

Travel outside the box — unique destinations

TODAY Travel editor Peter Greenberg on places you might have overlooked

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I always laugh when I tell people where I've been, because of their almost inevitable response. Almost always, it's: "Really? That's not on my list."

Not on my list? Not on your list? Who publishes this list? Do unevolved travelers actually get together early each morning and synchronize their lists?

And what's on the lists? The usual suspects: France, Italy, Spain. Why? I'm convinced the listmakers are all failed art history majors who figured they had studied the artwork in college, so they might as well go see it, at least once.

Based on the most recent accounting, there are 314 countries and distinct destinations around the world. I've been lucky enough to have visited 146 of them — or about 145 more than most Americans. (Remember, only about 24 percent of U.S. citizens have passports!)

So what's on my list? Every destination that I've never visited!

Of course, it goes without saying that some places are easier to get to than others. But when I can finesse the logistics, I always figure out a way to go. And so should you.

So here are three of those countries/destinations that are probably NOT ON YOUR LIST. But should be. They certainly qualify on my own new list: the next great places.

Greenland

Until recently, one of those hard-to-get-to destinations was... Greenland. I've been there before, but not by choice. I landed there once in an emergency landing years ago, when we lost an engine on a transatlantic flight. And the second time, a refueling stop on a delivery flight of a small jet.

But recently, I made the conscious choice to visit the largest island in the world, which is suddenly (and slowly but surely) becoming a travel hot spot. Imagine a place that's more than three times the size of the state of Texas, but has only 56,000 people. Think that's small? Imagine a country that has only two (I counted) traffic lights. No main roads between cities. And only two (I counted again) motorcycles. Why only two traffic lights? Greenlanders don't need them. And why only two motorcycles? About 20 years ago, after a number of serious motorcycle accidents, the government banned motorcycles, allowing only those that were in the country at the time to continue to be operated. And that number is now down... to two!

Some may think that Al Gore put Greenland on the map, but of course, the Vikings beat him to it. However, it has now become ground zero, the focal point in the growing awareness about global warming and the melting ice caps. You want ice caps? For the moment, at least, Greenland is the place for you. Of Greenland's 840,000 square miles, 84 percent of the country is covered by those melting caps.

And until recently, there was no easy way to get there from the U.S.

But in late May, new air service was started between Baltimore and Greenland; the four-and-a-half-hour flight goes twice each week on ... Air Greenland. And early last month, I flew to Baltimore and hopped on board the flight.

The service is only seasonal, running between May and the end of August, on 197-passenger 757s. On the flight I took, only 23 passengers were on board: five research scientists, three wildlife photographers, my camera crew and about 11 diehard tourists — proof positive that Greenland is still a pretty well-kept secret.

Which is exactly why you should go.

Don't look for luxury hotels. Many hotels are converted barracks left over from a large U.S. military Cold War presence, which just about ended 15 years ago. Don't look for lush vegetation, since there are no trees in Greenland.

And you don't go for the nightlife. In the summer, don't even look for nightfall. Try light, 24 hours a day.

But Greenland is a country with incredible wildlife and marine life, great fishing and wide open spaces. It's also a country where it's virtually impossible to have a bad view — you're looking out on miles of pristine fjords and glistening glaciers.

No beaches here. And no summer swimming. As the locals like to joke, you'll freeze before you drown. Unless, of course, you're wearing a dry suit.

And, if you're wearing that dry suit, there's great kayaking. If you've got a warm parka, then try dog sledding, paragliding, and yes, even golf on the world's most northerly nine-hole course.

What's particularly great about Greenland tourism is that the country isn't set up for it — there are few organized tours. And refreshingly few brochures. If you want to go fishing, go down to the dock and ask one of the locals if he or she is taking the boat out. Then hop aboard.

Scientists come to Greenland to research the melting ice caps (84 percent of the country is ice). But smart travelers also come to experience things they'll never get to do elsewhere: musk ox safaris, special boat excursions out to the glaciers, and exploring the icebergs floating freely in the fjords. Want to go fishing? Drop your line in the water, and you catch fish.

My most memorable Greenland experience? Just about everyone has a boat, so instead of organized tours, just go down to one of the docks and ask someone if they're going out. They're happy to take you, and in the summer months, as you hug the rocky coastline, the melting glaciers form an almost never-ending series of waterfalls dropping directly into the sea.

What's for dinner? Other than seafood (excellent), virtually everything else is imported. If you want shrimp, no problem. It's the biggest industry. Steak? It's flown in from Argentina via Denmark. Fresh vegetables? Be prepared to pay dearly. There are some notable exceptions: You can order reindeer lasagna, which is proof positive that with enough sauce even cardboard tastes terrific. But a wonderful and unexpected dish: musk ox carpaccio. Delicious. And one dish I tried (when in Rome...), but which I have vowed never to try again: whale. (Rubbery, oily, and it does NOT taste just like chicken!)

Cuisine notwithstanding, there are a number of compelling reasons to go to Greenland, and a lot of them are focused on the ice from the glaciers. The ice, some of which is as old as 60,000 years, is used to brew Greenlandic beer. Even beer and soft drinks are made in Greenland using local water. And the ice is now being harvested to make a special, very pure Greenlandic vodka called Siku (in Greenlandic, siku means "ice").

Bottom line: The luxury of Greenland is not in the accommodations or the food. Don't come expecting spas and pampering. The true luxury here is that you get to be first on your block to explore a very special destination. Greenland may be ground zero for the display of global warming, but for the moment, from a travel perspective, the refreshing news is that there's no global swarming. And remember, the air service is only seasonal, and only twice a week until the end of August.

It's time to amend your list.

Travel facts: Twice-a-week nonstop service on Air Greenland from Baltimore to Kangerlussuaq, around \$1100 roundtrip. There are tours offered as well. Seven-night tours from General Tours start at \$3199 a person, and include air flights within the country as well. More info from www.greenland.com

Tasmania

When I mention Tasmania to Australians, they always look at me in a funny way and say, "Why would you go

there? No one goes there." Words I love to hear. This amazing island, 150 miles south of the Australian mainland, is still little known to Americans. It is subtle, understated, and beautiful. It has 18 — that's right, 18 — uncrowded national parks and is the world's last temperate wilderness. Talk about mild:

Temperatures are in the low 50s in winter and mid-70s in summer.

It offers massive stretches of protected wildlife, unspoiled beaches and plenty of adventure tourism.

Tasmania has more than 1,200 miles of walking tracks and 18 national parks. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area covers about 3.4 million acres.

Like to get outdoors? Tasmania is your new world capital.

Freycinet National Park/Wineglass Bay

Red granite peaks reflecting in blue waters and a circle of white sand forming the beach of the bay. The area was proclaimed a national park in 1916. There's a huge variety of birds and vegetation. Activities include fishing, boating, sea kayaking, bushwalking and rock climbing.

Wineglass Bay Lookout Trek: You can hike from the beach at Wineglass Bay to the saddle between Mount Amos and Mount Mason (known as the Hazards), where you can get a great view of Wineglass Bay. 1.5 to 2 hours.

Cradle Mountain National Park

This park is located about 120 miles northwest of Hobart. It stretches from Cradle Mountain to Lake St. Clare. You can start the famous Overland Track, a rugged six-day walk, plus a number of side trails. The trails are pretty well marked and the trek can be done without a guide.

Anglesea Barracks

This is the oldest military establishment still in use by the Army in Australia. It was built in 1819 as a military prison. When the British left Tasmania in 1817, the buildings were used as a school, a home for elderly women and a gymnasium. Outside is a pillar commemorating the soldiers stationed here who died in the N.Z. Maori War in 1840; inside is the Military Museum of Tasmania.

Rafting

A day trip along the Derwent River is an easy, gentle rafting trip that is great for families. The Picton River is a little more difficult, taking you through the Tasmanian bush and the rainforest. Rates are about \$100 per person. You can also find 5-, 7- and 10-day rafting trips along the Franklin River, a mid-level expedition for about \$1,400 per person. www.raftingtasmania.com

Cable hang gliding

Located in Trevallyn State Recreation Area, soar from a 60-foot cliff and land 650 feet away. You're secured to a steel cable, so you're perfectly safe (it doesn't run in bad weather conditions).

ATVing

What better way to experience the forest, beaches and sand dunes than on an ATV tour? You can find tour operators all over Tasmania, particularly Flinders Island and Freycinet. Even beginners can try this

Food and wine

Tasmania is definitely emerging as a wine, beer and culinary destination.

King Island off the northwestern coast of Tasmania has a reputation for cheeses (brie, cheddar, blue vein), as well as yogurts, cream and something yummy-sounding called King Island Chocolate Crème Dessert. Visit King Island Dairies fromagerie to see how it's made and buy your own [Tasmanian cheese](#). I have been there and can tell you it's great: They make one of the best, creamiest gorgonzola cheeses anywhere.

There are seven wine regions on the island: Tamar Valley, North West, Pipers River, East Coast, Coal River, Derwent Valley and Southern. Tasmania's first vineyard was planted at New Town outside of Hobart in 1821. Tasmania now produces cool-climate wines such as pinot noir, riesling, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, cabernet

sauvignon, pinot gris and sparkling wines. And let's not forget locally brewed beer — Cascade is the name.

Getting there

The main carriers are Qantas and its subsidiary JetStar, and Virgin Blue, which fly direct routes to Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. It's about 1:10 from Melbourne and 1:50 from Sydney.

There are two passenger and vehicular ferries departing Melbourne each night: [Spirit of Tasmania I](#) and II depart Melbourne. It takes about 10 hours to reach Devonport.

My suggestion: Fly.

Other good news: A number of cruise ships are now offering stops in Tasmania on their itineraries. Last year, nearly 32,000 passengers visited Tasmania via cruise ship.

Orion Expedition Cruises- Food & Wine Tour of Tasmania

5 nights, December 2008 departure

Departing from the Sydney Opera House, sail the New South Wales coastline to the whaling town of Eden before heading to Tasmania. Visit Wineglass Bay and Coles Bay, Port Davey, Southwest National Park and Hobart. Rates: \$US 2,800-\$5,800.

Abercrombie and Kent

Offers an extension to Tasmania for \$1,660, or a "Tailor Made" trip.

Visit Hobart, the Salamanca Market, Mount Nelson; stay in the Freycinet Peninsula, the Freycinet Marine Farm and Launceston.

Montenegro

Europe's newest country, Montenegro declared independence June 3, 2006. Montenegro's history, however, stretches much further back, with plenty of medieval buildings in the country surviving to this day. But Montenegro offers more than just history. It boasts a wide array of warm, sandy beaches and isn't too far from several ski resorts. There's also hiking and boating, and even some decent nightlife in Podgorica and the popular seaside cities like Kotor and Budva.

Consider this: The most recent James Bond movie, "Casino Royale," was filmed in Montenegro. Result: It's now on the radar, and some very savvy travelers are now beginning to buy beachfront real estate in Montenegro — as second, vacation homes.

And as an added bonus, Montenegro uses the euro, making it an easy addition to any longer European vacation. Montenegro isn't actually in the European Union yet, nor is it part of the official "eurozone." But they went ahead and adopted the euro as their official currency (partially to stimulate tourism), even if they can't mint the money themselves.

Getting there

The capital and largest city of Montenegro is Podgorica, though it still has fewer than 150,000 residents. Podgorica's airport (which carries the airport code "TGD" from when it was called Titograd) is the main entry point, but an increasing number of visitors are using the smaller Tivat airport, which offers easier access to Kotor and the beaches. Tiny Tivat is used mainly for charter flights in the summer and, thanks to its short runway and odd positioning, is sometimes called one of Europe's scariest airports at which to land. Podgorica offers more regular connections to Paris, Budapest, Vienna, Rome, Moscow, Belgrade and a number of other European cities.

City of Kotor

The Old City of Kotor is a well-preserved city typical of the Middle Ages, built between the 12th and 14th century. Medieval architecture and numerous monuments of cultural heritage have made Kotor a UNESCO-listed "World Natural and Historical Heritage Site." Among its 'must-see' attractions are the Cathedral of St. Tryphon and several miles of old walls above the town. Kotor is a popular stop on smaller-ship cruises, as the city is easy to access by water.

Said to be among the most beautiful bays in the world, the Kotor Bay is situated between high rocks that are reflected in its dark blue waters. The town itself is clustered in and among the rocks along the bay. However, despite the presence of the sea, Kotor is not conducive to swimming and sunbathing — there are no good sandy beaches in the town. However, barely 30 minutes away are high-quality beaches of the “Budva Riviera.”

Budva and the “Budva Riviera”

Budva is the mecca of Montenegrin tourism thanks to the great number of beaches that make this one of the country's most desirable destination. Apart from its natural beauty, its bay islands and beaches, for example, Budva is rich in historic monuments. The Old Town lies on a small peninsula and is a veritable treasure chest of rich cultural heritage. Crossed with narrow streets and squares are historic buildings, the Church St. Trojica, housing the tomb of writer Stjepan Mitrov Ljubisa, the Churches of St. Ivan, St. Bogorodica and St. Sava. During the summer months it turns into a City Theatre with numerous local performances and shows from abroad. In the Stari Grad (Old Town) you can also visit many shops, cafés, restaurants and galleries.

Ostrog Monastery

Monastery Ostrog is carved almost in its entirety in a vertical mountain cliff, and is today the pearl of Montenegrin spiritualism. Annually visited by more than a hundred thousand pilgrims from around the world and of all religions, it is reputed to be one of the most visited Christian destinations on the planet, with its cave-like chapel, frescoes and monastery complex.

Port Towns: Bar and Petrovac

Bar offers a mix of old and new, with a 2000-year-old olive tree and the remnants of King Nikola's 15th-century Haj Nehaj Fortress as well as more modern amenities like a marina.

Petrovac is another small coastal town with a long history that's experiencing resurgence in popularity. Third-century mosaics and the 16th-century Fortress Castello are on offer in Petrovac, along with some prime beaches and the now-private “hotel island” of Sveti Stefan. Sveti Stefan has become something of a celebrity hot spot ever since it became a private resort in the 1960s.

Montenegro tours

[Intrepid Travel](#) offers two tours that include Montenegro. One is the “Balkan Adventure,” which includes stopovers at Ostrog Monastery and the beaches of Bodva. This 14-day tour starts around \$1350 and includes one night in the Monastery, but does not include most meals. The “Central Europe Encompassed” tour includes these Montenegrin stops, but tacks on an additional two weeks in Central Europe for a tour starting at around \$2250.

[General Tours World Traveler](#) has a “Little Tour of Montenegro” that might be a good introduction for travelers who like more privacy and flexibility. The Little Tour hits the popular spots like Bodva and Kotor, but you'll also spend some time on your four-day tour visiting lesser-known spots like Njegusi, for local specialty ham and cheeses, and the obscure highland village of Kolasin. Included are a private driver and guide for the duration of the journey, and all meals. The cost is \$1500 per person.

Another popular way to see Montenegro is via cruise ship. While the largest ships can't dock at many of the small ports in the area, using a smaller ship will offer access to many of the less-visited places. One option is from [International Expeditions](#), which uses the 34-passenger Callisto to access ports like Kotor and Herceg Novi, Mljet and Krocula Island. The upscale “Croatia and Dalmatian Coast” tour starts at \$6,598 per person and includes seven nights aboard the ship as well as a few days in hotels at the beginning and end of the 12-day tour.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is the Bahamas before it went upscale. It's St. Barts without the attitude. And it's lots of Americans vacationing — even buying second homes — without the Sandinistas. Yes, Daniel Ortega is back in power, but with a new vision — perhaps a shocking one to those who remember his former regime — but not surprising to those who realize the key to saving and improving the economy of the largest country in Central America is by focusing on travel and tourism.

No Starbucks yet. No over-the-top spas. But great beaches. One of the other reasons Nicaragua is so attractive now is that it remains the least densely populated country in Central America with a population in size to its smaller neighbors. The country is bordered on the north by Honduras and on the south by Costa

Rica. Its western coastline is on the Pacific Ocean, while the east side of the country is on the Caribbean Sea.

About 60,000 Americans visit Nicaragua each year, attracted by the beaches, jungles, history and culture. Although Nicaragua has been largely peaceful since the election of the first democratically-elected female president in Latin America, Violeta Chamorro, in 1990, the country still bears some scars from the decade-long civil war.

But the country is well on its way to recovery. Since Nicaragua is less developed, it's often mentioned as a cheaper alternative to its richer and more developed neighbor, Costa Rica. Ecotourism, volcano walks and nature activities are a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry. Nicaragua has 78 nature parks that draw in visitors each year.

León Viejo, the old village of Leon, is viewed to be one of the oldest and the most well-developed historical Spanish settlements, giving it important archaeological value. Leon Viejo was abandoned in 1610 after almost 100 years of habitation when the Momotombo volcano erupted. The ruins have now been largely excavated and have been a UNESCO site since 2000.

The Island of Ometepe is formed by two volcanoes that rise out of Lake Nicaragua. Much of the island is now a nature preserve (farms cover much of the rest) with unique rainforest environments in the shadow of the volcano.

Granada is considered to be one of the most beautiful towns in Nicaragua, with its nostalgic atmosphere and colonial architecture. It's also the second-oldest city founded by Europeans in the Americas, founded in 1524. Many of the town's old buildings are now being refurbished after years of neglect in the conflict-ridden 1980s and the poverty-filled 1990s. Granada also attracts visitors to its beaches on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, which is also home to a large number of freshwater bull sharks.

Wildlife attractions

Filled with all kinds of interesting animals, birds, fish, insects and plants, an animal lover will find Nicaragua a virtual paradise. Of course, not all these delightful creatures are within easy access to the public. Much of Nicaragua's wildlife live protected lives in wildlife reserves and have made their homes in rainforests, lakes, mountains and volcanoes.

Each year thousands of sea turtles make the journey from the sea to the beach, where they spend the entire night digging a nest and laying their eggs before returning to the water. The event can be fascinating to watch — as are the hatchings of these precious little creatures. Birdwatchers will rejoice in the wide variety of beautiful birds that have made their home in Nicaragua. Nicaragua has several wild cat species, including the puma, the cougar, the jaguarondi, the margay and the ocelot.

Selva Negra Coffee Estate

The organic coffee estate of Selva Negra is an eco-friendly, sustainable farm located in the Selva Negra Cloud Forest Reserve. You can explore the forest on walking trails and on horseback, tour the coffee plantation and an extensive greenhouse.

Tours

Exitto Travel offers an interesting "San Juan Experience" — a boating experience that travels from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean via the San Juan River. Though no boating experience is required for the minimally-exhaustive trip, the waters will take you through the heart of the country's best-preserved rainforests and rivers. The cost for this eight-day tour is \$2,469 per person, and does not include international flights.

Brendan Tours features the "Best of Nicaragua" on an eight-day tour. The tour's highlights include a few days in Granada and Managua along with plenty of visits to the Pacific shore. Prices start at \$1198 per person, and include guides, transport within Nicaragua, lodging, and some meals, and do not include international flights.

For nature lovers, Tours Nicaragua has the 14-day, 13-night "Nicaragua Natural History Expedition." This 14-day tour covers six distinct ecosystems and nine nature reserves, from cloud forests to coastal mangrove swamps. Included are plenty of boat tours and private wilderness guides to give you a truer view of Nicaragua's nature.

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