations that have encouraging stories to tell. Among these is the first destination ever to register in the range of "Catastrophic," with a score of 24 out of a possible 100: the oil-stained coast of Louisiana. The less highlighted story here is the Pelican State's watery network of inland marshes and bayous, which have largely escaped oil damage and invite exploration.

Ironically, offshore oil drilling also is an issue for the top scorer, Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula (84), where the winning scenery



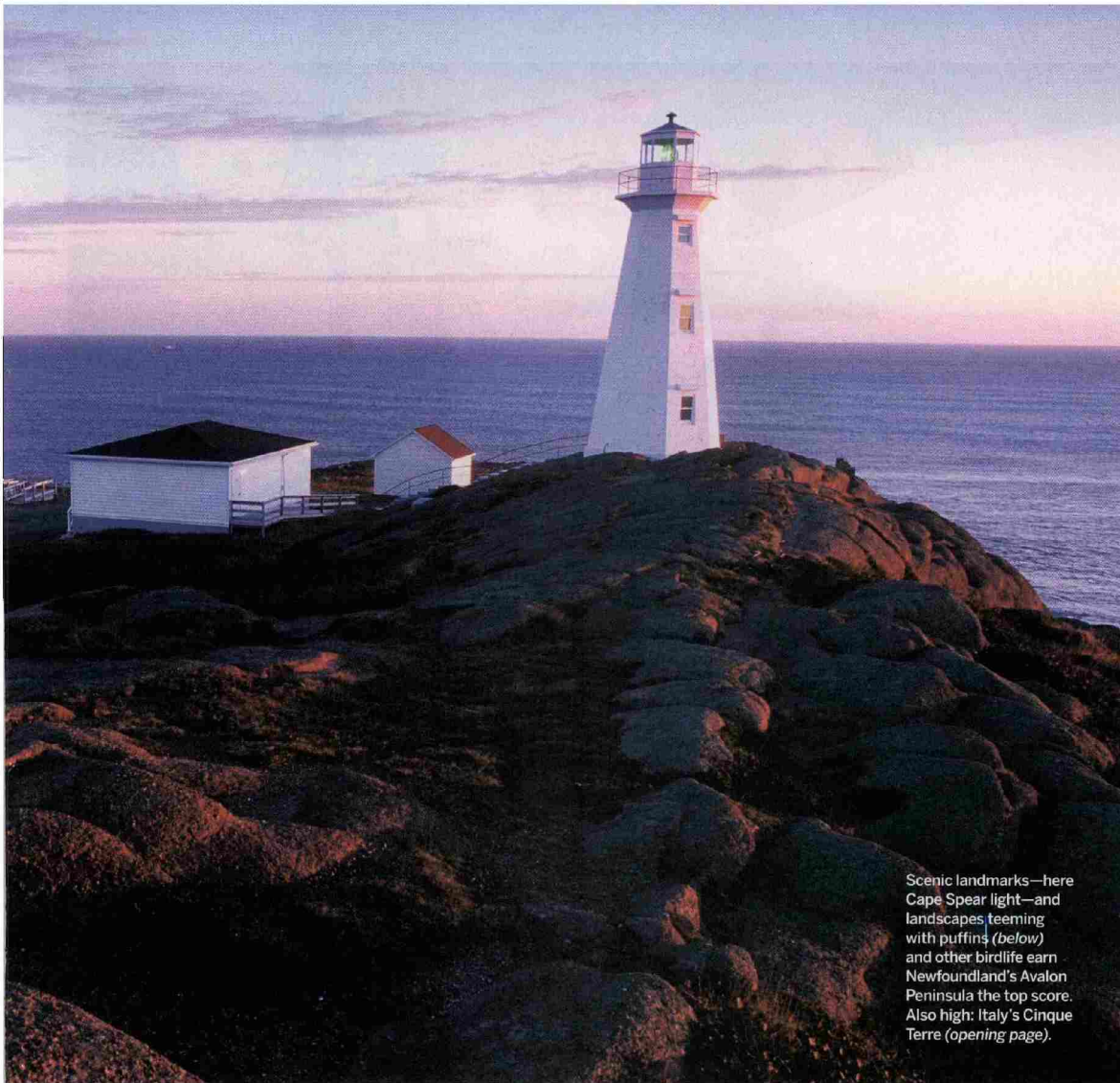
and genuine nature of the people contend with a petro-funded future of new development and potentially unbalancing immigration.

A full list of the 99 destinations and their ratings appears on page 84; you'll find an explanation of this survey and its methodology on page 89. And a selection of panelist comments illuminating why each place received the score it did, along with the scores for coastal destinations we surveyed in 2009 and therefore omitted here, are at <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations-rated>.

A final observation: Colder locales tend to score higher thanks to fewer development pressures. So it's good to see warm-weather coasts such as Oman's Batinah (79) and Kauai's Na Pali (79) in the Top Rated group. In the end, the quality of our coasts depends less on climate than on us—how we use them, how we care for them. Visit them well, and support the businesses that support the place.

JONATHAN B. TOURTELLOTT, *Traveler's* geotourism editor and a National Geographic Fellow, devised this destination stewardship survey in 2003.

OPENING PAGE: HANS MAER / A14/FREDDIX ABOVE: CHRISTIAN HEBEL/A14/FREDDIX



Scenic landmarks—here Cape Spear light—and landscapes teeming with puffins (below) and other birdlife earn Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula the top score. Also high: Italy's Cinque Terre (opening page).

Newfoundland: Avalon Peninsula

(Score: 84) Imagine Iowa stripped of its farms, or Texas after the oil runs dry. That approaches the cataclysm experienced on the Canadian island of Newfoundland in 1992, when large-scale cod fishing was banned.

The epicenter was Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula, which dangles from the island's southeastern corner by a slender 35-mile-long isthmus. The peninsula is home to one of the oldest English cities in North America—the provincial capital of St. John's—and a winding coastline dotted with picturesque and accessible fishing villages that look out on the Atlantic Ocean and its Grand Banks. Once one of the world's most bountiful fishing grounds, these nutrient-rich underwater plateaus powered the economy of the Avalon Peninsula, drawing people to this rugged land to fish big. But severe overfishing in the

1980s decimated the cod population, and it hasn't recuperated. Many think it never will.

What happens when a centuries-old way of life disappears? Scrappy Newfoundlanders, accustomed to sea breezes blowing through their hair, found other ways to make a living from the ocean. In addition to welcoming offshore oil and natural-gas wells and turning their fishing sights to crabs, lobsters, mussels, and haddock, they turned to tourism. Harborside shops and hotels in St. John's replaced fishing docks, and boats now leave port for whale-watching and iceberg tours.

A desperate pursuit of tourism dollars can end up ruining a destination. But Professor Michael Hall, who teaches tourism and marketing at New Zealand's University of Canterbury, contends that the Avalon Peninsula has struck the right balance, extolling its "stunning natural and cultural integrity." He





Relatively inaccessible, automobile-free, and protective of local traditions, the quintet of Italian seaside villages called Cinque Terre (Five Lands) received favorable reviews from panelists.

goes even further, calling it “one of the best-kept tourism secrets.”

That may be because the tourism industry here is homegrown, says Shannon Guihan, a Newfoundlander who runs an international food-tour company. “The tourism industry has done well to revitalize the waterfronts,” she says. They also come to enjoy wave-carved shores, remote fishing settlements, coastal hiking trails, colorful birdlife, and a seafaring heritage.

“Visiting the Avalon Peninsula, with its close-knit communities and strong local culture reflected in the music and arts, is like

going back in time,” says Ross Klein, a professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland. “The unspoiled scenery ranges from stark moonscapes to crystal-clear lakes to open land where caribou roam.” A particular standout: Cape St. Mary’s Ecological Reserve, an ornithological Eden where more than 60,000 gannets, gulls, kittiwakes, razorbills, and guillemots roost atop a 300-foot-high rock emerging from the sea.

Other observers have worries. “St. John’s is spreading like an invasive species—a lot of big-box buildings, wide roads, and

ALANTIDE PHOTO/AMELCOBIBIS

The List: 99 Places Rated

TOP-RATED

In excellent shape, relatively unspoiled, and likely to remain so.

- Newfoundland: Avalon Peninsula 84
- Wales: Pembrokeshire coast 80
- New Zealand: Tutukaka Coast, Northland 80
- Chile: Chilean fjords 79
- Hawaii: Na Pali Coast, Kauai 79
- Oman: Batinah Coast 79
- British Columbia: Gulf Islands 78
- Nova Scotia: South Shore 77
- Australia: Broome 77
- Argentina: Valdés Peninsula 76
- Scotland: Moray Firth coast, Inverness to Peterhead 76
- Italy: Cinque Terre 76
- Namibia: Skeleton Coast 75
- Cook Islands: As a whole 75
- New Zealand: Great Barrier Island 75
- Oregon: Oregon coast 75
- Prince Edward Island: Coastal areas 74
- Georgia (U.S.): Sea Islands 74

DOING WELL

Retaining sense of place, with a few surmountable problems.

- Portugal: Southern Atlantic coast 73
- Malaysia: Kota Kinabalu, Sabah 72
- Morocco: Essaouira, Atlantic coast 72
- Bermuda: As a whole 72
- Croatia: Dalmatian Coast 71
- Antarctic Peninsula: 70
- Costa Rica: Caribbean coast 70
- Jamaica: S.W. coast, Savanna-la-Mar to Old Harbour 70
- Mozambique: N. coast: Cabo Delgado/Quirimbas 69
- Puerto Rico: West coast 69
- Samoa: As a whole 69
- Brazil: Bahia, northern coast 69
- Philippines: Palawan 68
- California: The Peninsula, San Mateo/Santa Cruz coast 68
- Greece: Crete, south coast 67
- Florida: Forgotten Coast (Apalachicola area) 67
- Greenland: Southwestern coast 66

- Seychelles: As a whole 66
- Brazil: Rio de Janeiro beaches 66
- Colombia: Cartagena coastal region 65
- France: Guéthary, southwest coast 65

IN THE BALANCE

A mixed bag of successes and worries, with the future at risk.

- Bonaire: As a whole 63
- India: Kerala coastal areas 63
- Germany: Baltic Coast 62
- Alaska: Juneau 62
- Mauritius: As a whole 62
- Denmark: Jutland beach areas 61
- Italy: Sardinia, Costa Smeralda 61
- UAE: Abu Dhabi 61
- Maldives: As a whole 61
- Mexico: Tulum to Sian Kaan 61
- Washington: Puget Sound 61
- Israel: Haifa 61
- Tanzania: Swahili Coast 61

ITALY: The Cinque Terre are more than just one of the treasures of Europe. They are a great example of sustainable-tourism management for the whole world.

—ED MCMAHON, sustainable-development expert

cookie-cutter developments,” says travel writer Wayne Curtis. “Still, a few miles away lies an amazingly wild coast, where it’s easy to get away on a kayak or for a hike. And the older parts of St. John’s are walkable and historic.”

For Newfoundland native Shannon Guihan it comes down to basic pleasures: nature, culture, food. She urges folks to pack dancing shoes for the thriving music scene in St. John’s. Popular clubs offer an amalgam of rock and Newfoundland folk music, while the pubs showcase everything from sea shanties and Irish music to traditional fiddling and homegrown reggae. Other local specialties she insists everyone try: fish and *brewis*, a prized concoction of salt cod, hardtack, and fried pork fat; *toutons*, butter-fried pancakes doused with molasses; and bakeapples, tart orange-yellow berries.

Italy: Cinque Terre

(Score: 76) The cluster of seaside villages known as Cinque Terre—Five Lands—burst onto the travel scene a decade ago to become one of the most visited attractions in Italy. Travelers might reasonably expect choking traffic and tawdry souvenir shops, but “the Cinque Terre still look like Italy did a hundred years ago,” says sustainable-development authority Ed McMahon. “The towns are as beautiful, if not more beautiful, than anywhere along the Mediterranean Sea.”

What happened? How did these towns defy the conventional wisdom that popularity inevitably dilutes the appeal of a destination? The answer lies in a mix of geography—the steep, rocky coast that the towns perch on has afforded them a natural seclusion from the rest of the mainland—and savvy development.

Only two narrow, cliff-hugging roads lead to the coastal villages, which limits access—a feature that locals have chosen to keep. Most visitors arrive by train or boat, or on foot along hiking trails, which reward walkers with views of vineyards, terraced farms, and seascapes. The villages feel like a pedestrian Shangri-la, free of the perils, fumes, and honks that accompany car traffic.

Recognizing and capitalizing on this natural advantage, the communities have carefully safeguarded the qualities that make them special. Zoning regulations are clear and enforced: No large-scale or modern-looking developments are permitted. Checking into a hotel or dining out often means meeting a local family. And while tourism pays the bills for most residents, you still see fishermen mending their nets and farmers tending their fields.

“The Cinque Terre are more than just one of the treasures of Europe,” McMahon says. “They’re a great example of sustainable-tourism management for the whole world.”

Supporting evidence: In 1997 the area was designated a World Heritage site. In 1998, the coastline was named a protected marine reserve. And in 1999 the whole area was declared a national park. Fees visitors pay to hike a number of the trails and enjoy the more popular beaches help maintain the park and villages.

That still leaves a knotty problem—the summer months bring hordes of visitors. “There are so many people in the village of Vernazza, you can hardly move,” rues sustainable-tourism consultant Julianna Priskin, who is based in nearby Switzerland. “Even the trails are overcrowded.” Her suggestion to local officials: Extend the territory of Cinque Terre to include nearby towns with similar charm, such as Lerici and Portovenere.

McMahon goes further, advocating daily limits on the number of visitors from June through August. This has worked well for national parks, he notes. Most folks would gladly accept that inconvenience for the chance to better enjoy this coast’s many pleasures: swimming, lingering in the piazzas, drinking wine made from local grapes, exploring hiking trails through the mountains, and getting to know families who have lived here for centuries.

“What’s unique about this place,” says McMahon, “is that each town has its own personality—and that you can go from one to the next independent of cars and tour buses. The villages of Cinque Terre offer us the chance to experience extraordinary journeys as well as authentic destinations.”

Turkey: Turquoise Coast (Aegean) 60
 California: Santa Catalina Island 60
 Morocco: Mediterranean coast 60
 Chile: Viña del Mar 60
 Greece: Santorini 60
 England: Torbay, Devon 60
 Sri Lanka: South coast, Galle to Hambatota 59
 Spain: Tenerife, Canary Islands 58
 Belize: Coast and barrier reef 58
 Honduras: Northern coast 57
 Spain: Mallorca 57
 Latvia: Jurmala area 56
 Costa Rica: Pacific coast 55
 Dominican Republic: Cabo Samaná 55
 England: Brighton, East Sussex 55

FACING TROUBLE

Under severe pressures, many places working to recover.

Tunisia: Coastal resort region 54
 Florida: Treasure Coast (Boca Raton-Vero Beach) 54

Arizona: Lake Powell 53
 South Africa: KwaZulu-Natal coast 52
 Albania: Coastal regions 52
 Greece: Crete, north coast 52
 Indonesia: Bali coasts 52
 South Korea: Pusan 50
 China: Hainan 51
 Thailand: Andaman coast 51
 Kenya: Mombasa to Malindi 50
 Bulgaria: Black Sea coast 49
 California: Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta 49
 Monaco: As a whole 49
 Australia: Gold Coast 48
 Japan: Okinawa 48

IN TROUBLE

Severe problems; some destinations fighting back, some not.

Mexico: Zihuatanejo 47
 Gambia: Atlantic beach coast 45
 Hawaii: Waikiki, Oahu 45

Jamaica: N.W. coast, Montego Bay-Ocho Rios 45
 Portugal: Algarve 44
 Lebanon: Coastal areas 43
 Vietnam: Nha Trang to Mui Ne 43
 South Carolina: Grand Strand (Myrtle Beach and region) 43
 Spain: Costa Blanca (Alicante) 43
 India: Goa 41
 Egypt: Sharm el Sheikh area 38
 Cambodia: Sihanoukville 38
 UAE: Dubai 37
 New Jersey: North Shore 36

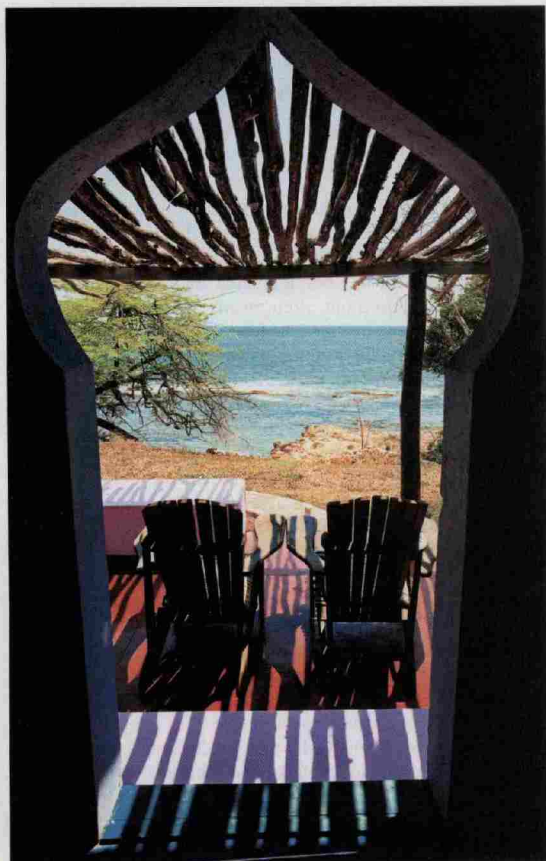
NEAR CATASTROPHIC

A disaster occurred. Tourism has a role in recovery.

Mississippi: Gulf Coast 33
 Louisiana: Gulf Coast 24

GO ONLINE

See panelist comments on these places at <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations-rated>.



Jamaica: Southwest/Northwest Coasts

(Score: SW 70/NW 45) The coast of Jamaica offers a tale of two shores: the party-hearty northwest coast, headlined by the popular resort towns of Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, and the low-density alternative along the southwest coast, where you can form rewarding bonds with the locals. (In between lies Negril, which earned a subpar score of 46 in our 2004 rankings and is something of a mixture of both places.)

The southwest coast embraced eco-friendly tourism in the 1970s and touts its abundance of attractions—old-growth forests, bird-flocked estuaries, centuries-old sugarcane plantations, and miles of beaches. “Both Jamaicans and foreigners [here] are trying to learn from [the mistakes of] other parts of Jamaica by developing while maintaining the sense of place,” says sustainable-tourism consultant Chris Seek. Jamaican-born Jason Henzell, owner of the local Jake’s resort, says: “Here you can be part of a community of people full of pride in where they live.”

Treasure Beach, a series of four coves blessed with golden sand (hence the name), offers the classic Caribbean pastimes of sun-bathing, beachcombing, and snorkeling in the atmosphere of an art colony: A popular art school teaches painting, and the area’s annual Calabash literary festival—organized by Henzell’s sister, Justine—draws Nobel Prize-winning writers like Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott.

Nearby Bluefields Bay is home to a string of fishing villages,

where you can hire a boat to angle for snapper, kingfish, and tuna. Boat tours bring you face-to-face with crocodiles, egrets, hummingbirds, owls, and grebes at the portentously named Black River Great Morass, the largest wetland in the English-speaking Caribbean. And you can pay your respects to a reggae pioneer at the Peter Tosh Memorial Gardens, a tiny museum and monument maintained by his family in the village of Belmont.

This region also is considered Jamaica’s breadbasket. Local organic farmers offer free-range chicken, fresh-caught fish, and heaping platters of just-picked sweet peppers, pumpkins, papayas, mangos, eggplants, and melons. The drink of choice? Appleton Rum, made at a nearby estate.

Jason Henzell notes that communities here are implementing a sustainable master plan for development that emphasizes environmental awareness. But threats remain, including bauxite mining in the neighboring hills. Also of concern to some locals: the advance of all-inclusive resorts from the north. In 2005 the Sandals chain opened a posh resort, Whitehouse, designed to look like French, Dutch, and Italian villages. “We’re really hoping no more are planned,” says Henzell.

Such all-inclusive resorts, where you never have to leave the grounds, define the lower-scoring northwest coast around Ocho Rios and Montego Bay. The area, according to Larry Bleiberg, a former editor at *Coastal Living* magazine, is “more a resort theme park than an authentic slice of the Caribbean.” Also affecting the region: a proliferation of new hotels, weak coastal-management plans, careless snorkelers (and outfitters) who damage the reefs, trash (both on land and in the waters), and increased bauxite mining. But some panelists express optimism, citing Ocho Rios for being “aesthetically pleasing with vibrant colors and local architecture,” and plans that call for the historic town center of Falmouth to “be landscaped with many palm trees, flowering plants, and benches, and restricted to pedestrian traffic.”

Mozambique: Northern Coast

(Score: 69) So far, so good, sums up the assessments of sustainable-travel experts who have journeyed along the remote north coast of this African nation by the Indian Ocean. They roll out the superlatives to describe the tawny sands, turquoise waters, coral islands, tropical woodlands, and centuries-old Portuguese forts found here—and the promising initial steps toward a tourist economy that could benefit local people.

Yet the problems and pressures mounting in this northernmost province of Mozambique are daunting. The area is extremely poor

even by African standards and has suffered repeated economic blows when foreign fishing ships have depleted fish catches, diseases have crippled the cashew and coconut crops, and erosion has drained fertile crop soils. Life expectancy is just 37.8 years,



Places in our survey rating well despite challenges include the beaches of Rio de Janeiro (right), for being well maintained in a crowded environment; the north coast of Mozambique, for development benefitting local people (left); and Jamaica’s southwest coast (left, upper), for its eco-tourism and cultural projects.

GREG JOHNSTON/CONCRETE PLANET IMAGES (UPPER); LUCA GARGANO (LOWER)

MOZAMBIQUE: You get on the Quirimbas islands and you're out of this world. You feel time stand still. The plan is to make Quirimbas park economically sustainable so it'll continue when foreign funding is done.

—KWASI AGBLEY, tourism specialist

according to government figures, and almost 30 percent of children die before age five.

Such stark statistics suggest that any tourist development should rightfully benefit local people—and that's what happens at Quirimbas National Park, opened in 2002 with French financial aid and technical assistance from the World Wildlife Fund.

"The plan is for [the park] to benefit the people and become economically sustainable," explains Kwasi Agbley, a tourism specialist working with USAID in Mozambique. "That way it will continue after the foreign funding is done."

Quirimbas park covers some 3,000 square miles and encompasses 11 tropical islands and swaths of forest along a 56-mile stretch of coastline. Those islands, rich in biodiversity, are showing up on the must-visit lists of divers, birders, windsurfers—and everyone who has dreamed of experiencing the natural rhythms of Africa. "You get on these islands and you are out of this world," exclaims Agbley. "You can feel time stand still."

Many of the park's guides, staff, and volunteer corps of rangers come from area villages. Agbley credits park officials with reviving fish populations by creating marine reserves, preserving forests and protecting elephants by curtailing illegal lumber operations,

preventing deadly brush fires by educating villagers, and continuing the protection of local ecosystems.

Richard Tapper, a biodiversity consultant and director of a green-business group in London, is thrilled at the promise of Quirimbas. "Small eco-resorts are being built in local style. The birdlife is incredible," he says. And 20 percent of all user fees are distributed back to the communities.

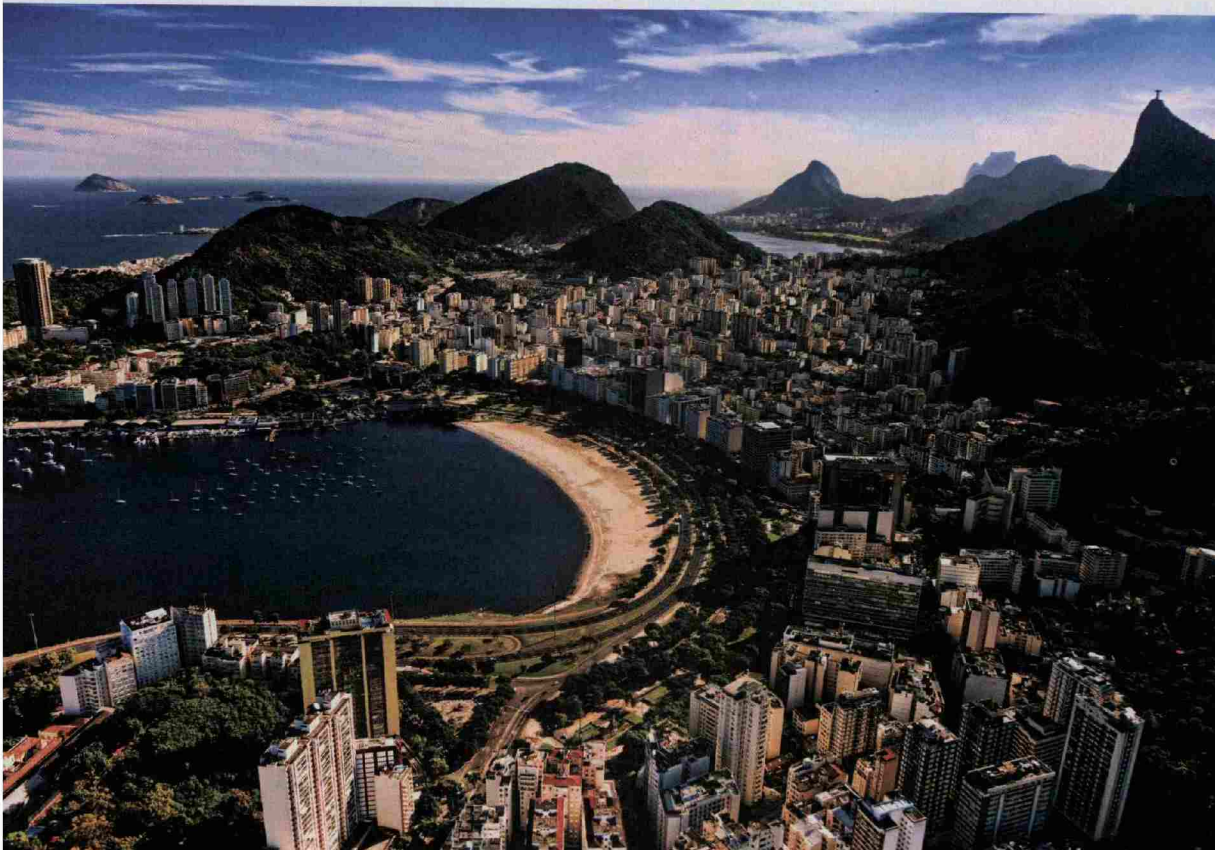
Yet, he points out, the park draws only some 3,000 visitors a year, in part because the closest major international airport is 600 miles away over sometimes bumpy roads. "The amount of money tourism contributes is very small compared to the size of the need."

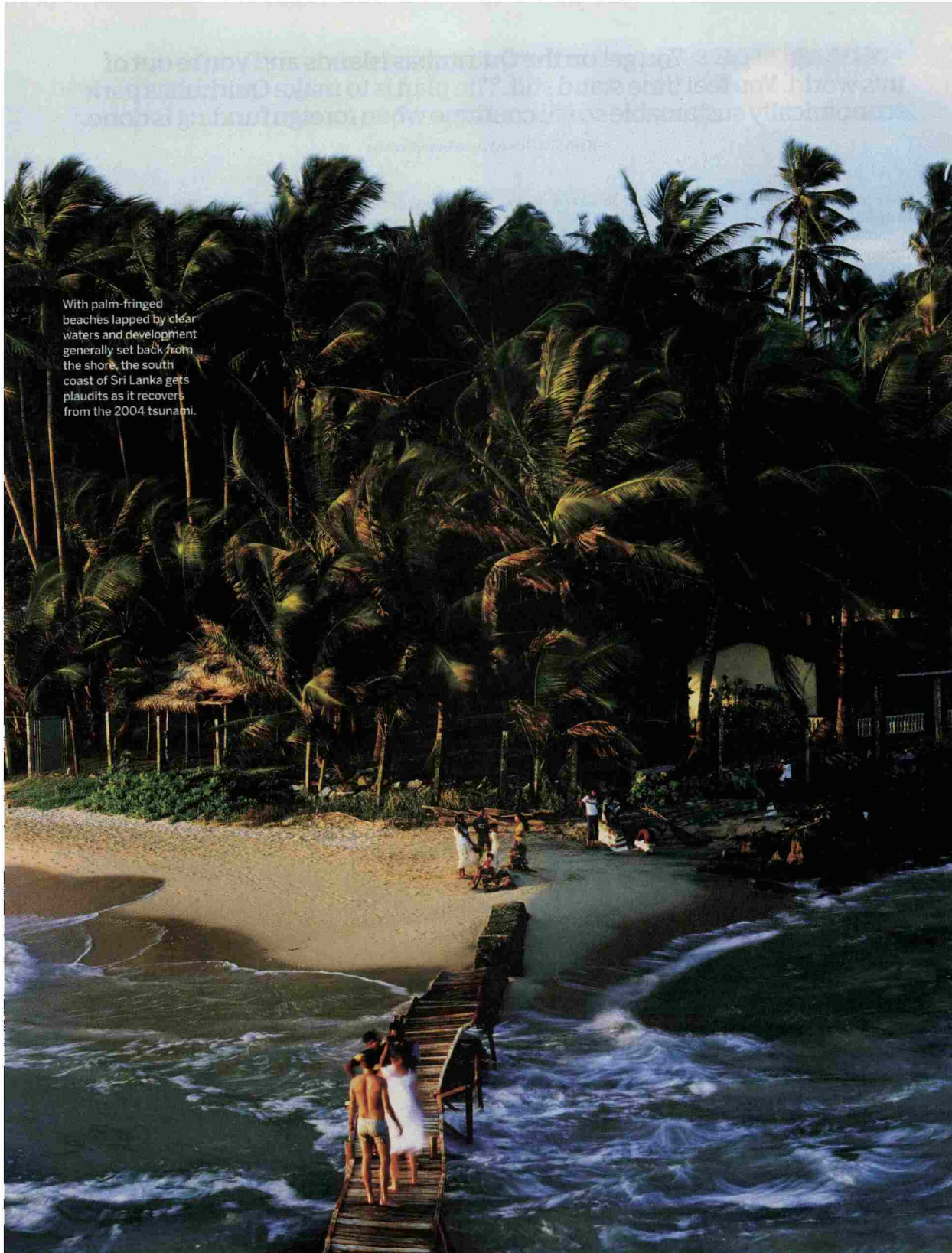
Still, Tapper sees virtues in only gradual development of the destination. "There are significant issues of water resources and waste handling that need addressing before more visitors come," he says. "If we open the park up too fast, it won't hold the same attraction for tourists in the long term." And sustainability, by its very definition, is about the long term.

Brazil: Rio de Janeiro's Beaches

(Score: 66) Rio's beaches—Copacabana, Ipanema, Leblon—qualify as world wonders for two reasons: their heart-stopping setting

ANTONINO BARTUCCO/CCORBIS





With palm-fringed beaches lapped by clear waters and development generally set back from the shore, the south coast of Sri Lanka gets plaudits as it recovers from the 2004 tsunami.

SRI LANKA: This conflict-ravaged country, with help from people elsewhere, can use tourism to realize the promise of a peace dividend. The potential benefit is enormous.

—LELEI LELAULU, sustainable-tourism expert

along the bold hills that rise up from Guanabara Bay—and for maintaining their appeal despite contending with the ever present blights of slums, traffic, sewage problems, and crime in the surrounding city of six million.

“These are some of the best urban beaches on the planet,” says Canadian sustainable-tourism expert Edward Manning, “because they’re very well maintained; so are the neighborhoods behind the beach, where high density is done about as well as possible.”

Rio knows what it’s doing: These popular playgrounds are meticulously cared for because they remain both star attractions for the city’s tourism industry and the center of local culture. “For Cariocas [Rio residents] the beach is where you meet your friends. It’s where you make contacts for your next job. It’s like a neighborhood bar in Boston,” says Bill Hinchberger, a longtime foreign correspondent in Brazil and founder of Brazilmax.com, an online guide to the country.

Clean-up crews scour the beaches for litter every morning, special police units patrol the area, and the city has invested millions in the latest sewage-treatment technology to protect these sand-blanketed assets. The nearby streets, lined with chic shops, restaurants, and apartment buildings, feel more like a congenial neighborhood than an area developed for tourism.

Strolling along the trademark black-and-white-paved beach promenade, you can feast on a cornucopia of street food, choose from an infinite menu of straight-from-the-blender smoothies, and check out the fearless surfers, adrenaline-pumped volleyball teams, supermodel wannabes, smiling street musicians, and sand castles that make this piece of coast unique. You’ll notice that everyone, from teenagers to septuagenarians, dons Brazil’s famously skimpy swimsuits, managing to sport them with a natural elegance and nonchalance.

“The rich Carioca beach culture,” notes Kathryn Wannan, a sustainable-tourism outfitter, “is thriving. The beauty and liveliness here offers visitors a different perspective on what life is all about.”

Of course no one will mistake Rio for paradise. “It’s a heckuva fun place to visit, but major social issues lie just below the surface,” notes Ken Lindeman, professor of Marine and Environmental Systems at Florida Institute of Technology. Impoverished favelas (slums) sprawl just beyond the seaside hills, and crime remains an issue throughout Rio. The beach is among the safer spots in the city, but travelers are still advised to use their street smarts, especially at night.

Some observers also worry about the architectural heritage of neighborhoods, including some of Rio’s most fashionable, near the beaches. Handsome old buildings routinely fall to make way for shiny new ones. Still, you can almost feel the ghosts of Mary Pickford, Errol Flynn, and Orson Welles at the refurbished Copacabana Palace Hotel. And winsome beachgoers still parade past the bar where bossa nova master Tom Jobim was inspired to compose the music for “Girl from Ipanema.”

Rio is scheduled to host the soccer World Cup in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016. This imminent influx of visitors, and the almost constant global spotlight that will accompany these mega events, should mobilize the city’s greatest resource—its proud citizens—to come together and ensure that Rio lives up to its moniker of *Cidade Maravilhosa*: Marvelous City.

Sri Lanka: South Coast

(Score: 59) Emerging in 2009 from more than 25 years of civil war and still rebuilding from the deadly 2004 tsunami, the tropical island nation of Sri Lanka acutely needs to heal its ethnic divisions and revive its economy. Tourism figures prominently in plans to achieve both goals, including leveraging the assets of the strife-free south coast: beaches, colonial cities, temples, and wildlife.

“I believe war-ravaged Sri Lanka, with help from people elsewhere, can use tourism to realize the promise of a peace dividend,” says sustainable-tourism expert Lelei LeLaulu. Elizabeth Becker, a former *New York Times* correspondent who is writing a book

About this Survey

This, our seventh annual “places rated” list, is not a popularity contest. It’s an assessment of **authenticity and stewardship**, an evaluation of the qualities that make a destination unique, and a measurement of “integrity of place.” Thus the remote coast of Namibia, Africa, can rate notably higher than the popular—perhaps too popular—North Jersey shore.

Evaluating an entire destination involves such unquantifiables as aesthetics and cultural integrity, so we decided the best way to measure a place would be through informed human judgment. We assembled a panel

of 340 well-traveled **experts in a variety of fields**, including historic preservation, sustainable tourism, ecology, geography, site management, indigenous cultures, archaeology, and travel writing and photography.

We asked the panelists to evaluate only the places with which they were familiar, using our customary **six criteria**, weighted according to importance: 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.

Experts began by posting **points of view** on each place, anonymously, to ensure objectivity. After reading each others’ remarks—a variation of a

research tool called the Delphi technique—panelists then filed their final scores. For the list of panelists who participated in this survey, visit www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

The resulting **Stewardship Index** rating represents the average of informed judgments about each place. Like the scores posted by Olympic judges, our experts’ ratings reflect both measurable factors and intangibles (style, aesthetics, culture). And like Olympic athletes, each of the destinations rated here has an opportunity to improve.

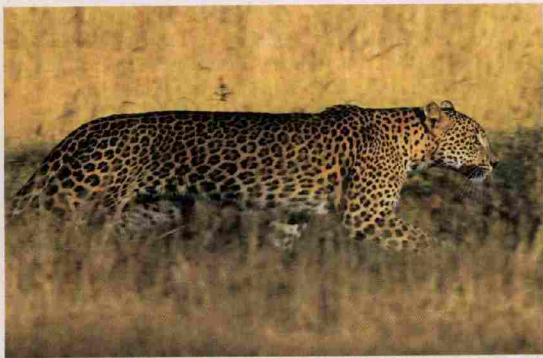
about global tourism, sees Guatemala—where opposing factions collaborated on tourism projects to revive their war-torn land—as a model for Sri Lanka.

“The best way to get past the war is to give everyone jobs,” adds LeLaulu, “to ensure that the social benefits of tourism are spread around.”

Typical sun-sea-sand package tourism made incursions in Sri Lanka before the civil war flared in 1983 but never took hold in the south. Becker notes that the civil war and the devastating 2004 tsunami have presented Sri Lanka with a prime opportunity to transform itself into one of the world’s finest coastal destinations.

“War shielded the island from the worst excesses of industrial tourism,” she says. “It’s one of the last great unexploited regions.” This may apply in particular to the south coast, which was spared much of the conflict. Her concern, looking ahead: “Will a few well-placed people make a lot of money—or will there be a community-focused model, where many people benefit from the prosperity?”

Long stretches of the palm-fringed, gold-sand coastline are in



All sleek stealth, a Sri Lankan leopard—a subspecies native to Sri Lanka—stalks through coastal Yala National Park, one of 12 national parks in this island nation. Yala earns praise for its conservation-management program.

foreign hands, with uncertain implications for sustainability. Most accommodations are guesthouses, only some of which are sensitive to ecotourism concerns. Many guesthouse owners at Unawatuna beach, for example, rebuilt just feet from the tide line after the tsunami—despite the demonstrated perils of building close to the water. At Mirissa Beach, in contrast, development blends with the environment. Oil exploration along the coast raises worries, as do the effects of a new international port and new airport at Hambantota—although LeLaulu reports every effort has been taken to make the airport ecologically friendly.

The lagoons of Bundala National Park and the savannas of Yala National Park, both near the coast, elicit praise for their conservation management. Yala remains one of the best places in the world to watch leopards stalk through underbrush and Asian elephants graze in grasslands. The region’s cuisine—“an alluring fusion of Southeast Asian and South Indian,” LeLaulu says—is another attraction.

The countryside is dotted with stupas and other religious shrines, both Buddhist and Hindu, which provide hopeful symbols for a rapprochement between the brawling Sinhalese and Tamils. “These days you can go to a Hindu temple,” LeLaulu reports, “and find Buddhist priests looking around.”

Then there’s the fortress city of Galle, which the Dutch developed in 1663 after seizing this strategic ocean outlook from the Portuguese. Celebrated for its blend of European architectural

styles and South Asian traditions, this World Heritage site draws visitors to wander its web of narrow streets and enjoy its open-air cafés—but many buildings need substantial renovations.

“Sri Lankans need to knuckle down and do some real planning for sustainable tourism,” concludes LeLaulu. “The potential benefit for them, their environment and economy, and for world travelers, is enormous.”

Coastal Louisiana

(Score: 24) Fact: The 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico damaged much of southeastern Louisiana’s coastline. Also fact: Much of the Pelican State’s western coast was spared, thanks in part to a fortuitous combination of geography and gulf currents that kept most of the tar balls away. Here, the coastal wetlands that define the region have remained a haven for both wildlife and the state’s unique Cajun and Creole cultures.

Stretching to the Texas border, this watery landscape of bayous and *cheniers*—earthen ridges composed of sediment deposits and live oaks—ironically owes its survival in part to big hurricanes like Rita in 2005 and Ike in 2008: Repeat batterings discourage development. “Western Louisiana’s coast is low, wet, and difficult to get to,” adds John Andrew Nyman, associate professor of Wetland Wildlife Ecology at Louisiana State University. “This has helped keep the region’s culture and natural environment relatively intact.”

Challenges abound, however. Assaults by everything from nutria, an invasive South American rodent that chews up marsh grass roots, to channels that were cut through the wetlands by the oil and gas industries, have affected the natural balance here. But, says Nyman, “Louisiana’s wetlands are resilient. They’ve endured and remain one of our greatest treasures.”

Exhibit A: The 180-mile Creole Nature Trail into “Louisiana’s Outback,” a wetland landscape comprising five nature refuges and sanctuaries teeming with vegetation—moss-draped live oaks, sheltering marsh grasses—and punctuated by windswept *cheniers*. Paths thread along swamps, through pasture lands, and into legend; the 18th-century pirate Jean Lafitte allegedly hid his gold somewhere along the Calcasieu River here. Located on major migratory flyways, this “outback” supports large populations of herons, ibises, and other waterfowl. The state-run Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge is a center for alligator research, and the reptile is frequently glimpsed along the trail.

Then there is the Atchafalaya Basin, the largest swamp in the United States. A primeval waterscape and river delta extending over 595,000 aqueous acres, it serves as a critical habitat for the endangered Louisiana black bear and is treasured for its bottomland hardwood forests, cypress-filled bayous, meandering marshes fringing the Gulf—and spirited Cajun culture.

“Many Louisianans rent houseboats and spend the weekend afloat in this ‘Lost World,’ fishing and relaxing,” says Pelican State native Emery Van Hook. On Sunday nights, you’ll find them mingling on the deck of Angelle’s Whiskey River Landing, a dockside dance hall and bar near Breaux Bridge sporting a deck that literally bounces from the stomping feet of revelers moving to Cajun and zydeco bands. In nearby Lafayette a similar blend of entertainment is dished out at landmark restaurants like Randol’s, where local couples and families kick up their heels between plates of fried alligator and crawfish étouffée. The Cajun expression of delight, “Ca c’est bon!” (“That’s good!”) neatly sums up the experience of this world built on water. —Andrew Nelson

Contributing editor JAY WALLJASPER writes about sustainability issues. New Orleans-based ANDREW NELSON last covered Miami (April 2010).

TONY COCETTA/PHOTOLIBRARY



The 2010 BP oil-rig spill hit Louisiana's coast but largely spared its inland web of marshes and bayous—here Oyster Bayou—and local Cajun culture, which rolls on at convivial Whiskey River Landing (below).

LOUISIANA: The Cajun expression of delight, “Ca c’est bon!” (That’s good!) sums up the experience of this world built on water.

—ANDREW NELSON, travel journalist



JAMES P. BLAIR/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC (UPPER); MICHAEL VENTURA/LAMY (LOWER)