

2009

READERS'
CHOICE
AWARDS

BEST IN THE
WORLD

Cities, Islands, Hotels, Resorts, Cruises

The big news is that, undaunted by tough times, our readers are still way out in front, discovering the coolest experiences, electing the top performers for every kind of service—and reaffirming an enduring passion for travel. Look no further for the most stimulating global stimulus package you could hope for

IT'S STILL UP, UP, AND AWAY FOR THE COMMUNITY of readers of *Condé Nast Traveler*. ♦ In a remarkable picture of how you spent your travel dollars in the past year—the toughest for the business in a long time—it's clear that you remain as adventurous, discerning, and devoted to the worldwide diversity of travel as ever. In fact, these 2009 Readers' Choice Awards emerge as a unique, reliable, and very timely leading economic indicator—there is no other resource to match them. ♦ Consider this, for a start: **The awards reflect the personal—and recent—travel experiences of 25,008 readers.**

They form, in effect, a global force of incognito inspectors with the power to rate every service crucial to travelers. To put that 25,008 in perspective, compare it to the 80 inspectors Michelin fields to produce the Red Guide to France—historically the most rigorous, feared, and, let it be said, idiosyncratic screening of the

Condé Nast Traveler readers
who participated in the survey

25,008

Michelin judges who contribute
to the Red Guide to France

80



finest French hotels and restaurants.

And so these pages are not just our **22nd annual global survey**, ferreting out the best performers in the travel business—invaluable though that is. Rather they are a striking, news-making view of the state of world travel now. It is as wide as it is deep, going to the outer reaches of geography (as well as style) and drilling down into discrete patterns of behavior and taste.

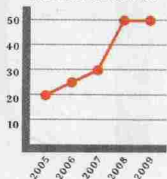
The basic form is this: The survey is composed of categories—cities and islands; hotels and resorts; airlines, cruise lines, and car rental agencies, more than 10,000 candidates in all—each ranked on a set of relevant criteria (see “Methodology,” page 175).

A new and intriguing influence is becoming increasingly apparent. This year, **fully one-third of the hotels and resorts on our Top 100 list (see page 170) began their journey on our Hot List of the world’s best new properties, published each May.** The annual Hot Lists are sentinels. They are the earliest blips on the radar of newcomers of merit. And because our readers are ahead of the curve (and the crowds), they are connoisseurs of the cutting edge wherever it appears.

But innovation itself is not enough. The new needs to have quality, not just modishness, to endure. Which means that those Hot Listers which now make it to this list have passed that test. There isn’t any other comparable screening process out there. Period.

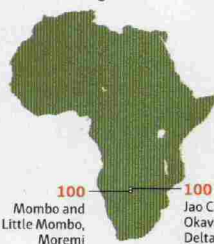
Another salient result, and a heartening one in terms of travel’s ability to stimulate economies, is geographical. In 2005, Africa merited a Top 20 list of resorts and safari

Africa’s Rising Number of Resorts



PACHYDERMS AND PULCHRITUDE

The safari sites in and near the Okavango Delta include two resorts with **PERFECT SCORES FOR LOCATION.** And both of them are notable for elephant sightings—as is the **WORLD’S TOP SCORER**, the Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle, in Chiang Rai, Thailand.



camp (see “Africa’s Rising Number of Resorts”). The following year, 2006, Africa generated a Top 25. In 2007, a Top 30. Last year, it shot up to a Top 50, where it remains (for now). One particularly notable reason: Africa has two resorts that earn perfect 100s for Location. And one country has both of them: **Botswana.** In fact, *one region* has them both: the Okavango Delta (see “Pachyderms and Pulchritude”).

There are some entertaining and quirky facts, too. As in, how much does eating reveal about the relative friendliness of cities? (see “Would You Like an Insult with That?”). The Top 10 domestic cities are evenly split, five northern, five southern—and confirm two enduring regional truths: The highest-rated cities for restaurants are San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, while the lowest are all well south: Savannah, San Diego, and Honolulu. On the other hand, **Southern hospitality apparently extends beyond Dixie: The friendliest U.S. cities are Charleston, Savannah, and Honolulu, while the least friendly, by an uncomfortable margin, is New York (54.0—ouch).**

But when it comes to the grouchiest places on the planet, check out the Putin-o-meter, marking a handful of the most and least amiable destinations. The friendliest town of all is Ubud, at the jungly heart of Bali, an island that delivers a spectacular travel twofor: one of your favorite cities on one of your favorite islands.

Seaside vacations aren’t restricted to islands like Bali, of course. Any cruisaholic can tell you that they have never had more

WOULD YOU LIKE AN INSULT WITH THAT?

High ratings for restaurants do not guarantee cheery service. Northern cities are **FIRST FOR RESTAURANTS**, but the **FRIENDLIEST CITIES** are all south of an extended gastronomic Mason-Dixon Line. Charleston is an exception, scoring in the 80s for both cuisine and courtesy. Moral: Tip accordingly.



choices—or bigger ones. About 50 ships already have passenger capacities of at least 2,500. **This year, the cruise line category has a new subdivision—mega—in part to anticipate the ever bigger ships being built.** Next month, the largest cruise ship yet, Royal Caribbean's *Oasis of the Seas*, will launch from Fort Lauderdale. How big is *Oasis*? It could easily carry the population of Okeechobee (5,376). It could carry Opa-locka North if filled to the sky deck (6,296).

And yet... small is beautiful. The top-scoring cruise line in the world could hardly be smaller. The word *mega* applies to Sea Cloud Cruises, too—its seagoing megayachts accommodate fewer than 100 passen-

HAPPY TO SEE YOU (OR NOT)

Across the world, **FRIENDLINESS** can be metered, and it's a swinging needle. Newark, New Jersey, is abysmal; Moscow, dubious; Rio on the rise; Ubud and Queenstown all-embracing. Paris? Don't ask.



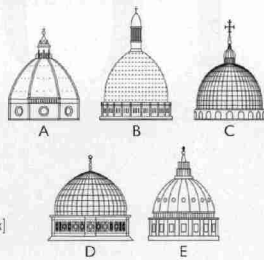
gers (with 60 crew, no wonder the Service score is the 98.4, the highest on the high seas). For a graphic comparison of the seaworthy David and oceangoing Goliath, see “Mega Minor and Mega Mega.”

Mega ships have been called floating resorts, but true resorts need not fear. They're increasingly popular, particularly close to home: **Half of the 85 resorts that score above 90 are in or near North America.** After all, if you want to golf, or ski, or improve your backhand, there are plenty of great choices in our home hemisphere.

But what if you want to golf at a thirteenth-century castle, or snorkel under your overwater bungalow, or photograph elephants from your jungle balcony? In order: Ireland's Ashford Castle, a trove of resorts in Oceania, and—the summit of this year's lists, the highest score in the world—the Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle in Thailand. Resorts also come in all sizes, of course,

GIVE A DOME A HOME

The five cities in the world that are top-rated for **CULTURE/SITES** have one thing in common: famous domes. Can you match each topper with its home?



1. Rome [St. Peter's]
2. Florence [Duomo]
3. Paris [Sacré Coeur]
4. Jerusalem [Dome of the Rock]
5. Venice [St. Mark's]

FOR ANSWERS, SEE PAGE 172.

even small—especially in the United States, where dozens have fewer than 50 rooms, and scores impressive enough to earn them their own subcategory, Top 20 Small U.S. Resorts.

What's true for resorts is doubly true for hotels. This year, both the United States and Europe have such a wealth of exquisite small properties that both regions have new “Small” lists this year.

Fran Lebowitz may have spoken for all travelers when she said, “To put it rather bluntly, I am not the type who wants to go back to the land; I am the type who wants to go back to the hotel.” **Hotels are by far the biggest category in these Readers' Choice Awards—almost 600 populate the 15 regional lists.**

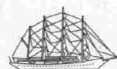
That represents more than 130,000 luxury rooms, ranging from the six at the Peninsula House in the Dominican Republic (the world's top hotel this year; see page 198) to the 4,027 at the Venetian in Las Vegas. Some destinations offer more choices than others, of course. Perhaps predictably, Vegas has the most—10,418 rooms in its four top-rated hotels. Perhaps less predictably, Beijing is next, with more than 5,800 rooms, just ahead of Shanghai and Hong Kong.

All in all, to use another fiscal metaphor of the moment, the 2009 Readers' Choice Awards are an unrivaled stimulus package for travel. □

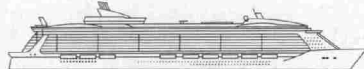


MEGA MINOR AND MEGA MEGA

In the world of cruising, even small ships are getting bigger. On the mega-yacht *Sea Cloud*, just 64 passengers are served by a crew of 60. On the latest mega-ship, Royal Caribbean's *Oasis of the Seas*, 5,400 passengers have 2,165 crew. You do the math.



64
PASSENGERS



5,400
PASSENGERS