

OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

Every year the UNESCO World Heritage Committee meets to review global sites of exceptional natural and cultural significance and to award those selected the highly coveted UNESCO World Heritage status. We look at some of this year's new additions.

Curious globetrotters, savvy backpackers, millennial nomads and international tourists are instinctively drawn to places that enjoy the recognition and protection of the UNESCO seal. Those six letters instantly denote great cultural importance – a wonder of the world – and accordingly, the universal appeal of any destination is greatly enhanced by UNESCO World Heritage status.

The United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation was founded in 1945 in the direct aftermath of World War II. The UN agreed that a cultural and educational organisation was paramount, stating: “Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed.”



Almost three decades later, in 1972, UNESCO drew up its World Heritage Convention during its general conference in Paris. In this document, the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties were united. The convention lays out the criteria by which natural or cultural sites can be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List. UNESCO made clear that “the overarching benefit of ratifying the World Heritage Convention is that of belonging to an international community of appreciation and concern for universally significant properties that embody a world of outstanding examples of cultural diversity and natural wealth.”

The 42nd session of the World Heritage Committee took place recently, in Manama, Bahrain, under the chair of Shaikha Haya Bint Rashed al-Khalifa of

Bahrain. Forty years after the first World Heritage List was published, which included the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador and Yellowstone National Park in the USA, 19 new additions were added to the list.

Speaking to the committee, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay described heritage as “a wealth that comes from the past but is also a source of sustainable development for the present and for the future”, adding: “The countries that have managed to protect and enhance their authentic heritage have tremendous assets for their economic development.”

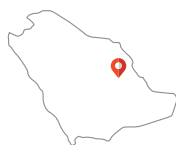
The World Heritage List now stands at 1092 sites in 167 countries, all legally protected by international treaties for having cultural, historical, scientific or other form of significance. This issue *Flashes* highlights seven of the newly added sites to join the hallowed UNESCO club. ➤



ANCIENT CITY OF QALHAT

 Oman

The great Muslim scholar and explorer Ibn Battuta said of Qalhat, in northeastern Oman, that it had “fine bazaars and one of the most beautiful mosques”. Modern day travellers can still admire the mausoleum of Bibi Maryam and the remains of the fortified walls that surrounded this ancient port city, which developed on the east coast of Arabia between the 11th and 15th centuries CE. Qalhat is an enduring testimony to the trade links between the east coast of Arabia, East Africa, India, China and south-east Asia.



AL-AHSA OASIS

 Saudi Arabia

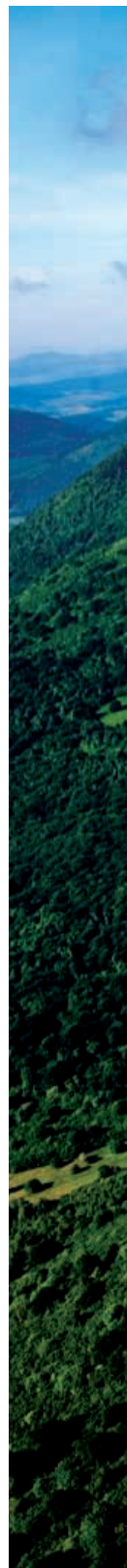
Located in eastern Saudi Arabia, the Al-Ahsa Oasis is the largest oasis in the world. Water is abundant in an otherwise arid region and this has sustained inhabitants since prehistoric times. Gardens with over 2.5 million date palm trees join canals, springs, wells, a lake and archaeological sites such as fortresses and mosques to make up a fascinating geo-cultural landscape.



BARBERTON MAKHONJWA MOUNTAINS

 South Africa

Comprising some 40% of one of the world's oldest geological structures – the Barberton Greenstone Belt – the Barberton Makhonjwa Mountains represent the best-preserved succession of volcanic and sedimentary rock on the planet, dating back to primitive Earth. It's impossible to comprehend the passage of 3.25 billion to 3.6 billion years, but it is possible to marvel at the evidence of meteor impacts from the Great Bombardment 3.8 billion to 4.6 billion years ago.





THE CHAÎNE DES PUYs, LIMAGNE

France

An exceptionally preserved illustration of the phenomenon of continental break-up, the Chaîne des Puys fault tectonic arena, located in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region in the centre of France, was created in the aftermath of the formation of the Alps around 35 million years ago. In its synthesis, the committee described the site as “an exceptional illustration of the processes and characteristic features of continental break-up, a fundamental phenomenon in the Earth’s history. It is globally significant in terms of its completeness, density and clarity of topographic expression”.





FANJINGSHAN

 China

Fanjingshan is a visually arresting island of metamorphic rock in an eye widening karst landscape. The animal and plant diversity here dates back between 2 million and 65 million years. Found in the Wuling mountain range in south-west China's Guizhou Province, Fanjingshan rises from 500 metres to 2570 metres above sea level and is rich in vegetation and wildlife. This is home to the endangered Chinese giant salamander, the Guizhou snub-nosed monkey and the forest musk deer. Fanjingshan also has the largest and most contiguous primeval beech forest in the subtropical region.



CHIRIBIQUETE NATIONAL PARK, 'THE MALOCA OF THE JAGUAR'

 Colombia

Chiribiquete National Park in the north-west Colombian Amazon is the largest protected area in the country, a landscape of sheer-sided sandstone plateaux and forest which indigenous communities hold as sacred. The park has some 60 tabletop mountains on which more than 75,000 rock pictographs can be found. Associated with the worship of the jaguar, a symbol of power and fertility, the paintings date back 20,000 years and depict hunting scenes, battles, dances and ceremonies. Chiribiquete is still home to the jaguar, along with other wildlife such as puma, lowland tapir, giant otter and howler monkey.



THE CALIPHATE CITY OF MEDINA AZAHARA

 Spain

An undiscovered city that has lain hidden from view for almost 1000 years... this is the kind of wonders that inspires people to see the world. This 10th century city from the Western Islamic civilization of Al-Andalus was rediscovered in the early 20th century. The remains of the Umayyad cultural civilization found here are astonishingly well preserved thanks to the natural environment, where little has changed since the destruction of the city in 1009 – 1010 CE.